



James White. A Review of **Douglas Rogers**. *The Old Faith and the Russian Land. A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009, xvii + 338 pp.

Money, Morality, and Power in the Russian Regions

For many commentators on Russia's past and present, Old Belief has served myriad uses. Its break with the Russian Orthodox Church in the mid seventeenth century over seemingly insignificant liturgical alterations has become for many western writers a symbol of a general problem with Eastern Christianity: that it is obsessed with ritual minutiae at the expense of more 'rational' theological questions. In a not too dissimilar vein, Orthodox churchmen castigated the schismatics for the fanaticism with which they defended their rites, an attitude they deemed improper and unseemly. For others, the schism was portrayed as preserving an authentic form of Russian folk culture, a treasure trove of national identity protecting a Russia untouched by the westernising of Peter the Great and his successors. To Marxist-Leninist scholars, it was the outraged cry of a people oppressed by serfdom and a centralising autocracy, understandable in the conditions of the seventeenth century but outdated and reactionary in the industrial age.

All of these points of view have competed with each other, in various periods and institutional contexts, to dominate the narrative of Old Belief and its place in Russian history. The Old Believers themselves have had all too few occasions to put forward their own accounts: with a few brief exceptions, Old Believers have seldom had the freedom to print their stories for

James White
European University Institute,
Firenze, Italy
james.white@eui.eu

general public consumption, a deep irony given how much they valued literacy and book culture as a whole. Generally, Old Belief is a tale that has been told by outsiders, always seeking either to praise or condemn it in terms often radically removed from those used by its adherents.

It is no surprise therefore that many articles and essays have either glossed over or completely misunderstood so many aspects of Old Believer rite, theology and communal life. For example, how could Soviet scholars, dedicated to demonstrating Old Belief to be doomed popular reaction, explain its remarkable vitality in late imperial Russia, in precisely those conditions of modernity that should have condemned it to obsolescence? In much the same way, how have populists who saw within it the spark of authentic tradition dismissed the myriad ways Old Believers have adapted their modes of living to urbanisation, rapidly changing technology and modern forms of economic relations? To even speak of a single movement known as Old Belief shows how deep the misconceptions run: there are innumerable groups that operated and operate under this umbrella term, many of which bear only the vaguest similarity to each other. This is a vision that we have inherited not only from bishops and missionaries but also from the schismatics themselves as some of them sought to forge a unity of belief, ritual and purpose that never really existed in the first place [Michels 2000].

Modern historians, both Russian and western, have done much to undo many of these problematic interpretations, abandoning them in favour of sophisticated analytical frameworks developed in the study of western religions. Monographs have been published that focus on gender, community, relations with the state and wider society and interactions with processes of modernisation: all have sought to destabilise essentialisms by turning to the voices of Old Believers themselves and by showing how time and place could change what were once thought to be fundamental characteristics of Old Belief. Much of this has been dependent on the tireless efforts of Soviet and post-Soviet archaeographers whose pursuit of old texts, examples of material culture, and interviews with modern adherents of the old faith have put a tremendous and ever increasing source base at the disposal of scholars.

It is within this ongoing project of reworking Old Belief's past, present and future that the ethnography of Douglas Rogers is situated. Focussing his study on the small town of Sepych and the surrounding area in the Perm region, Rogers traces the history of priestless Pomorian Old Belief [*Pomortsy*] in the locality from its origins at the end of the seventeenth century to the twenty first century. To do so, he makes copious usage of archival material, interviews and field observations from the ethnographic work that he conducted in the town over the course of several years.

