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## Unangan Orthodox Christianity: Conversion Through Similarity

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Unangan Orthodox Christianity: Conversion through Similarity

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the Humanities

Dominican University of California

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## Abstract

Between 1741, when Russians first entered the Aleutian archipelago, to 1867, when Russia sold Alaska to the United States, virtually the entire Aleutian indigenous population, the Unangan peoples, having been minimally missionized and influenced only by traders, had subsumed their ancient religious beliefs and practices into a new framework and converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity. This, despite the fact that by 1800, murder, disease and forced labor at the hands of the Russian traders were major causes of a near-extinction-level Unangan population decline of eighty percent.

This thesis will argue that, despite the injustices suffered by the Unangax at Russian hands, a major contributing factor in their conversion to Orthodox Christianity was their perception of impressive similarities between the two outlooks. This thesis will explore in detail four major points of correspondence that the Unangax likely perceived between their religiosity and that of Russian Orthodoxy, namely: 1) their cosmologies; 2) the ritual uses of Unangan masks and Orthodox icons; 3) the roles of water in rituals of purification; and 4) their practices of prayer. This thesis will conclude that because of these similarities, the Unangax found Orthodox beliefs and practices far from alien, and thus adoptable without an emotionally prohibitive abandonment of their own spiritual sensibilities.

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## Introduction

On Unalaska Island in the northern Pacific Ocean a man stands facing east as the sun rises. He bends down striking the icy stream with his hand and proclaims, "I am not asleep; I am alive; I greet with you with the life-giving light, and I will always live with thee" (Petrov 153). Four thousand seven hundred miles away in Moscow, another man stands facing east, in the predawn light, he prays, "Having arisen from sleep, we fall down before Thee, O Blessed One, and sing to Thee, O Mighty One, the angelic hymn: Holy! Holy! Holy! art Thou, O God; through the Theotokos, have mercy on us" (OCA.org). The similarities of the men's morning rituals are one of the reasons Russian Orthodox Christianity was accepted by the Unangax of the Aleutian archipelago after Russian fur traders established outposts on the islands in the mid 1700s.

The Unangax, which translates to the People, or the Seasideers, are also known as the Aleuts. They are the indigenous people of the Aleutian Islands whose territory extends from the Alaskan Peninsula to Kamchatka in Asia. Until recently, the ethnonym "Aleut" was used in most scholarly references, although, as Lydia T. Black (1925-2007), a leading scholar of the Russian Era in Alaska (1741-1867) notes, Unangax is "coming into use as an autonym of all Aleut groups as the idea of a United Aleut Nation takes hold" ("Animal" 126). Both names will be used in this thesis to retain the words and perspectives of quoted sources, both indigenous and nonindigenous. The name "Aleut" was given to the Unangax by Russian traders who may have mispronounced the Unangan (singular of Unangax) word for community, *allithuh*.

Long before first contact, an Unangan shaman predicted that White men with strange customs would come to them from beyond the edge of the sea and that all the people would become like the new arrivals. The prediction came true. The Unangax first encountered Europeans in 1741 when a Russian trading ship that was part of one of Vitus Bering's (1681-

1741) expeditions entered a harbor at the island of Adak, Alaska. The Unangax came out to the ship in their animal skin baidarkas, today known as kayaks, to see the great foreign sea vessel and traded some goods with the crew. The ship was commanded by Alexei Chirikov (1703-1748) who documented the encounter in his logs stating that “these men resembled Tartars in appearance” (Black, *Russians* 42). Meaning they are short in stature, with straight dark hair and a complexion similar to people of Northern Asia. The Unangax offered the Russians edible roots, a wooden hat, and sea mammal bladders filled with fresh water in exchange for knives, needles, and beads. Chirikov noted the Unangax were shrewd traders who would not accept one knife for one bladder; they demanded several knives for each vessel (42). Following the return of Bering and Chirikov’s crews to Russia, fur hunters began voyages to the Aleutian Islands seeking wealth from the enormous population of fur bearing animals such as foxes, fur seals, and seas otters. Encounters with the Russians, many being not as amicable as the first, would increase dramatically over the next few decades as the demand for fur and the need for safe harbors increased.

The Russians were in North America for one reason only; commerce. They were not officially interested in colonization nor imperial expansion. The high demand for fur by China was incredibly lucrative as the Chinese paid in gold for the furs at several times the going rate available in Russia. Catherine II (1729-1796), known as Catherine the Great, who became Empress of Russia in 1762, was a strong proponent of free trade and repeatedly refused requests for a trading monopoly like those of the British Hudson’s Bay Company or the East Indian Company. She also refused petitions for colonization of the Alaskan mainland. She said, “It is one thing to trade, quite a different thing to take possession” of the people (qtd in Black, *Russians* 113). Catherine II was also concerned with the numerous reports of abuses to the native

population at the hands of Russian merchants. In response to the reports, she reinstated the death penalty for a limited number of crimes against the state, unprovoked violence against natives being one of those crimes. Free trade in Russian America, the land mass currently called Alaska, which was then owned by Russia, ended in 1799 when Emperor Paul I granted a monopoly for the eastern North Pacific fur trade to the Russian-American Company. The Russian-American Company was Russia's first joint stock company and was chartered to establish new settlements in Russian America, harvest the natural resources, trade with the Native people, and explore the region. The monopoly escalated the fur trade which had devastating consequences for the sea creatures as well as the Unangax.

By 1800, barely fifty years after the initial contact with Russians, the Unangax population declined more than eighty percent, to about 2,500 people. Fierce battles broke out when the Russians took the Unangax' land for trading outposts. The Unangax were formidable fighters who were adept at throwing spears as well as in hand-to-hand combat. The Russians, unlike other European merchantmen, carried no cannon. They could not sit safely offshore and bombard the Unangan villages into submission; they were forced to come ashore through treacherous waters and engage the Unangax directly. The early Russians had lances, knives, and a type of narrow sword with a hilt cup called a *shpaga*. Weapons wise, Unangax and Russians were more or less matched evenly.

Armaments were not the only threat to the Unangax. The Russians sent more and more ships filled with sailors who carried European diseases with them. The Unangax could not survive the imported disease combined with the exporting of Unangan males from their villages to be used as forced labor. The Russians enslaved the Unangax to work in the fur trade. Dislocating large numbers of people from their homes by force had grave results. The young,

able-bodied men were taken away to work, which left the home villages without a means of sustenance. According to William S. Laughlin (1919-2001), who first visited the Aleutian Islands in 1938 as a student member of a Smithsonian Field Expedition and later conducted extensive field work in the Aleutians, the death toll from illness increased during the long winter months when food storage ran low, but overall death rates were higher during the dangerous hunting season when men ventured into the sea (*Aleuts* 13). The strong hunted at sea and the Unangan villages were now filled with the elderly, women, and children who could not provide enough food for everyone. Hunger and hardship were common. Black states, “This practice [of forced relocation and labor] of the last two decades of the eighteenth century must be considered one of the most disruptive factors affecting the population of the Aleutian archipelago, perhaps much more than the introduced or epidemic diseases: no epidemics were reported until after the turn of the century” (128). Through all of this, no part of Unangan culture was left unchanged.

