

Ekaterina Teryukova

Museum Collections as a Research Source for the Study of Religion: From the History of the State Museum of the History of Religion (St Petersburg, Russia)

In the very heart of St Petersburg, at 14 Pochtamtskaya Street, one finds a unique museum, the State Museum of the History of Religion (SMHR), sitting right next to the world-famous architectural masterpieces – the Admiralty and St. Isaac's Cathedral. Today, it is the only museum in Russia – and one of the few in the world – that is devoted solely to the universal phenomenon of religion and the role it plays in human culture. The museum was founded in 1932 by Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan, an outstanding Russian citizen and director of academic institutions. He was a scholar of linguistics, ethnography, anthropology, and history of religion, as well as a poet, author, journalist, teacher, and full member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. For 85 years, the museum has been acting as a research centre, studying religions of the past and present, in addition to playing a significant role in the culture of the city of St Petersburg.

It is hard to place the SMHR within modern museum classifications, in which museums are typically divided into art, history, ethnography, science, technology, etc. Just as the complexity of religion as a phenomenon naturally turns the study of religion into multidisciplinary research, the collection and exhibition principles set out for religious objects at the museum are quite specific: they are multi-dimensional, and founded on a historical and typological approach to the study of religion, and a comparative method of display. Since its foundation, and throughout its history, the museum collection and permanent exhibition have displayed a wide range of religious beliefs, from ancient times to the present day, and outlined the evolution of religion through the diversity of its historical forms.

Today, the museum collection stands just shy of 200,000 artefacts, which are noteworthy for their diversity. In addition to popular, mass-produced and common religious objects and items used in personal worship in everyday life, it includes true rarities, and world artistic masterpieces of undeniable cultural, historic, and aesthetic value. The museum houses monuments of spiritual and material culture from a range of countries, epochs, and ethnic and cultural groups, the oldest of which are dated to the Palaeolithic Era, and the newest of which tell the story of religion today. The greater part of the collection is divided by religious de-

nomination. Philately, fabrics, precious metals, photography and negatives, rare books, and the Scientific and Historical Archives form separate collections, due to storage requirements. The broad spectrum of topics, artefacts and geographic locations, from Oceania to South America, and from Africa to Siberia, makes the SMHR collection a vast pool of resources for the study of religion, which has not yet been fully tapped into. As many collections have links to famous Russian scholars of religion, it could also be used as a source base for the history of approaches to the study of religion in Russia.

The analysis of museum collections shows that they may be subdivided into several large categories of sources: books, photography, written documents, visual arts, ritual objects and clothes.

We can demonstrate a number of examples of this approach to viewing a museum collection as sources to be researched. First and foremost, it is worth highlighting the SMHR Research Library, Russia's largest (more than 180,000 items) secular collection of books and periodicals on religion, comprising publications dating from the 18th to the 21st century. Early printed books dated from the 15th to 17th centuries form a separate Rare Books Collection. Many items in the library collection bear bookplates, autographs, gift and ownership inscriptions, and handwritten notes by famous Russian historical and religious figures. The most valuable parts of the library collection are the Old Church Slavonic books, bibles in several world languages, theological journals published by pre-revolutionary Russian Spiritual Academies and Seminaries, lifetime editions of works by Russia's early 20th-century religious philosophers, and Russia's most comprehensive collection of atheist literature from the 1920s and 1930s.

The book collection grew rapidly in the first decades after the museum's foundation. Books were purchased, received as gifts of personal library collections of Russian historians and religious scholars, or transferred from monasteries, churches, or religious schools closed in the 1930s. Books were brought in from public, religious and governmental societies that were no longer in existence, such as the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society and the Holy Synod, as well as from field trips to regional museums of local history. A great number of books have found their way to the museum through numerous changes of ownership, and thus bear many different ownership marks. In 1947, a large book collection came to the SMHR from Moscow's Central Antireligious Museum that had closed down.¹

1 Ekaterina Teryukova, "Central Anti-Religious Museum in Moscow: Historical Landmarks (1929–1947)," *Study of Religion* ("Religiovedenie"), no.4 (2019): 121–27, <https://doi.org/10.22250/2072-8662.2019.4.121-127>.

The books from the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is a vivid example of a collection that forms a section of our library in its own right. The Society was established in 1882, and consisted equally of prominent spiritual leaders and representatives of academic science. On the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917, it possessed an appreciable collection comprising photographs, negatives, books, pilgrim souvenirs, glass lantern slides ('foggy pictures'), and Russian paintings, drawings and prints, dating from the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century. The books (over 10,000 volumes) and photographs (over 7,000 images) from the collection of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society are of particular value and great historical significance. They provide an unsurpassed source of visual and printed data for the study of 'the Holy Land' in the late 19th to early 20th century, the history of its research and the history of Palestine studies, as an integral part of Russia's intellectual history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The museum's separate Rare Books Collection is also of note. It comprises Cyrillic printed books from the 16th and 17th centuries, 41 incunabula (books published before 31 December 1500), and European books from the 16th and 17th centuries. Their routes into the SMHR were varied. The provenance of some of the early printed books can be established through stamps and notes by previous owners. Some were part of personal book collections belonging to famous Russian scholars and bibliophiles. Nowadays the museum's incunabula collection is the fifth largest among those in St Petersburg.

