

Paradoxes of the Old Believer Movement¹

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The growth of interest in religion among the Russian people since the fall of the communist regime is usually looked at from only one angle – the revival of the Orthodox Church. This has a certain logic to it from the personal, cultural, ideological and national viewpoints. However, the picture most people, including newspaper columnists and the secular authorities, have of spiritual life in Russia has become extremely one-sided. Normally, when people speak of a return to religion or to the Church, they are now referring exclusively to the Orthodox Church.

In the religious sphere as such, the main task is to recover the past. However, this has turned out to be a crude process incapable of fully reproducing the spiritual and cultural diversity of prerevolutionary Russia. Returning to ‘the faith of our grandparents’ sometimes turns out to mean returning to the faith of grandparents who are strangers to us: people can lose touch with their family traditions.

One traditional alternative to Orthodoxy for most Russians, but one that attracts very little attention today, is the Old Believer movement.

According to prerevolutionary statistics 10 per cent of Russians called themselves Old Believers – that was about 16 million people. This figure is indeed probably too low, since after long years of persecution the ‘ardent devotees of ancient piety’ would be inclined to conceal their faith rather than advertise it.

Before the Revolution Old Believers were influential in many areas of national life. The biographies of prominent Old Believers at the turn of the century showed that they were wealthy, well known and successful in their chosen professions. They were a distinctive type, with a culture completely different from that which had developed in the mainstream of Russian life. Most of the well-known Old Believers – the Ryabushinskys, Guchkovs, Morozovs, Shibayevs, Sheloputins, Soldatenkovs, Bugrovs and Ostroukhovs – were rich merchant families. Among all the wealthy of Russia the Old Believers were noteworthy for their involvement in social work, charitable activity, patronage, local government and popular education, and for technically and socially innovative projects in the economic sphere. Many of them were leading religious activists; others applied their great energies to artistic or scientific work.

These renowned prerevolutionary Old Believers start to give us an idea of the scale and extent of the religious, economic, cultural and social activities of the followers of this ‘traditional creed’. They were life’s true householders, strong in faith, with a great deal of common sense and a strong sense of responsibility.

So where then has this strong, prosperous and healthy element in Russian national life disappeared to? Where is the Old Believer element in the spiritual life of modern

Russia, in its business life, politics, culture and public life? Why do modern surveys show that less than one per cent are Old Believers, compared with 10 per cent before the Revolution? Do the Old Believers have a future?

In order to answer these questions we must first find out what exactly the Old Believer movement is today, and assess its role in the modern world from the cultural and sociological point of view, comparing it with the Protestant and Catholic Churches. Second, we must explain what happened to the Old Believer Church under Soviet rule.

The Old Believer movement (*starobryadchestvo* or *staroveriye*) is the general name given to a number of independent religious movements consisting of Russian Orthodox believers who refused to accept the church reforms carried out by Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century and who tried to preserve church regulations and traditions in the ancient forms which they believed had existed since Russia's conversion to Christianity. The Old Believers are divided on points of dogma into 'concords' ('*soglasiya*') or 'tendencies' ('*tolki*'): the differences between them are often fundamental matters of principle. However, all these groups acknowledge that they are ideologically and socially kin, if only because they have had the same historical experience.

As far as the 'ruling Church' is concerned, the Old Believers have always been 'schismatics', propagators of religious ignorance and superstition, fanatically proud and stubborn. In the words of the nineteenth-century historian Afanasi Shchapov, a liberal intellectual, 'the Old Believers are a fossilised fragment of Ancient Rus'.² During the Soviet period the prominent historians Aleksei Klibanov and Konstantin Chistov regarded the Old Believer movement as 'social protest' movement (their research was mostly confined to the prerevolutionary period), with a utopian understanding of society.³ They studied the Old Believer way of life, their traditions and rituals. 'It's simply disgusting,' an Old Believer lay preacher said to us: 'they look on us almost as if we were mummies in a mausoleum or models in a shop window.' It rarely occurred to anyone to consider the intrinsic value of the Old Believers' religious philosophy and way of life, or their influence on the culture and life of society.

The unique character of the Old Believer movement lies in its fundamental ideological principle: the need to preserve in its entirety the Orthodox ritual tradition as it had taken shape in the Russian Orthodox Church by the mid-seventeenth century. The psychological inertia brought about by declaring the rituals sacred meant that the Old Believers also had to preserve many everyday customs relating to clothing, diet and communal life. Perhaps no other significant religious movement in the history of Christianity has accorded such a central place to ritual. To many historians and churchmen who have criticised the Old Believers this simply proves how absurdly uncivilised they are, treating religion like magic; and it means that the Old Believer movement cannot be included among the religious movements that have played any kind of positive role. All this has served as an excuse for refusing to take the Old Believer movement seriously as a system of belief.

In order to understand the Old Believer movement, we ought to see if there are any analogies with it in the history of European Christianity. If we think in terms of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, then the Old Believer reaction to the innovations of Nikon was undoubtedly analogous to the latter. Moreover, in Russia the Old Believer 'Counter-Reformation' was more effective and successful than Nikon's 'Reformation' on the human and psychological level in that it aroused more spiritual enthusiasm. What did Nikon's 'reforms' lead to, superimposed on the

secularisation of society and the growth of absolutism? Apart from some innovations in ritual as such, they promoted bureaucratisation in the Church and stagnation in religious life. At the same time, the Old Believer 'Counter-Reformation' had a great many consequences that led to significant change. Here we come up against one of the obvious paradoxes that Russian history abounds in. The Old Believers wanted to preserve everything as it had been, but very soon they ran into serious problems – for example, with regard to the clergy. As a result, they were in reality forced to live like Protestants. The Old Believers had no set hierarchical structure to which they had to be subject. They found themselves in a one-to-one relationship with God, to whom they were individually responsible in solving their spiritual problems. There is no point in waxing indignant at the fanaticism of the Old Believers. After all, from the point of view of liberals today, Luther and Calvin were terrible obscurantists, conservatives and reactionaries. In fact, they represented a reaction to secularisation. In many ways the Old Believers were their Russian counterparts, though they took a Russian form.

