

Old Belief and Work

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The correlation between Protestantism and capitalism was demonstrated effectively by Max Weber. His findings related to the West. What is the situation in Russia? Can a similar correlation between economic and religious development be traced here? The example of Old Belief springs most readily to mind as its contribution to the Russian industrial revolution, which took place at the turn of the century, was unusually high. I propose to consider whether an analogy is justified or even possible; it would in any case be instructive to look more closely at the place of Old Belief and its significance in the social history of Russia.

In contrast to the Protestantism and Catholicism of the West, which have some fundamentally different theological doctrines, the dogmas and teachings of Orthodoxy and Old Belief are alike. Old Believers consider themselves to be followers of ancient Orthodox Christianity.

The spiritual crisis of seventeenth-century Russia, which saw the origin of Old Belief, evoked a huge interest in the ancient Russian Orthodox heritage. This interest was particularly intense among Old Believers, whereas it remained at a low level among those who remained true to the official church, those called 'Nikonians' in Old Belief terminology. Among the Old Believers the eloquence of St John Chrysostom shone once more in its true colours. It can even be said that among Old Believers Orthodox teaching experienced a revival, regaining the living significance of the times of the Church Fathers. It is important to point out here that this interest in the Orthodox heritage and pre-Nikonian church writings quickly brought about near-universal literacy among Old Believers.

Old Belief was by no means a uniform movement. Different tendencies or 'concordats' (*'soglasiya'*) within Old Belief responded to the challenge of the official church in different ways. The most moderate group of Old Believers, the *popovshchina* ('priestly'), recognised the heresy of the new post-Nikonian hierarchy but nonetheless did not refuse to accept deserters from among its priesthood and put them through a special ceremony in which they renounced their former heresy. This situation arose because none of the bishops in seventeenth-century Russia remained true to Old Belief. Pavel Kolomensky, the only bishop devoted to the old ways, was martyred by the authorities.

Another group of Old Believers, called the *bespopovshchina* ('priestless'), believed that the split in Russian Orthodoxy had brought the earthly hierarchy and priesthood to an end and that they were now to be found only in heaven. The *bespopovtsy* kept up all aspects of ancient Orthodox practice except those which could only be performed by a priest. They therefore have no liturgy and there is no altar in their houses of prayer: it is as if the altar were sealed up.

A third group of Old Believers, the *Spasovo soglasiye* (or *Netovskoye soglasiye*) and those affiliated to it – for example, the *strannichestvo* ('pilgrims') – held that 'in this world there is no Orthodox priesthood, sacraments or grace' and that the only hope of salvation was through hope in Jesus Christ (*Spas* 'Saviour'). In this way the *Spasovo soglasiye* deviated from the strict observances of ancient Orthodox ritual.

From the very beginning, then, Old Belief was divided into three: the moderate followers of *popovshchina* who were very close in their views to the traditionalists of new-style Orthodoxy; the *bespopovtsy* in the centre; and the radicals who rejected the sacraments and refused to have any dealings with the tsarist authorities, which they believed bore the mark of the Antichrist. The doctrinal differences within Old Belief meant that its different groups made various contributions to economic development in Russia. The largest contribution was made by the *popovtsy* and the moderate *bespopovtsy*. The more radical Old Believers were active in the assimilation of the remoter parts of Russia, above all of Siberia.

In looking at the economic potential of Old Belief we should remember that the Old Believers were that segment of society which preserved the organic wholeness of the way of life of Ancient Rus'. While Russia of the new rite was being put under spiritual pressure by Nikon's church reform and the transformations wrought by Peter the Great, Old Believer Rus' continued to operate by reference to primordial Orthodox values and ancient Russian cultural and economic traditions, an organic part of which was the legacy of the northern republics of Pskov and Novgorod. An important element in this legacy was the 'Russian custom of love' which was put into practice by the construction of churches 'within one day' ('*obydennyye*') or 'within one night' ('*obynochnyye*'). The prominent early twentieth-century Old Believer publicist and economist I. A. Kirillov noted this phenomenon:

Work done not for the sake of the economy or because of legal requirements, but out of the moral desire to show brotherly love and to help one's neighbour, ceases to be an awkward and heavy burden; its very nature is changed and the worker passes from the plane of material necessity to another plane of existence, in which brotherhood replaces class war and the law of love for one's neighbour replaces the fight for survival.¹

This kind of work is naturally transformed into service of God and becomes a form of Christian spiritual achievement ('*podvizhnichestvo*').

