

TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND THE OLD RITUALISTS

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In Russia, the countryside is an overwhelming presence. It is not some secondary life-style, episodic, diminished or reduced to quaint happenings. It has a life of its own, unique, total and day-to-day, both material and moral.

Pierre Pascal, *La civilisation paysanne en Russie* (1937)

The above was written 60 years ago. Much has changed. The majority of Russians today live in urban conditions. The village is dying. But the mass exodus from the countryside began during the lifetime of the parents of today's young adults. With the exception of the *intelligentsia* and the thin stratum of skilled workers and technicians, the mass of city-dwellers carry with them the legacy of 'peasant civilization'. This is especially true in the provinces, where 'cities' exist more in name than in fact. The psychological weight of the peasant legacy is evident in the popular reaction to 'market reforms'.

Pièrre Pascal was perhaps Pre-War Europe's greatest 'Russian expert'. For him, understanding Russia meant knowing Russian peasant civilization, which in turn meant knowing about the Old Ritualists, the cultural and spiritual vanguard of the peasantry. The importance of Old Ritualists in the preservation of Russian traditions is tacitly recognized by field workers in ethnography and folklore, since it is among Old Ritualists that peasant society and culture survive in their most complete and unspoiled forms.

'Tacitly', because in Soviet times it was forbidden to write about Old Ritualist communities. Thus, in all the numerous ethnographic studies of Siberian peasants conducted during the past three decades – the vast majority of

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them Old Ritualists – the euphemism, old-timers (*starožily*), was substituted. But this meant that researchers had to ignore the central role of religion in the life of these communities.

For instance, not a single ‘spiritual verse’ religious epic song (*duhovnyj stich*) or other sacred song is included in Dorofeev’s book on the song-culture of the *Semejskie* Old Ritualists of the Lake Baikal region. Since these are not only the most numerous genres, but provide the models for lyric genres, the unique structure of the latter is unexplained.

Dorofeev’s work was completed in 1970. It had to wait until *glasnost*, nineteen years, before it was published – and then only after the religious songs were excluded.¹

Three centuries of persecution

Refusal to acknowledge the contributions of Old Ritualists to Russian society and culture was not a Soviet innovation. From 1654, when Patriarch Nikon violently attacked the Lovers-of-God (*Bogoljubcy*) for refusing to cross themselves with three fingers instead of two, Orthodox Christians who adhered to the traditional Russian rites were persecuted by the tsarist State and Church. While persecution officially was ended by the decree on religious toleration issued in the wake of the 1905 Revolution, Old Ritualists continued to suffer many disabilities. It was only with the final removal in 1971 (1973) of the anathema proclaimed against the Russian rite by the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch and Constantinople in 1557, confirmed by the Church Councils of 1666-67, that the new and old rituals were equated and members of the Patriarchal Church were permitted to become Old Ritualists.

Persecution of the Old Ritualists continued with varying degrees of intensity for over 300 years, at times reaching paroxysms of savagery. Thus, during the regency of Sophia (1686-1689), the early years of Tsar Peter the Great (1689-1699) and the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855), at least 30,000 Old Ritualists were burned alive. While the majority were

¹ N.I. Dorofeev, *Russkie narodnye pesni Zabajkal’ja: Semejskij raspev* (Moscow, 1989).

self-immolations, many committed themselves to the flames voluntarily to escape mutilation and execution by fire at the hands of tsarist torturers. Untold thousands of Old Ritualists were executed in the aftermaths of the peasant rebellions of Stepan Razin (1671-1673) and, especially, of Emelian Pugačëv (1774-1775), himself an Old Ritualist. The last great massacre of Old Ritualists took place in 1930 at the start of Bolshevik collectivization of the peasants of Siberia: entire Old Ritualist villages in the Altai Mountains and the Far East along the Manchurian border were exterminated. Many thousands more died in concentration camps.

Although persecution of the Old Ritualists was carried out in the name of the official Orthodox Church, it was the State rather than the Church that directed the persecution. From the time of the Church Councils of 1666-1667, whose decisions were dictated by Tsar Aleksej Michailovič, the Russian Orthodox Church was reduced to little more than an arm of the tsarist State. Tsar Peter-the-Great's abolition of the patriarchy, accompanied by total subjugation of the Church to the civil authority through appointment of an Ober-Procurator (Attorney General) to oversee all of its affairs, formalized and regularized a relationship that already existed.

