

REVIEWS

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Douglas Rogers. *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Culture and Society after Socialism Series). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009. Bibliography. Index. xvii +338 pp. \$69.95 (cloth). \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-8014-7520-7

In the late 17th century priestless Old Believers settled in and around Sepych in the Upper Kama area of Perm' region, aiming to preserve "a spark of true piety" from the corrupting influence of the world. Though the community survives still, many changes have occurred since those early days. In 2000-01 Douglas Rogers spent a year living among them, following this up with a number of shorter visits. His book focuses on the ways in which the people of Sepych have adapted to the conditions of life over the centuries. Appropriately for a community founded on religious principles, the prism through which he examines this history is that of ethics. Rogers interprets ethics as signifying "a field of socially located and culturally informed practices that are undertaken with at least somewhat conscious orientations towards conceptions of what is good, proper, or virtuous" (11). The book thus scrutinizes the choices, decisions and actions that have determined the lives of Sepych inhabitants over the centuries, and not just those that relate to the religious domain. He shows that the Old Belief was more subject to change in periods when money and marketization were to the fore (in the post-Emancipation and post-socialist periods). In depicting and evaluating these changes the author deploys the key concept of "moral communities," indicating efforts to align ethical practices among groups of people, partly through shared aspirations, but also through interconnectedness.

The author is insistent that Sepych neither stands for Russia as a whole nor for any smaller group within it. He eschews generalization, though readers will note many parallels like the response to post-socialist instability, funeral ritual, or contemporary Old Believer elders' emphasis on запреты (taboos) rather than theology or texts. The book has a chronological structure, though the emphasis is always on the dilemmas faced in the creation and maintenance of moral communities.

The first chapter covers the period before the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. With no hierarchy the Old Believers of the Upper Kama located religious authority in collective decision-making, each community selecting its own pastors. These were respected middle-aged men expected to withdraw from the world and observe rigorous ascetic

practices. By the mid-nineteenth century the community formed two separated groups, younger members who lived in the world, only attending services as observers, and elders who prepared for salvation through observance of traditional ascetic practices, including sexual abstinence and food and drink taboos. The increasing separation of the generations was probably accentuated in the 1830s and 40s by the state campaign against civil marriages, as well as pressure from their Stroganov landlords. Elders, who regarded marriages as a necessary evil did not attend the ceremonies, which had little religious content, and could even under pressure from the authorities include an Orthodox service. Elders were, however, in charge of social reproduction, instructing children in the tenets and practices of their religious beliefs.

Chapter 2 shows changes brought by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861: less interference from landlords, but increased burdens in the form of redemption payments. As the new conditions gave the inhabitants of Sepych greater access to cash through trade and small-time industry, inequalities developed because neighboring communities remained largely agricultural. Modernization, which obliged the inhabitants of Sepych to face a number of dilemmas, seems to have been an important factor in the major schism between two groups that emerged in 1866. Gender may also have played a role, with the growing authority of women in spiritual affairs in this period leading to events being interpreted in terms of women exceeding their authority in a religious tradition in which male authority was dominant.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the changes of the Soviet period, focussing respectively on younger adults and elders. Resettlement as a consequence of collectivization, urbanization and industrialization resulted in the number of communities declining, and particularly affected the young. Chapter 3 examines the interaction between socialist attitudes to labor, both material and moral, and local conditions in Sepych. Generational differences intensified, but also made the adoption of socialist practices somewhat easier, since people of working age lived in the world, and the community emphasis in socialism could dovetail with traditional ideas of communal action and responsibility. Given elders' traditional disdain of weddings, the adapted folk wedding ritual favored by the authorities could be adopted without friction. In the next chapter Rogers looks at the ways in which the elders adapted to socialism, demonstrating that, far from conventional discourses about resistance to the state or survival of tradition, Old Believer elders in the Upper Kama were involved in socialist society, its features and changes,

even though the generational divide widened over time. Social change – resettlement, migration, collectivization and shortages – impacted more strongly than anti-religious campaigns, the limited success of which stemmed from ignorance of local differences. There were no churches to be closed; it was the presence of elders that created a sacred space. And since religious authority was diffuse, the usual targeting and regulation of religious authority figures was less effective. Deferred ritual practice and few material manifestations of religious practice meant the avoidance of many dilemmas during a working life. Indeed the separation of the generations, Rogers argues convincingly, intensified the sense of the path of old age and so helped Old Believer faith to survive. One further result was the geriatricization and feminization of elders; whereas in the pre-Revolutionary period middle-aged elders acted as mediators between the two types of community member, now elders were not only increasingly old but normally women.

Chapters 5-7 look at post-socialist Selych. Here we see the complex ways in which the changes resulting from the collapse of socialism, the resulting inequalities and economic instability intersected with the socialist past, religious concerns and the contemporary search for national identity. Chapter 5 mainly focuses on the role in the moral community played by moonshine in the economy (mainly as substitute wages), money (including dollars) and moonlighting. Whereas rural socialism had helped to incubate traditional asceticism, post-socialist transformations largely undermined it, leaving the population searching for and trying to create new moral communities. Chapters 6 and 7 look at the complex ways in which the desire for a moral community interacts with religious revival and a search for national identity. The new priestly Old Believer church in the town, for example, is regarded as more authoritative than the old women elders of the priestless tradition, partly because it is led by men, and secondly because it has a wider network of connections so important for the moral community of Selych. These last two chapters are the most fascinating in the book in their exposure of the dilemmas and contradictions in Selych today. Supporters of the new Church may well evince views that relate to their priestless Old Believer background or to their Soviet experience. The historical background of the first few chapters makes these contradictions clear and understandable.

The book is described as a historical ethnography. Rogers barely uses the term “folk,” and regretfully appears to equate folklore study with the collecting and preservation of ancient traditions as in Soviet and

much post-Soviet scholarly activity. Nonetheless the book holds considerable interest for folklorists. Oral testimony is key to the book, and the way it is treated constitutes one of its strengths. Rogers is not only sensitive to interpreting the meaning such oral narratives have for the people and communities in which these circulate, but also carefully examines the historical truth of these through careful contextual analysis of economic, social and other factors. His refusal to accept conventional interpretations of phenomena is also salutary. Though folklorists of the modern kind would certainly have tackled this subject differently, there is much in this well written, researched and argued study to ponder on and enjoy.

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