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Orthodoxy versus Globalization: The Russian Old Believers in Eastern Europe today

Throughout the centuries, the Russian Old Believers, often living in a foreign and hostile environment, were able both to preserve their own unique cultural identity and find ways of settling down and integrating into their new environment. They also created their own rich literature, folklore, art and culture. Currently, an estimated 10 million Russian Old Believers live in enclosed groups in many countries around the world, including the USA, Canada, Latin America and many European countries. I believe that the study of all aspects of the history and culture of the Russian Old Believer communities is very beneficial for us today, as it can provide us with valuable lessons of the peaceful integration and preservation of the unique cultural identity of an ethnic and religious minority group at a time of ethnic and religious tensions.

Today, I will introduce and discuss one group of ethnic Russians who have been living on Latvian soil for three hundred years and could be described as an ethnic and religious minority and religious dissidents. In my paper, I aim to examine how this Orthodox community, that has consciously rejected much of modernity, adapts to contemporary society that favours innovation and integration. I will look at some selected aspects of everyday life of the Russian Old Believer communities today, such as customs, traditions, education and business activities that define the stereotype of this enclosed community as obscurantist and religious fanatics who have no ability to adapt themselves the world around them. I have chosen the Russian Old

Believer community in Latvia as a fine example of Old Believers living abroad because it is a fully functional, well preserved, and one of the strongest and largest community of Old Believers in Europe. The paper is based on my research on the literary manuscripts from this community (mainly, poetry, stories and some dogmatic works on theological matters) and my visits to the community. However, we will start from a 3-minute extract from a documentary made during a field trip to the Old Believers of Latgale (the Eastern district of Latvia). This short clip illustrates very well all the main points of my paper today

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzzmhckeixQ>):

- It provides ethnographical settings to help us to picture the everyday life led by communities in the rural areas - traditional, two-storey, wooden houses (precisely as we can see today in Northern Russian villages); a traditional female outfit (long black dresses and shawls).
- The clip reveals the core element of their eschatological world view; their firm belief that we are all living in sin under the shadow of the Antichrist. Therefore good Christians must think about salvation, death, afterlife, punishment for sins etc.
- We also can learn about the major problem the Old Believer communities face everywhere in Europe – ageing population, youth forced to leave the country due to high unemployment so that no-one is left to keep the old traditions and way of life. The Old Believers say that the test by freedom is the hardest one.

Finally I will play some of the psalm to show the Old Believers customs.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzzmhckeixQ>

The Russian Old Believers are routinely compared with Amish communities or other religious groups. I would say that the Old believers are quite unique as they have never denied the use of modern technology or any benefits that progress could offer. Just the opposite they have been very resourceful in their adaption to the outside world. They strive to preserve the world view and mentality of medieval Orthodox Christian man who is doing well in our contemporary society. They see no contradiction in this situation and this makes them a truly phenomenal social group. To understand this cultural phenomenon we need to place The Russian Old Believers' movement in historical context.

Brief history highlights

In 1653-1667 after almost two hundred years of theological disputes and arguments within the Russian Orthodox Church, they finally implemented a reform that was aimed at unifying translation of the Holy books, the Church service and some customs. The reform was carried out more for political than pure theological reasons, to satisfy the country's ambition to become the leading force of Eastern Christianity. The reform appeared to be a controversial issue and a reason to form a religious break-away movement of Russian dissidents led by a relatively small group of middle-rank clergy entitled "Zealots of Piety". Shortly these disagreements led to a full scale Schism in the Orthodox Church.

