

# “I used to be a traitor”

## Russian Baptist Conversion as Unlearning

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.131508>

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This article discusses adult conversion in the Russian Baptist community as the unlearning of old sinful ways of living. Russian Baptists see conversion as an act of repentance, surrendering to Christ, and becoming born again, and as a life-long process of growing in faith. Based on an ethnographic study of the Baptist community in north-western and central Russia, the article discusses the glocal nature of the Russian Baptist community that attracts the kind of people that convert to this faith and the circumstances of their conversion. Russian Baptist conversion is viewed as an act and a process, and conversion is seen as an ethical choice and an unlearning of the old ways of living.

### Introduction

In this article, conversion in the Russian Baptist community is regarded as not merely a transformative process of learning the new religion, worldview, and lifestyle, but also as an unlearning of old sinful ways. As evangelicals, Russian Baptists believe in the corruption and depravity of this world and every individual conversion is seen as a rejection of worldly values and redirection of oneself towards the Heavenly Kingdom. At the same time, evangelicals do not believe that God approves of escapist strategies of salvation, such as monastic or other forms of isolated life. Rather, they emphasize the Great Commission – a Christian duty to not only convert oneself but also

spread the Gospel message “to the ends of the world”.

Another important theological feature of evangelicalism in this context is the emphasis on individual conversion of every believer, whether raised in a Christian home or not (Bebbington 1989, 16). One’s repentance (*pokayaniye*), which is the key concept of the Russian Baptist understanding of conversion, is thus not an exclusively soteriological but also an ethical choice of rejecting “the world” as the moral compass.

In the Russian Baptist context, this ethical choice has several historical, social, and ideological implications. I aim to demonstrate and analyse the ethical aspect of the Russian Baptist conversion in the context of learning new and, at the same time, unlearning old values. I will first discuss the glocal nature of the Russian Baptist community that attracts the kind of people that convert to this faith and the circumstances of their conversion. Next, I will talk about the nature of the Russian Baptist conversion regarded as an act and a process of growing in faith. Last, I will present conversion as an ethical choice and unlearning of the old sinful ways of living. I will support these points with ethnographic examples from my fieldwork in the community.

This article is based on the data from two ethnographic research projects. First, my doctoral research has taken place in the rehabilitation ministry for people with addictions run by the Evangelical-Christian Baptist (ECB) Church in St Petersburg and north-western Russia (Mikeshin 2016). I conducted participant observation in four rehab facilities (lasting from one week to a month, sometimes repeated), and participated in church services, leadership meetings, guest and missionary trips, and so on.

Second, in my recent research project on family values, gender order, and sex in the same community, mostly in the town of Vyborg in 2021, I conducted ten interviews and participated in various church activities (Sunday services, Bible studies, picnics, etc.). In 2020–21, during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, I conducted six interviews online. For this project, my research assistant Ekaterina Mironova also conducted thirteen interviews in Tambov, Lipetskaya oblast, Bashkortostan, and online.

My main methods were ethnographic fieldwork, which included participant observation and ethnographic interviews. During the pandemic restrictions we interviewed people online, via Skype, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Zoom. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Working with recovering addicts, neophyte converts, and conservative Christians raised special ethical concerns. The common anthropological practice of replacing the informants' names with pseudonyms when quoting their interviews (which I also employ in this article) is especially important when working with people with prison and street experience. I was also very aware of other vulnerabilities of the people I worked with. I had to be especially cautious when discussing the troubled past of recovering substance

and alcohol abusers so as not to provoke a relapse. As recent converts, many people were also susceptible to uncomfortable questions about their new faith. Lastly, the ECB community is quite conservative when it comes to gender norms and sexuality (see more in Mikeshin 2020b). Hence, I was only able to discuss most of my research topics with men or, once, with a married couple. In order to get a female perspective, I hired a research assistant, also a skilled ethnographic interviewer, Ekaterina Mironova. Being a member of the ECB community herself, she managed to conduct interviews in several congregations and to interview both women and married couples.

