

The Ethical Values of *Narodnoe Pravoslavie*: Traditional Near-Death
Experiences and Fedotov (1)

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In 1935 the emigré scholar G. P. Fedotov published an analysis of the ethical values of popular Russian Orthodoxy, basing his conclusions on the genre of *dukhovnye stikhi* (lit. spiritual verses). These religious songs were performed before the Revolution by the blind itinerant singers known as the *kaleki* or *kaliki perekhozhie* [Fedotov 1935/1991].(2) For Fedotov the key features of folk Orthodoxy (*narodnoe pravoslavie*) were the emphasis on life as suffering, the profound sinfulness of man, the belief in the power of Christian love and the attachment to Mother Earth (*Mat' syra zemlia*) and maternal values in general, with their supreme embodiment in the Mother of God. His view has proved highly influential outside Russia, largely through its distillation in the opening chapter of volume one of *The Russian Religious Mind* [Fedotov 1946]. Fedotov's influence has perhaps been reinforced by the coincidences between his own concept of folk Orthodoxy and key aspects of Dostoevskii's view of the people (*narod*), itself based to a considerable extent on the writer's reading of the *dukhovnye stikhi* [Ivanits 2002; Wigzell 2002b:28-31].(3) In Russia where Fedotov's work began to appear only in 1989, his views have had less impact, while, among folklorists, there is a new interest in and awareness of the complexities of folk ethics [Belova 2002]. In this essay I question the validity of Fedotov's analysis for popular Orthodoxy as a whole by examining another of the genres of religious folklore, the type of vision known as the *obmiranie*.

So unfamiliar is the *obmiranie*, except to some folklorists and traditional Orthodox believers, that a definition would seem in order. The term *obmirat'*, self-evidently linked to *umirat'* (to die), refers both to the state of falling into/being in a coma as well as to the narrative account of what is seen during a coma, that is, essentially a near-death experience. To this day among traditional believers (official Orthodox or Old Believers) in rural Russia as in other Orthodox Slavic countries, the near-death experience is generally believed to consist of a journey to the world beyond the grave.(4) Here the subject most commonly meets relatives, sees the torments of hell and learns the date of his or her own death. Obviously these narratives represent a continuation of early and medieval Christian tradition (Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the supreme literary example.) Visits to the world beyond the grave were traditionally experienced not only during coma but also as dreams, or, when awake, as visions, but in Orthodox Slavic countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such visions are linked primarily with a coma or unusually prolonged and deep sleep. Indeed, it is traditionally assumed that anyone in this state will visit the afterlife, and in particular hell. During the vision, even when heaven is mentioned, the specific virtues of the blessed are not. Consequently, the ethical emphases of the *obmiranie* have to be judged largely from the sins mentioned, whether those of categories of sinners, or specific people known to the visionary, including his or her own moral failings. Within the Byzantino-Slavic Orthodox tradition considerable differences exist between accounts of visits to heaven and hell, allowing the visionary to select

from a wide range of possible choices those sins and values he or she deems most significant. Here religious affiliation, social background, gender and regional traditions may, it will be argued, also play a role.

Given that Fedotov wrote about Russian rather than East Slav folk Orthodoxy as a whole, I have drawn most of my examples from Russian material, but have included Poles'e on the borders between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, where the linguistic dividing line between the various East Slavic languages is not always clear. At times I shall refer to Ukrainian material, because the differences between Russian and Ukrainian tradition in this respect are no greater than those between local Russian traditions.(5) Of the contemporary texts, around thirty are oral narratives, almost all recorded since 1974, though the event described may have occurred much earlier. A further four are written texts, composed since 1950, but undergoing oral or printed transmission in subsequent years. I shall compare these with oral and written narratives from between 1830 and the Revolution (a further sixteen).(6)