The drastic decline in population left many villages empty and forced the Unangax to consolidate. Prior to the first contact with the Russians in 1741, there were hundreds of Unangan villages throughout the Aleutian Island chain and on the western end of the Alaskan peninsula. By 1834 only twenty-seven villages remained. When the Russian Era ended in 1867, approximately seventeen Unangan communities survived. The actual population numbers prior to and during the Russian Era are unknown. The first official census of the Unangax was limited to the Eastern Aleutians and excluded the seventeen islands of the central region and the Unangan who living in Kodiak. The census was conducted in 1791-92 by the Billings-Sarychev expedition, who were tasked by Russia with finding a navigable passage from the Arctic to the Pacific. The census only counted able-bodied men who were not baptized. The census recorded 950 able-bodied males.

At the same time as the dislocation of villages, other social and religious changes also occurred. Village leadership, which was based on matrilineal kinship ties, all but disappeared as leaders often found themselves in the uncomfortable role of negotiating between the Russian's economic interests and their own people. Along with these transformations came a new religion, Russian Orthodoxy. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, even before the first Russian Orthodox priests arrived from Russia, the Unangax were being baptized by Russian laymen. Russian Orthodoxy soon became the sole religion of the region.

In the Aleutian Islands, the secular business interests of the Russian trading companies clashed directly with the evangelistic spiritual goals of the Russian Orthodox Church. The trading companies were private enterprises that were not affiliated with the Church. The majority of the Russian traders were Orthodox Christians who brought their religious practices with them to the Aleutian Islands. The ships often carried a priest with them, but the clergymen were not employed by the trading companies. Conflict between the two, Church and the Companies, occurred over abusive treatment of the Unangan conscripted to work in the fur trade. Hieromonk Makarii, who stopped in Unalaska 13 June 1796, found the situation there most disturbing. Oleksa translated a letter Makarii personally submitted to the Emperor Paul. He wrote in part:

The Shelikov-Golikov Company men act like barbarians toward the people [Unangan]. They exhibit no humanity whatsoever. They beat people to death. Beginning in the early spring they send both the healthy and the sick to hunt sea otters against their will. They force them to continue hunting until autumn so that they have no time to attend to their own sustenance activities, to store food for themselves, or to take animals to make winter parkas. (288)

The Russian Orthodox Church had its own reasons for traveling to America. Christian missionaries travel throughout the world with the intent of converting non-Christians to their religion. Proselytizing is an aspect of their core beliefs and originates in a line in the Bible,

known as the great commission, in which Jesus instructs his followers to “go out and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). A common belief of Christian missionary work is that Christianity and Westernization must go hand in hand. Another common belief is that the indigenous people’s lifestyle, including their religious practices and beliefs, must be eliminated because they are incompatible with Christianity. Obvious examples of forced Westernization are the colonization of the Americas and the colonization of the African continent by Europeans, which decimated indigenous religious practices and beliefs.

However, not all Christians consider indigenous cultures and religions incompatible with Christianity. The Russian Orthodox Church’s missions did not seek to change the way the Unangan organized their communities and lives, even though their lives had already changed dramatically due to the fur trade. They only sought to convert them to their faith. According to Michael Oleksa, their “missions were of a spiritual nature, not a political one” (*Alaskan* 279). The Orthodox missionaries viewed meddling in political or cultural affairs as harmful to the indigenous people and harmful to the spread of Christianity. The Unangax were originally introduced to Christianity by Russian traders during the later portion of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then by Russian Orthodox Missionaries throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Black writes that “the Orthodox faith was carried to the Aleuts, and later to other Alaska Natives, not by missionaries dispatched for the task of conversion of the heathens, but by ordinary people, first the Russians and in later years by Natives who considered themselves Orthodox Christians (*Russians* 225). The most influential of the missionaries who came later was Father Ivan Veniaminov (1797-1879), who lived on Unalaska Island from 1824 to 1834, as the first parish priest stationed in the Aleutian Islands. He learned the Unangan language, wrote it down using Cyrillic letters, translated the Gospel of Matthew, and created the first Aleut dictionary.

The total combined time of priests on the Aleutians prior to the arrival of Veniaminov was less than two years within the span of nearly eighty years after the first Russians arrived in 1741. But even though the Unangan had already converted to Orthodox Christianity, Veniaminov was amazed by the reception to Christianity by the native Alaskan people. After his first visit to the Unangax in 1824, he wrote to Bishop Mikhail: "It is difficult to describe the zeal with which my Aleuts have been accepting the faith; their gratitude towards me teaching them; and the pleasure in my heart that I have received from teaching" (qtd in Yakimov 626). Because scholars do not have written accounts from the Unangax themselves, we can only surmise that this account accurately reflects the Unangan experience with the Orthodox clergy. It very well may not, and further research may bring this to light, but for now we must rely on written accounts of the clergy.

Prior to first contact, the Unangan religion was an offshoot of the prevailing shamanistic beliefs common to the northern Eskimo and the people of northeastern Asia. They believed in the existence of a creator of everything, but did not connect this god with daily activities. Their creator god was not an interventionist god like the God of Christianity. The Unangax acknowledged spirits and a multitude of deities, but did not single out one specific deity for widespread special attention or worship. They believed in the efficacy of talismans, especially those that would protect the hunter from death. The most common was a girdle woven with special knots and tiny beads which was worn close to the body (Golder 346). The Unangax believed in life after death and that the body contained a soul. Their beliefs were passed along in the form of songs, dances, and stories passed between generations and villages.

Why was the conversion of the Unangan to Orthodox Christianity by the laity so complete? One could assume, as mentioned above, that based upon the conversion of the native

people in the southern part of the Americas that the transition was forced and the new beliefs replaced the indigenous ones, yet, for as much as historians have been able to ascertain, this was not the case. Failure to understand how this religious transformation happened is due in part to our general failure to appreciate that some aspects of human religiosity are universal.

Three scholars who have contributed to the research on the subject of Unangan and Orthodox religious melding are, Lydia T Black, Father Michael J. Oleksa and S.A Mousalimas. This thesis draws heavily upon their work. Archpriest Michael J. Oleksa, who served in over a dozen Alaskan Native villages as their parish priest from the 1970 to 1990 and holds a PhD with an emphasis in Alaskan Native History, writes about the similarities between Unangan religious beliefs and practices and those of Orthodox Christianity in the introduction of his edited collection, *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality*: “Several specific aspects of the Orthodox theological/spiritual tradition corresponded directly to the pre-Christian beliefs and customs of the indigenous peoples and facilitated their conversion to Orthodox Christianity” (25). For example, the liturgical and festival cycle of the Orthodox year closely resembled the ceremonial calendar of the native Alaskans, therefore both groups could date events in relation to fixed dates on the liturgical calendar. Since the Unangax organized their lives around the cycles of nature, there is a strong possibility they easily related to the cycle of rites throughout the Orthodox year.

