

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX MISSION AND PRIEST-MONK AFANASII'S "SECRET," 1824–1826

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the Russian-American Company (RAC) and the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska often conflicted, creating political tensions on both sides of the Bering Sea. An 1826 report by priest-monk Afanasii that was critical of RAC actions on Kodiak epitomizes the conflict. This incident highlights both the economic priorities of the RAC and the church's concern for the well-being of its adherents.

The Russian Orthodox Church has had a tremendous influence on the course of Alaska history. During the Russian-American period, it influenced the daily life of the Natives of Alaska—their languages, customs and traditions. The church remains very important to Alaska Natives to this day. Presently scholars use multi-disciplinary approaches to research the history and heritage of Russian America (e.g., Petrov et al. 2011), producing a number of works both in Russian and English. In 2010, Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin) published a fundamental volume on the development of Orthodoxy in Alaska since 1794. He is presently planning to translate it from Russian into English. New and interesting documents on this subject have been collected by Alexander Petrov and priest-monk Makary over the last two years. This essay is based on some of those documents.

The first mission to Alaska from Valaam Monastery, Karelia (consisting of six monks and four novices), departed from Moscow on January 22, 1794, and arrived in Kodiak on September 24 to establish the new era of Christianity in America. From this original group, which "has a tremendous history" (Kapalin 2010:21–97), only Afanasii and Herman remained by 1824. In many respects, 1824 was a crucial year for the North Pacific Russian colony. The period from 1818 to A.A. Baranov's dismissal by Russian naval officer Hagemester in 1824 was a difficult one for inhabitants of Russian America. The colony

was facing starvation due to a food supply shortage and, to complicate matters, the Russian-American Company (RAC) wasn't allowed to trade with foreign ships between 1820 and 1824.

These were also difficult years for the Russian spiritual mission in Alaska. There weren't enough priests to go around at the time, and those who were active tended to be rather old. By 1823, when most of them had passed away or gone back to Russia, the mission had all but stopped (Gregory 1990:292).

This serious situation was the subject of a special discussion in which the directors of the RAC, Minister of Finance E. F. Kankrin, and P. S. Meshcherskii, Chief Prosecutor of the Holy Synod, took part (Sokolov 1824). Having received letters from America and from St. Petersburg regarding the situation in Alaska, His Grace Mikhail, the bishop of Irkutsk, Nerchinsk, Iakutsk, and Cavalier, decided to support the spiritual mission by all possible means. In the autumn of 1823 and spring 1824, the spiritual mission in Russian America received reinforcements in the persons of Fathers Ioann Veniaminov and Frumentii Mordovskii.

On July 8, 1824, the ship *Ruirik* set sail for Unalashka. Father Ioann Veniaminov, the future "Apostle of America," was on board. During his nine-month stay in Novo-Arkhangel'sk [Sitka] he managed to gain the respect of Matvei I. Murav'ev, who was a captain in the Russian

navy and the territory's general manager from 1820–1825. Murav'ev (1824) wrote of the young priest: "It would be impossible to wish for a person of greater moral character, such knowledge, noble bearing, and with such dedication to his duties for this region than father Ioann."

Father Ioann's parish consisted of sixty islands on the border of the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the largest of which was Unalashka. Here he found ten small villages. There was no church on Unalashka, only a half-ruined chapel. He began his missionary activity by constructing a church. He was an excellent carpenter and mason, and in gaining the respect of the locals, managed to draw them into the construction effort (Veniaminov 1997:60–64). In a letter to Kyrill T. Khlebnikov, head of the RAC's Novo-Arkhangel'sk office, Father Ioann wrote: "I am pleased with my present situation, insofar as I am healthy, and could be happy, at peace, well-off, and content" (Dridzo and Kinzhalov 1994:157–158).