Fedotov notes that the popular ethical values of the *dukhovnye stikhi* differ in various respects from those of the official Church. The three main categories he discerns are interrelated. The first, the sin of offending Mother Damp Earth has links with the *gens* religion of the ancient Slavs, and thus includes sins against parents (especially mothers) and relatives. Clearly connected to folk attitudes about Mother Earth is the veneration of the Mother of God, the supreme embodiment of maternal love and caring intercession for those who suffer. Reverence for the Mother of God is matched by an intense sense of sinfulness and sorrow at offences against Christian love and the innocent suffering caused by man's cruelty and injustice to man. One of the primary emphases in the *dukhovnye stikhi* concerns the unjust treatment of the poor by the greedy and heartless rich, a theme found in other oral genres such as the tales of everyday life (*bytovaia skazka*) and folk religious legends (*legenda*) [Ivanits 2002]. The category of sins against the Christian law of love includes for Fedotov not only the lack of charity towards others, but also the sin of scandal mongering. Perhaps the most conventional group involves sins resulting from the non-observance of Church laws and prohibitions (such as neglecting prayers, church attendance, ignoring major festivals, fasts or ritual actions associated with Wednesdays and Fridays.) Other sins are mentioned sporadically: breaches of moral purity as well as theft or lies (scandal mongering apart) seldom appear, though Fedotov does cite a variant of the song about the Last Judgement in which the damned include drunkards, adulterers, pimps and those involved in laughter culture (*smekhovaia kul'tura* [Likhachev, Panchenko, Ponyrko 1984]) [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. As can be seen, the various transgressions he highlights embrace both the sin of the individual before God, the evil that man does to his fellows (social sins), and sins against the Church's teaching and prescriptions.

Turning to *obmiranie* narratives, it is clear that there are considerable differences of emphasis. Much of the reason for this lies in the social situation and gender of visionaries. Whereas, judging from the nineteenth-century ethnographer S. V. Maksimov's observations, the *kaleki perekhozhie* were predominantly if not exclusively male [Maksimov 1877/1989], visionaries, at least after 1830, are almost exclusively women [Wigzell 2003]. What is more, most are wives, mothers and ordinary laywomen, though there are a small number who belong to a monastic community. By contrast, the *kaleki perekhozhie* had neither home nor family,

and, though not formally attached to the Church, led a life devoted to Orthodoxy; they would be found singing their mournful songs beside church doorways and at monastery gates on feast days. Since their material was drawn from the Bible, apocrypha and hagiography, they were, though illiterate, much better informed about Orthodoxy than most peasants (to whom, we may assume, most village *obmiravshie* belonged). In Fedotov's view, *kaleki perekhozhie* represented the summit of religious knowledge and understanding among the folk (in contradistinction to the most unenlightened sectors of the population (*samaia temnaia ... sreda*) [Fedotov 1935/1991:15]. Today, after decades of official hostility and repression, the general level of religious knowledge in the village is considerably lower than before the Revolution, although religious belief remains a given. The situation is in many respects worse in urban areas. If we compare the respective amounts of detail in pre- and post-revolutionary *obmiraniia*, it becomes clear how much less familiar lay visionaries are nowadays with the Christian visionary tradition and the teachings of the Church more generally [Tolstaia 2002: 215]. There is another important difference: *kaleki perekhozhie* formed a specific social group, whereas visionaries come from more varied backgrounds. Most are peasants, but those who feature in written texts tend to come from a more educated or urban environment, and to be better versed in Church teaching and traditions. A few come from a monastic or ecclesiastical milieu. While narratives reflect the different environments, periods and origins (oral/written), their shared features permit us to generalize about a broader popular Orthodox view of morality than in the spiritual songs. On the other hand, how do circumstance and gender factors affect moral emphases, and hence how can any one genre provide an accurate snapshot of folk ethical values?

In view of the differing social and gender context of the *obmiranie*, a shift in the moral emphasis towards matters affecting women in their everyday lives seems inevitable, especially when it concerns their traditional role of ensuring the wellbeing of family and friends. Narratives that emerge from a rural environment (the majority) can be expected to reflect the moral concerns of the wider village community. If we begin with the maternal element, which for Fedotov lies at the core of his conception of folk Orthodoxy [Nikitina 1991: 141], we see that maternal concerns (including the broader concept of caring for friends and neighbors) are also extremely important in the *obmiranie*, but in ways that differ from those in the religious songs. Hardly surprisingly, the cult of Mother Earth is absent from narratives, though evident in traditional funeral ritual. On the other hand, both narratives and songs share the sense of the sinfulness of life on earth.

