

PROTECTING THE YOUNG AND SENDING OF THE DEAD: OLD BELIEF AND THE POLITICS OF “RELIGIOUS REVIVAL” IN THE RUSSIAN URALS

Douglas J. Rogers, University of Michigan

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As in many colonial and postcolonial contexts, religious change in the postsocialist world provides a useful lens through which to understand transforming power relations and to look for emerging forms of personhood. In this paper, I describe and analyze one significant aspect of post-Soviet religious change in Sepych, a rural town in the Russian Urals settled by priestless Old Believers in the late seventeenth century. In the twentieth century, Sepych was a thriving merchant town, still later a successful state farm, and most recently home to a struggling post-Soviet agricultural enterprise.¹

Russian Old Belief, if it ever was the unified movement of protest against Patriarch Nikon’s seventeenth-century church reforms that it has often been described as, quickly fragmented into many “concorde,” and there are two primary concords in Sepych. The first group is the priestless Pomortsy who, variously negotiating with tsarist and Soviet campaigns against religion, have predominated in Sepych since its founding. Surviving religious manuscripts, collected by Soviet scholars, tell us that there was a schism in Sepych and the surrounding region in 1888, and the two resulting groups came to be called Maksimovskie and Demenskie (see e.g. Pozdeeva et. al. 1994). Both Maksimovskie and Demenskie abjured priests, churches, and most sacraments, and their religious services in Sepych have long been held in private homes. Characteristic of both groups has been a generational divide: religion was only practiced by elders who joined after retirement and usually after the death of a spouse, at which point they adopted a set of strict monastically-inspired taboos on social and economic exchange. In the absence of an ordained clergy or hierarchy, lay “spiritual fathers”—and in the Soviet period increasingly and very significantly “spiritual mothers”—led these groups of priestless Old Believers. The second relevant group of Old Believers is the priestly Belokrinitsy, who built a

new church in Sepych during the 1990s. These priestly Old Believers, as their name implies, accept priests, the full Orthodox regime of sacraments, and have a worldwide hierarchy of male clerics. With the building of the church, many priestless Old Believers in Sepych, along with some Soviet-era atheists, “converted” from the town’s native priestless Old Belief to Belokrinitsy priestly Old Belief.

The new church slowly changed religious life in Sepych, but the situation throughout the 1990s was more complex than the term “conversion” implies. Not many people attended religious services on a regular basis, but religious baptisms and funerals slowly became standard and, for most, important rituals. However, distinct and solid camps of townspeople, some defending priestless Old Belief, others preferring the newer priestly Old Belief, did not emerge. Religious identifications did not correlate well with any of the other axes of social distinction in Sepych. A few families stuck firmly, even resolutely, to one or another group, but even for this minority, religious differences had no import for their other relationships or social ties. Related to this, I think, there was also no developed rhetoric of conversion: even those who had been baptized into the church often claimed that they hadn’t really changed affiliation, and did not describe the experience in life or identity-changing ways, as might be expected from the comparative literature on religious revival or conversion. Rather, in 2001, the town was suspended between the priestless Old Belief of earlier periods and the new priestly Old Belief along the fault line of life stages. Most people preferred the church and the new priest for baptism, but choose the old women—the spiritual mothers—when it came to funerals, to sending the dead off to the other world. In order to explore the significance of this divide, I discuss baptisms and funerals in turn.

The clergy associated with the new church, who visited only once a month, viewed baptism in large part as a sign of affiliation with the only authentic version of Christianity—their Belokrinitsy Old Belief—and therefore as providing salvation. Townspeople in Sepych, however, tended to view baptism rather differently, primarily as a means of acquiring a guardian angel and hence protection in *this* world, protection against, as I was told on various occasions, sickness, lighting, early death, and so on. “A baptized person is a protected person,” I was often told. In the early 1990s, as townspeople were attracted to new possibilities for religious expression, Sepych’s two spiritual mothers—one Maksimovskie, one Demenskie—did a brisk business in baptisms. However, as the church building slowly grew in Sepych, and clergy began to appear in town on a monthly basis, townspeople began to wait for the priest to show up in order to request baptism. The church’s outdoor summer baptism ceremonies were often held for 20, 30, or even 40 people at a time, and attracted many more onlookers and family members. Most of these newly baptized townspeople did not attend the church on a regular basis—it is usually only a group of old women, the new priests’ first converts, who attend the church services.

In contrast to the assertively public baptisms, funerals continued to be held at home, and family members of the deceased summoned one of Sepych’s three groups of old women—Belokrinitsy, Maksimovskie, or Demenskie—to come to their houses and pray the appropriate canons on the day of the funeral and, sometimes, the nine-day, forty-day, and one year commemorations of death. It was often the same families who had their children baptized in the church who summoned the *priestless* Old Believers for funerals, especially if the person who died had not joined the church or if it was unclear whether he or she had been baptized at all. Moreover, even on those occasions when families summoned representatives from the church, they did not invite the priest to perform the funeral services, and did not wish that he were available. In fact, a Belokrinitsy priest had not, as of 2002, yet officiated at a funeral in Sepych, despite baptizing several hundred townspeople. It was, rather, either the priestless old women or the old women of the church community themselves (without their priest) who performed the funeral services. The old women from the church functioned at funerals, that is,

essentially as a third “priestless” religious group in Sepych.