On January 27, 1824, Murav'ev sent the ship *Kiakhta*, under the command of Prokopii S. Tumanin, to Kodiak with a load of wheat (Tumanin 1825). The priest Frumentii Mordovskii was on board to be a priest in Kodiak. The situation in Kodiak had been the topic of discussion in the Holy Synod on September 23, 1824. The result was a decree stating that creoles who were "educated and with excellent moral character" could serve in the church as sextons (Murav'ev 1825a). The Holy Synod even authorized service without requiring travel to Irkutsk to receive the blessing of Bishop Mikhail, due to the hardship and time needed to travel the thousands of miles from Kodiak to Irkutsk (Sokolov 1824). Father Frumentii was supposed to have occupied his position in Kodiak the previous fall but, due to his illness, he and his family were allowed to postpone their departure with a rest stop in Novo-Arkhangel'sk (Murav'ev 1825b).

During the winter of 1825, Murav'ev was ailing, but continued to work in spite of his ill health. He busied himself with church affairs such as sending orders to his officers regarding the decree of the Holy Synod allowing creoles to wear the *sticharion*, an Orthodox liturgical garment. For example, in the Saint Arkhistratig Mikhail church in Novo-Arkhangel'sk, the creole Nikolai Chichenev (Chechenev; Chichenoff) was ordained as a *prichetnik*, a server for a priest, with an annual salary of 250 rubles.

The news Murav'ev received in Novo-Arkhangel'sk from Kodiak and Unalashka islands in the spring of 1825 was both good and bad. The troubling news came from Kodiak. Father Frumentii, together with Nikiforov, the

head of the Kodiak office of the RAC, went on a special inspection expedition to Spruce Island where monk Herman lived as a hermit. Herman had not visited Kodiak in many years, though Spruce Island is only about a mile away. He was reportedly operating an orphanage and had religious adherents living in the vicinity. At least one woman, Sophia Vlasov, was helping with the children at the orphanage. Herman didn't socialize with the people in Kodiak, as they made fun of him, although he had visited when Baranov was there. Father Frumentii, arriving at the hermit's cabin and finding a number of liturgical items worth thousands of rubles, took an inventory of Herman's possessions. Herman was then sent to Kodiak.

The situation in Unalashka was rather better. Ioann Veniaminov had settled in the old government house and had managed to present himself not only as a capable jack-of-all-trades but also as a very humble man. Murav'ev wrote, "the deeds of Father Frumentii from Kodiak have convinced me of the comparative superiority of Father Ioann" (Murav'ev 1825c:264).

While Murav'ev was happy with the activity of Veniaminov, he was worried by Father Frumentii's actions, since the RAC general manager had a great deal of respect for the monk Herman. Further, Murav'ev discovered that Father Frumentii, on his own initiative, had sent priest-monk Afanasii to Irkutsk. Murav'ev decided, however, not to take sanctions against the priest, fearing he may have been acting on directives from the bishop in Irkutsk or even the Holy Synod. Instead, Murav'ev sent to the RAC headquarters for special instructions.

As it turned out, Father Frumentii *did* have authority to send Afanasii to Russia (Afonsky 1977:43). It would perhaps be unfair to view Father Frumentii's actions solely in light of Murav'ev's comments. Father Frumentii was very much a man of his time and did his best to fulfill his role in the Orthodox mission as he understood it. In the end, his actions encouraged the government to pay closer attention and give greater care to the Orthodox Church in America.

Priest-monk Afanasii's return to Russia included an unexpected and unpleasant incident for the RAC. The 68-year-old priest-monk presented a detailed report to the bishop upon arriving in Irkutsk. He described "his 33-year service for the American mission and indicated that he had a secret [about the RAC] he was willing to disclose only to the Holy Synod," located in St. Petersburg (Holy Synod 1826:2). The Irkutsk office of the RAC began doing all in its power to prevent Afanasii from sharing his

secret. “[R]est in a monastery hospital” was suggested for Afanasii, who had just returned from an exhausting mission; Afanasii was also encouraged to tell his secret by letter, rather than in person. Bishop Mikhail asked Afanasii to stay in Irkutsk, while the RAC issued him an annual pension of 200 rubles (Kapalin 2010:91–92). Priest-monk Afanasii, however, was insistent that he reveal his secret to the Holy Synod. Eventually news of the affair reached St. Petersburg, and Afanasii was granted access to the synod and permission to return to Valaam Monastery.