As the remarkable Russian thinker Nikolai Fedorov put it,

The building of churches 'within one day' expresses the fact that for the triune Christian God there is nothing more pleasing than people working together in unity, with all their minds, hearts and souls. Soon, within the space of a day, their strength is gone but the job is done leaving a sense of zeal, which comes from the knowledge that they have worked together on a common task with heart, soul, love and mind. To live together is both good and beautiful, ethical and aesthetic, but to labour together on God's work is yet nobler, greater and more beautiful.²

It was always the free, autonomous parish that provided the basis for the spiritual and also the socio-economic activity of the Old Believers. Persecution and an almost complete lack of priests even among the *popovtsy* – there was a period during the reign of Nicholas I when there were only three active *popovtsy* priests left in the whole of Russia – meant that the laity played a key role in parish life. It was thanks to their awareness of and devotion to the tenets of Old Belief that their religious

parish lifestyle was preserved; and the economic activity of the Old Believers, which was based on a firm work ethic and imbued with the ideals of mutual assistance and community, was also to a great extent upheld by parish life. We must remember that there were not such sharp divisions between social classes among the Old Believers as among the new-rite Orthodox, and that therefore their religious convictions virtually separated them from the nobility. In contrast to that of the Old Believers, official Orthodox parish life fell into decline after the Nikonian reforms. Attempts were made to renew it only at the start of the twentieth century before the revolution and during the early postrevolutionary years.

One of the most striking manifestations of the economic activity of the *bespopovtsy* Old Believers was connected with the Vyg monastery in Severnoye Zaonezh'ye, which was established in 1691. In the first years of the eighteenth century Tsar Peter was in great need of iron and so, one after another, ironworks began to open up in the Olonetsky region and near Povenets. However, it was hard to find workers in such out-of-the-way places. 'Then they remembered the Vyg hermits', who were ordered to come and work in the factories in Povenets. 'In return for their service to the state – as was Peter's custom – they were promised the freedom "to live in the Vyg monastic community and to worship God according to the old texts".'³

The weakening of persecution brought an influx of residents to the community.

The people who were coming to Vyg were those to whom the current system did not provide the opportunity to develop their skills and activities. Free men were accepted along with fugitive sailors and runaway serfs. For the latter, the community often paid an agreed price to the landowner if he discovered the whereabouts of the runaways and if they had turned out to be useful workers ... In the Vyg brotherhood all members were equal and every individual enjoyed the same legal rights. Princes, deacons, abbots, serfs, noblemen, rich merchants, clerks and peasants were all united in one community and striving towards one aim; everyone was presented with the freedom to participate in the common assembly (*veche*); everyone's individuality was enhanced by the right to conduct the affairs of the community, to share community property and to vote. Regardless of station and guided by their own judgment, all members of the community elected their superior, who could be anyone who had distinguished himself by his intelligence, the usefulness of his activity or his sincere devotion to the common good. Even a simple peasant could rise to be a community superior ... Nothing of importance affecting the members of the community happened in secret, but everyone in the community had a say in everything ('byla polnaya obshchinnaya glasnost') ... The Vyg community was subdivided into various workshops ('artels'); each 'artel' had its own building and its affairs were conducted by seniors and officials, who were elected every year. People rose to such duties gradually: they started with ordinary general work ... anyone who stood out as quickthinking, resourceful, industrious and disinterested could be made an elder, then a leader and, finally, a treasurer.⁴

The Vyg community was organised as a brotherhood and was originally self supporting. However, as it grew wealthier it began to use outside labour and established itself in St Petersburg and Arkhangel'sk. During the reign of Nicholas I the community suffered repressions from which it did not recover. The community's archive

was not preserved and the scope of its activities during its most successful years can be assessed only from fragmentary information. According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, in 1828 there were 2859 people of both genders in Vyg.⁵

In the first half of the 1830s the community's income was 200 000 roubles. Of these 30 000 were contributed by the community in St Petersburg and 5000 by the Arkhangel'sk community, 50 000 came in from fishing and animal husbandry, up to 10 000 from the sale of manuscripts and up to 5000 from copper-smelting and icon painting, and the remaining 100 000 roubles came from agriculture, the mill and the sawmill as well as in the form of alms from benefactors.⁶

The economic success of the Vyg community in opening up the Russian north demonstrated the great potential of the Old Believers. Meanwhile at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century the rich merchants from moderate *bespopovtsy* circles from the larger towns began to play a growing role. They gradually eclipsed the Vyg community, which had essentially been a church commune. The rise of the merchants was a feature of several of the different concords within Old Belief at that time.