S.A. Mousalimas compliments Oleksa’s statement in his own observation that there “must have been vital characteristics within [Unangax] ancestral cultures that corresponded to and could engage with the Russian Orthodox Christian faith” (106). However, as Mousalimas emphasizes, though correspondence implies significant analogies between the two religiosities, it “does not imply equivalence” (106). Nevertheless, Unangax surely perceived an analogy between, on the one hand, their belief that a person who participates correctly in the ritual use of

a mask is temporarily transformed into the creature represented in the mask, and on the other hand, the evident Orthodox belief that a priest, when properly accoutered, is temporarily transformed into Christ. The two beliefs are formally similar but their full meaning, for each of the two groups, are dependent on very different contextual frameworks and thus not at all equivalent.

This thesis, in order to explain the one plausible means by which the Unangax absorbed and identified with Orthodox Christianity, will explore in detail four major points of correspondence that the Unangax almost certainly perceived, albeit with some indoctrination, between their religious sensibilities and those of the Russian Orthodoxy, namely: their cosmologies; the ritual uses of Unangax masks and Orthodox icons; the roles of water in rituals of purification; and the practice of prayer.

### Cosmologies of the Unangax and the Russian Orthodox

Religious cosmologies are attempts by man to explain how the universe is structured, how it began, how it works, and how, or if, it will end, and about how to live everyday life in accord with that overarching order. The Orthodox Christians and Unangan both viewed the structure of the world as layered and interactive.

#### Orthodox Cosmology

Orthodox Christians believe there are three levels in the cosmos: heaven, earth, and hell. They also believe in a single supreme being who is present in three aspects: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They believe the world was created by this Supreme Being, and that although the Creator is separate from the world, He permeates all things within His

creation. The technical name of this belief is panentheism, a notion that God suffuses but also exceeds the world.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online explains the etymology of panentheism as a combination of the Greek term “pan”, meaning all, “en”, meaning in, and “theism”, meaning God. Traditional theism often isolates God from the world. Pantheism and panentheism interrelate God with the world — i.e., God is in the world and the world is in God – but panentheism adds that God is also greater than the world. Panentheism emphasizes God’s active presence in the world, but holds that God also exceeds the world.

Mousalimas himself notes that panentheism means the existence of “all in God” and equally “God in all.” Mousalimas explains that panentheism conveys “divine immanence and divine transcendence as complementary realities” (*Masks* 116). The New Testament’s Gospel of John can be read panentheistically: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God and all things were made through Him” (Jn 1:1-2).

Oleksa, in “The Alaskan Orthodox Mission and Cosmic Christianity,” discusses how the Eastern Christian Church positively valued the created universe: “John 3:16, for example, in the original Greek says, ‘For God so loved the cosmos that He sent His Son.’ Ephesians 3:9 refers to the mystery which had been hidden ‘in God who created all things by Jesus Christ.’” In the same article, Oleksa quotes Colossians 1: 15-20:

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven and in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by him and for him: He is before all things, and by him all things consist; and he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first born of the dead; that in all things he might have pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell.

Orthodox Christians believe the creation of the world is a mystery originating from the will of God and executed through the power of the Holy Trinity who created the cosmos “out of nothing,” because “there was no preexistent matter” (OAA). God brought all things visible and invisible into existence.

### Unangan Cosmology

The Orthodox belief of “God in all” and “all in God” was similar to the indigenous Alaskan’s beliefs that the animal world was intelligent and powerful and that the Creator inhabited all. It is likely, therefore, that the Unangan found the cosmology of Orthodox Christianity compatible with their own cosmological understanding. The Unangax believe the cosmos contained three distinct worlds, to which they ascribed being and action. The highest world, called *akaban kuyuban*, is the most populated world and a world of eternal “day” with no night or evening. The second, or middle world, is the earth, where the least amount of people live. The third world is subterranean, and called *sitxfiuyix kuyufax*, where a multitude of people exist. There is no indication that any of these worlds were better or worse nor any indication of whether the beings who dwell in the separate worlds are mortal or immortal. According to Veniaminov, whose extant journals are the oldest documentation of Unangax religious beliefs, the Unangan “believed in the existence of a creator of everything visible and invisible,” whom they called *Aguluk*, “but [they] did not connect him with the guidance of the world, and paid him no special worship” (Ransom 346). *Aguluk* existed in all parts of the world. However, Veniaminov believed that they “kept him too far separated from the ruling of the world” and thus did not worship him (*Notes* 18).

Like cultures around the world, the Unangax had origin stories, one is paraphrased here from Ivan Petroff's (1842-1896) *Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska* from 1882:

At the beginning the earth was vacant, inhabited by nobody; but at one time there fell from the high world to the middle world two beings somewhat resembling man, but they had long fur all over their bodies. From them sprang a couple of familiar beings, but without fur; and from this couple came all the people who began to spread out to the east and north (they do not mention the south and do not suppose people live there). The place where these people originated was warm there was not winter, no gales, not a perpetually pleasant climate. The first humans were long lived, strong, and hardy.

At the beginning the people lived peaceably and in friendship, knowing no dependence or independence, no quarrel, and no wants; but with the increase of people, want and necessities appeared, and in their training of the art of making arms for hunting animals; then came dissention and wars, and the arms were turned against man. Want and the oppression of the weaker by the stronger compelled the former to migrate from their original habitations and the world was peopled. (154)

Although their Creator was non-interventionist in their daily lives, they did acknowledge, according to Ransom, two kinds of spirits “who determined the fate of man in every respect” (346). The first they called *xfiyax*, who is a helpful spirit, and the second *aylixayax*, who is an unhelpful spirit. Ransom surmises that “the earliest Aleuts worshipped light, the celestial bodies, and even the elements” (346). Black notes, “the symbolism with light was central and associated with good” (*Russians*, 230). The change in daylight after enduring long dark winters would naturally be regarded as a good thing. With spring came the food sources from the land and from the sea.

The Unangax believed in the immortality of souls and in a future life. This becomes apparent from the fact that prominent individuals were buried with slaves to serve them in the afterlife as they had done in life. An examination of the Unangax burial practices sheds light on

their cosmology. Archeological evidence reflects a diversity of kinds of graves and grave furnishings. The Unangax treated the dead in a variety of ways depending on the deceased's rank in society, if they were related to the deceased or not, or if they were enemies. Some adults had red ochre stained on their heads and young children often times had amber beads buried with them. Some bodies were found buried directly on the earth, some were placed on the top of a whale scapula, another inside a box constructed from flat stones, still others had chunks of whale bone placed over the skeleton. Some included harpoon heads and many included nothing at all except the body of the deceased.