The Old Believers 'retreated into ritual', cutting themselves off from life around them, which they saw as unacceptable. However, their circumstances had radically changed: they lacked a hierarchy or properly ordained clergy, and the ecclesiastical authorities they had formerly acknowledged were hostile to them. They strove to preserve their rituals and faith at any cost, but as a direct result of their efforts they were forced to change both rituals and faith in fundamental ways. They had to decide how to live in completely changed circumstances while refusing to renounce a single jot of their ancestors' heritage and theoretically preserving everything as it was. Luther's solution was simple: anything added in the course of history must be rejected, as the only authority was that of Holy Scripture. To the Old Believers this approach would be worse than any heresy; yet in practice they boldly swept aside many formerly unassailable spiritual authorities, turning to the Scriptures in their search for a solution to their problems; like any Lutherans, they were then forced to rely on their own reason. One of the main, possibly 'revolutionary', differences between the Old Believers' image of 'Holy Rus'' and that of the Orthodox majority was their principled opposition to the state, their desacralisation of the rulers of this world, who had taken the side of Nikon and his supporters and harshly persecuted those who revered the ancient religious traditions. As far as they were concerned the monarch ceased to be the anointed of God, and not a trace remained of their pious feudal respect for authority.

The logical extension of their dissident attitude to the Church was civil dissidence. In practice this could mean anything from a critical attitude to the authorities to complete rejection of state institutions. The principal differences among the Old Believer nonconformists sprang from the answer they gave to a fundamental question regarding their relations with the world: has grace departed from the world because the whole church hierarchy has fallen into heresy; or can the hierarchy, and thus the Church, be restored and grace return once again to the world? The former implied a rejection of the Church; the latter that there could be no grace apart from the Church. In the way they answered this question the Old Believers split into two main groups.

The less numerous 'priestless' concords, including the '*stranniki*' ('wanderers') and '*beguny*' ('runners'), deny in principle the possibility that the priesthood can be revived and believe that grace has departed from the world for ever. The general Old Believer conviction that the age of Antichrist began at the time of Nikon has been taken to its theoretical limits by some of the more radical members of these groups:

they have taught that Antichrist is already reigning 'in the flesh' in this world, incarnated in the tsar; then under the Bolsheviks in the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU; nowadays, occasionally in Yel'tsin; in the ruling Church; and in government laws and regulations, taxes, the army, currency, passports; even in the family. The doctrine of the kingdom of Antichrist 'in the flesh' has led to the claim that a wandering and secret way of life is the most pious since as it allows one to evade any form of dependence or coercion.

Meanwhile the more respectable and 'conformist' of the Old Believers do not believe that grace has departed from the world. They do not believe, therefore, that the tsar or other rulers are Antichrist, and have obeyed the laws of the land (except of course those directed against their faith). However, there has been no trace of servility in their attitude to the state authorities: they have supported what is lawful, but no more than that. In tsarist times, repression and discrimination made it impossible for them to forget that their 'Holy Rus'' had nothing in common with Uvarov's triad 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and National Identity'.

The modern liberal consciousness is forgetting its religious roots. This is especially so in Russia, where they are more difficult to trace than in the West. Weak as the religious roots of democracy in Russia are, however, it is in the indigenous spiritual culture that we have to look for them; and they are best to be found in the Old Believer movement. No political ideology or political organisations emerged among the Old Believers: this was because they were subjected to constant persecution; because their own doctrines taught that there should be as little change or innovation as possible; and because they had no professional intelligentsia of their own until the very end of the nineteenth century. However, whenever Old Believers have found themselves in democratic conditions they have found it natural and easy to join in, as if the garments of democracy had been designed in the forests beyond the Volga rather than in the British Isles. The decree on religious tolerance of 17 April 1905 and the subsequent opening of banned churches permitted Old Believers to take an active part in the social and political life of Russia. At that time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, they produced neither revolutionaries nor members of the Black Hundreds. Guchkov and Ryabushinsky were both real European conservatives, of whom there were not all that many among the Orthodox. It is true that there were few politicians of national stature among the Old Believers, but they fully demonstrated their abilities in local government, in the *zemstva* (district councils) and in urban administrative bodies.

For Old Believers who found themselves in the West, it was just as easy to fit in with the way of life there. Vasili Rozanov wrote a short article about his contacts with the 'Fedoseyev' community in Riga. He was amazed at the way the Riga Old Believers had adapted to the German-Lutheran culture. They were marrying German Lutherans, which presented no difficulties for them; they had the same social status and demonstrated the same social skills. Both groups would say to Rozanov: 'Well, the Fedoseyev community has its icons, but otherwise, there's not much difference between us, is there?'⁴ In the summer of 1996 we were able to discuss Rozanov's article with Aleksandr Yevgen'yevich Khrychev, the *nastavnik* (leading lay preacher) of the Fedoseyev congregation in Kazan', one of the most influential Fedoseyev congregations. 'Rozanov was quite right', he told us.