### **ECB as a global community**

The emergence of Russian evangelicals started in 1860s, when the translation of the Bible into the then modern Russian language – the Russian Synodal translation – was completed (Sinichkin 2017). Unlike most of the Protestant communities before, the evangelical movement consisted predominantly of local Russian-speaking converts. Some groups formed as a result of foreign missions, some under the influence of the already settled foreign diasporic churches, such as German Baptists or Dutch Mennonites, yet soon the movement became independent and grew on its own terms (Sinichkin 2017; Nikolskaia 2009).

The modern-day ECB is a result of the merging of two theologically close denominations – the Baptist Church and the Church of Evangelical Christians. In 1944, during the partial liberalization of religion under Stalin, Russian evangelicals were allowed to register one centralized union. Although it contradicted one of the most important Baptist principles of the autonomy of the local congregation (Wiens 1924), this registration was the only way

of legalization, which was still a significant improvement after the bloody repressions of the late 1930s and almost total destruction of all religious leadership in the country (Nikolskaia 2009).

During the anti-religious campaign of Nikita Khrushchev, in 1961, the ECB community split over the question of obedience to the state and prohibitive legislation on religious organizations (Nikolskaya 2009, 201–14). The reformed community developed its own ideology and theology (Sawatsky 1981, 337–58), and hence my focus is on the so-called “registered” ECB. Since 1944, they were held under control by the state, but since *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have enjoyed a relative freedom of worship and have become one of the biggest Christian communities in Russia, but obviously, not comparable to the dominant Orthodox Church (“Religious Organizations in Russia” n.d.).

The history of religious persecution, marginalization, and state control made Russian evangelical Christians, and Baptists in particular, a glocal community – global and local at the same time. On the one hand, their fundamental theological tenets remained the same and fitted well into the diversity of global evangelicalism. On the other hand, their relationships with the state and the Soviet and post-Soviet society forced them to develop their theology, ideology, and lifestyle isolated from the outside world (Mikeshin 2020a).

The most important trait of their peculiarity is the Bible they use. As I have mentioned before, the same translation that was a catalyst for the mini-Reformation in Russian Christianity is still in use by the vast majority of Russian-speaking Christians worldwide, with the exception of Old Believers and the Russian Orthodox Church, which still use the Old Church Slavonic Bible for liturgy and the Synodal

translation for all other purposes (such as education, home study, and so on). This translation, though revised, is still mostly based on the mid-nineteenth-century Russian language and is heavily influenced by the Russian Orthodox theology and even the Old Church Slavonic Bible (Tikhomirov 2006).

The Bible bears a specific significance for evangelical Christians. Evangelicals are biblical literalists by definition (Bebbington 1989, 16), which means they consider the Bible to be an inerrant and sufficient scripture for faith and practice. For Russian Baptists it is even more important. Unlike other evangelical denominations in Russia which emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit and written or unwritten denominational tradition, ECB strives for the highest degree of biblical literalism. Naturally, they have their own tradition when it comes to lifestyle and especially hermeneutics, yet their most important ideological narrative is fully based on the Bible as the one and only word of God to humanity (Mikeshin 2021).

Another important feature of the Russian Baptist community that is brought about by their history and role in Russian society is that ECB is a denomination of adult converts. Although there are families and generations of believers, small rural congregations slowly die out, and most of the urban communities are filled with people who converted as adults. According to a historian and an archivist of the ECB Union Aleksei Sinichkin, there are no official statistics, yet about two-thirds of ministers in the community are adult converts (Sinichkin, personal communication).

Adult converts could be divided into two main categories. The first wave of neophytes emerged in the late 1980s to the early 1990s with *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Previously shunned,

religious ideas and communities were given an unprecedented degree of freedom. Many new religious groups formed, and the already existing churches faced a huge flow of neophytes, driven by curiosity, God-seeking, and emotional distress caused by the economic and sociopolitical crises that shook the country. Naturally, for many people religion was a new experience and many of them would either leave or find another denomination, but a significant number of people, now in their 50s and 60s, converted during those turbulent times.

The second group is much more spread over time. The same events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely economic and political crises, ethnic conflicts, the war in Afghanistan (1979–89), and systemic collapse, led to the subsequent moral and societal crises in Russia. Rampant crime, alcoholism, the drugs and HIV epidemic, and a permanent overwhelming crisis of identity forced many active working-age people to seek refuge in religion and continues to do so to this day. In the ECB community, the impact of the substance abuse treatment and prison ministry is so significant that some of the new urban congregations predominantly consist of converts from these ministries and their family members, including the church leadership.