The most common method of burial, which was used for friends and relatives, was to place the body in the ground near the barrabara in a village. A barrabara is a semi-subterranean dwelling, consisting of one great room, where several families lived together. The burial consisted of an oval shaped hole which was dug about three feet deep in which the body was placed inside and arranged in a curled up, fetal position. This was presumably to save space and lessen the amount of digging required. These graves contained beads and other small adornment items. Graves sites such as these are found throughout the Aleutian chain.

Another type of burial is more elaborate and is called an *umqan* burial. This burial consisted of a low mound with stones placed over the top of one or more graves. These graves were shallow and similar to the ones described above with the exception of having a V-shaped groove dug around the site to direct surface water away from the grave. These graves also included burial goods to accompany the dead into the spirit world (Laughlin, *Aleuts* 89).

In the Eastern Aleutian Islands, the Unangax frequently made mummies of some of their dead. The mummies' elaborate graves were placed in a remote or difficult area to access such as a cave or a rock shelter. Mummification was most likely used for persons of higher social rank.

This is supposed because graves which include mummies have a higher number of objects found with them than burial sites without mummies.

The objects include kayaks, various hunting equipment, armor, shields, masks, drums, and other people who were sacrificed with the corpse. Unangan men sometimes paid visits to the mummies of powerful individuals whose remains were believed to aid in hunting and other endeavors. The fat emanating from a mummy could be rubbed on a harpoon to transfer the power from the deceased to the living hunter. The Unangax believed in the power of the spirit even after death. Laughlin writes, "The basic objective was the preservation and use of the spiritual power that resided in the human body. This power could be retained in the body or let out of the body, but in all cases, it has to be regulated and handled with expert care" (*Aleuts* 96). The same great care taken with the bodies of those who are loved or revered was not shown for the slain enemies of the Unangax.

A slain enemy or dangerous person was dismembered to release and render harmless the hostile powers they could still possess. The dismemberment was a way of protecting the living survivor from a fatal encounter later. The following tale of a dangerous monster who was dismembered was dictated by Isidor Solovyov (1849-1912), an Unangan storyteller, to Waldemar Jochelson (1855-1937), a Russian ethnologist who recorded Unangan tales and narratives from 1909 to 1911:

#### Tagalax

When nobody who went around the island came back, Tagalix got angry and set out to go around the island. And he began to paddle. As he paddled on he saw something on the beach and not knowing whether it was a person, landed near him. Landing near him he went up the beach to him. He saw it was the one called Farter. Having seen that, he hurried back to his baidarka [single seat kayak], took the thickest sea lion hide he had with him and some pitch he brought with him. Getting to him, he covered his anus with the sea

lion hide and started to sew on it, finished the seam. Then he started to pitch the seam all around and finished it.

After that he turned back to his baidarka, lifted it up and threw it into the sea and jumped into it. Then he put on his spray skirt and tied his hood, and then lay with the paddle across his baidarka. Then he took his spear thrower and began to beat his baidarka deck, shouting, "Farter, for what you used to fart for, there are two lagoons."

And he saw Farter wake up and turn around toward him. He saw him having turned around toward him, make his anus ready for him. He began to see him straining. He began to see the hide he had sewn onto his anus become white. After a while he let smoke out of his mouth and fell down on the ground.

When he fell on the ground, he [Tagalix] landed near him. Then he went up to the beach to him with his bait knife. Having gotten to him, he cut off his head. He cut off his hands. Then he cut his stomach open. He took out his entrails. Having taken his gut loose and stretched them over him, he went to his baidarka, threw it into the sea and jumped into it. Then he started to paddle. He paddled around his island and reached his settlement.

Nobody who went around the island had come back, but he was said to come back, brought home with many going out and many going in, it is said. (95)

The enemy continued to be dangerous to the victor as long as the body was intact.

Laughlin notes that the early Russians who battled the Unangax recorded the "horrible mutilation practiced by the Aleuts" (*Aleuts* 103). Dismemberment of one's foes was not limited to the Unangax, other peoples of the Alaskan region such as the Inuit, also practiced this form of protection. Other forms of protection came from making offerings to invisible spirits.

The aboriginal Aleuts had no temples and created no idols, but there were holy or forbidden places known as *awaba'yaax*, which was where they made offerings to the invisible spirits. Such holy places were found in every village, being usually a mound, or some prominent outcropping. Women and young men were strictly prohibited from visiting these places and especially from gathering the grasses for basketry or removing stones (Ransom 346). The Unangax took care not to upset the spirits. They kept those things which belonged to the sea with

the sea and those items which belonged to the land, with the land. If a hunter needed to lighten the rock-ballast on his baidarka, he could not simply throw the stones into the sea, he had to return to shore and return the stones to the land. Likewise, the bones of a sea animal killed by a hunting party had to be thrown back into the sea, because not doing so would upset the spirits of the sea and of the land (Quimby 35). Oleksa explains that the “basic to Alaskan spirituality was a fundamental intuition that the animal world was intelligent and powerful” (*Alaskan* 9). The animal world and the spirits who existed there could act upon the Unangax in positive, as well as negative ways. The Unangax took care not to upset the order of the cosmos. Nevertheless, sometimes, the animal world intentionally upset the human order.

The bird Raven is a cultural hero and trickster among the Unangax. He is a benevolent transformer figure who helps people in their daily lives, but he is also a trickster character who’s poorly thought out behavior gets him, and the humans he interacts with, into trouble. The identity of the folklore tales about Raven among the Northwest Coast indigenous people was established by the Franz Boas (1858-1942), Jochelson, and others as a result of the Jesup Northwest Pacific Expedition from 1897-1902. For the Unangax, Raven is an expected part of life and is always around. Sometimes to teach a lesson and sometimes to announce the news as in tale of Real Raven told by Solovyou in Jochelson, “Raven, who was on top of his house, waiting on top of his house for them to come, and then, when mother appeared, Raven shouted, ‘A woman appears! May she come to Raven! Caw!’ (61). Raven is first among many birds and animals who appear in Unangan life (Liapunova 6).

Through predatory birds such as eagles, falcons, and hawks, men were given the power to hunt, kill and give life, to provide food, and to procreate. Black explains that “men made offerings of falcons, hawks, and eagles to benevolent powers associated with the sky, the east

and the sun” (“Animal” 132). Smaller bird feathers were used for decoration and as protection on *Kamleikas* (waterproof shirts made of large mammal intestines) and baidarkas. The colors of the feathers were symbolically significant, specifically the combination of black, white, and red. Furthermore, Black writes that “down was one of the most powerful protectors against evil spirits” (ibid 132). Birds were the most important symbol in the Unangan world view with the exception of sea otters.