"The saviours of the old piety"

In Russian, there are two words to define the term "Old Believers". The first word - "*raskol'niki*" is rooted in the word "*raskol*" (the schism), and refers to the schism that occurred in the Russian Orthodox Church at the time of Nikon's Church reform. The word "*raskol'niki*" means the initiators of the schism, those that disagreed with mainstream Russian Orthodoxy. The second word, "*starovery*" (old

believers) means the followers of the old faith. It is interesting that the Old Believers very rarely used either word to define their beliefs. They considered themselves as “*khraniteli drevliago blagochestiai*” that can be translated into English as “the saviours of the old piety”. The latter phrase is a key phrase to understanding the Old Believers’ mentality and world view and how that world view was reflected in their customs, ideology, religious teachings, literature and folklore. The “Zealots” furiously opposed the reform on a number of theological disagreements, changes to the services of the Orthodox Church and the editing of the Holy books. However, behind these theological disputes, there appeared to be a firm belief and a fear of Nikon’s opponents that the Russian Orthodox Church had voluntarily retreated from the self-appointed position of the being “the Third Rome” and the saviour of the original model of true Christianity laid down by Christ himself and His first followers. Therefore, the reform was promptly interpreted as a sign that the world had come to the end and that the Antichrist had established his realm on earth [Zenkovsky: 2009, Melnikov 1999]. This assumption was made on the basis of an undisputed idea accepted by all Orthodox theologians that the world will certainly come to an end when the last stronghold of pure Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church, would make “the last step back” (“*poslednee otpaden’e*”) and fall [Filosofova 2010: 66-76]. This explains why the reforms, concerned only with some outward appearances of the church services and some editing of the translation of the Holy books, were perceived as shaking the essential foundations of Orthodoxy and even as a sign of the Apocalypse.

The ways for salvation

However profound the eschatology of the teaching, ideas and religious beliefs of the Old Believers, it was never contemplative or passive. On the contrary, the Old

Believers actively engaged in seeking ways of living and roads to salvation in this “*fallen world*”. These ways changed with time and, of course, bore the mark of one era or another. The mass self-immolation of the Old Believers in the first decades of the breakaway movement was not practised in subsequent centuries. A new tactic was adopted, which aimed at creating communities of Old Believers engaged in educational activity and enlightenment. One of the best ways of defying the harmful life on earth, beyond the confines of the Old Believer community, was to preserve the basis of religious devotion within Old Believer communities and to inculcate in every Old Believer a sense of personal responsibility, before God, for the flourishing of the old faith in Russia [Pozdeeva 1998: 12-20, Pozdeeva 1999: 3-28]. Therefore, it was essential for every Old Believer to work to strengthen life in the community in accordance with the orthodox tradition (“*drevlee blagochestie*”) and to protect it from the tempting influence of the devil’s world (“*prelestnyi mir*”). One way the successors to the old rituals achieved this, was to create their own culture and traditions according to the Old Russian Orthodox model. Old Believers took the traditions and forms of everyday devout living from the Russian Middle Ages along with the basic ethical norms of orthodoxy and the rules governing how one should live as a good Christian as well as attitudes toward books and reading. Education in the traditions of “*the old piety*” was considered as a process of “*the formation of the soul*” and was taken very seriously in the Old Believer communities. Therefore, the educational and enlightenment needs became an important stimulus in developing the written manuscript literary and folk traditions by local Old Believer men of letters.

The Old Believers in Latvia - a success story?

Today the Old Believers define the stereotype of an enclosed community of obscurantists, narrow-minded and uneducated religious dissidents. Naturally, the

faith of each individual Old Believer community around the world and in Russia differs and depends on historical circumstances that determine the community's existence. For example, the Old Believers who settled far away from Moscow became out of reach and managed to escape the persecution and repression of the central power. In particular, the history of communities of Old Believers who settled in the territory of contemporary Latvia could be considered a success story due to the religious tolerance of the local government and the ability, of the Old Believers, themselves, to adapt to new surroundings. They started to escape Russia immediately after the Church reform in the second half of the 17th century and established their communities around the cities of Riga, Dinaburg (contemporary Daugavpils) and Resekne. It is difficult to have true estimates of the number of the Russian Old Believers living in Latvia. today As you can see from the table below the figures from the official Government survey and an unofficial survey by the Old Believers themselves is very different – 2,500 against 80,000 people. The only explanation I can provide for this discrepancy as the Old Believers themselves include in their estimates of all youths who went to work abroad, mainly to Ireland and the UK due to the very high unemployment in Latvia. The number of young Old Believers as economic migrants to the UK, in particular, became so high that last year the Chair of the Old Believer Council of Latvia, the Farther Zhilko, is now seeking permission to establish the Russian Old Believers church and cultural centre in London.