More surprising is the virtual absence of the Mother of God in the role of intercessor or guide round the Other World. Her connection with the afterlife was widely known thanks to the popularity of the apocryphal Pilgrimage of the Mother of God among the Torments (*Khozhdenie Bogoroditsy po mukam*) among Old Believers, and, via the *dukhovnye stikhi*, with official Orthodox believers. In it the Mother of God begs her Son to alleviate the suffering of sinners observed on her tour of Hell. If we bear in mind her association with a guided tour round hell, the deep reverence in which she was held and the capacity for variation in the oral visionary tradition, it might be expected that she would sometimes act as an otherworldly guide in the *obmiranie*, even though in the Pilgrimage she, like the visionary, is led not leading. However, normally the guide is either a close relative (male or female) or an old man/saint (this last conforming to tradition). The only

text to name her directly as a guide is the written vision of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964), where the subject is shown the torments by the Mother of God [Gubanov 2000:11-14]. There are, however, two oral narratives that refer to “a woman like a nun” and “a woman in a cloak,” both of whom possibly represent the Mother of God [Lur’e and Tarabukina 1994:23].

Otherwise it is only Klavdiia’s vision that makes any reference to her role as intercessor, though not in the same way as in the Pilgrimage. Though grieved by what she sees, the Mother of God declares herself unable to change the fate of those in hell. In its message that only the prayers of those on earth can save souls in torment, the text reflects Church teaching about the importance of prayers for the dead, and of repentance and moral reform by the living (the key message of the *obmiranie* genre) [Gubanov 2000:14].(7) Apart from this, Mary’s function in the vision of Klavdiia and four other written narratives is more distantly connected to the caring maternal virtues mentioned by Fedotov and the intercessory role she plays in the Pilgrimage. All five texts come from a monastic environment or circles of active believers, both official Orthodox and Old Believer: the visions of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964) [Gubanov 2000], of the novices, Fekla (1902) [Panteleimon 1996] and an anonymous young man [Nazidatel’nyi rasskaz 1915], as well as of the Old Believer Agniia (1956-57) [Pokrovskii 1997] and an anonymous laywoman [Panteleimon 1996:126]. In these texts the Mother of God’s role is to decide that the visionary can return to earth to continue living, or convey a message of that nature. Thus in the vision of Agniia, a Siberian Old Believer text written after 1953, the Mother of God intercedes with Christ to grant the visionary three more days of life [Pokrovskii 1997:40]. In the visions of both novices the Mother of God descends from above and decides that it is too early for them to die [Panteleimon 1996:50; Nazidatel’nyi rasskaz 1915:14-15], and in the vision of Klavdiia she helps the visionary return to earth after Christ has decided it is not yet time for her to die [Gubanov 2000:14-15].(8)

For the most part, the vision relies on the bleaker depictions found in apocryphal texts and on the iconography of the Last Judgment [Mil’kov 1999; Rovinskii 1881:391-402; Goldfrank 1995], both of which warn of the need for repentance and change. The image of the Mother of God as successful intercessor for souls in torment seems not to have featured in oral visions, judging by the extant texts, including a large number from Poles’e analysed by Bilyi [1930:64-65]. With the exception of the two narratives mentioned above, and the occasions when a female relative takes on the role, the otherworldly guide is always male. It would be preposterous to suggest that the reason for the absence is that village visionaries are more familiar with Orthodox tradition than those from circles close to the Church, where the Pilgrimage has had greater influence. The reason may well lie instead in the attitude of the visionary to the main traditional function of the *obmiranie*, the moral warning. In village narratives, as will be seen, the caring maternal element finds its outlet in consoling meetings with relatives. This leaves the visionary free to focus (albeit while unconscious in a coma) on the sins that she most deplors, whether general categories, such as drunkenness, abortion, sorcery, or specific people guilty of such sins. The guilty can be located in the fires of Hell without the need for intercession. This opposition between love and condemnation is not absolute. Oral narratives where a visionary seeks remission for a sinner who is a family member exist, but they are rare [e.g. Dobrovol’skaia 1999:no. 6].