The German Lutherans are culturally the closest to us. You will probably be surprised to hear that in our Voinovsky Monastery in Prussia before the First World War the elders kept portraits of the German emperors along-

side the icons. Conditions were better for the Fedoseyev community in Prussia than anywhere else.

In response to our bewilderment at such respect for worldly rulers, so untypical of Old Believers, Khrychev remarked: 'After all, the emperors were pious men, their laws protected our faith, while that Herod in Petersburg was persecuting it.' This ardent devotee of ancient Russian piety went on to express regret that such a pious land as East Prussia had disappeared from the map.

This lay preacher from Kazan', an educated, thinking man, had recognised what most Old Believers would probably never imagine: they have been psychologically closer to the West than they think. Having completely rejected the West – this was after all the reason for their appearance at the time of Nikon – the Old Believers nevertheless easily accept it when they end up living next door to members of western denominations, in similar conditions.

Not only the social and political skills of the Old Believers, but even their economic skills, reveal the Russian European in them. In modern western cultural studies it has become a commonplace to state that European civilisation grew out of the monasteries. It was the monasteries that nurtured responsibility, discipline and honesty, as well as initiative and innovativeness. For a number of reasons, as yet unanalysed, the education given by the Russian Orthodox monasteries did not produce such men for the world. However, in Old Believer communities a process took place from the very start that helped to spread monastic values into the lives of laymen. Strict separation from the fallen world of Antichrist together with deep personal faith and relative freedom of choice led to the emergence of special 'communal settlements' – unique half-monasteries, half-congregations. Their rule was one of severe discipline, strict obedience to the *nastavnik*, religious services many hours long and property held in common. Beside their communal dwellings, they had chapels, hospitals, homes for invalids and various workplaces – for agriculture, handicrafts and textile manufacture – where those living in the communal dwellings worked regularly without payment. A settlement of this kind sometimes comprised over a thousand people. 'The devil finds work for idle hands' was one of the basic precepts, and it led the Old Believers to abandon the traditional Russian disdain for business activities. From the end of the seventeenth century the Fedoseyev communities bred a large number of successful practically-minded entrepreneurs and merchants: they ensured the economic wellbeing of the communities as well as becoming rich as individuals.

One expert on the Old Believers has noted that with their strict discipline, their puritan attitude to a world perceived as sinful, their industriousness and steady accumulation of profits, their consciousness of being specially chosen and the lay ministry of their *nastavnik* (and, we might add, the individual responsibility of each man for his own salvation through faith, as expressed in prayer, work and ascetic practices) some communities, mostly those of the Fedoseyev type, are more reminiscent of Geneva under Calvin than of Orthodox monasteries, although historically Calvinism and the Old Believer Movement have no connection.⁵

If the general attitude of Old Believers to the state is expressed most clearly in the ideology of the *beguny* and *stranniki*, their attitude to economic activity is most clear in the ideology of the Fedoseyev communities. Other groups – the 'Belokrinitsa' and 'Pomor'ye' Concords – followed more or less the same path, but in a more moderate form. By the beginning of the twentieth century a typical large Old Believer business was no longer like a monastery, but nevertheless in some ways still resembled a large

congregation, in which the workers were united with the management by feelings of mutual responsibility and solidarity: there were good working conditions (an eight-hour working day, insurance, hospitals, kindergartens) and a healthy work ethic among the employees. A large business would be linked with smaller ones, and also with craftsmen, banks and commercial enterprises, where fellow-believers usually also worked. The whole organism was similar to a modern western corporation. Moreover, any innovations were regarded not as novelties, but as a return to the good old days, to 'Holy Rus'.

The Old Believers have always regarded charity as an obligation; capital is seen not as a means to create a luxurious lifestyle or as an end in itself, but as a gift from God, which should therefore be used to help other people. As Vladimir Ryabushinsky put it, 'wealth is a form of duty'. Old Believer publications sometimes state that before the Revolution 64 per cent of trading capital in Russia belonged to Old Believers. This may seem a remarkably high figure; there is no doubt, however, that the sums the Old Believers gave to charity would be of the same impressive order.

The Old Believer circles were influential in the towns, then; but nevertheless before the Revolution most Old Believers were peasants. Observers frequently noted that Old Believer villages were clearly superior as far as everyday morality and work ethic were concerned. Nikolai Leskov and Vasili Rozanov have written eloquently on this subject. In his book *Pravda staroi very*, a favourite with the Old Believers, Ivan Kirillov quotes Count Uvarov, a Duma deputy, who said that if in any corner of Russia you see a village with attractively built houses and industrious, sober and honest peasants, you can be quite sure they are Old Believers.⁶

Now let us describe what happened to the Old Believers under the Bolsheviks.

Like members of all denominations, the Old Believers were subjected to savage persecution. In the 1920s the Belokrinitsa hierarchy in Russia still had about 20 bishops, but after the death of Archbishop Meleti (Rastorguyev) in 1934 only the elderly Bishop Savva of Kaluga remained at liberty. In the 1930s all the lay preachers of the Pomor'ye Concord on the territory of the RSFSR were wiped out. All the monasteries, educational institutions and welfare organisations of the Old Believers of all persuasions were destroyed.

Stalin's concordat with religion, which allowed the Moscow Patriarchate and Islam to restore their basic institutions, had hardly any effect on the Old Believers. The Belokrinitsa Old Believers were permitted to have a bishop in Moscow, at the Rogozhskoye cemetery, and there were a few dozen parishes registered in various parts of the country. The Higher Old Believer Council of Lithuania (*Vysshi staroobryadchesky sovet Litvy*), which continued to exist after the Soviet annexation of Lithuania, became the official centre of a few dozen registered Pomor'ye congregations, which even held assemblies in Vilnius three times during the Soviet period for the Pomortsy of the USSR as a whole. The remaining concords had their legal existence reduced to the absolute minimum.