My recent research project focused on family values and gender norms, and I had to constantly course-correct and accommodate the social context of substance abuse and prison. This led to the situation in which even adult converts who had never had such an experience refer to it in their testimonies. As Viktor,<sup>1</sup> a regional bishop

and an adult convert himself, put it: “Since I’d never smoked, drunk, or chased women, I considered myself to be a good man. But when I came to believe, I realized that I was as evil as anybody else, and I needed Christ just as much.” I will talk more about the significance of substance abuse and prison when discussing the ethical unlearning aspect of conversion.

### Conversion as an act and process

Although actively used in research literature and in many Christian communities worldwide, conversion is more of an etic than an emic term when it comes to ECB. Sometimes ECB do mention conversion (*obrashcheniye*) in its conventional meaning, but in their colloquial everyday faith narratives, they divide this notion into two important concepts. Conversion for ECB is both an act and a process – an act of being born again, surrendering one’s life to Christ, penitence, and repentance (*pokayaniye*) and a process of growing in faith or spiritual growth (*dukhovnyy rost*) (cf. Rambo 1993, 5).

In anthropology, conversion is regarded as a process of moral transformation that goes far beyond mere change of identity or religious affiliation. In the Church of ECB, especially in such “hardcore” ministries as the rehab, it is a radical change of perspective and redefinition of one’s life aspirations and interest in God’s will and plan in the ECB interpretation. Researchers do not always view conversion as such a drastic change, yet in most cases conversion divides one’s life into “before and after”, which implies a break with a sinful past, or, rather, its reinterpretation in biblical terms (see e.g. Meyer 1999).

1 As mentioned above, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the

privacy of my interlocutors. All quotations are translated from Russian by the author.

Moral transformation or significant change of behaviour in evangelical conversion (Harding 2000; Barker 1993; Robbins 2004; Wanner 2007; Erzen 2006; Meyer 1999; Priest 2003; Stromberg 1993) is often followed by bodily transformation, such as healing and embodying the works of the Holy Spirit (Coleman 2006; Luhrmann 2004) or rehabilitation from substance abuse (Sremac 2013; Mikeshin 2016). Some researchers put special emphasis on the liminality of conversion, that is, temporary or permanent transition (Gow 2006; Meyer 1999; Priest 2003; Glazier 2003). The cultural contexts of conversion in many cases lead to certain social costs, both positive and negative (Harris 2006; Hefner 1993). In the post-Soviet context, conversion has been studied with regards to the history, politics, and socio-cultural diversity of the regions (Pelkmans 2009; Vagramenko 2014; Vallikivi 2009; Vallikivi 2014; Wanner 2007; Zigon 2011), often including conflicts with dominant religious and secular narratives (see e.g. Wanner 2007, 141–46).

The act of conversion, repentance, is the most important event in the life of an ECB. In a practical sense, after repentance one is considered to be a Christian, whether one identified as such before, or practised or believed in a Christian God or not. Like most evangelicals, ECB believe that Original Sin and the accumulation of wrongdoings throughout a human life condemn a person to eternal death and damnation. The one and only way to salvation is the acceptance of Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross. Hence, repentance has two major aspects: a recognition of one's sinfulness and depravity and acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour. This is summarized in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>2</sup>

Repentance divides a believer's life into before and after, which is constantly reflected in his testimonies. A testimony is a colloquial narrative of evangelical faith, used as legitimization and authentication of one's faith for the insiders and a powerful evangelizing technique for the outsiders. A testimony vividly demonstrates – especially in the context of drug rehabilitation, prison, or soup kitchens for the homeless – how God transforms the lives of the most miserable and marginalized sinners who do not deserve mercy yet receive it for the glory of God.

The next step after repentance is baptism, which for ECB signifies a formal membership in the Church, with all subsequent rights and obligations. Both repentance and baptism are only recognized as conscious decisions of a mature individual (although not necessarily legally an adult), hence child baptism is not recognized. Nevertheless, whether one is baptized and acts as a full-time church member or not, repentance is the only way to salvation and anyone unrepentant goes to hell after death (except for small children and those who have never heard the Gospel message). ECB are not exclusivist and generally they recognize that one can be saved in most conventional Christian denominations.