It might be assumed that, given the traditional respect for the older generation, the maternal theme in *obmiranie* narratives would take the form of the sins of children against their mothers or parents, but in fact it does not. Offences against fathers almost never feature; just a single example in the written vision of Vera (1962), where a little girl, encountered in the Other World, turns out to have sinned by uttering four offensive words to her father. She sends back a message: “Tell my little brother Pavlik not to be rude to his mother and father, because it’s an unforgivable sin” (*A bratu Pavliku skazhite, tetia Vera, pust’ ne oskorbliaet ottsa i mat’, a to neprostitel’nyi grekh*) [Cherednikova 2001:244]. A more common paternal image is the reverse scenario, where the father (never the mother), though not directly guilty of an offence against his children, is condemned for his moral failings; for example, in one dream narrative the subject’s father languishes in hell because of his lack of charity [Lur’e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 4]. If fathers are sometimes seen in hell, mothers are more often in heaven. The best example is a narrative from Sudogda region, Vladimir oblast’, where the subject, this time a man, sees his father suffering because he was a drunkard, while his long-suffering pious mother is in a place of flowers and heavenly birds [Dobrovol’skaia 1999:no. 6].(9)

This last account bears a strong moral message, but very often in highly folklorized *obmiraniia* the main function of the journey to the Other World is a consoling encounter rather than a moral lesson. The visionary is reunited with her parents [Lur’e and Tarabukina 1994:24], or family members. For example, A. N. Redova from Kargopol’e, who recorded her own dreams, described how she was reunited with her beloved sister, Nast’ia, who had died in 1947 [Pigin 1997a:45; Semenova: II, 4]. The visionary may also meet villagers and friends.(10) Such meetings provide personal consolation, or allow it to be offered to friends and neighbors, who learn about their own dear departed. Occasionally an element of reassurance is involved, when the visionary is able to dispel the fear that the person who has died has gone to hell. The consoling meeting with the dead reflects not only the female authorship of the overwhelming majority of narratives but also the *gens* religion, with its concern for the dead seen in the traditional funeral rite. It is simply a different manifestation of ancestor worship from that found in the *dukhovnye stikhi*.

Among female *obmiravshie* the commonest maternal worries concern their own or their friends’ dead children. At one level this may result in a comforting meeting in the Other World with a daughter [Lur’e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 1], or with a son who had died in the Second World War [Tolstaia 1999:no.2]. Sometimes the concern with dead children is more general, simply wanting to know they are happy, as in a narrative recorded in 1994 in Kargopol’e where the visionary reassures her neighbor that her dead son is now walking behind the priest carrying the processional candle in church [Folklore laboratory: from A. M. Popova, Verkhov’e vill., Tikhman’ga]. A more common occurrence, certainly in times past, was the death of a baby. When infant mortality was very high, and every mother might have lost at least one child, concern with their fate in the Other World was natural when the Church and with it the laity held that unbaptized children would go to hell [Vlasova 2001]. As far as baptized children are concerned, judging by material recorded in the pre-Revolutionary period, it would appear peasant women, however distressed by the death of a baptized infant, were better able to resign themselves to their loss than women from urban and educated circles with their

modern sensibilities and higher expectations of life. Grief and concern about deceased children is the dominant theme in narratives from this environment. One particularly interesting written narrative tells of a woman from Baku whose newborn child was, she is led to believe, baptized before his death. In a vision she sees the child suffering. It then transpires that the godparents who had secretly had an affair, something which ruled them out as godparents. They had then lied about having the child baptized [Panteleimon 1996:124-32]. As child mortality decreased during the Soviet period, concern with dead children and whether they were baptised becomes less apparent, although the anxiety that this aspect of Orthodox teaching must induce doubtless contributes to its endurance. For example, in a narrative recorded in Tver' oblast' in 1988 the visionary sees baptised children eating, while those who were not baptized are starving and immersed in water [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 3].