The Freemasonry Collection will, undoubtedly, prove a source of many future discoveries, as it includes several thousand artefacts. It is distributed over various of the museum's collections, rather than forming a separate one of its own. Characterised by typological diversity, it is a perfect example of a museum collection as a historical research source. There are manuscripts, constituent decrees, and diplomas dated between 1760 and 1930, as well as masonic symbols, ritual objects and garments, pieces of art, porcelain figures, and books.

The documents on free thought and atheism in Russia, as well as on Soviet anti-religious propaganda between 1920 and 1960, also present a vast potential historical resource. There are collections of antireligious posters (over 300 pieces), antireligious toys, prints, paintings, photography, research archival documents, collections of periodicals and books stored at the Research Library; for example, the now-rare complete sets of *Revolution and Church*, *Antireligioznik*, *Bezbozhnik*, *Bezbozhnik u Stunka*, *Militant Atheism*, etc.

We would like to provide several examples in which the SMHR collection serves as an information source not only for the study of religious beliefs, but also for the history of the study of religion in Russia.

Between 1947 and 1955, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich (1873–1955) was director of the museum. By this point, he was known as a revolutionary *Bolshevik*, social and political activist, writer and publicist, human rights defender, as well as a researcher of religious minorities in Russia, who had put together a unique collection of documents on the history of ideological movements among the Russian people.

Bonch-Bruevich became interested in the study of Russian religious minorities while living abroad from 1896 to 1905. An active member of the Russian revolutionary movement, he left for Switzerland in April 1896 after his underground cell in Moscow was exposed. In Switzerland, he joined the community of Russian political émigrés, working with several Russian publishing houses abroad as well as a number of Russian newspapers. It was at this point that he began collecting documents. From 1898 to 1899, while working at Free Word Press, which was set up by V. G. Chertkov, the leader of the Tolstoy movement in London, Bonch-Bruevich organised an archive on the history of, and research into, Russian sects (this term applied to religious minorities in early 20th-century Russian religious legislation). From 1899 to 1900, he accompanied Dukhobor migrants fleeing religious persecution in the Russian Empire. During this trip, he established himself as a researcher. Having collected data on Dukhobor history and folklore, he recorded, and prepared for publication, a book of their religious poetry, “The Book of Life”. From 1899, the topic of Russian sects became central to Bonch-Bruevich’s research, politics, and writing.

In 1908, his research took a new turn. He concentrated on preparing a series of books on socio-religious movements in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and became the leading academic in the study of popular religion, his project having no parallels in the study of religions in Russia. Having a clear understanding of the significance of the broad sect movement to life in Russia, Bonch-Bruevich’s goal was to conduct a comprehensive study of a vast array of Russian sects. He believed that it was necessary to begin by collecting and publishing the many manuscripts accumulated from various public and private libraries, private archives, sect communities, and other such places.

In 1908, the first issue of “Materials on the History and Study of Russian Sects and Schism” was published. It included Bonch-Bruevich’s “Programme for Collecting Data on the Research and Study of Russian Sects and Schism”. The programme

was addressed to a wide audience who could assist him in his research; first and foremost, those called 'sect followers', 'schismatics', and 'Old Believers' in Russia. Assistance meant sending manuscripts and other materials already stored in archives and owned by private citizens in various communities. Bonch-Bruevich hoped that 'sect followers' would take up the pen and write down the histories of their communities from their lifetime, or from stories passed down from their ancestors or from family to family. He pointed out that, in describing their lives, it would be necessary to outline a comprehensive understanding of faith and life, and of people's need to live in accordance with the precepts of their faith; to record their teachings: psalms, prayers, rhymes, legends, tales, and various interpretations; to describe all the events that happened in the course of their lives, especially those in which people or whole communities had to suffer for acting according to their faith. In addition, he encouraged into the project everyone who had had the opportunity to study and observe the life of the populations in question, asking them to make their descriptions as full and accurate as possible, in line with the procedure and the 36-article guidelines proposed by him. He later expanded the guidelines to 39 articles.

Bonch-Bruevich's project was a success as he received letters from many communities in response to his request. The significance and results of this project are evident in the scope of its output. In 1908–1916, he published six volumes of *Materials*. Each volume contained only a fraction of the records collected during his trips or received by post in response to his *Programme*, which was re-outlined in the introduction to each of the volumes, with small alterations. It is safe to say that the real authors of the journal were the people themselves, who eagerly responded to the request for their participation in publishing materials about themselves.