In order to explain this configuration of religious practices, it helps to consider what powers were motivating them, in particular how the church came to stand in the center of Sepych in the first place. The church emerged in town from a particularly “transitional” conjuncture of modes of social power, precisely in the hinge between the accumulation of *people* so characteristic of socialist-era patronage networks and the still-emerging significance of accumulating *capital*. The Belokrinitsy, with their worldwide fundraising network and considerable business profits from selling books, icons, and other devotional items, clearly outstripped the priestless Old Believer spiritual mothers in the capital department, and they have built churches throughout much of Russia. At the same time, they would not have expanded into Sepych had they not skillfully plugged into the patronage of the leadership of now-privatized State Farm Sepych. The director of the farm and his brigade leaders endorsed the project, and it was they who organized the labor and materials to build the church at far below cost. The farm leadership cast the church-building project in the 1990s as “society work” by and for the people of Sepych, and this categorization spurred many townspeople to identify the new church in the same vein as the state farm’s many projects on behalf of townspeople in the past—housing, paved roads, a new kindergarten—all of them the result of the leadership’s plan-bargaining skills and higher-level party contacts, and all of them understood, like the church, as good for the people of Sepych as a moral community.

The Belokrinitsy, through their association with the leadership of the now-privatized farm, the corresponding identification of the church-building project as public “society work,” their closer association with the new forms of capital accumulation, and in general their status as powerful outsiders, gradually cornered the discourse on religious expertise associated with the activities of *this* world. The priests’ frequent assertions that the remaining Maksimovskie and Demenskie old women no longer knew what they were doing, and thus were unable to provide complete or effective baptisms, became widely shared in town over the course of the 1990s. When I asked people why they chose the priest over the spiritual mothers for baptism, I was almost without exception told

that the priest was more effective, more knowledgeable, and that the old women frequently made mistakes. Religious change thus took on a very gendered dimension, and the assertively masculine face of the priest became associated with effective protection in matters of *this* world that townspeople understood the rituals of baptism to confer. This world became a much riskier place in 1990s Russia, and the church is only one of the ways in which the privatized farm underwrote material and symbolic ways to manage that risk.

The priests' expertise did not extend to funerals. In talking to families who arranged funerals, it became clear to me that it was at least as important that *old women* be summoned for a funeral as it was which old women—Demenskie, Maksimovskie, or Belokrinitsey. Although families did in general attempt to match the group of old women they invited with the deceased's baptismal affiliation, no one ever questioned the *expertise* of the old women in sending off the dead in the way that was so common in discussions of baptism. Why not? Many of the old women still practiced, or at least were thought by townspeople to practice, the set of taboos on social and economic exchange historically associated with elders in the Maksimovskie and Demenskie groups. They ate separately from those who were not religiously active, did not eat food purchased in stores, and observed strict fasts. Indeed, those who invited the old women to sing the funeral canons brought upon themselves a considerable amount of preparation in order to orchestrate the separate dietary requirements for feeding and hosting the old women. The old women represented, that is, both in the abstract and in the concrete organization of a funeral day, a symbolic withdrawal from worldly social relations. This withdrawal made them ideal conduits for accomplishing effectively the purpose of funeral services: sending the dead off to the *other* world. So, whereas the priests' associations with the new, distinctively postsocialist powers of *this* world helped them both build a church and corner the discourse on the rituals of baptism that provided protection in this world, *priestless* old women were still thought by townspeople to be the most effective at sending souls off to the *other* world.

This story and analysis are interesting beyond Sepych and beyond the postsocialist context for several reasons. Sepych in the 1990s

presents a case of religious transformation intertwined with political economic change that is *not* routed through subjectivity or personhood. The shape of this reconfiguration is intriguing because one of the major themes in the recent anthropology of religion has been attention to religions transformations in the context of European colonial expansion, a theme that has led anthropologists again and again to missionaries and conversion, usually Protestant, sometimes Catholic (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Van der Veer 1996). The arguments of this strain of theorizing usually follow one or another version of "Weber on wheels." They combine the Protestant Ethic thesis with one or another theory of power to explore the inculcation of new religious ethics, subjectivities, or forms of agency in colonized populations, ethics and agencies suited to join and/or domesticate the new sets of political and economic relations in which colonized peoples found themselves.

So where does this leave us in the postsocialist world? Although it is only one corner of a broader field, Sepych does seem to present something quite different. Despite the undeniable significance of the church-building project—it was the only non-private construction in town since 1991, and was built when the privatized farm was bankrupt and people were becoming nothing but poorer—the church was not a laboratory for new kinds of selfhood or personhood in dialog with new political economic circumstances. On my reading of the coming of the Belokrinitsey, the involvement of the farm leadership, and the rituals of baptism, the church offered one way to symbolically mitigate "transition," rather than to engage, transform, or domesticate it on the terrain of personhood. Then again, perhaps this is entirely appropriate, and to look for analogs in the industrial capitalism of the colonial era is unhelpful. To consider baptism as a symbolic form of risk management—as the developed rhetoric of protection suggests—may be entirely fitting, given the nature of modern "risk societies" in general (Beck 1992) and the postsocialist context in particular, where all manner of actors have gone from a system with no concept of liability to soaring liability and risk all around (cf. Verdery forthcoming). Maybe, in this case, we don't need Weber to explain the configuration of religious and political economic change.

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Endnote

1. For useful comments on the argument here, I am grateful to Irina Kulikova, Valerie Kivelson, Natalia Litvina, Katherine Verdery, and the 2002-3 Fellows of the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan. Field research in Russia during 2000-1 was supported by grants from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship of the Social Science Research Council with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) with funds provided by the United States Department of State, which administers the Title VIII Program; and the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, administered by the United States Department of Education. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.