The martyrdom of Orthodox, Muslims, Protestants and Catholics has been widely documented, but the sufferings of the Old Believers and their protests against Bolshevik persecution still await a historian. Too little is known about their participation in peasant uprisings, their flight to distant regions of Siberia and their opposition to collectivisation. Only individual episodes have so far come to light; but even these stagger the imagination. Solzhenitsyn tells us how MVD troops destroyed 'priestless' settlements in the Siberian taiga in the early 1950s using air power and artillery and how imprisoned 'chasovennyye' refused to take food from the hands of their gaolers, the servants of Antichrist, and starved to death. One of the last survivors of that

staunch breed is Agaf'ya Lykova, a living symbol of the ineradicable longing for liberty and self-respect shown by ordinary Russian men and women.⁷

The persecution of the Old Believers was savage, but no less savage than that directed against members of other denominations or faiths. Why is it, then, that by the end of the 1980s the Old Believers were in a much weaker position than, for example, the Baptists? After all, the Old Believers had had the tragic experience of 300 years of opposition to a repressive state system; they loved freedom; they had a democratic spirit and their own traditions of self-government and internal organisation.

There are two reasons for what happened.

To begin with, the Old Believer movement survives on the basis of an established traditional way of life, in which the fundamental religious customs are incorporated: singing, reading, praying together. Their way of life nurtured their aesthetic ideals: their love of icons, their beautiful church services and their unique Old Believer folklore. It nurtured their moral ideals: respect for their elders, care for the young, mutual assistance and honesty. With its established rules on food and clothing, the Old Believers' way of life preserved their unique identity.

Secondly, the religious life of the Old Believers was not limited to the family and the church, but included all spheres of human activity, especially work and social life. A high level of social unity allowed them to set up independent socio-economic structures, peasant communes, business enterprises and trade associations, which united to form even larger macrostructures.

The Old Believers were thus able to survive all the regimes that persecuted them for their religious views and practices, but which did not aim to destroy their social structure or way of life. However, 70 years of Soviet rule aimed precisely at the latter, and this had a fatal effect on the Old Believer movement. The liquidation of the well-off middle class immediately after the Revolution, the campaign against the 'kulaks' and Cossacks of the 1920s, the collectivisation of the 1930s, the campaign against entrepreneurs and the enlargement of villages were far more harmful to the Old Believer movement than the closure of churches or the imprisonment of lay preachers.

By the late 1980s, when persecution and restriction of religious life finally came to an end, the Old Believer movement was like a broken vase with its fragments, scattered all over Russia, reflecting different aspects of the original whole.

Most numerous are the elderly Old Believers, who are less well educated and mostly of peasant origin. This is a not formally organised movement, even if the old people regularly hold prayer meetings. Young people from this background have almost all abandoned religious practices, although they often retain their Old Believer identity – they christen their children according to the Old Believer rite, and in recent years they have started to marry in church and take part in religious festivals. However, the spiritual life of these young people has in fact largely been cut off from Old Believer traditions. Nevertheless, in places where numbers of Old Believers had settled in the same area, public opinion among the Old Believers has already become an important element in local life, and the administrative authorities of districts, villages and settlements have to take it into account. Districts of this kind are to be found in Nizhny Novgorod, Chelyabinsk and Perm' *oblasti*, Krasnoyarsk and Altai *kraya* and the Komi, Tuva, Khakasia and Altai republics. Orthodox clergy from Nizhny Novgorod and Chelyabinsk *oblasti* have told us that attempts to establish parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate in traditional Old Believer districts have aroused opposition from the public and the local authorities under their

influence. Among peasant Old Believers in Siberia, whose faith has remained strong, principled antistate activists, who refuse to accept pensions, are still to be found. At the time of Chubais' privatisation plan whole villages had the opportunity to demonstrate their principles by refusing vouchers.

Another form of existence for the Old Believers is in Old Believer centres that were registered in the Soviet period and which continue to function today, for example the community at the Moscow Rogozhskoye Cemetery and the Kishinev diocesan administration of the Belokrinitsa Concord. There are only a few centres of this kind, but in the face of a general decline in the Old Believer lifestyle they have managed to preserve basic religious teachings and cultural traditions. However, the fact that these centres existed legally during the Soviet period has left its mark on many of their members. There were real Soviet patriots among them, motivated not by fear but by sincere loyalty to Soviet power; they regarded their more successful older sister, the Moscow Patriarchate, with a mixture of respect and envy, and did not see the virtual destruction of the Old Believer way of life as a great tragedy. They have preserved a shell of Old Believer culture, but have lost their Old Believer spiritual identity.

A rather unexpected phenomenon is the survival through the Soviet period of a few small educated Old Believer clans in various towns and cities, keeping up some kind of occasional contact with Old Believer centres, but in practice living autonomously, preserving their religious life within the family circle. Members of these clans are now beginning to go to Old Believer churches and are among their most promising signs of growth. Since the late 1980s, moreover, there has been a small but educated and active influx of converts, who are not from Old Believer families but who are disillusioned members of the Russian Orthodox Church or else from completely nonreligious backgrounds.

All these Old Believer fragments have their own character, then; and the Old Believer movement today is fundamentally different from what it was before the Revolution. Religion is no longer part of work or social life, or even (judging by the attitudes of the younger generation) of family life. As with Orthodox believers, it has become a personal, private matter.