If this were all that the book did, then it would already be a startlingly original work, for no one else has furnished research so intensive in its geographical focus but yet so broad in its chronological scope, furnishing us with the kind of in-depth account sorely needed. However, he goes much further by forming a highly sophisticated analytical framework aimed at investigating not so much the history of Old Belief but rather of the ethics that Old Belief helped forge in Sepych, ethics being defined as 'a field of socially located and culturally informed practices that are undertaken with at least somewhat conscious orientation toward conceptions of what is good, proper or virtuous' (p. 11). The object of his attention is what he calls 'an ethical repertoire', a series of deeply rooted practices and ways of acting within a particular community that persisted over a long period of time but yet were profoundly altered by various contingencies and external forces seeking to mould ethics for their own purposes. Of fundamental importance in these shifts were the 'materials of ethics', physical objects (money, food, drink, bodies and rituals) and the ways in which they were exchanged. When transformations occurred within the circulation, sufficiency and value of these materials, the ethical repertoire necessarily changed as well, sometimes falling back onto older habits and other times becoming something new and unexpected. Monetisation and demonetisation are thus key themes within the book, for the presence or absence of money and the effect of such on patterns of exchange could significantly alter practices. This also connects Sepych with a wider context that spans far beyond Perm or even Russia: broad economic changes occurring on a global scale have transformed the way in which ethical relationships were formed in this small town in the Upper Kama region.

Power is also a major subject in such a study since the 'moral communities' forged by ethical practices were unequal, conflict-ridden and functioned on mechanisms of exclusion as well as inclusion: thus changes to the ethical repertoire shaped and were shaped by power relations and the moral expectations that they engendered. The ethical repertoire also interacted with 'moralising discourses', instructions from various figures of authority that sought to homogenise behavioural practices.

Rogers opens the analysis by turning to the eighteenth century origins of priestless Old Belief in Sepych in order to examine the idealised form of the ethical repertoire. This he finds in the generational divide that shaped religious worship. Originating both within priestless theology and long established Orthodox traditions, the Old Believers of Sepych functioned on a basic division between those who lived in the world and those who did not. Those who had to deal with the material world did not occupy themselves with religious matters, often not even attending services: these were younger people,

concerned with matters of economic survival. The older generations, on the other hand, left the world behind to become ascetic elders and focus on religious affairs: such was their disdain for worldly matters that they rejected eating the same food or sharing the same dining utensils as those who lived in the world. General aversion to economic matters (like the handling of money) was also expected. It was only with age and perhaps in preparation for death that individuals would become elders, thus taking up religious worship and eschewing the sins of the world in preparation for salvation. Pastors were the one exception: middle-aged men, they acted as something of a bridge between the worldly young and the unworldly old when they were elected to this position. This generational deferment was the fundamental practice at the base of the ethical repertoire that was supposed to define an individual's attitudes to material objects, be they religious rituals, coins or food, other people and the larger structures of state and society.

Such an ideal was added to by the 'moralising discourse' of Nicholas I against civil marriage, a common habit among Old Believers none too inclined to have their marriages legitimised by Orthodox priests. Sexual abstinence and the disengagement with the business of marriage became part of belonging to the elders who refused contact with the world in preparation for passing to the heavenly kingdom. This helped preserve Old Belief. Since the younger generation could marry in an Orthodox church without necessarily endangering their chances for salvation, the community could satisfy the requirements imposed by the state and the local landowner without sacrificing their Old Belief, to which individuals could 'return' on the death of a spouse or after the opportunity for sexual activity had long since passed. The body, its gender and the sexual relationships in which it engaged were thus one of the 'materials of ethics' that transformed the ethical repertoire, shaping the relations and practices of both generations.

Money and its growing presence in the post-emancipation economy posed new challenges to the ethical repertoire: since there was now much more opportunity (and need) to handle money after the abolition of serfdom, there was increased danger that the elders would be exposed to it. Equally, money changed labour patterns and thus gender relations: as men increasingly migrated in search of paid work to deal with higher cash rents, women asserted a stronger role in the household economy. This in turn led to a growing number of female pastors. The result was an enduring schism between two groups of Sepych Old Believers as one accused the other of failing to properly separate itself from the world and handing over too much authority to women. In other words, the growth of a monetised economy caused shifts in how the elders related to the world, which in turn helped to exacerbate fragmentation as quarrels broke out over

the definition of what constituted ethical behavior for an Old Believer.