### Cosmological Correspondence

Two major similarities in the cosmologies of the Orthodox Christians and the Unangax are evident above. The most important is that both cosmologies picture reality as three-tiered—upper, middle, lower—and place the lives of mortal humans on the middle tier. The Unangax were probably able to accept the well-defined Christian notions of heaven and hell as better versions of their less defined upper and lower worlds, and thus accept the whole Orthodox cosmology without much of a stretch.

Moreover, and similarly, Orthodox panentheism, the view that God’s spiritual power is everywhere and suffuses all possible worlds, probably sounded to the ordinary Unangan virtually the same as his or her animism, the view that spirit-powers of all sorts are everywhere and suffuse all possible worlds. Given the indigenous Alaskan’s beliefs that the animal world was intelligent and powerful and that the Creator inhabited all it is likely that the Unangan found the panentheistic cosmology of Orthodox Christianity compatible with their own cosmological understanding.

## Ritual Uses of Unangan Masks and Orthodox Icons

The following section explores the creation, use and meaning of icons by Orthodox Christians and of masks by the Unangax to assist in accessing the spirit world.

### Orthodox Use of Icons

Icons are painted images, and reproductions of these images, typically of biblical scenes, the life of Jesus Christ, historical events of the Church, and portraits of saints. The word icon comes from Greek meaning image. Church tradition teaches that the first iconographer was Saint. Luke the Evangelist, who painted the image of the Virgin Mary on a wooden panel. Icons are usually made of wood, but metal and glass are also used. They vary in size anywhere from a few inches across to a panel covering an entire wall. The Greek word *anagogic*, literally meaning, lead one upward, describes the purpose of icons. Photios Kontoglou, the renowned modern iconographer, explains that the icon raises the soul and mind of the believer (Alfeyev 216).

“Icons are primarily theological” writes Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev (1966-). “They portray [in nonverbal form] the basic dogmatic truths of Christianity—the Holy Trinity, the incarnation, the salvation and deification of man” and serve as a reminder of God (214). Icons thus play a catechetical role allowing the illiterate populations of the past to engage with the contents of Scripture and adding a visual dimension to the spirituality of the literate. “Icons do not depict anything; rather, they reveal” says Archimandrite Zinon (1955-), a contemporary world-class icon painter (qtd in Alfeyev 212). In the same spirit, Mousalimas adds that “The icon is a point of interaction with the archetype represented. The icon is also a point on intersection between heaven and earth” (*Masks* 134-5). Icons show people the invisible God by giving people glimpses of the invisible.

The distinctive look of an icon is achieved by the iconographer following the guidelines that govern their creation. The Russian Orthodox Church's first rule is that all icons must portray persons or angels. Yet an icon is never a portrait; rather, it intends to reveal its subject in their deified condition, serving as an analogue of the transformed Christ (Alfeyev 215). Leonid Ouspensky (1902-1987) an iconographer of the Church of Russia concurs: "The icon visibly captures the man [or woman] who has become a living icon, a true likeness of God" who has conquered his passions through the grace of God (166). The second guideline for the iconographer is to make the body parts thinner than normal and the features of the face such as the nose, eyes, and ears, elongated, to represent spiritual changes resulting from the ascetical efforts essential to authentic Orthodox spirituality.

The main person's likeness depicted on an icon is never in motion and never in profile, which conjures the impression of movement, but is painted in full-face view. Only people to whom reverence is not given, such as Judas the Betrayer are depicted in profile. The iconic face never depicts emotion, neither joy, sadness, nor elation. The spiritual center of the icon is the eyes, which rarely look directly at the viewer. They are usually looking off to the side or slightly over the viewer, as if to look into the spiritual world that exists outside of oneself. Alfeyev writes: "Icons stand to contrast a new meaning of life against the biological, brutal, beast-like life of fallen man" (216). The icon is a display of the result of obtaining sainthood rather than the process of obtaining sainthood. Therefore, icons are static, showing how they have no need for movement as they have arrived at the place others are still seeking.

In fact, before the iconographer begins his work, he must, according to the guidelines of tradition, engage in asceticism for self-purification. He prays and fasts in hope of achieving a level of consciousness that allows him to be a conduit of spiritual power to the icon.

Understandably, then, icons are both objects of contemplation and objects of veneration.

Veneration often takes the form of their being ritually incensed by priests while the faithful bow down before them.

One group of lay people who used icons were the *promyshlenniki*, (contract laborers hired by Russian sea captains to work in the fur trade) who were overwhelmingly from the Russian north. Their religious ceremonies at home were mostly presided over by laymen and their congregations included Siberian aboriginal populations. It was natural that they brought icons and other items required for the liturgy with them on their long sea voyages. In addition to the icons used for the liturgy, each ship contained a mast icon, and each Orthodox Christian sailor wore a body cross which was given to them at their baptism and worn for life. The ship's mast icon was a metal frame with several paintings inside, one of which was always Saint Nicolas, patron of sailors. On the manifest of their vessels they listed which icons and holy books were aboard first, then they listed the other cargo and personnel. The *promyshlenniki* held regular religious services onboard their ships and on land with their icons on display for all to see.

### Unangan Use of Masks

Unangan masks, or *Sagimaaqlux*, were carefully created sacred objects and were treated as such during each stage of their creation, use, and intentional destruction. "Knowledge of Aleut masks," Rogers regrettably reports, are "based on a small number of ethnographic objects and accounts, and even fewer archaeological finds" (66). Despite the paucity of physical evidence, however, we do know that the Unangax created and used masks for sacred ceremonial reasons, and never for decoration or personal ornament. Most masks were destroyed immediately after use by the person who used it because it was believed the mask held its power only during the

period of its intended use. The masks were used in a variety of community rituals such as dances, festivals, and burials.

Unangan winter festivals held for the purpose of insuring good hunting in the spring involved mask-wearing dancers dancing to the point of exhaustion. Their masks were “representations of spirits of animals and of supernatural beings who lived in the earth, ocean, or the sky” (33). It was believed that the wearer was, for a time, transformed into the represented spirit so that he or she could act as an intermediary between the visible and invisible worlds for the benefit of the community.

The Unangan tale of *Tanax-Amix* typifies these beliefs, *Chagnachxilax*, a visitor to *Tanax-Amix* (St. Paul Island) puts on a mask to change into a killer whale and heads out to sea. The killer whale form gives *Chagnachxilax* great strength which he uses to create a war party of killer whales to raid his enemies who live on *Tanax-Amix*. In this way *Chagnachxilax* used the powers contained in the mask to vanquish his enemies and keep his community safe.