The prospects for the revival of the Old Believer movement are not improved by certain serious problems, apart from those common to all confessions, which are not going to be solved quickly: the denomination's economic and social structures need to be rebuilt; its members will have to adapt psychologically and indeed physically to the heavy demands of everyday life; they will also need to find ways of working with young people. These are not the only difficulties that are peculiar to the Old Believer groups. During the Soviet period the Orthodox Church and Islam preserved a base that serves as a foundation for their present growth: a properly organised religious life, orders of clergy and academic institutions. There was public awareness of them, albeit minimal. Meanwhile the Protestants and Catholics, who suffered no less than the Old Believers at the hands of the Bolsheviks, are now receiving considerable support from fellow-believers in the West: material aid and literature, and opportunities to study abroad. The Old Believers do not have the potential resources that the Bolsheviks allowed the Orthodox and the Muslims to keep; nor do they receive assistance from anyone abroad. Naturally they are finding it more difficult to revive their faith, as things proceed much more slowly.

In the 1920s and 1930s Metropolitan Sergi and his supporters said that the most important thing was to preserve the internal structure of the Russian Orthodox Church; later, under more favourable circumstances, it would rise again. Sergi's

opponents asserted that the most important thing was to avoid any alliance with the Soviet authorities, which would mean the complete perversion of the faith. The Old Believers found themselves in the same situation as Sergi's opponents; and indeed the extent of their recognition by the state was negligible. However, it was precisely because of this that the Old Believers lacked the heavy ballast of Communist-Christian cooperation: corruption; unworthy bishops and clergy imposed by the KGB; the shameful tradition of servility and secretiveness. It is immeasurably more difficult for the Old Believers than for the Orthodox to revive their faith, but it is a healthier revival.

The first shoots of Old Believer revival are already visible. How is this revival happening? Perhaps the most typical way is when a young, educated Old Believer appears in an elderly, quietly dying community. He has left his job in order to get back to his roots and has become a priest, a lay preacher or an elder. Gennadi Chetvergov, an aviation engineer, became leader of the Belokrinitsa community in Kazan'; the artist Georgi Gilev became dean of the Saratov community; the *nastavnik* of the Pomor'ye community in Syktyvkar, Ivan Sokerin, was a former senior bank official. Energetic young people like these quite soon put a stop to the gradual demise of their communities and in the course of a few years restore the church or build a new one. Normally they do this without any financial support from the state: they collect money from the Old Believers or businessmen who have remembered their Old Believer origins. Unlike the semi-literate elderly priests, they attract middle-aged and younger people into the community – at first from Old Believer families, and then converts who have no Old Believer roots. They are well aware that without a younger generation the Old Believers have no future, so one of the first things they do is to set up Sunday Schools for children and start classes for infants.

It is a remarkable fact that a high proportion of young and middle-aged people who are joining Old Believer congregations, if not most of them, have higher education. One of the leaders of the Pomor'ye concord, Aleksei Khval'kovsky, told us: 'For years and years it's almost always been elderly men, without much education, who have become our lay preachers, but recently almost all the new ones have been young intellectuals.' The reason for this is fairly clear. For many years the Old Believer movement was preserved, according to tradition, in a semi-patriarchal environment, in villages and small towns. Nowadays this type of environment has practically disappeared, and younger people from the villages and the working class have lost touch with Old Believer traditions. It is more likely to be a well-educated young man, with cultural and intellectual interests, who will see the beauty of those traditions and seek to discover the truth in them: and indeed for a newcomer to the Old Believer movement there is a great deal that needs to be learned and understood.

What then does a modern individual find relevant in the Old Believer tradition, and what attracts him to it? Gennadi Chetvergov, a young priest of the Belokrinitsa Concord, explains:

You followers of Nikon probably don't know that one of the greatest virtues, for a Christian, is self-respect. Our Church is a self-respecting Church. Its founding principle is: not giving way to our weaknesses, to circumstances, to the authorities or to prevailing opinion. Yes, our services are long and our fasts are strict, we are not accustomed to grovelling before the authorities and we refuse to accept the despicable morals of today. Our faith is for spiritually strong, courageous people. And those are

the kind of people who come to us. As for the weak and dissolute, good riddance to them on their way to the ruling Church.

Fr Gennadi may be romanticising the situation of the Old Believer movement rather, and he is hard on the Orthodox Church, but his words are sincere and it is clear that they apply at least to some who are returning to the Old Orthodox faith. The Old Believer movement seems archaic, but its values and convictions are capable of attracting people today. The ‘courage’ to which Fr Gennadi refers and moral steadfastness: these are salient. The Old Believer form of patriotism also seems relevant, with its characteristically ardent love of Russian spirituality, history and culture, and at the same time its contempt for the authorities and Russian government traditions. In a small town in the Siberian taiga an elderly semi-literate priest of the Belokrinitsa Concord tried to prove to us the spiritual presence of Antichrist:

The Historical Museum has been closed for 25 years by the servant of Antichrist, Luzhkov. Now people don’t even have the opportunity to gain a true understanding of Holy Russia, our Mother. Luzhkov builds churches for the followers of Nikon and gives them money, but there is no place where people can find the truth. The followers of Nikon have to serve the authorities, so they now pray to Luzhkov rather than to Jesus Christ.