End of the 'Third Rome'

The Russian Orthodox Church had been the last major institution of society that remained relatively independent of the tsarist State. It had been a voice of conscience that would not be silenced during Ivan IV's reign of terror in the 1570s and again, in the 'Time of Troubles' (*Smutnye vremena*) interregnum between dynasties at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the country was devastated by Polish and Swedish armies and ravaged by Cossack bands, supporting pretenders to the throne of Muscovy. After its subjugation by Tsar Aleksej Michailovič, the Church was reduced to an instrument, willing or not, of the autocrat's will.

Aleksej Michailovič had the Byzantine prayers for the Russian tsar introduced into the liturgy. In these prayers, the formula, 'God's Anointed', was interpreted to mean God's proxy, placing the ruler above the Church. The Old Ritualists interpreted the anointment of the tsar by the Patriarch in an exactly opposite manner: the tsar thereby acknowledged a Higher Law embodied in

the Church. They considered the demand to praise the Tsar as God's proxy to be blasphemous. It had been the coronation of false tsars that had brought Muscovy to the brink of ruin during the Time of Troubles interregnum.

Therefore, according to the view of the relationship between tsar and Church held by the *Bogoljubcy*, the ruler shows himself to be legitimate by submitting to the Church, upholding all its dogmas and acting in accordance with Christian principles. An unjust tsar, who misuses the Church, is illegitimate. In the seventeenth century, the appearance of a ruler, who betrayed the Grace of God (*blagodat'*) bestowed on Russia at her baptism, came to be interpreted as the sign of the coming of the antichrist, which in the St. Cyril's Book (*Kirillovskaja kniga*), was predicted to occur in 1666.

Their's was the traditional view, underlying the notion of the Third Rome. The extraordinarily rapid rise of Muscovy in the fifteenth century coincided with the final decline of Constantinople, which fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. This was taken as a sign that Moscow alone had remained true to the faith, the first two Romes having fallen for betrayal.² The Third Rome would stand until the Day of Judgement. It was the lot of Russian Orthodox Christians to bear witness for humanity, and the burden of salvation had passed to the Russian Orthodox Church and tsar. It was the responsibility of the Church and tsar to prepare their people morally and spiritually for salvation.

Revolt against secularization

Orthodox Russia had been saved during the Time of Troubles not by the great boyars, members of the noble and princely houses of Ancient Rus', who had largely sold out to the Catholic king Sigismund of Poland, and like Prince Šujskij, a distant relative of the Rjurik royal house, had stopped at nothing to seize power, but by the people themselves. A national coalition uniting townsmen and peasants with the lower gentry rose up under the leadership of a butcher and Cossack prince against the boyars and foreign invaders alike.

² The Byzantine Church and Emperor betrayed the faith by recognizing the Pope as supreme head of the Church at the Council of Florence in 1439.

It was no accident that the movement of lower clergy and their congregations to transform Muscovy into an ideal Christian community, the ultimate objective of the *Bogoljubcy*, began on the Middle Volga in the region of Nižnij Novgorod, the same region where the popular uprising that restored the Moscow Tsardom was initiated against Polish intervention and boyar tyranny.

One consequence of the manner in which the tsardom was restored was a great strengthening of the social position of the lower and middle gentry upon whose support the new Romanov dynasty depended. This in turn led during the reigns of Michail and Aleksej, the first two Romanov tsars, to a vast expansion of the bureaucracy as the gentry were recruited to manage the country. Since the treasury was empty, the gentry were rewarded with grants of land together with the peasants living on these grants. Vast territories were ceded.

As a concession to the gentry, the peasantry, thousands of whom during the Time of Troubles had regained relative freedom by colonizing the new southern districts, were in 1649 subjected to a form of serfdom more severe than any that had previously existed. It is during the reigns of Aleksej Michailovič and his son, Peter the Great, that the percentage of peasants held as serfs was greatest.³ During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the majority of free peasants were probably Old Ritualists.

Expansion of the gentry bureaucracy in this manner was naturally accompanied by the growth of corruption and abuse of power. These evils penetrated into the Church, whose finances were under control of gentry-administrators and bishops, many from noble families. They shamelessly exploited the income of monasteries and parishes to enrich themselves, robbing the lower clergy and congregations alike. Thus, from the standpoint of the *Bogoljubcy* and their supporters, the theological reforms reasserting the primacy of the Church would restore social justice and mend divisions in society that secularization had generated.

³ According to published estimates, in 1698 over 75% of Russian peasants were serfs. In 1861, when Russian serfdom (*krepostničestvo*) was abolished, no more than 37% were serfs.