It has to be noted that, while Bonch-Bruevich did not support the official church, he did not share the beliefs of his correspondents either. However, acting as an "archivist of human errors", as he described his role, the researcher adhered strictly to the principles of scholarly honesty and impartiality. For Bonch-Bruevich, this meant that research could not be founded on the sources traditionally used for this purpose in the Russian Empire: police investigation records, court indictments, sect texts recovered during police searches, and notes and testimonials from the 'repentant' and 'converted'. His research method required precise and comprehensive study not only of literature but also of the everyday lives of religious minorities, as described in the materials collected from sect members, of their own accord and upon Bonch-Bruevich's request; that is, from sources he discovered himself.

The project resulted in thousands of pages sent to the researcher and preserved for historical records. Some of them were published, which occurred, in every instance, with the consent of their authors. Bonch-Bruevich considered this to be the deepest indicator of trust in him as a researcher. He wrote that he would like to tell the reader:

народ теперь доверяет Вам свою душу, свою совесть. Вот они, эти простые, часто загнанные, истерзанные люди, простосердечно, полные любви, говорят вам: вот мы какие, вот все наше святая святых. Вот все, чем и для чего мы живем и как понимаем жизнь. Отнесемся же бережно к этому высокому порыву тружеников земли, живущих там, далеко, в степях и равнинах, в горах и кручах, в болотах и лесах необъятной России.²

The people trust you with their soul, their conscience. Here they are, these simple, often persecuted, tortured people; with a simplicity of heart and full of love, they tell you: this is us; this is our sancta sanctorum. Here is everything we live for and here is how we understand life. Let us treat with utmost care this noble impulse of the workers of the land who live out there, in the steppes and valleys, on the hills and mountains, in the marshes and forests of the boundless Russia.³

Some materials remained in his private archives until later finding their way to the SMHR. As the museum's director, he founded the Department of Manuscripts in 1952, which was later renamed the Scientific and Historical Archives. It contains the materials donated by Bonch-Bruevich, which forms Collection No. 2. Today, it includes 9,062 inventory items and comprises tens of thousands of handwritten and typed pages created or collected by Bonch-Bruevich.

Another significant source for the history of the study of religion is the SMHR collection of Chinese popular prints (approximately 1,000 inventory items) that brings to mind the name of academician V. M. Alekseev, an outstanding Russian sinologist. The museum acquired from him not only the art and epigraphic material, but also a part of Alekseev's handwritten archives, which are of infinite research value.⁴ A joint Russia-Taiwan research project has made it possible to identify these documents in the museum's Research and Historical Archives, and bring them into research circulation. It revealed that the archives also contain

2 Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, *Materials on the History and Study of Russian Sects and Old Believers* (Saint-Petersburg: Printing-office B.M. Volf, 1911), XX–XXI.

3 Translation by O. Glotova.

4 Ekaterina Teryukova and Ekaterina Zavidovskaya, "The Archive of Academician V.M. Alekseev from the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion as a Source for the Study of Popular Religious Beliefs in Late Imperial China," *Manuscripta Orientalia* 23, no. 1 (2017): 61–69.

handwritten notes in Chinese, dated to 1905–1907, commissioned by Alekseev from Chinese consultants. They provide commentary on the prints, their plots, characters, literary sources and clarify the symbolic riddles that these contained. Altogether, the documents from Alekseev's archives and popular prints present a unique source for the study of religious syncretism during the last years of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

Another renowned Russian religious scholar, E. M. Shilling (1892–1953), contributed greatly to the museum's collection.⁵ Between 1920 and 1940, he undertook more than twenty expeditions to the North Caucasus, and the collection he gathered there greatly enriched those of several large museums in Moscow and Leningrad. Shilling's material objects collection at the SMHR numbers approximately 130 inventory items that arrived between 1930 and 1938. Just as in the case of Alekseev's contribution, the artefacts are accompanied by documents in the Research Archives. Although they appear fragmented and random at first glance, these documents provide a comprehensive set of field notes from his field trips to the Caucasus between 1920 and 1940, and contain a description of the state of religious beliefs among the residents of Dagestan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh at the time. On the one hand, the cults and beliefs in question had generally remained part of the living tradition in these areas, while, on the other, they had already begun to experience ever-increasing pressure from the new political system. It was this pressure that eventually led to their transformation, and complete disappearance from everyday ritual practice.