### Mask and Icon Correspondence

Unangan masks were, and icons still are, believed by their respective users to aid them in their attempts to relate themselves to the invisible suprahuman powers identified in their myths. As Mousalimas puts it, “Icons and masks correspond inasmuch as both types of phenomenon involve divine participation with the cosmos through matter” (“Transition” 154). Masks represented the complete range of good and bad mythological beings with whom the Unangax imagined they had to deal wisely in order to avoid disaster and keep life on an even keel. The Unangax believed their lives depended on the intercession with the spirit world which was made

possible through their ritual use of masks. When the Orthodox Christians arrived with their icons of patron saints who interceded for them with God and the rest of the invisible world, the Unangax would naturally recognize the similarity once the purpose of icons was explained to them. As Black writes, “[over time,] the icon became a functional equivalent of the mask that provided a window into the worlds of the spirits and the Spirit” (*Russians* 229). She continues as quoted in Mousalimas, that when the wearer uses the mask ritually it, “transforms the wearer so that he becomes, for as long as he wears the mask, a living representation or incarnation of a beings outside the human sphere, but with the power to affect events therein. (*Mask* 133).

Behind both mask and icon lies the belief that their spiritual power and effectiveness depends on the sincerity of sacred intention the user brings to them. An icon hanging on the wall in a museum, for example, lacks the spiritual power it has when it is used within the Orthodox liturgy. Likewise, the mask was useless once the presumed ritual heightening the sacred intention had ended. The similarities the Unangax perceived between the spiritual function of their masks and that of Orthodox icons thus provided an important pathway for the Unangax to embrace the Christian faith.

Of course, there were differences between mask and icon as well. The mask is worn, while the icon is usually not worn. The mask covers the face of the wearer, while the icon, standing alone, as it were, is faced by everyone. The Unangax believe they lose their own personhood and identity during the moment they are transformed into the being represented by their mask, while the Orthodox Christian believes that even in the most intense moments of worshipful union with the icon’s representation, his or her separate personhood and identity (soul) is maintained.

## Roles of Water in Rituals of Purification

The following section will examine Orthodox and Unangan ritual use of water. The Unangax may have perceived similarities in the ways they and the Christians used water in their dealings with spiritual powers.

### Orthodox Ritual Use of Water

People have always used water to clean their bodies and their objects to remove unwanted dirt and other contaminants. As the Christian belief system developed a concept of spiritual contaminates (sin), water was used symbolically to cleanse the soul. John the Baptizer used water to baptize people in order to remove their inner dirt or sin. John performed this water ritual on Jesus of Nazareth, in effect launching the latter's career, assuring that this water-ritual of spiritual purification would have a permanent place in Christian spiritual ways.

The practice of baptism is literally an immersion in water that was practiced among the ancient Israelites. Ritual washing and complete immersion in water occurred in the days of the Temple in Jerusalem. Baptism holds the universal meaning of entering into a new life by washing away the old and starting anew. The new life includes a change of mind and heart from old and bad to new and good. For Christians the act of baptism is something more than a sign of moral change and spiritual rebirth a dying and rising with Christ.

Ritually blessed water or holy water, called *Agiasmos*, is used during the baptism ritual. This holy water, the effectiveness of which demands involvement by the person being baptized (or his or her representative if an infant) through a sincere act of faith. Saint John Chrysostom (349-407), an early Church Father, teaches, "it is the grace of the Spirit which sanctifies the nature of the [baptismal] water" (Quastin 47). Without this participation between the baptized

person and the Spirit, the sprinkling of *Agiastos* is nothing but an unwanted cold shower, devoid of any true significance.

The *promyshlenniki* brought the sacrament of baptism to the Unangan on those first ships and those who followed for the eighty years prior to the arrival of the first parish priest continued the practice of lay baptism. Black writes that the baptism was considered by the Russians as a “great gift they could offer” (*Russians*, 224). Water, in the form of lay baptism was central to the widespread conversion to Orthodoxy that Veniaminov encountered upon his arrival in the Aleutians.

#### Unangan Ritual Use of Water

Water played a prominent role in Unangan participation with the spirit world. Petrov records Veniaminov’s account of the ritual of Unangan men meeting the day:

The grown men were in the habit of emerging from their huts as soon as day was breaking, naked, and standing with their face to the east, or wherever the dawn appeared, and having rinsed their mouth with water saluted the light and the wind; after this ceremony they would proceed to the rivulet supplying them with drinking water, strike the water several times with the palm of their hand, saying: “I am not asleep; I am alive; I greet with you the life-giving light, and I will always live with thee.” While saying this they also had their faces turned to the east, lifting the right arm so as to throw the water, dripping from it, over their bodies. Then throwing water over the head and washing face and hands, they waded into the stream up to their knees and awaited the first appearance of the sun. Then they would carry water to their homes for use during the day. In localities where there was no stream the ceremony was performed on the sea-beach in the same manner, with the exception that they carried no water away with them.” (153)

The Unangax believed water purified them and self-purification was an important ritual to complete before beginning one’s day or providing for others. They also had a strong sense of the connection between the spiritual and living a fulfilling life. The Unangan man strikes the

water and proclaims, “I am not asleep.” He understands that without awareness of the spiritual world, one can be alive yet still be asleep.

Only the Unangan males went into the ocean to hunt. The task was obviously dangerous and required incredible strength. This necessitated that men begin training their body as young boys. They would perform special stretches to loosen the tendons in their legs to be able to sit inside the baidarka for long hours and they were repeatedly immersed in the icy ocean waters to build up a tolerance to the water they would hunt in and to get the sea used to the future hunter. When a woman was going to handle something that the man was going to use for hunting, she would wash her hands and comb her hair first. This was done so that the animal would not be afraid of things she handled (Jochelson 197). The Unangax clearly believed water properly used could transform a person or object from something bad and unwanted, to something good and valuable.

Unangan storyteller, Isidor Solovyou, recounts the water ritual of pregnancy and childbirth where a pregnant woman fetches water in a bucket then “rubs it on her belly and throws the water away” to sanctify and ease the birth of her child (135). The discarded water contains the unwanted, leaving behind the good. Once the child was born the water rituals continued. The newborn child was given a rude introduction to the Unangan world by a ceremony of immersion into the chilly surf of the Bering Sea. The sea would be the child’s world for the rest of his or her life, so they were introduced early.

## Ritual Water Use Correspondence

The Unangax who immersed their newborn children in the sea to welcome them into the world would have perceived the Christian practice of baptism as a close similarity.

Archimandrite Ioasaph, one of the missionaries to be stationed in the Aleutians wrote in a letter dated 1795, that “they [Unangan] take baptism ... to heart” (Oleksa *Alaskan* 39). The letter also claims, that once baptized, the Unangan would throw away their amulets and charms. This claim seems extreme and it is more likely that though some Unangan threw away their amulets, but many held on to them since they were deeply imbedded in their ways. In a letter dated two years later, Ioasaph finds it remarkable that the village elders, “accept it [baptism] in the younger people. As they believe it is dishonorable not to be baptized” (65). The water ritual of baptism may have been accepted by the Unangax because it was so similar to their childbirth water ritual. The similarity of the two rituals may have kept elders from seeing the Christian ritual as a threat.

When the Orthodox Christians explained that baptism washed away the sins of the person, the Unangax would understand this as another way to ensure a successful life. Black concludes that “in both religious systems, water was a medium of healing, transformation, and purification” (*Russians*, 230).