Secularization is 'westernization'

In Russia, secularization is synonymous with 'westernization', usually associated with Peter Alekseevič, Tsar Peter the Great, Aleksej Michailovič's son. Westernization as a policy was in fact initiated by his father, who introduced *Bel Canto* chorale singing into the Church and Italian theatre, painting, decorative art, furniture, dress styles, etc., at the Court. It was in the so-called 'German Quarter' (*Nemeckaja sloboda*), established to house the hundreds of European merchants and technicians invited to Russia by Tsar Aleksej Michailovič, that Peter acquired his taste for western culture.⁴

As the adherents of the Russian rite correctly foresaw, its replacement by the New Greek rite in 1653, confirmed at the Church Councils of 1666-1667, opened the gates to secularizing influences emanating from Poland. As the ritual of the Church that had betrayed Orthodoxy in 1439, the Greek rite was suspect from the start. The report of the learned monk, Sučanov, on the behaviour of the patriarchs of Constantinople intensified this suspicion. The corrupting influence of 'Hellenism' was detected – substitution of philosophy, i.e., sophistry and casuistry, for religious faith.

The basis for this fear was the introduction of the Greek rite into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by Peter Mohila, the Patriarch of Kiev. Whatever other motives Tsar Aleksej Michailov may have had, it is undeniable that the reasons for replacing the Russian rite by the Greek were as much political – hence, secular – as religious. It made possible voluntary submission of Ukraine and part of Belarus to the Tsar in 1653.

By this act, Aleksej Michailovič acquired his own 'Window on the West', giving him access not only to western technology, but to the intellectual culture of countries that had experienced both the Reformation and beginning of the Counter Reformation. The centre of this new intellectual culture was the Kiev Theological Academy, where the higher clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church now received their education. Monks trained at the Kiev Academy introduced the elite of Moscow Russia to the philosophy,

⁴ Peter also met Anna Mons here. The daughter of a Dutch merchant, she became his mistress. It is thought that he learned to speak some Dutch from her. The Netherlands may have fascinated him in part because it was her homeland.

science and literature of Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance. From the end of the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, ecclesiastical colleges were the chief source of cadres for the 'Russian Enlightenment'.⁵

Challenge to the omnipotent State

The issue of tsar-worship went to the very heart of the renewal of the Church undertaken by the *Bogoljubcy*. Secularization was destroying the Ancient Grace (*Drevle blagočestie*), spawning immorality and injustice. It was natural for a religious person of the seventeenth century to conclude that secularization would culminate in the coming of the antichrist. By refusing to acknowledge the tsar as God's proxy and equating tsar-worship to the advent of the antichrist, the *Bogoljubcy* and their spiritual descendants, the Old Ritualists, challenged the total domination of society by the State.

From the *Bogoljubcy*, the original 'rejectionists' and first martyrs for the ancient faith, the Old Ritualists inherited a religion of engagement, a form of social Christianity with theological roots in the teachings of John Chrysostom (*Ioann Zlatoust*). Among the adherents to the *Drevle blagočestie*, the community and congregation are one, and the Church is lived day-to-day. This community organized as a church is in fact the most developed form of the organization of the peasant community by ritual. The peasant social utopias envisioned in the legend of the Holy City of Kitež and the fabled Land of White Waters were widespread ideas among Old Ritualists.⁶

The Old Ritualist confessional commune as the prototype 'civil society'

By organizing spiritually independent communities outside the control of the State and its Church, the Old Ritualists in effect created space for the emergence of a 'civil society' undermining the State's monopoly on power. These communities were bound together by networks of exchanges founded on religious obligations: mandatory loans and other types of mutual aid,

⁵ See R.L. Nichols, 'Orthodoxy and Russia's Enlightenment, 1762-1825', in *Russian Orthodoxy and the Old Regime*, ed. R.L. Nichols and Th.G. Stavrou (St. Paul, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1978).

⁶ See K.V. Čistov, *Russkie narodnye social'no-utopičeskie legendy xvii-xix vv.* (Moscow, 1967); A.J. Klibanov, *Narodnaja social'naja utopija v Rossii (period feodalizma)* (Moscow, 1977).

trade in religious items such as icons and beeswax candles; and by marriage ties necessitated by the religious prohibition on marriages between relatives out to the seventh branch (*koleno*) – equivalent to fifth cousins (*šesterojurodnye bratja i sěstry*). During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the networks of Old-Believer communities in North Russia, on the Don, the Kuban, Terek and Ural (*Jajk*) Rivers, in eastern Gomel' and northern Černigov provinces, in the Baltic provinces and Siberia, formed what was in effect a religion-based alternative society with its own internal structure based on rules, customs and beliefs that had their ultimate origin in the free peasant *obščina*-commune transformed by Christian principles.