I studied repentance in the ECB community with my project on the substance-abuse treatment ministry run by the ECB Church in St Petersburg and north-western Russia. The eight-month programme consists of two stages, two months of rehabilitation and six months of adaptation. The first stage is predominantly focused on the study of the New Testament in isolation from the outside world, a strict

2 All biblical citations in English are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

regime in very modest conditions.<sup>3</sup> At this stage, a rehabilitant is expected to rethink his life and repent. After repentance, one should grow spiritually by internalizing the Scripture, which I will discuss later. There is no clear procedure or timely expectation of when exactly one should repent, but due to poor living conditions, lack of proper food, and strict discipline, most of the unrepentant lack any other motivation to stay (especially in the warm seasons when the homeless rehabilitants can live outside and earn their living relatively safely). Hence, by the time a rehabilitant progresses to the second stage, everyone at least professes repentance.

A repentance should not necessarily be public because it is considered to be a direct interaction with God. For instance, one can repent when alone or at night in bed, and share it with the rest of the group in the morning. Outside the rehab ministry, in church or other contexts, one can also repent whenever ready, but in any case, it is a custom to come forward and declare one's repentance publicly. This is very important because a repentant individual is now considered to be a Christian brother or sister, and, although not yet a member of the local congregation, a member of the body of Christ.

Depending on the rehab facility and its leadership there could be different opinions on pushing rehabilitants to repentance. Generally, there is an understanding that one should make a responsible decision

3 These poor conditions are caused by the fact that the programme is free of charge and the rehabs barely make ends meet on the occasional donations from church congregations. However, from the standpoint of practical theology, these severe conditions are used to teach rehabilitants humility and obedience (Mikeshin 2015).

based on free will. However, in many cases elders try their best to use scare tactics or shaming to push their protégés to repent. Max, an elder in the biggest of the rehab facilities, argued that the time might be too short to wait for someone to take this step: "Yes, I push people to repent. And I will go on doing so! Because tomorrow could be too late." On another occasion, he put it even more bluntly: "[One] should be pushed, if he believes but is afraid to take the first step. What if he bites the dust (*sdokhnet*) tomorrow?"

The second stage of the programme initiates the spiritual growth and personal development required to be a useful member of the society. For the next six months, rehabilitants are given the full Bible to study (newcomers are considered too spiritually immature to study the Old Testament) and daily work assignments, both to support the premises of the rehab facility and to reintegrate back into society with real-life skills. The spatial and labour segregation of the sexes in bigger mixed rehabs also serves as a practical implementation of conservative Christian gender norms (Mikeshin 2015).

Repentance only happens once in one's lifetime. Even though ECB believe that one may lose salvation or collapse in his spiritual journey and go back to his sinful worldly living (Mikeshin 2017), one cannot be born again for a second time. Rather, one should confess his sins to God, seek the support of the community, and commonly go back to how he initially obtained salvation, for instance, retake the rehabilitation programme, at least partially.

Naturally, one does not stop sinning after repenting. As Andrei, another elder on rehabilitation, put it: "Your flesh will never repent", which is especially true for people with a long experience of addiction, homelessness, prison, or street life. The

old habits, language patterns, family and friends, and mentality do not go away, at least initially. ECB believes that one's heart is transformed after repentance, but evidence shows that this transformation is not instant, but rather a long, even a life-long, process.

After repentance, for the rest of his life, a believer "grows in Christ" (*vozzrastayet vo Khriste*). In the ECB community, this growth is predominantly based on the interiorization of the Scripture (cf. Coleman 2000) as the language of not only worship and ministry, but also communication, thought, and reasoning. The more one adopts this language of the Russian Synodal Bible, the stronger one is considered to be in faith (Mikeshin 2016). Naturally, there are traditions, jargon, and customs of the community, but most of them ultimately refer to (the ECB interpretation of) Scripture.

Many converts, especially with such "hardcore" backgrounds as substance abuse or prison, are so overwhelmed with emotions and awe of God who saved them that they experience some sort of a neophyte zealotry. Andrei referred to them during the evening discussion at the rehab: "This happens to many brothers who have repented no more than half a year ago: 'I'm gonna save everyone, I can do everything, I'm gonna cast down mountains!'" For some new converts such zealotry eventually leads to a relapse and moral collapse because they are not yet ready, either physically or mentally, for the outside world (see more in Mikeshin 2017, 218–19).