In Moscow on September 3, 1826, priest-monk Afanasii revealed to the synod that for some time the RAC had been sending hunters from Kodiak and other territories out on trips lasting eleven or more years. As a result of the lack of spiritual guidance and separation from their wives and children, Afanasii claimed the men were drifting away from their faith. Further, the population had begun to decline due to the men’s prolonged absence. Afanasii asserted that there had once been as many as 7,000 Christians in Kodiak, but that by 1826 there were less than 4,000. According to Afanasii, fur hunters should be separated from their wives for no more than one year (Holy Synod 1826:1–3).

The priest-monk’s accusations against the RAC were a serious matter. On October 20, 1826, the synod’s chief prosecutor, Prince Petr S. Meshcherskii, sent a request to Minister of Finance Kankrin, asking him to settle the matter. By that time, the RAC had a great deal of experience dealing with such grievances. For example, in 1797 Father Makarii had gone to St. Petersburg to present a list of complaints about the RAC to Russian Emperor Paul I. The synod took no action, and Father Makarii was sent back to America with an admonishment from the Holy Synod not to leave his post without authorization and to cease complaining, as it was unbecoming in a priest. In the detailed response to Afanasii’s “secret,” the directors of the RAC demonstrated their respect for the Russian Orthodox mission and presented their understanding of the situation:

There is only monk Herman left from the spiritual mission, and he himself lives as a hermit. At present, [most clergymen have] been replaced by the white [secular] clergy which are providing better correspondence concerning the circumstances of the area, because while administering the rituals of the Church, the white clergy can lead with a good example of home life (Kankrin 1826:8).

The RAC directors in St. Petersburg were unsure whether Afanasii’s claim that the hunters had been sepa-

rated from their families for ten years or more was well founded. This was the first time since the company had been founded in 1799 that its agents met with criticism from its own directors. From RAC headquarters, Minister of Finance Kankrin wrote:

without insulting the memory of the Honorable [Grigorii I.] Shelikhov [the RAC’s “honorary” founder], it may be noted that he may not quite have accurately estimated the population of Kodiak, indeed, that he may have exaggerated it in order to lend greater importance to his new discovery, so to speak, his conquest. The clergy, following this reasoning, in a very forgivable mistake, increased the number of new converts to Christianity (Kankrin 1826:8).

The letter concluded, “during the last five years, the population [of Kodiak] had not diminished.” Priest-monk Afanasii did not pursue the matter and returned to Valaam Monastery, where he passed away in 1831 at the age of 74. He was interred in the monastery cemetery (Vinokurov 1937:120). In his book, Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin 2010) described priest-monk Afanasii as sick both mentally and physically.

The events of 1824–1826 described above are but a glimpse of the Orthodox mission’s activity in Alaska. The spread of the Russian Orthodox Church in America is inseparable from the history of Russian America and the RAC, which is in turn tied to world history. Events in the domestic and international arenas had a tremendous impact on the activity of the RAC, while “Orthodoxy, in the form of the Orthodox Church, was following in the footsteps of the Russian-American Company” (Gregory 1990:291–292).

As Russia’s first monopolistic privately held joint stock company, the RAC, under the protection of His Imperial Majesty, was trying to both profit and protect its flanks. The Orthodox Church, while economically and financially dependent upon the “Golikov-Shelikhov” Company (1794–1799) and later the RAC (1799–1867), saw its mission as transcending the business interests of the companies. The intent of the church was, and is, to give spiritual guidance and enlightenment to every individual regardless of nationality, ethnicity, economic position, and citizenship. Its doors were open to all. The differences between the Orthodox and RAC approaches to conditions in Alaska are clearly evident in the case of priest-monks Makarii (1797) and Afanasii (1825–26) (Petrov 2000:105–108). The actions of the Orthodox clergy in America were

seen as inflexible, even disloyal, from the perspective of the RAC. Yet, a limited number of clergy, working thousands of miles from home, brought Christianity to another world. The mission in America reached its apex in the work of Ioann Veniaminov, later St. Innocent, who brought to his teaching “patience and . . . a complete lack of any kind of force.” Innocent had “no use for seeking praise from people, no reason or purpose for pretense before others” (Gregory 1990:297; cf. Garrett 1979:327).

Many sources are available on the Russian Orthodox mission in Russian America. These documents, however, are scattered in different depositories throughout Russia and the United States. Bringing them all together is crucial to presenting a complete history of the era.

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