The networks extended over vast areas. They provided support to communities fleeing into the wilderness to escape persecution. Thus, for instance, Old Ritualists successfully settled the wastes of Siberia and the Far North, where within a few years they were able to establish flourishing communities. In contrast, ordinary peasant colonists, who flocked to Siberia in search of free land after abolition of serfdom, suffered a disastrously high rate of failure, unless they happened to receive support from an Old Ritualist community. In the twentieth century, these networks have stretched to join continents, binding together, for instance, Old Ritualist pioneer settlements in the United States with their parent communities in Brazil.

The Old Ritualists' entrepreneurial spirit

The spiritual independence of the Old Ritualists bred in them a sense of enterprise and daring uncharacteristic of the ordinary peasant. The latter suffered daily degradation and insults to his dignity at the hands of the local administrative and police apparatus, which undermined the autonomy of the peasant commune, thereby posing a constant threat to the survival of its members. To this was added policing of the peasant's spirit through the use of the Church as a surveillance tool: thus, the priest was required on pain of severe punishment for non-compliance to report to the police any information received during confession that might be deemed detrimental to the State's interests.⁷ Survival in these conditions depended on avoiding risks.

⁷ Priests in the Soviet Union were likewise required to report information learned during Confession to the KGB. The Soviet regime sought to destroy the Church from within, in

In contrast, Old Ritualists could survive only by accepting a high order of risk in their daily lives. When not actually threatened by physical persecution, they still suffered severe economic discrimination, such as the double soul tax (*dvojnaja podušnaja podat'*) and tax on beards, or the prohibition on sale to them of land, which would have crippled peasants not able to rely on the religiously motivated system of mutual aid.

The spirit of enterprise was therefore fed by an ability of Old Ritualist families to accept risks. This enabled enterprising individuals, usually respected leaders in their confessional communities, to found businesses, the capital for which was obtained by drawing on the resources of the community. Generally, only Old Ritualist employees worked for Old Ritualist businessmen, at least at the outset. The businessman in turn supported his community financially. Thus in tsarist Russia the Old Ritualists developed a 'socially-responsible capitalism'. Medium and large native private enterprise, as opposed to State capitalist and foreign-owned enterprise, was largely in the hands of Old Ritualists, who included such well-known entrepreneurs as the Gučkov, Rjabušinskij and Morozov families.

Confessional basis of ethnic identity

Ethnographers consider Old Ritualists to constitute a culturally distinct segment of the population. Their cultural distinctiveness increased as society became more secularized. The mores and conventions of tsarist and later, Soviet society diverged towards 'modernism', while the Old Ritualists continued to live according to religiously-sanctioned traditional rules.

Old Ritualists, of course, recognize this distinctiveness, which they try to maintain in so far as possible by adopting norms of behaviour that isolate them from the profane community that surrounds them. A number of these norms derive from codes to avoid accidental ritual pollution, such as the prohibitions on eating and drinking from cooking pots and utensils, dishes,

effect turning the Patriarch and much of the clergy into more-or-less unwitting agents of its anti-religious policies. See: Gleb Jakunin, *O sovremennom položennii Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi i perspektivach religioznogo vozroždenija*; trans. in *Christianity and Government in Russia and the Soviet Union: Reflections on the Millenium*, ed. Sergei Pushkarev (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1989), pp. 107-145.

glasses, silverware, etc. used by the damned (*mirjane*),⁸ and on shaking hands, especially with a woman, as well as from taboos on smoking, drinking coffee (and in some confessions black tea), vodka, etc. All of these norms contrast starkly with the norms of hospitality characteristic of peasants. Among themselves, of course, Old Ritualists are no less, if not more, hospitable than 'Nikonite' peasants, even as they strictly adhere to the above and other taboos on food and drink.⁹

But it is not rules that preclude intimate contacts between Old Ritualists and *mirjane*, which make them different. Leaving aside the differences in religious behaviour, which are great,¹⁰ Old Ritualists as a group are distinguished by numerous features of material and spiritual culture. These tend to be of three types: features lost by peasants elsewhere, including by the population in which a local group of Old Ritualists originated; features acquired from other ethno-cultural groups among whom Old Ritualists lived during their migrations to avoid persecution or in places of exile; features newly developed to take the place of traditional behavioural norms condemned on religious grounds, or in the case of priestless Old Ritualists, invented because in the absence of priests the original behaviour could not be followed (this applies primarily to the wedding ceremony).

An article is not the place to detail the rich cultural heritage of the Old Ritualists, especially as they are not a homogeneous group, but comprise a number of ethnically distinct subgroups.¹¹ The focus here is on the

⁸ Literally, 'the worldly'; in Old Ritualist usage, the term refers specifically to 'Nikonites' (*Nikoniancy*), who, as members of the Church of the antichrist (the Patriarchal Orthodox), will be condemned to Hell at the Last Judgement. Thus, it has the meaning of 'the damned'.