The Old Believers have no official political ideology, but when you talk to them, the basic outlines of their political thinking become fairly clear. Above all, they are firmly anticommunist. Once we happened to hear an argument between two Old Believers about membership of the CPSU: was it a heresy or a mortal sin? Finally they agreed that it was both. As Father Gennadi Chetvergov says: ‘Whatever we Old Believers may lack, one thing we do have is a good memory, and we shall not forget the spiritual destruction wrought by the communists.’ There were some elections coming up and Old Believer Metropolitan Alimpi had just sent out a telegram appealing to people not to vote for the communists. Father Gennadi expressed his bewilderment: ‘I can’t imagine that any of my parishioners would vote for them; he didn’t need to send a telegram.’ People from traditional Old Believer families are often said to assert proudly that ‘we have had no members of the CPSU in my family throughout the 70 years of Soviet power’. At the same time, they rarely have a positive word to say for today’s authorities either. ‘The people have never meant anything to those in power.’

The traditional democratic system of relations amongst Old Believers and the habit they have developed of organising their own affairs and relying on their own abilities often lead to unusual decisions and are gradually beginning to achieve results. An elder of an Old Believer congregation in one Siberian city (a man with a higher degree, incidentally) acquired a flat in the city centre, so he demolished a house he had inherited on some land and the congregation built a church there from its own resources and without any official sanction. ‘Wouldn’t the authorities regard this behaviour as illegal?’, we asked him. ‘This is my land’, he riposted,

and I can build whatever kind of house I like on it – even one with a dome, even one with a cross on top of the dome. I can ask anyone I like to visit me – there’s no law against inviting 30 guests on a Sunday morning or a Saturday evening. The Catholic priest in this town has been trying for two years to get permission for land to build a church – but all the cadres⁸

keep telling him to get lost. That won't work with me!

So far we have been trying to identify the characteristics of all Old Believers and have deliberately disregarded the differences among the concords. However, when we go on to look at their future prospects, we need to focus on the distinctive features of the various concords.

Many of the smaller concords and tendencies, such as the '*aristovy*', '*ryabinovtsy*' and '*dyrniki*' have either died out altogether or have turned into ethnographic groups with no regular, organised religious life. The most radical 'priestless' concord, the '*filippovtsy*', now consists of only a dozen or so small, semiunderground congregations of old people. The Spasov Concord is not much better off. The most numerous of the prerevolutionary 'priestless' concords – the Fedoseyev Concord – numbers no more than 20 congregations that regularly meet for religious services and no more than seven lay preachers, and as yet shows no noticeable signs of revival. The 'priestly' Novozybkov Concord is in a state of stagnation. Of course, it is possible that some kind of revival might take place even among these Old Believer groups. However, there really are grounds these days for speaking of favourable prospects for three concords: the Belokrinitisa Concord, the Pomor'ye Concord and the Chasovenny Concord.

The Belokrinitisa Concord

In 1986, at the very beginning of *perestroika*, Alimpi (Gusev) was elected as leader. He is now a metropolitan. During his years in office the number of bishops has risen from two to six (four of them in Russia) and three monastic establishments have been founded (one of them in Russia – the Nikolo-Uleimensky convent near Yaroslavl'). About 25 new churches have been opened, 10 of which have been rebuilt (including some in the large complexes of church-related buildings in Novosibirsk, Izhevsk and Barnaul). More than 60 priests and deacons have been appointed. A large summer camp for children from all over Russia has started near Rzhev and the first Sunday Schools have opened. In 1996 the metropolitanate founded a theological training college, with two-year courses, and an Old Believer school of applied art.

The Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (ROOBC) (as the Belokrinitisa Concord now calls itself) is now making efforts to reclaim its recent history. In 1997 it canonised Metropolitan Amvrosi, the founder of the Belokrinitisa hierarchy. In 1998 the Holy Synod decided to canonise the revered Old Believer priest-monks Konstantin and Arkadi, murdered in 1856 and buried near the village of Shamara in Yekaterinburg *oblast'*. The church calendar of the Metropolitanate has begun to publish background information on Bishop Arseni (Shvetsov) of the Urals (1840–1908), the great nineteenth-century champion of the Old Believer movement who is due to be canonised soon. The Metropolitanate is also collecting material for the canonisation of others who were martyred or suffered for the faith, under the tsarist authorities as well as the Bolsheviks.

The ROOBC, materially the most prosperous Old Believer Church, adopts a protective attitude towards other Old Believer Concords. Since 1996 its Sacred Councils (*Osvyashchennyye Sobory*) have been issuing calls for unity, which in practice, in the present circumstances, would mean joining the ROOBC. Meanwhile it has become quite common practice for a church that once belonged to the ROOBC to be handed over to another denomination by mutual consent and vice versa. The Church of the Intercession on Novokuznetskaya Street in Moscow, the property of

the Belokrinitsa Concord, was handed over in 1990 to a ‘fugitive priest’ (*‘beglo-popovtsy’*) congregation, while the former Pomor’ye church in Orekhovo-Zuyev was transferred to an ROOBC congregation.

The crumbling of the fortress of age-old tradition has quite recently resulted in the emergence of ideological movements within the ROOBC that are completely alien to that tradition. Towards the end of the 1990s a noisy nationalist faction unexpectedly appeared, almost wholly made up of people who had no Old Believer roots. They founded the Righteousness (*Spravedlivost’*) society in Moscow and allowed themselves to be influenced by secular nationalist antidemocratic circles, in particular by the newspaper *Zavtra*. The radical nationalists, who take this newspaper as their mouthpiece, have become disillusioned with ‘the Moscow Patriarchate’s policy of appeasement towards Yel’tsin’s regime, which has sold itself to the West’ and are trying in various ways to get the ROOBC on their side. The traditional Moscow Old Believer intelligentsia wants nothing to do with this movement. A well-known Old Believer intellectual who holds one of the key positions in the Metropolitanate told us that ‘sooner or later we’re somehow going to have to drive that rabble out of the Church’. However, Metropolitan Alimpi is in no hurry to shake off these new converts, possibly counting on assimilating at least some of them into the Old Believer environment.