The Soviet regime's campaign against religion had paradoxical effects in terms of the ethical repertoire. The generational divide in Sepych Old Belief was perfectly tailored to avoiding the eyes of the state: younger generations could relate to the communist world and its institutions for the community while the elders could conduct religious ceremonies whilst excluding themselves from dealing with many aspects of socialist reality. Equally, the shortage of goods and products, especially in the 1930s and 40s, meant that it was much easier to eschew those objects that were defined as being worldly. Thus, the division between old and young, unworldly and worldly, was exacerbated by the Soviet period's anti-religious campaigns and material shortages. Other changes also occurred. The feminisation of Old Belief continued apace: women engaged as much as men with the socialist world around them but did not break off religious networks connected with the household economies that they managed, allowing them to become elders once their worldly commitments no longer weighed upon them. Equally, the growing number of years spent on careers and family obligations led to increasingly geriatric elders and thus put paid to the role of the middle aged pastor who might act as a bridge to younger people.

The post-Soviet era has challenged the ethical repertoire more strongly for two reasons. Firstly, the circulation of money (and its occasional replacement, moonshine) has once again questioned the extent to which it is possible to rigidly reject the material world: the answer of many is that the strictures are largely unnecessary. Secondly, priestless Old Belief has come under threat in Sepych from the establishment of a priestly church belonging to the Belaya Krinitsa hierarchy in the town: their message of a Christian community undivided by generations has had a great deal of appeal in the socio-economic uncertainty of the 1990s. The appearance of a hierarchical church has once again masculinised the leadership, if not the laity, of Old Belief: now religious authority lies firmly in the hands of a male priestly caste. However, Rogers concludes with a discussion of funerary rites where it is apparent that preparation for death still involves the separation of the worlds of work and prayer.

Thus the ethical practices and relations deriving from generational deferment of participation in religious worship are still extant in Sepych, even if they are greatly transformed from their emergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This preservation is not down to some essential characteristic of Old Belief that makes it better at maintaining tradition but rather is due to the way in which individuals and communities have interacted with broader changes of economy, society and politics.

Rogers' text is far more expansive and rich than this brief summary of his argument allows me to record. For example, there are enlightening discussions of the scholarly discovery of Sepych Old Belief in the late 1960s and the utilisation of their significant manuscript collections to contest Soviet modernity with a popular Russian tradition. Nor should one neglect to mention the intensive examination of both Soviet and post-Soviet economic realities in Sepych where the analysis focuses on the moral realities in which idealised economic models operate. Anyone interested in gender, marriage and family in late imperial Russia will find much of value in chapters one and two. Finally, it would be remiss to ignore Rogers' sharp investigation of why the category of conversion is of little use when dealing with movement to, from and between schismatic groups.

There is little in terms of criticism that one can legitimately point to in this profoundly original and well-argued study. Admittedly, sometimes one did feel the need for greater contextualisation: for instance, an examination of the revival of Old Belief in Russia as a whole after 1991 would have been helpful in understanding the events occurring in Sepych, especially since competition between Old Believer groups is a key part of the story. Equally, there are the occasional moments when the terminology of Rogers' conceptual framework obscures almost as much as it reveals. However, these are minor quibbles against a book that in many ways vastly changes how scholars look at Old Belief. The methodology and concepts of historical ethnology combined with a *longue durée* perspective on a relatively small locality proffer a real way forward for dealing with the schism in the historical, anthropological and sociological disciplines. Written with a wry sense of humour, acute analytical verve and a mastery of the techniques of his discipline, Roger's monograph is highly recommended to all interested in Old Belief, the history of Russian religion and the ethnography of socialist and post-socialist societies.

References

- Michels G. B., *At War with the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.