⁹ An especially significant taboo observed in the past by *Pomorcy* and some other 'priestless' Old Ritualists was against 'Tsar Peter's Apples', i.e., potatoes, introduced by Peter the Great, which Old Ritualists claimed were a diabolical device to impoverish and corrupt the peasants by taking the place of Holy bread. Peasants still say that when bread is on the table, it becomes an altar (*chleb na stole i stol – prestol*). After collectivization, when peasants were deprived of horses and plowing implements necessary to grow grain, the Old Believers' prediction came true: for several decades most peasants were reduced to a diet of potatoes planted and dug on their own tiny plots with shovels.

¹⁰ See 'A Guide in Old Ritualism' in this issue of *CO*.

¹¹ A fair number of ethnographic studies of local ethnic groups of Old Ritualist peasants has been published. They differ widely as to their scientific value. Here are several for

ethno-confessional form of self-definition, a subject of considerable theoretical interest.

At the basic level of self-definition, all Old Ritualists distinguish themselves from *mirjane*. This distinction often takes precedent over language: thus, Finnish Komi among the Jurla Old Ritualists do not identify with other Orthodox Komi, but with Jurla Russians to whom they are married. Conversely, some isolated populations of Old Ritualist use their local group name (e.g., *Kamenščiki*) to distinguish themselves from the majority Russian population, although linguistically they are also Russian, while in the Tichvin district of Leningrad Region Russian women, who have converted to the *Drevle blagočestie* and married Karelian Old Ritualists think of themselves as Karelian, because in this area, Russians are Orthodox (*Pravoslavnyje*), while Karelians are Old Ritualists (*Starovery*).¹²

The confessional form of self-definition was an important factor in the emergence of the modern Russian nationality and to a lesser extent, of the modern Komi and Karelian nationalities. Many Finnic populations, especially among the medieval Merja and the ancestors of the modern Veps, changed their ethnic self-identity when they became Orthodox. Conversely,

those interested in pursuing this subject: *Russkie pišmennye i ustnye tradicii i duchovnaja kul'tura (po materialam archeografičeskich ekspedicij MGU 1966-1980)*, ed. I.V. Koval'čenko (Moscow, 1982); E.É. Blomkvist and N.P. Grinkova, *Buchtarminskie staroobryadcy: Materialy komissii ekspedicionnyh issledovanij* (Leningrad, 1930); V.A. Lipinskaja, *Russkoe naselenie Altajskogo kraja: Narodnye tradicii v material'noj kul'ture (XVIII-XX vv.)* (Novosibirsk, 1987); F.F. Bolonev, *Semejskie: Istoriko-ětnografičeskie očerki* (Ulan-Ude, 1985); *idem*, *Narodnyj kalendar' semejskich Zabajkal'ja (vtoraja polovina XIX-načalo XX v.)* (Novosibirsk, 1978); *Na putjach iz Zemli Permskoj v Sibir': Očerki etnografii severoural'skogo krest'janstva XVII-XX vv.*, ed. V.A. Aleksandrov (Moscow, 1989); E.V. Richter, *Russkoe naselenie Zapadnogo Pričud'ja (očerki istorii, material'noj i duchovnoj kul'tury)* (Tallin, 1976); T.A. Bernštam, *Russkaja narodnaja kul'tura Pomor'ja v XIX-načale XX v.* (Leningrad, 1983); R.A. Morris, *Old Russian Ways: Cultural Variations among Three Russian Groups in Oregon* (New York, 1991).

¹² See O.M. Fišman and D.O. Cypkin, *Tichvinskie Karely: Opyt izučeniya lokal'noj etnokontsional'noj grupy* [Manuscript]. According to E.M. Smorgonova ('Staroobryadcy Verchnej Jaz'vy: Osobaja jazykovaja situacija', in *Tradicionnaja duchovnaja i material'naja kul'tura russkich staroobryadčeskich poselenij v stranach Ebropy, Azii i Ameriki*, ed. N.N. Pokrovskij and R. Morris (Novosibirsk, 1992), pp. 157-162) Komi Old Ritualists on the Upper Jaz'va River claim not to be Komi, although they speak the Komi-Permjak language.

local populations of Idžja, Zirjan and Permjak Komi incorporate an originally Slav component.