A unique phenomenon in the ROOBC is the *Marenafa* movement, started by Vladimir Turkin, a Belokrinitsa priest. In the early 1990s Fr Vladimir founded his own congregation of ‘Old Believers of all concords’ in the village of Chul’man in Yakutia, and by the end of the 1990s he had founded another of the same kind in Moscow. Fr Vladimir actively fosters ecumenical contacts with Protestants, including praying together. He is trying to organise an association of Old Believers and Evangelicals. In 1996 the Metropolitanate removed him from his position but he insists that he has sympathisers among the Old Believer clergy, and that even Bishop Siluyan was temporarily banned from holding services in 1996 for supporting Protestant trends in the ROOBC diocese of Siberia.

The Belokrinitsa Concord suffers from one handicap, however, which is not a problem for the Pomor’ye Concord or the other Old Believers: its administrative and economic structures, which have survived from the Bolshevik period, and a ‘church establishment’ that is similar to that of the Moscow Patriarchate. These people are not very numerous and have no influence in the provinces, but their decrepit institutions are weakening the central administration at the Rogozhskoye cemetery in Moscow and could be a serious hindrance to further development. The anarchically inclined communities throughout the land show little interest in what happens in Moscow, and no one can force them to change their priests, to send more money to Moscow than they deem necessary, or in general do anything they don’t want to do. Nevertheless, the weakness at the centre shows itself up: in particular, in the serious problems involved in reviving monasticism and in the restoration of the churches at the Rogozhskoye cemetery, which despite the help of the local government in Moscow has turned into a long-term construction project.

The Pomor’ye Concord

This is the most moderate and ‘liberal’ tendency in the ‘priestless’ Old Believer movement. At the end of the last century it was much less numerous and less influential than the more radical Fedoseyevtsy. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, both before the Revolution and after it, the Fedoseyevtsy and other

'priestless' concords have been losing very large numbers of people to the Pomor'ye group. At present the Pomortsy are by far the most numerous and influential of the 'priestless' groups.

The first signs that the Pomor'ye Concord was experiencing revival, and an influx of young people, appeared later than in the Belokrinitsa Concord, in the mid-1990s. Since about 1993 younger lay preachers from the intelligentsia have begun to appear, together with the first Sunday Schools and kindergartens, and the construction of prayer houses has started. There are some 50 officially registered Pomor'ye congregations (there are far more unregistered ones, but practically all of them consist only of elderly people). Of these 50, some 20 are now developing rapidly. Since 1992 an Old Believer theological college has been operating in Riga, and in 1999 the St Petersburg community began to offer courses for lay preachers at its '*Nevskaya obitel*' centre.

Many respected Pomor'ye lay preachers recognise the impossibility of restoring in full the strict demands made on believers in the last century, and support a certain liberalisation in church life.

This concord's greatest problem is the organisation of its central administration. The Pomortsy have no church hierarchy; until 1905 the Pomor'ye Concord consisted of independent communities that had no central authorities at all. It was only in 1909 and 1912 that the First and Second All-Russian Councils of Christians of the Pomor'ye Concord were held in Moscow. In the 1920s the Bolsheviks abolished the all-Russian and regional centres of the Pomortsy. That short and canonically unnecessary tradition of centralisation is now proving difficult to revive. The Pomor'ye centres in Latvia and Lithuania, which to some extent played a coordinating role in the postwar years, are now beyond the border.

Since 1989 the complex task of building up central administrative bodies in Moscow for the Pomor'ye Concord has been proceeding, but it is made difficult by the fact that the Pomortsy are not accustomed to supporting such central bodies financially and even flourishing provincial congregations have been in no hurry to send money to Moscow. Traditional provincial distrust of Moscow also plays a significant role. At the same time the Moscow Pomortsy and their central organisations have had great problems with their buildings. In 1930 they were deprived of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ and the Intercession of the Mother of God on Tokmakov *pereulok*, where they usually held their All-Russian Councils and other events. Since then they have had to make do with a small church at the Preobrazhenskoye Cemetery, which they share with a congregation of the Moscow Patriarchate. A few years ago the church on Tokmakov *pereulok* was returned to the Pomor'ye community in a deplorable state. Its restoration has been going on for years, because of lack of money; the Moscow local government promised resources but these have not materialised. The Pomortsy are now preparing to hold an All-Russian Council, which they hope will solve many of their problems. Originally they planned to summon the Council in the summer of 1991, but later it was postponed a number of times (first to 1999, then to 'the beginning of the third millennium').

The Pomor'ye Concord's problems are exacerbated by the constantly smouldering historical conflict between the Moscow-Volga communities and those in the North. The northern communities are in the Komi Republic, Perm', Vyatka and St Petersburg; there is also the community that started to revive in 1998 in the historical birthplace of the Old Believer faith, near the town of Povenets in Karelia. They are noted for their extreme asceticism and strict regulations, their eschatological frame of mind and their strongly antistate attitudes. The Pomortsy of Komi, for example, still

regard the Russian state authorities as Antichrist, as they did under the tsar and under the Bolsheviks. The Pomortsy officially have no political ideology, but the communities in Moscow, Samara, Astrakhan' and elsewhere are more liberal in their dogmatic teachings and more loyal to the existing state authorities.