In the course of the nineteenth century, and in particular at the time of the emancipation of the serfs, the important capital resources in Russia were accumulated by schismatics. Why by them particularly? Was it because they were more talented than others or because they were united in one economic community? The help of the community did actually play a large role. Many of the big Moscow capitalists obtained the capital which formed the basis of their wealth from the coffers of the schismatic community.⁷

In the second half of the nineteenth century the economic activity of Old Believers became very evident in the Volga region, where they founded many trading villages and small towns – the town of Semenov, for example, and the villages Mechetnaya, Krivoluch'ye, Kormyazhka, Puzanovka, Sukhoi Ostrog, Bol'shoi Kushum, Maly Kushum, Balakovo and others, which played an important role in the rise of the grain trade in Russia.⁸

The emancipation of the serfs gave a powerful impetus to the development of a strong Old Believer peasant economy. Old Believer peasants eagerly used their own funds to buy land. According to data provided by the Council of All-Russian Old Believer Congresses from statistical reports on 50 provinces in European Russia, in 1905 the average Old Believer holding was 5.4 desyatiny (some 15 acres) of land while the average for the peasantry as a whole was 1.1 desyatiny.⁹ 'When you are travelling about the country', said Count Uvarov, a deputy to the State Duma, 'and in the middle of nowhere you come across well-constructed houses and buildings, sober people busy with their work, people who are both moral and abstinent, you can tell in advance – just ask them, they'll tell you themselves – that these are Old Believers.'¹⁰

Finally, we need to look at the historic role of Old Believers in the opening-up of Siberia and other remote areas of Russia. In contrast to most Russian settlers in Siberia, Old Believers went there quite voluntarily from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards. Escaping persecution, they moved deep into the taiga, building homes there and establishing an economy. Many of these were members of radical concords within Old Belief. They moved deeper and deeper into Siberia in their efforts to avoid all contact with the tsarist authorities, which they considered to

be of the Antichrist.¹¹ It is known that some Old Believer families got as far as Tibet. The Likov family is a good example of the persistence of the traditions of Old Belief in the taiga even today.¹² Unfortunately, when this family came into contact with modern civilisation the results were tragic: four out of the five family members died from diseases brought by settlers from the civilised world and only the youngest daughter, Agaf'ya, survived. Another contemporary odyssey is unique: in the last century a whole community moved from the Volga to the Far East, and then after 1917 to the Chinese part of the Ussuri taiga in Manchuria; in 1949 they moved to Brazil; then to the American state of Oregon; and in 1968 they moved to Alaska where they now live in the village of Nikolayevsk. These Nikolayevsk Old Believers created the Russia Sea Association and developed a fishing trade, competing successfully with local traders.¹³ Many Old Believer villages are still to be found scattered throughout Siberia and the Far East. According to the leaders of the Pomorskaya Old Believer Church (of the most moderate *bespopovtsy* group) there are even today no atheists in some of the Old Believer villages of Altai.

According to data assessed by the editor-in-chief of the Old Believers' magazine *Tserkov'*, A. V. Antonov, before the revolution of 1917, 64 per cent of the trading classes in Russia were Old Believers. The outlook was positive and the revolution came as a crushing blow. In the NEP years Old Believers attempted to get back on their feet but historical developments extinguished all their hopes. The totalitarian state destroyed the basis of the Old Believers' economic strength – the community – and although today a rebirth of religious and spiritual life among Old Believers is evident, it is difficult to say whether or not they will again become economically and culturally significant. All we can say is that some fragments of this mighty economic organism have been preserved in the remotest regions of Russia.

It is fairly obvious that there is a correlation between religion and economics in Old Belief. Further research is needed, including field work among the Old Believer peasant communities still in existence. It appears, however, from initial investigations that it is the preservation by the Old Believers of the spiritual and moral values and organic integrity of ancient Russian life that constitutes the uniqueness of their contribution to the historical economic development of Russia and potentially to the future rebirth of its economy.

Notes and References

- ¹ I. A. Kirillov, *Pravda staroi very* (Moscow, 1917), p. 428.
- ² N. F. Fedorov, *Filosofiya obshchego dela*, vol. 1 (Verny, 1906), p. 706.
- ³ P. G. Lyubomirov, *Vygovskoye obshchezhitel'stvo* (Moscow-Saratov, 1924), p. 31.
- ⁴ N. Aristov, 'Ustroistvo raskol'nich'ikh obshchin', *Biblioteka dlya chteniya*, June 1863.
- ⁵ Lyubomirov, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 107–8.
- ⁷ V. V. Andreyev, *Raskol I yego znachenie v narodnoi russkoi istorii* (St. Petersburg, 1870), p. 163.
- ⁸ D. Mordovtsev, 'Ob irgizskikh obshchinakh', *Delo*, no. 4 (1872), p. 308.
- ⁹ I. A. Kirillov, *op. cit.*, p. 400.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 401–2.
- ¹¹ See, for example, the tale 'My pobedili', G. A. Machtet, *Izbrannoye* (Moscow, 1958).
- ¹² V. M. Peskov, *Tayezhny tupik* (Moscow, 1990).
- ¹³ Jerzy Gołos, 'U starowierców na Alasce', *Poznaj Świat*, no. 10 (1984).

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