In this process, it may have been significant that clergymen, who came from a Finnic milieu, played central roles in the tragedy of the schism of the Russian Orthodox Church: both Nikon and Avvakum had at least one Mordvin parent, while Neronov may have been of Merja descent. Little is known about the origins of the Forest Fathers (*lesnye starcy*), but their hermitages, where their disciples gathered and the first self-immolations took place, centred in the forests southeast of Jaroslavl' around Nerechta and in the Pešechon woods, thought to have served as refuges for the last Merja. Is it possible that their apocalyptic vision reflected despair at the impending doom of this people? The great monastery of Solovki, which held out for nearly ten years against the forces of the antichrist, was founded by a Karelian monk, Zosima, and in the seventeenth century was the religious centre of Karelia. The number of Old Ritualists among the Komi and Karelian populations, and in part also among the Mordvin-Erzja, was disproportionate to their numbers in the population as a whole, reaching in the nineteenth century at least 80% among Karelians and not less than 40% among Komi.¹³

The Old Ritualist confessional commune as a culture-reserve

The Old Ritualists as a group are conservative. But their 'conservatism' shares little with the political conservatism of modern right-wing extremists. For instance, they were traditionally pacifist: as Neronov explained to Tsar Aleksej Michailovič when the latter requested his support for the war against Poland, it is a grievous sin to kill. During the reign of Catherine the Great, Old Ritualists in the Altai Mountains (*Buchtarmincy*) were classified with the natives as *inorodcy* (non-Russians) in order to exempt them from conscription. Giving aid to the persecuted and oppressed irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliation was also considered by many Old Ritualists to be a duty: thus, at the time of the savage pogroms against Jews at the beginning of this century, encouraged by the tsar and abetted by clergy of the

¹³ P. Čubinskij, 'Statističesko-ětnografičeskij očerk'Korely', *Trudy Archangel'skago statističeskago komiteta za 1865 g.* (1866), pp. 65-134; Ju.V. Gagarin, *Istorija religii i ateizma naroda Komi* (Moscow, 1978).

Patriarchal Church, Old Ritualists sheltered Jews, even though they hold Jews responsible for Christ's martyrdom.

It has been claimed that in their ideals Old Ritualists are close to 'Christian Socialism', but this is based on a misunderstanding: in general, Old Ritualists eschew political identification, fearing corruption by worldly passions and the false morality of the damned. Many Old Ritualists strive as far as possible to live the ascetic life of the monk withdrawn from the world, and the liturgy of the Old Ritualist Church has been likened to the monastic All-Night Vigil.

Old Ritualists are conservative in the literal sense of preserving God's Grace. This required adherence to the sacred rites by which God was praised¹⁴ in the pre-Nikon Church. To the extent that these rites were imbedded in a specific social order, the Russian Orthodox confessional community of the seventeenth century, the social relations structuring this community had to be maintained. That in turn encouraged the retention of traditions, which elsewhere have tended to disappear as society becomes secularized.

For instance, it is still common for Old Ritualists to maintain joint extended family households, in which the economies of parents and married sons, or of married brothers, are combined. Marriages, therefore, still are arranged between households, although nowadays on the basis of the children's preferences, followed by a traditional wedding incorporating the major rituals (some twenty in all).

In most Old Ritualist confessions (*soglasie*) ritual importance is attached to outward appearance: women should wear traditional clothing, their hair cannot be cut and if married, it must be twisted into two braids that are arranged in a cross pattern on top of their heads and covered; men must cut their hair, but wear beards (conversely, men of the *Filippov tolk* [persuasion] of Priestless Old Ritualists never cut their hair). At least when in the house of worship, they should wear traditional Russian shirts and kaftan jackets.

¹⁴ In Russian, 'Orthodox Christians' are *Pravoslavnye christiane*, literally, 'Christians who praise God correctly'.

Belts must be worn by Old Ritualists at all times, even when sleeping and bathing: a baby receives a belt upon being baptised. This requirement has kept alive the ancient art of belt-weaving.¹⁵ Unfortunately, these ideals could not generally be observed in the Soviet period, since they marked the Old Ritualists as a people apart.

But it is in the realm of the spirit that the Old Ritualists have made the greatest contribution to the preservation of Russian culture. That so much of the rich oral literature of Medieval Rus' has been recovered is due in large measure to Old Ritualists.

Old Ritualists and the Russian epic tradition

Perhaps the most spectacular instance of this concerns the survival of the *bylina* (heroic or *bogatyr'* epic song) genre of Ancient Rus'.¹⁶ Considered a national treasure, the pride of Russian folklore, this genre has been linked from its 'discovery' in the eighteenth century to the present with Old Ritualists, who as performers and as the first to write down and make note transcriptions were responsible for the recognition of the *bylina* by the small educated public of Imperial Russia as the national equivalent of the Homeric epic.