The revival of the Pomor'ye Concord has started, then, but it is still at a tentative early stage.

The Chasovenyye

The 'priestless' Concord of the Chasovenyye is barely represented in European Russia; its areas of settlement are in the Urals and Siberia (in the Perm' and Kemerovo *oblasti*, the Krasnoyarsk and Altai *kraya* and the autonomous republics of Altai, Tuva, Buryatia and Khakasia). They have no tradition of centralisation at all and have never had any training schools or regular publications of their own. Most of these congregations are unregistered and have preserved a traditional hostility towards state institutions. To this day the members of this concord are just ordinary people, elderly peasants. Nevertheless, they are still quite numerous and their faith is still too strong for them to be written off completely. It is interesting that whereas the Belokrinitsa and Pomor'ye groups show a tendency to become intellectual or urban in character, in the rare cases when Chasovenyye congregations have attracted younger members this is linked with economic activity – the setting up of co-operatives and private farms.

In recent times the economic situation of these communities (especially in the Altai and Krasnoyarsk *kraya*) has improved significantly. Private farmers have appeared among them, supporting their communities' way of life with their own resources. In those villages, settlements and districts where the Chasovenyye form a significant proportion of the population they practically control the local authorities.

The Chasovenyye in the Urals, unlike those in Siberia, have by and large renounced the 'escapist' approach to society: they participate in elections and obey the law. In recent years they have seen an influx of young people, descendants of Chasovenyye families, and weddings and christenings have once again ceased to be rare events. Scribes have survived who can transcribe the ancient books. The Chasovenyye of the Urals have started coming together again on pilgrimages to sacred sites and the legendary city of Kitezh, which they revere. The Chasovenyye are still engendering radical movements and ideas. Apocryphal tales are again being told of appearances by St Nicholas and the Mother of God prophesying the end of the world. A few years ago a 'Community of faith in the Paraclete' ('*obshchina Paraklitovoi very*') (about 50 people) emerged among the Chasovenyye of Kurgan *oblast'*, led by a certain Domna, who called on people to reject passports, documents and money and to give up potatoes, coffee and tea, and denounced electricity and cars.

The Chasovenyye greeted the fall of communism with enthusiasm, but most of them have no time for the present regime, and many believe that Yel'tsin is Antichrist.

Conclusion

There are clear signs of an Old Believer revival, but it is hard to imagine that the movement could regain its prerevolutionary numbers, wealth or influence. It has an opportunity to become a small but respected minority. However, a religious com-

munity's influence can be greater than its size or wealth. The basic ideological concepts, way of thinking and religious feelings expressed by the Old Believers live on in Russian life and in Russian spiritual and political culture.

On one occasion in Russian history there has been a movement among some Orthodox to reestablish links with the Old Believers. In the 1920s one of the movements within the catacomb Orthodox Church, led by Archbishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky), to all intents and purposes united with the Belokrinitsa Old Believers: suffering persecution, they were aware of how closely they were ideologically, socially and psychologically to the Old Believer movement.

It is to be hoped that tragic and bloody circumstances like these will not again be required for the Old Believer mentality to achieve its expression; but this does not mean that the Old Believer values are no longer required in the secular world. 'Disregarding the opinions of the majority and refusing to give way to them, independently preserving a given truth: this is the precious contribution of the Old Believers to the Russian religious mentality.'⁹ These are qualities that are still needed in Russia today.

Notes and References

- ¹ The authors would like to thank their colleague Vladimir Vladimirovich Nekhotin for providing them with materials and for his invaluable assistance on this article.
- ² A. P. Shchapov, *Zemstvo i raskol*, in *Sochineniya* (3 vols.) (St Petersburg, 1906–8), vol. 2, pp. 451–579.
- ³ A. I. Klibanov, *Narodnaya sotsial'naya utopiya v Rossii: period feodalizma* (Moscow, 1977); K. V. Chistov, *Russkiye narodnyye sotsial'no-utopicheskiye legendy XVII–XIX vv.* (Moscow, 1967).
- ⁴ V. V. Rozanov, 'Fedoseyevtsy v Rige', in *id.*, *Okolo tserkovnykh sten* (Respublika, Moscow, 1995), pp. 22–28.
- ⁵ S. Zen'kovsky, *Russkoye starobryadchestvo: dukhovnyye dvizheniya semnadsatogo veka* (Tserkov', Moscow, 1995), p. 450.
- ⁶ I. Kirillov, *Pravda staroi very* (Moscow, 1916).
- ⁷ In the early 1970s some tourists in the dense forests on the border between Khakasia and Kemerovskaya oblast' discovered a family of Old Believers, the Lykovs, who had been living there for decades in complete isolation. Soviet newspapers wrote a lot about them, mainly on the human capacity for survival in extreme conditions. Soon after their discovery all the members of the family except Agaf'ya died. Agaf'ya still absolutely refuses to leave her hut. Tourists and journalists sometimes visit her. Before the Kemerovo gubernatorial election of 1996 the governor, Aman Tuleyev, came to see her with gifts in a bid to secure the Old Believer vote.
- ⁸ 'Cadre' is a contemptuous nickname used by Siberian Old Believers for any representative of the authorities, from the President to the woman who issues passports.
- ⁹ Vladimir Ryabushinsky, *Starobryadchestvo i russkoye religioznoye chuvstvo* (Mosty, Moscow/Jerusalem, 1994), p. 102.

(Translated from the Russian by Marite Sapiets)