Many refer to the changes in their hearts as terrifying: "I'm going through such rapid transformations that it even scares me. I change every day" (Matvei). Sergei reported even more dramatic changes: "With God you won't be able to live like you lived before. Everything [in your life] will blame you. You could be so anxious [*zagnat'siya*]

that you can simply hang yourself [*v petlu zalezesh*]."

During the initial stage of spiritual growth, most converts are concerned with all the harm they caused to their loved ones in their old lives. For Oleg, these thoughts even interfered with his preparation to the evening discussion in the rehab:

I don't understand anything at all. It's Friday, and I'm a little bit out of steam. All my thoughts are about my city, Arkhangelsk. Not even about alcohol but my old life. How much evil I caused there!

Roman, a little bit more advanced in his spiritual journey, expressed the same concerns in a more accepting manner: "So we have this dread [*gonki*], how is it going in my old life, what can I do? I can't do anything! It's even better without me there." Max, a rehabilitation elder, addressed this issue from the position of his spiritual authority: "We try to revitalize our old relationships with the wife and child. Yet we need to build new ones."

This dynamic of making up for the harm caused in the old life by building new relationships or trying to recover the old ones is the initial point of the important moral aspect of conversion. In the context of an adult convert with a troubled past, the unlearning occurs not by forgetting the sinful past but by revisiting and re-evaluating it in the context of worldly and godly values, sin, and a change of heart. In the rest of the article, I will discuss the unlearning of the old ways of living as an essential element of the moral transformation of an ECB adult convert.

### Spiritual growth as unlearning

In the introduction to their collective monograph on religious learning, David

Berliner and Ramon Sarró (2007) emphasized the importance of the social context of religious learning. While acknowledging the importance of the cognitive aspect of moral transformation, Berliner and Sarró, as well as other contributors, discussed the way this process is shaped by the social and cultural environment. Likewise, adult ECB converts learn the biblical norms of morality and ethics as something anti-thetical, almost a reverse of their old sinful behaviour. For them, the most efficient and comprehensive way of learning Christian morals is unlearning, that is, thoroughly analysing their past behaviour through the prism of biblical teachings as the example of what not to do and why.

In the same line, Juliette Galonnier and Diego de los Rios (2016) discuss “pedagogies of conversion” in two seemingly different cases, religious classes for Muslims and evangelical Christian converts. Despite the orthopraxic focus of the Muslim group and the orthodoxic nature of evangelicals, Galonnier and de los Rios found striking similarities in the ways both groups teach religion to recent converts. In a similar way to ECB, both groups regard conversion as an act and process that calls for both belief and practice. The learning aspect of conversion is a life-long process, and it actively employs the convert’s past as an experience to learn from, rather than simply rejecting it.

ECB converts use patterns of behaviour from their past as ethical affordances, which according to Webb Keane are “any aspects of people’s experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not” (Keane 2016, 27). These patterns are not necessarily meant to be referred to and used in this way – a Bible verse and its interpretation would be more than enough for the

moral judgement of an ECB. Yet, they are the most convenient and comprehensive points of reference in the narrative of one’s conversion, both for himself and outsiders who can relate with a similar experience.

Conversion and spiritual growth imply a lot of learning, both for a child in a Christian home and an adult convert. One should learn (the ECB interpretation of) the fundamentals of faith, Scripture, Church traditions and customs, and Christian ethics and morals. For an adult convert, this process is much more intense because of time and especially all the baggage from the old life: old ideas about God and faith, worldviews, values, and moral frameworks. An adult convert replaces much of his life experience and principles with new ones, and this implies both learning the Christian life and unlearning the old worldly ways.

In the rehab context, the old life is called *vetkhaya*, which is the old Russian word for “old” with a negative connotation, such as “worn-out”, “outdated”, and “ancient”. *Vetkhiy* (in the masculine) is also used in the Synodal Bible as a translation for “old” in “Old Testament” – *Vetkhiy Zavet*. The use of *vetkhaya* for the old sinful ways of living, therefore, is rich in context. It refers to the old life as obsolete, dated, bygone, and, most importantly, overcome by Christ who gives the new life with the new promise instead of the old one.