The work that brought these songs to the attention of the 'Enlightened Gentry' elite during the patriotic upsurge at the turn of the nineteenth century was the collection of Kirša Danilov. First published in 1804 under the title, 'Ancient Russian Versification', it was based on a manuscript in the possession of the Old Ritualist, Prokopii Akinfovič Demidov, son of the founder of the iron mining, smelting and manufacturing 'empire' in the Ural Mountains.¹⁷

¹⁵ Important exceptions to this rule occur: at the beginning of this century in some Old Ritualist communities, the belt was viewed as a survival of paganism, and it was strictly forbidden to wear one during religious services.

¹⁶ The *bylina* (*starina*) epic song appears to have had its origin in the tenth century as a genre of heroic praise songs in which the *družina*, or armed retinue, of princes of the Rjurik dynasty, was collectively glorified as the mainstay of the town-centred social order established by the princes of Kiev and Novgorod. However, while this may account for the origin of the *bylina*, it does not explain its further development, because of 80 *bylina* subjects, fully $\frac{1}{3}$ do not belong to the *družina* songs of the Kiev Cycle. Up to the 1980's, some 3000 *bylinas* had been collected, averaging 200-300 verses, but occasionally exceeding 1000 (in North Russia).

¹⁷ The Demidov family were an early example of the importance of Old Ritualists to development of native Russian capitalism. They came from Tula, first centre of firearms production in Russia and a stronghold of Old Ritualist merchant-craftsmen. On the eve

Apparently the respected elder of an Old Ritualist community in Western Siberia, 'Danilov' (that may not have been his real name) had in the period from approximately 1720 to 1740 noted down himself and received from other Old Ritualists epics and ballads for his own use as a performer (*skazitel'*). Comparisons with material gathered in the next century suggest that most of his repertoire of 36 *bylinas* originated in communities of the Russian *Pomor* ethnic group from which he probably came himself.¹⁸

By the mid-nineteenth century it was thought that the ancient art of *bylina*-singing had died out. The truth is more likely that the folklorists of the day, coming mainly from the *intelligentsia* far removed from the peasantry, had no access to the Old Ritualist communities in which epic songs were performed. It was not until a specialist, Pavel Nikolaevič Rybnikov, who came himself from an Old Ritualist family, published *bylinas* that he had collected mainly from Old Ritualist *skaziteli* in Russian Karelia and among the Pomors, that the scientific world learned that *bylina*-singing was a living tradition carried on by gifted masters of the art.¹⁹

The art of *bylina*-singing continued to be practised by Old Ritualists not only in Karelia and North Russia, but also in many localities inhabited by descendants of Don Cossack Old Ritualists. For instance, even within the last few decades, *bylinas* have been recorded from the Nekrasov and Gribensk Old Ritualist Cossacks.²⁰

of the Northern War between Russia and Sweden for control of access to the Baltic Sea, Demidov senior had been ordered by Peter the Great to establish iron production in the Urals to free Russia from dependence on iron-ore imported from Sweden.

¹⁸ *Drevnie Rossijskie stichotvorenija, sobrannye Kiršej Danilovym*, s predislaviem K.F. Kalajdovičim (Moscow, 1818). See V. Beljaev, *Sbornik Kirši Danilova: Opyt restavracii pesen* (Moscow, 1969). The original collection contained 35 historic songs, ballads and *pro-tjažnye* lyric songs in addition to the 36 complete *bylinas*, all with musical notation.

¹⁹ *Pesni, sobrannye P.N. Rybnikovym*, vol. 1, 2, *Narodnye Byliny, stariny i pobyl'ščiny*, ed. P.A. Bessonov (St. Petersburg, 1861-1862).

²⁰ B.N. Putilov, *Pesni gribenskich kazakov* (Groznyj, 1946). The majority of Cossack communities along the Don River refused to accept the reforms adopted by the Church Councils of 1666-1667 under pressure from Tsar Aleksej Michailovič. This created an ethnic barrier dividing the Don Cossacks who fled from persecution to settle the Kuban and Terek rivers, from the Ukrainian Cossacks who migrated into the Kuban after the *Zaporož'e Seč'* was disbanded. The *Drevle blagočestie* predominated among descendants of the Don Cossacks until the mid-nineteenth century.

They also performed sacred epic songs called 'spiritual verses' (*duhovnye stichi*), a religious obligation in many communities during Lent and memorial feasts. Epic-type spiritual verses date to the fourteenth-seventeenth century.

In my opinion, the singing of heroic and sacred epics was linked in several ways. Both texts and melodic structure are sufficiently similar, that many singers in North Russia performed both types to the same melodies. Both required prodigious feats of memory of texts that were in an older form of the language. Memorization of lengthy texts in an archaic language (Church Slavonic), was characteristic of Old Ritualists, especially of 'priestless' confessions, who were in the majority in North Russia. Members of a congregation were expected to know by heart both the prayer services, including the Psalms, and numerous lengthy prayers required for every occasion in daily life.