I would also like to mention Gleb Snesarev, another ethnographer and researcher of religious beliefs in Central Asia, particularly the Uzbeks, who was also active in the middle of the 20th century.⁶ He holds a special place in Russia's mid-20th century study of religion, as every single one of his publications was based on field data. Snesarev visited the region of interest of his research many times, from the 1930s to the 1960s, as part of both ethnographic and multidisciplinary expeditions. Moreover, he was one of the few ethnographers of his time who took his field work methodology very seriously, a fact which is illustrated perfectly in his mid-1950s paper "Some Aspects of Ethnographic Field Research Methodology for the Study of

5 Ekaterina Teryukova and Natalia Alferova, "The Archive of E.M. Shilling from the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion as a Source for the Study of Religiosity in the Caucasus Region in 1930s," *Manuscripta Orientalia* 25, no. 1 (2019): 64–72.

6 Ekaterina Teryukova, "G.P. Snesarev as a Collector and Researcher of Central Asian Religious Beliefs (on the Materials of the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion, St. Petersburg, Russia)," *Study of Religion ("Religiovedenie")*, no. 2 (2020): 121–26, <https://doi.org/10.22250/2072-8662.2020.2>.

Religion and Atheism”⁷. According to Snesarev, the only effective method is the stationary research method, in which a researcher stays in one place for a long time, expands his network of contacts, and wins trust through appropriate behaviour. This approach makes it possible to move beyond recording external aspects of religious experience, to studying deep processes of human consciousness, and to understanding the psychology of a religious person and the reason why vestiges of religion are so persistent. To obtain ‘mass data’ and make generalised conclusions, Snesarev recommended combining stationary research with themed routes. His personal field research experience in Central Asia demonstrated that various vestiges of religion were rooted in household family life. According to the scholar it was the family, which he considered the most “conservative” societal unit, that should be the main object of religious and ethnographic studies.

During his trips he collected a number of ‘material artefacts’, and made some significant observations on the strength of ‘vestiges of religion’, as they were called at the time, as well as on the possibility of eliminating them. Living in the midst of the religious community allowed Snesarev to contradict the theoretical premise that the lack of external signs of religious belief in the Muslims of the region demonstrated that there were no vestiges of religion in their circle. In this regard, he wrote that very often the population remained strongly religious, despite the absence of mosques or religious officials, or even sacred sites such as a *mazar*, a sacred tree or stone. He emphasised that the main environment for the preservation of such vestiges was the female population, the housewives staying true to the custom of wearing paranjas.⁸

One of the issues the researcher focused on in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, was identifying the reasons behind the women’s preservation of the custom of wearing these ritual garments. Snesarev wrote in his report:

Мне приходилось беседовать с женщинами, еще носящими паранджу, и женщинами, снявшими ее. Почти все закрытые женщины выражают горячее желание порвать с этим тяжелым обычаем; большинство отлично понимают какой вред приносит паранджа. Но все в один голос ссылаются на мужей, заставляющих их ходить с закрытыми лицами.⁹

7 Gleb Snesarev, “Some Aspects of Ethnographic Field Research Methodology for the Study of Religion and Atheism,” *Ethnographic Survey*, no. 6 (2013): 89–94.

8 Sergei Alymov, “G.P. Snesarev and Field Research of ‘Religious and Household Survivals,” *Ethnographic Survey*, no. 6 (2013): 73.

9 Gleb Snesarev, “The Report on Expedition to the Central Asia in Spring, 1940 with the Purpose of the Study of Religious Vestiges,” in *History and Anthropology of Religion (1929–1946)*, ed. Marianna Shakhnovich (Saint-Petersburg: Saint-Petersburg State University, 2019), 236–62.

I talked to women who still wear a paranja and women who have taken it down. Almost all of the women wearing covers express passionate desire to abandon this difficult custom. Most of them are perfectly aware of the harm the paranja does them. However, they all mention their husbands who make them cover their faces.¹⁰

At the same time, Snesarev was enthusiastic to point out that, despite the old tradition, a wonderful movement against wearing paranjias now involved a great number of women, some of them religious. His 1940 expedition to Osh coincided with preparations for the International Women's Day celebration. At factories, in offices, and among housewives, there were large demonstrations and meetings. Removing the paranja was one of the central issues at hand. During this expedition, on 7th and 8th March, Snesarev attended several celebratory meetings and photographed the process of taking off the paranjias. At the meeting of the Arbakesh cooperative, three women took off their paranjias and presented them to the Central Anti-Religious Museum requesting that they become part of the museum's permanent exhibition.¹¹

Although the information on the SMHR collections provided in the present paper is by no means exhaustive, it clearly demonstrates that the objects stored at the museum, such as documents, manuscripts, monuments of material culture and art, photographs, and printed material, are a unique source base for the reconstruction and museum presentation of various aspects of the religious life of various ethnic and cultural groups, as well as for research into religion and the history of the study of religion in Russia.

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¹⁰ Translation by O. Glotova.

¹¹ Snesarev, "The Report on Expedition to the Central Asia in Spring, 1940 with the Purpose of the Study of Religious Vestiges," 256.

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