Some statistics on the Old Believers in Latvia (<http://pribalt.info/staroveri.php>)

<p>According to the Old Believers: the overall estimate of the Old Believers in Latvia – 80,000 people; 67 communities; the Old Believers' community in Daugavpils 8,000; Riga 12,000</p>	<p>According to the official Government survey: the overall estimate of the Old Believers in Latvia app. 2, 500 (5,49 % of the population; in Latgalia – 13,5% of the population); number of communities – 69.</p>
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As I mentioned before a volatile period of the Old Believers movement in the second part of the 17th century, when hundreds of the Old Believers burnt themselves to death in attempt to save the souls through cleansing fire, was very brief. Since then the Old Believers primarily focused on educational activities within communities in attempt to preserve the world view and mentality of the medieval Russian Orthodox Christian man. Let's refer to some quotations from Farther Zhilko: *"The Old Believer communities are not a "cultural reservation of people wearing traditional Russian shirts. Unfortunately our "free" society does not understand this point. **To be an Old Believer means to have the Old Believer world view" (my recordings – TF)***. The Old Believers strive to be bring up younger generations as good Christians who appreciate Christian values and take, seriously, their personal responsibilities for spiritual development and salvation of their own souls. *"We are against materialistic values and world view of western society" (my recordings – TF)* , - states on Farther Zhilko. The education of the good Old Believer would include:

- An ability to read Church Slavonic as the Church Slavonic and not Russian as Church Slavonic has been a language for Church services and Holy books.
- An ability to read and sing, using the ancient notation called "sol'i" or "kriuki"
- An ability to understand and interpret Holy texts, life of Saints, Old Russian apocrypha etc. in the way as these texts were interpreted before Nikon's reform.
- To pass spare time as a good Christian is supposed to do - spend time in reading instructive texts (for example, the life of Saints) or singing the folk religious songs (I play one short example of such song

<http://www.staroverec.lv/index.php?a=duhovniestih&m=108&l=1>)

- To read daily prayers, to observe Lents to avoid living in sin etc.

As we can see, a lot of these requirements are applicable to any person who considers themselves as good Christians, including mainstream Orthodoxy. However, one issue distinguishes the Old Believers from mainstream Russian Orthodoxy. They firmly believe that *we are living in the shadow of the Antichrist and the world has already fallen into his hands*. Therefore, a good Old Believer must stand firm for his/her values or, in another words, keep “*dukhovnaia ograda*” (“a spiritual fence”) that divides good souls from the dark diabolic forces. However, the Old Believers have never feared to interact with the outside “fallen” world. For example, many distinguished Russian wealthy and successful businessmen, politicians, writers, artists etc have old Believer roots. Some examples of recent activities by the Old Believers of Latvia could prove the point. In our days:

- They are involved in political activities, such participation in local government elections.
- They are active in obtaining EU grants for cultural and educational activities (conferences, concerts, exhibitions, publications).
- In November 2012 – the second international congress of the Old Believer businessmen was held in Ekavpils.
- In August 2012 a successful negotiation with the Dugavpils local Council over a plot of land was completed.
- Father Zhilko (the leader of Old Believer Church Council) was decorated with the Order of Three Stars by the Latvian Government for his cultural, educational and business activities and promotion of peace, tolerance and interaction.

The very limited time does not allow me to go much into details of this topic. However, to conclude I would like to bring us back to the main point made in my introduction. I hope that even these highlights of the history and contemporary life of the Russian Old Believers living in Latvia can provide us with valuable lessons of the peaceful integration and preservation of the unique cultural identity of an ethnic and religious minority group at a time of ethnic and religious tensions.

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