## Orthodox and Unangan Practices of Prayer

Saint Paul (c. 64) in his first letter to the Church in Thessalonica, exhorts the community to “pray without ceasing” (5:17). The Apostle to the Gentile’s instruction parallels the words of St. Luke, “He [Jesus] spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (18:1).

One of the main concerns of Christian prayer has always been the well-being of others (“love your neighbor as yourself”). The same holds true for the Unangax. In the Unangan community, prayers offered to keep a person safe on a fishing expedition for example, are actually prayers for the entire community, because if the fisherman does not return, the community does not eat.

### Orthodox Practices of Prayer

The *promyshlenniki*, the first of the foreigners to live among the Unangan, practiced prayer in all aspects of their life. They prayed before meals and before embarking on journeys. They asked for protection while out to sea and their ships were named after saints as a protective measure. They also faced East during prayer. The Orthodox face East because their Lord ascended to heaven on the Mount of Olives, and when he comes back, he will come on a cloud from the East. Saint John of Damascus explains that praying to the East has several other biblical references: “God is spiritual light” (1Jn 1:5), and Christ is “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal 4:2) and “Dayspring” (Zach. 3:8, 6:2, Lk 1:78).

Orthodox Christians pray at several designated times each day. The daily cycle of divine services is the recurring pattern of prayer and worship that punctuates each liturgical day in the life of the Orthodox Church (OCA). The daily cycle follows this pattern: vespers (sunset), compline (after-dinner), midnight Office (12:00 am), matins (sunrise), first hour (6:00 am), third hour (9:00 am), sixth hour (12:00 pm), ninth hour (3:00 pm). Of course, not all Orthodox Christians pray the entire daily cycle. Monastics and priests would do so, but laypeople like the *promyshlenniki*, would most likely pray only during the morning and evenings. However, prayer was not limited to the times designated by the Church. Black writes that the Russians said prayers at the commencement of the day or a task, and “during regularly held” religious services

officiated by laypeople (*Russians* 227). Offering prayer before and during daily activities was woven into the fabric of the Orthodox Christian's day. Without the services of the clergy or the availability of the worship space of a church, the Russian's religious life was maintained through their everyday activities, such as hunting, eating, and the completion of tasks. In the dangerous world in which these people lived, one could die at any time. Maintaining the appropriate prayers and rituals was essential to holding the Russian diaspora community together and staying in the good graces of the Creator. The ramifications of falling out of grace was to risk eternal damnation.

#### Unangan Practices of Prayer

Oleksa explains how all Alaskan Natives consider themselves "the Human Beings," as well as part of the tribe. When people enter the world, they are given a way in which to live in harmony with all the other forces, spirits, and creatures with whom they share the cosmos" (*Alaskan*, 8). Unangan children are taught this sense of self and collective identity. We are the "real people" and "our ways" are the ways that should be followed to remain aligned with the cosmic forces. Any deviation risks an imbalance and therefore catastrophe to the universe. To forget is to perish. Unangan prayer is therefore understood in part a remembrance of the spiritual world, a remembrance of sacred cosmic context of all life.

When Veniaminov observed the Unangax praying, he recognized the Christian style of prayer. This very well may be because the Unangax had been instructed on how to pray by the Russians during the fifty years of Russian occupation before Veniaminov arrived. The Unangan style of prayer the first Russians observed may not have resembled Christian prayer. "I do not say that all Aleuts pray," writes Veniaminov, "but some do, and they understand how to pray, I

do not mean that they merely know how to cross themselves, bow, mumble some sort of prayer—not at all. Some know how to pray from the heart” (Veniaminov qtd in, “If Reports” 189). Veniaminov goes on to describe where and how the Unangan pray, “They do not do so before others, but do so in their own dwellings behind closed doors. I have noticed that those who truly pray do nothing which attracts attention” (189). In Veniaminov’s opinion, the Unangan prayer practices were personal as well as communal. Veniaminov’s perspective was not objective. It is highly likely that as a Christian priest tasked with evangelizing to the Unangax, Veniaminov was looking for behaviors that aligned with his Christian ritual. The Unangax may have been praying in the Christian manner inside their homes to avoid criticism for not observing the traditional ways.

In some cases, “the Aleuts, . . . prayed to the East,” explains Black (*Russian*, 230). This was done during the widespread morning ritual of “greeting the day” by the Unangan men who splashed water upon themselves and said a prayer to the Spirits of the new day. Light was associated with the good and by praying in the direction of the rising sun, the Unangan men were asking for the good to enter their life (230).

Some aspects of life specifically required the special intention of prayer. This was especially true in the case of the hunting of animals to feed the community. The Unangan hunter prayed to show respect to the animals sought in the hunt. The Unangan believed animals possessed powers and abilities far beyond those of humans and by praying, the hunter showed the proper respect to the animal. In Unangan culture, if a hunter failed to bring home the prey, it was because the animal did not cooperate with the hunter. The reason an animal would not cooperate is when something was out of balance and the relationship needed to be improved. Prayer was a means of improving and repairing that relationship. Another way the Unangan

maintained a good relationship was when “men offered bird feathers” to the spirits, as explained by Black, “as a sort of material embodiment of prayers to the divinity” (*Animals* 132). Prayer and offerings provided the Unangax with a way to remain in harmony with the other beings who inhabit the cosmos.

### Prayer Correspondence

The early Russians and the Unangax shared much in the way of their Practices of Prayer. Every being and every aspect of nature was interwoven with the spirit, which needed recognition, and respect, because events could take a turn for the worse when one was not vigilant. Black records the observations of Cherepanov who wrote about the similarities in practices of prayer between his people and the Unangan:

They live and act in everything simply. Just like we Russians, when we set out on any enterprise, call on the name of the Lord God to aid us and bless [the enterprise] or when at sea in the baidaras on the way to our hunting, all keep silent for a while and then, having called on God in hope of his mercy, we say “God aid us,” likewise these foreign peoples, leaving for the hunt, say the prayer “Lord bless.” And when setting out in the baidaras, like ourselves, all keep silent and they say, like we do, “God help us.” (*Russians* 224)

When the Unangax saw the Orthodox Christians pray before setting out on an enterprise, they may have perceived this as asking for permission from the animal Spirits to capture them. The same correspondence of praying to the animal Spirits may have been perceived by the Unangax in the Orthodox prayer before a meal. In the Unangax view, how else could the animal allow itself to be captured unless the relationship between hunter and prey was correct?

While prayer was essential to the hunters in both cultures, not everyone prayed. The Unangax witnessed the Russians praying, but prayer was not a part of every Russian’s daily life.

This also may also have served as an avenue of similarity for the Unangax as not everyone in their community participated in prayers as noted by Veniaminov. When the Orthodox Christians who did pray did so at designated times of the day, the Unangax could understand this as a practice similar to aligning oneself with the spirit forces who are only present during that time of day.