However, the primary factor encouraging Old Ritualists to preserve the ancient heroic epics was probably the same reverence for Holy Russia that their religious feelings express. Throughout North Russia in districts settled between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries by colonists from Novgorod, veneration of Russia's past had a rather different meaning than elsewhere.

The glory of Ancient Rus' was connected by the *bylina* tradition to the historical primacy of Novgorod, which was the second capital of Russia centuries before Moscow was founded.²¹ To a certain extent the development of the *bylina* epic in the former Novgorod Rus' reflected the same independence of spirit that attracted Russian and Karelian peasants of this region in such large numbers to Old Ritualism, and in particular, to the confession that rejected the priesthood. Thus, in parts of North Russia *bylina*-singing was related to priestless Old Ritualism as a form of ideological rebellion in the name of the glory of Ancient Rus' against oppression of the spirit by the Moscow autocracy and synodal Church.

²¹ The first was Kiev. By the conquest and annexation of the Novgorod city-state in 1477, Moscow Grand Prince Ivan III (the Great) eliminated the last autonomous power centre of Ancient Rus', thereby securing the absolute power of the Moscow ruler over all of the Rus' lands. A century later (1570), Ivan's grandson, Ivan IV (the Terrible), razed Novgorod to the ground and massacred its citizens in a campaign to extinguish the last sparks of independence.

Much more could be written on the subject of the contribution of Old Ritualist communities to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Russian people. Thousands of illuminated manuscript books, including rare medieval writings, and icons ‘written’ according to the pre-Nikon canons, many of them dating to fifteenth-seventeenth centuries, were preserved in Old Ritualist *skity* (hermitages) and households. Even in the twentieth century, Old Ritualist monks, trained in the art of medieval calligraphy and illumination, continued to make beautiful copies in Slavonic, not only for use in churches and prayer houses, but in homes. In addition to strictly religious texts (liturgical and hagiographic), manuscripts included polemical writings by founders and defenders of the Ancient Grace, medieval literature and collections of religious chants and spiritual verses transcribed and still sung in *znamennyj* notation, a form of the tenth-century Byzantine neumes. Several ‘schools’ of icon-painting in the old style were still at work. In addition to icons, some created folk art such as painted wooden distaffs and lacquered boxes using the same techniques and colours. Beautifully carved wooden crosses, metal amulet locket and triptychs (three-panel folding icons) were made.

Concerning one district in the Middle Ural Mountains inhabited by Old Ritualists, one investigator recently wrote that the villagers “were the guardians of the traditional arts of the Russian North, as manifest in carved dishware and utensils, designs painted on home interiors, decorative knitting, and in oral literature”, while a second such district, where the culture and way-of-life have remained stable since the seventeenth century when it was settled by Old Ritualists of the Pomor persuasion, “has for many years been the object of study of the folk culture from different perspectives, including the lore of books [archaeography], folklore, music, ethnography, linguistics, art-history and sociology.”²²

I hope that readers of this essay have gained insight into Russian history and culture from my account of the defenders of the Ancient Grace. It may be

²² G.N. Čagin, ‘Prirodnaja sreda i osobennosti kul’turno-bytovych tradicij narodov Srednego Urala v seredine XIX-načalo XX veka’, in *Material’naja kul’tura narodov Rossii*, 1 (Novosibirsk, 1995), p. 131.

read as a warning against 'over-secularization' of Russian society and life on the western model. Russia was an overwhelmingly peasant country, in which the rich inner life of the spirit often contrasted starkly with material poverty.

SUMMARY

Traditional Culture and the Old Ritualists

The schism in the Russian Orthodox Church precipitated in 1654 by the 'reforms' of Patriarch Nikon was a milestone in the development of the Russian State and society. It initiated the spiritual crisis that eventually split Russian society and culture into an increasingly secularized 'Western' component confined at first to the upper castes of educated gentry associated with the tsarist court, army and civil service, and the traditional culture of the peasantry, in which everyday behaviour was guided by ritual and religion. Russian national culture, deeply rooted in this peasant way-of-life and system of beliefs, has tended to survive best in Old Ritualist communities. The contribution of research on the folklore, song and visual arts, crafts, iconography, literature and religious customs of the Old Ritualists to understanding of Russian traditional culture has been great. Paradoxically, the first shoots of 'civil society' also emerged in Old Ritualist communities, which produced the first native capitalists – merchant-industrialists and bankers not dependent on the tsarist State or foreign capital.