Unlike a child growing up in a believers’ family and educated in a Sunday school, an adult convert learns by comparison. Every aspect of practical theology, the implementation and application of the Bible, especially at the everyday routine level, calls for comparisons with the old life. One used to rely on oneself, now he trusts in God. He used to believe he would get to heaven if he is good, now he knows that he is a sinner, and the only way is Christ. He used to take



relationships with women lightly, now he believes in one marriage for life. Nikolai, a former heroin addict and TV personality, expanded on this transformation in his interview:

I used to be the greatest traitor. I didn't value relationships, I cheated on women very easily. ... Husband and wife, well, for me, fidelity meant nothing. The first thing that changed after my repentance is that I learned fidelity. I learned to value the relationships I have, to value love. I didn't value the love that people used to give me. That is, those good ones, well, when someone loves you. He<sup>4</sup> gives you the best, well, from his heart, well, he does something for you. And you don't value that. You behave like I don't know what. Well, I do know but I won't say it. And after my repentance, I think one of the main signs, let's say, that my repentance was genuine and that I live with God now is that I learned fidelity and to value relationships.

I used to take the idea of divorce lightly. Well, I thought, this is not my first marriage. I used to think that if something, well, goes bad we can just divorce, part our ways and that's it. For me, this solution was therefore acceptable. Now it is not acceptable. That is, now I understand that we're together and we'll be together until the end, we'll be together until death. At least, we'll do our best.

4 A neutral masculine when referring to people is conventional in Russian.

Adult converts use expressions like “now it's not acceptable for me”, “I can't behave like this now”, “this is no longer for me”, and the like all the time. Justifying their moral choices for their interlocutors and, primarily, for themselves, believers constantly refer to the ways they used to think and act as a counter-example of how they think and act now, as Christians.

As I discussed before, after their repentance, most adult converts are anxious about all the harm they caused in their old life and how they can make up for it. The more mature and experienced believers realize that it is mostly impossible and the best they can do is to live a contrastingly different life now and use their old life as a counter-example for themselves and others. As Max, mentioned above, suggested, one does not get to “fix” one's old relationships, yet one can try building new ones with the same person. The brightest example of this practice is the story of Ilya, a former drug addict and now a pastor particularly active in the rehab ministry:

How I came to believe. Well, I came to believe, I was in rehab and my wife came [to me] from Perm. Not yet my wife, my girlfriend. We had a child together. I prayed for them, and even prayed like this: “Lord, I've been a bad father, yes, I haven't cared for her, well. Lord, bless her so that she meets a decent man who will love my daughter, yes, because not everybody loves their non-biological children.” So, I prayed for them every day, even more than once a day, in rehab. And you know what, she then called me. I was an elder, I had a phone.<sup>5</sup> She called

5 Rehabilitants are not allowed to have phones, only elders.

me and said: “Well, I’m coming to you.” I was, like, taken aback. I called [the ministry leader]. I said, “[leader’s name], here’s the situation, what do I do?” “Well,” he said, “I’m giving you a week off. But watch out, well, no fornication and stuff like that.” “Well, of course, I understand.”

So, it happened that she came, and I was actually afraid of approaching her. She was astonished, we had a five-year-old child at that time, [daughter’s name], the older one, was almost six. So, I haven’t touched her, well, and then she repented there, and we had a wedding at [friendly church], well, on Sunday after the service. I remember, she repented, we applied for a marriage certificate, and only then, after three months, well, in December, yes, in March we got married. And only then were we intimate. I already approached that differently. Not like I used to. I intentionally took a pause, I abstained [from it]. Well. [Now] I understand that it is a great responsibility, like that. In my case, that’s how it was. Well, praise God, here we are.

This striving to do it “the right way” after so many years of sinful living is common for most adult converts with hard life experiences. Often these attempts are met with astonishment, suspicion, and even disapproval from friends and family, especially non-believers. One rehab leader once mentioned a former protégé who completed the programme, came back home, and started his new Christian journey. His loved ones, however, were so annoyed with his zealotry that even his mother told him once: “I wish you still shot up [heroin] rather than being like you are now!” However, most of the recovery stories I heard had

a happy ending. Unless the convert himself relapsed, and this unfortunately happens very often, his family members either supported his attempts to live a new life or were so impressed by his transformation that they converted too. In fact, there are many recently founded ECB churches (including two churches at which I conducted much of my fieldwork) that are led and predominantly consist of “ex-addicts”, former prison inmates, and their converted family members. One of the major narratives of success is new families and/or new children born after the repentance.