For both the Unangan and the Russian Orthodox Christians, prayer was a thing one does, and prayer was something a person is. It would be impossible to separate prayer from the individual or from the group.

## Conclusion

The pre-Christian Unangan who greets the dawn by joyously striking the water and proclaiming he is alive does so because for him all good things, and life itself, come from the rising sun. Likewise, the Russian Orthodox Christian proclaiming “Let us venerate Christ’s Holy Resurrection! For behold, joy has come into all the world,” does so because all good things come from the risen Son. The Sun and the Son are obviously worlds apart, but both these holy things “rise” might have been enough for Unangans to consider this yet another reassuring resonance that the strange beliefs professed by the powerful strangers now in their midst were perhaps not so strange after all.

The four points of correspondence discussed in the chapters above, cosmologies, the ritual use of masks and icons, the ritual use of water for purification, and their respective practices of prayer may well have facilitated the Unangax adoption of the Orthodox Christian religion. The Unangan witnessed the daily lives and practices of the Russians living among them and observed how some of the Orthodox Russians incorporated their religious beliefs into their daily activities. The Unangax would likely see the Orthodox Russian’s practice as a similar method of integration of spiritual belief to the way they integrated their spiritual belief system into their lives.

Prior to the arrival of the Russian traders, the Unangax existence depended on a correct relationship with the spirits who also lived among them. After the Russians established themselves in the Unangax communities, their very lives depended on a correct relationship with the Russians. Adopting Orthodox Christianity was possibly a way to maintain that correct relationship. The Unangax’ faith and ritual practices were deeply rooted in their way of life and in the structures of their community. The heart of the Unangax ancestral beliefs was their

practices of acknowledging and paying respect to the spirits around them. Which is why Mousalimas believes the Unangax were retained “the new [Orthodox] faith and practice” (*Masks* 224).

Embracing Orthodox Christianity very well could have been a means of survival and comfort for the Unangax who had experienced extreme trauma and upheaval at the hands of the Russians. Within fifty years of first contact with the Russians, the Unangan population had been decimated. The majority of the men had been killed or enslaved and most of the villages no longer existed. By relying on their ingrained belief in the supernatural, the Unangax protected themselves spiritually from the violence inflicted on them by some of the Russians. Despite this persecution, they were able to perceive the similarities of belief and practice between themselves and the Orthodox Christians and may have used religion as a way to heal their trauma or at least make it endurable. Their experiences during the Russian period may have helped them survive other traumatic upheavals that occurred later in their history and are briefly described in the addendum of this thesis.

The Unangax experienced violence and oppression at the hands of the Russians who were in their lands for profit, nevertheless, they adopted the religion of their oppressor without being forced to do so. The Russian trading companies had no desire to convert the Natives to Orthodox Christianity. There was no financial motivation to do so because the companies were not funded by the Church. The Unangax conversion happened over time through sustained contact with the Orthodox Russians who manifested their beliefs in everyday life through the observance of rituals and lay religious services. The religious conversion happened organically, without the coercion. The ancestral beliefs of the Unangax were not immediately abandoned upon arrival of the Russians. It took time for the Unangax to incorporate their spiritual beliefs and practices into

the Orthodox Christian framework. They likely did this through multiple perceived points of similarity between the two religiosities.

### Addendum

Much has happened to the Unangax since the Russian period of 1741 to 1867 when Alaska was purchased by the United States, including the near complete suppression of their culture and language, invasion and bombing by the Japanese, forced evacuation and interment by the American government, exploitation by fishing companies, the reclaiming of their land from the United States government, the development of the largest fishery in the Pacific, and a concerted effort to revitalize their culture through song, dance, and education. This addendum will provide a brief summary of the above-mentioned events will provide the reader with a more complete picture of these northern Pacific Islanders, the Unangan.

After the sale of Alaska in 1867, the forces of capitalism brought immense changes to the region. Unalaska remained the largest population center and most important port in the island chain. Whaling and fishing industries of cod, salmon, herring thrived along with trading, military activities, and an influx of maritime activity caused by the Nome gold rush in 1899. During the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fox trapping was a lucrative enterprise, although it declined soon, due to over trapping.

The Methodist missionaries arrived with a different brand of Christianity than was unfamiliar to the Unangan. Although the Orthodox has always maintained a presence in the region, the zeal and government backing of the Protestants overwhelmed the Unangan culture. Children were highly encouraged to go to school where only English was spoken and taught. The Jessie Lee Home for Children was established in Unalaska by the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1890 for the education of young natives. They soon began taking in children who were orphaned, came from broken homes, or whose parents had died from influenza which were rampant (Clark). Kathryn Dyakanoff (1884-

1980) was one of the children who lived there due to the loss of her parents to influenza. She was selected as a promising young person and was sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, then graduated from Westchester State Normal School. She returned to the Aleutians where she taught in several schools throughout Alaska and became a cultural leader of Unangan. Dyakanoff is the author's maternal great grandmother and the inspiration for this thesis. Stories of success such as those of Dyakanoff are unfortunately marred by the military aggression of the Japanese during World War II and the policies of the US government toward the Unangan.

On June 3 and 4, 1942, the Japanese military attacked U.S. Army and Navy bases in Dutch Harbor, Unalaska Island. Several days later, they occupied two islands in the Western Aleutians, Kiska and Attu. Forty-two Unangan were captured and taken to Japan where they were used as forced labor for the duration of the war. Twenty-four survived and were returned at war's end, but were not allowed to return to their villages because the US military classified the islands as unsafe for habitation. The twenty-four former prisoners of war were forced to live out their lives in unfamiliar communities on an island closer to the mainland.

For the rest of the Unangan, their fate was up to the United States. After Japan bombs Dutch Harbor, the U.S. Army evacuated more than 800 Unangan from the Aleutians. The Unangan were told they were being removed for their protection, but non-Unangan residents of the Islands were not evacuated, they were free to stay. The Unangan were only allowed to take one suitcase with them, then they were sent by open Navy boat 1500 miles East to abandoned canneries and mining buildings. Medical care, sanitation, and housing conditions are deplorable. The Unangan face food shortages and have to stuff newspapers to fill the holes in the walls to keep the winter air out. They would live this way for three years before being able to return to

their homes which had been ransacked and looted. One in ten Unangan would die during these three years. In 1988 the US government issued a formal apology and made financial reparations, but the damage to the cultural identity and spirit of the Unangan would take decades to rekindle (Blakemore).

Today, the Unangax are spread throughout the world, although most still live in Alaska. In 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed and the remaining 3,249 Unangan were enrolled in the regional Aleut Corporation located in Anchorage. The Aleut Corporation is a for-profit organization which provides services and opportunities, such as culture camps and scholarships for the Unangan. The Unangan are a resilient people who have a deep faith in their heritage and although their population is not growing rapidly, they are actively recovering their ancestral ways.

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