My interlocutors told me many stories of meeting their old friends or family and their surprise when they learned that a former “street lad”, “junkie”, “drunkard”, or “tough guy” no longer smokes, drinks, curses, or sleeps around. When it comes to sexual morality, they find themselves in a new role maintaining a proper distance from the opposite sex, inviting a third person to chaperone the date with a fiancée “so that the evil one does not tempt [them]” (Aleksei, a former drug addict), and abstaining from intimacy even with the mothers of their children before the wedding proper (the example of Ilya quoted above). All these things have more significance for adult converts than for life-long believers because they are in sharp contrast with their past. Thus, this past is not meant to be erased, but rather to serve as a personal example of wrong values and a wrong direction in life that helps comprehension, acceptance, and witness to the changes that a convert experiences.

## Conclusion

The glocal nature of the ECB community manifests itself in the adherence to most conventional evangelical convictions of faith, such as biblical literalism, the individual conversion of every believer, and

other matters (Bebbington 1989), but is also very specific. Dealing with constant marginalization and frequent oppression throughout their 150-year history in Russia, ECB has not had a chance to develop a substantial academic school of theology (Bintsarovskiy 2014). However, their applied theology, based largely on the application of scriptures to their everyday life (Mikeshin 2021), has been constructed as a response to the dominating Orthodox Christian narrative (usually in the simplified way ECB understands it) and to the challenges and secular values of nineteenth to twenty-first century Russia.

This everyday theology allows for the analysis of conversion in the context of not simply learning the new faith, but also unlearning the old ways of living. This is explicitly seen in the case of adult converts with “hardcore” backgrounds – substance and alcohol abuse, prison, homelessness, or street life – which comprised most of our interlocutors. For such a convert, reflecting on his old sinful and worldly oriented ways of living is a natural process of (un)learning as an integral part of a Christian conversion. These ways are not erased or forgotten; rather they are revisited as an example of the sinful and worldly living.

Andrei once brilliantly remarked (most probably quoting a widespread adage): “Your testimony is the fifth Gospel.” Referring to a common evangelical life-story narrative, Andrei emphasized how every personal story testifies to the glory of God because the listeners can relate to the corrupt and selfish behaviour of an unsaved sinner who was eventually saved undeservedly.

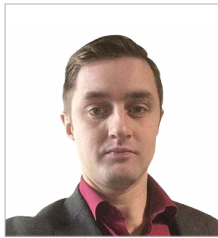
In the same way, Christ used the example of Lazarus’s sickness to declare: “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4). This verse

is popular among “ex-addicts”, for instance, Roman, now a pastor but a former heroin addict, said at the Sunday service: “Every time I have a chance, I share the fact that I am an ex-addict. I don’t do it to boast but to testify to the miracle that happened to me.” In a similar manner, Sergei, a long-time substance abuser and former rehab leader, shared with rehabilitants in his former rehab: “When I finished my programme, my brother told me: ‘You have such will-power!’ What willpower? This all was done to me by God.”

Therefore, when adult converts refer to their old ways of thinking and their old behaviour, they do it for two main interrelated reasons. First, they demonstrate the magnitude of their selfishness, worldliness, and sinfulness to emphasize the mercy and grace of God who saved such a terrible sinner. Second, they use that thinking and that behaviour as a counter-example and antithesis to the way they strive to think and behave now, in their new Christian life. There is no self-humiliation or tearful guilt, rather “boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31), his might, grace, mercy, patience, and love for the man who, like Nikolai, “used to be a greatest traitor”. ■

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Aleksei Sinichkin for his help. One of the research projects this article is based on was funded by the Kone Foundation (group project “The Role of Religion in Contemporary Ethical Self-Making / Uskonnon rooli eettisen minuuden muodostumisessa”) and the other Academy of Finland (group project “Religious Movements in Contemporary Ethical Life”).



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