In general, the concern for children has in recent times shifted mainly to abortion. Always regarded as a serious sin by Church and laity alike [Gromyko 2001: 221], abortion is nonetheless not mentioned in pre-Revolutionary narratives as often as suicide, lack of charity or sorcery. Nor is abortion a sin mentioned by the predominantly male *kaleki perekhozhie*, and hence by Fedotov. By contrast, in modern narratives the fate of those who have had abortions is described frequently, often in graphic detail [e.g Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 1; Semenova 2000:III, 8; Gubanov 2000:9; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 2; Tolstaia 1999:nos 7, 8; Tolstaia 2001:225-26; Paunova 2001:194].(11) This increased emphasis appears to result from a situation, in which abortion, long condemned by the Church, became the officially sanctioned method of contraception [Moroz 2000:202]. What we have here is either the moral disapproval of those who had not had abortions, or the conscious or sub-conscious guilt of those who had disobeyed the Church and had abortions. It is particularly women who express their abhorrence of abortion; male visionaries do not mention it. Both *dukhovnye stikhi* and *obmiraniia* therefore reflect a concern with maternal values, but in this area gender as well as time and social circumstances affect both focus and emphasis.

There are other parallels between the ethical values of the spiritual songs as seen by Fedotov and those of the *obmiranie*. One such is the disapproval of laughter culture. In its narrowest sense, it has been linked to the mocking, even lewd humor of the professional entertainers (*skomorokhi*) of the pre-Petrine period [Likhachev, Panchenko, Ponyrko 1984], and later to fairground humor, but is easily extended, especially by the pious, to include all manner of frivolity (*sueta*) and secular entertainment. It is hardly surprising that in the pre-Revolutionary period this motif survived best in communities that felt themselves besieged by the secular world, such as the monastery or the Old Believers. For example, the vision of Pelageia (*Videnie devitsy Pelagei*), probably originally from an Old Believer environment in the 1850s-1860s, condemns singing, dancing, joining in Yuletide rituals and even listening to songs [Gritsevskaiia, Pigin 1993:55, 60-62]. Similar sentiments may appear in twentieth-century lay *obmiraniia*, because the communities from which visionaries come faced the same difficult task of defending a Christian way of life from the secular world, as well as modernisation and the new socialist religion. Some Old Believer narratives continue the condemnation of laughter culture, but this feature is not unique to them: the written vision of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964) depicts theatre and

cinemagoers as servants of the devil. Other visionaries criticize dressing up and going out [Tolstaia 1999:no. 7 from Gomel' obl. in Poles'e], singing, dancing and attending weddings [Shevarenkova 1998:no. 158 from Nizhnii Novgorod obl.], or even the wearing of earrings [Semenova 2000:III, 8 from Kargopol'e].

Fedotov assigned laughter culture to the category involving sins of Christian non-observance, since it could include blasphemy and irreligious behaviour, an important theme in the spiritual songs. He also noted the emphasis in the religious songs on external expressions of piety, such as non-attendance at church and failure to observe Church fasts, rules and prohibitions, including those relating to Fridays. Judging by the numerous complaints in the journal *Rukovodstvo dlia sel'skikh pastyrei* (Guidance for rural priests) in the decades before the Revolution, the Church certainly disapproved of the peasants' irregular church attendance, but, far from insisting on the special nature of Fridays, it campaigned against what it saw as pagan beliefs surrounding activities on that day [Rozov 2001]. Predictably, the *obmiraniia* of those who come from religious environments (monastery, church or religious community) contain the same canonical emphasis on pious observance [Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:7-8; Panteleimon 1996:46; Gubanov 2000:10, 13]. Pre-Revolutionary peasant visions, on the other hand, barely mention churchgoing, though they encounter in hell those who ignored the ritual prescriptions relating to church festivals and Fridays [Selivanov 1886:70-71 on Voronezh province; c.f. Bilyi 1930:78]. In written visions from lay environments, which were often recorded by priests the position is much closer to that of the Church.

Oral visions go one stage further and condemn aspects of ritual observance with no connection to Christianity. The confusion between ritual proscriptions relating to the mythological worldview and Christian rules is characteristic of the ethical views of all Orthodox Slavic peoples. In fact, for them the concept of sin (*grekh*) embraces not only sins in the eyes of the Church and neglect of ritual convention, but even breaches of ritual and social conventions more generally [Tolstoi 1995; Tolstaia 2000; Gromyko 2001: 218-23; Belova 2002: 179-82; Moroz 2000: 202]. This confusion has affected the contemporary *obmiranie*. Generally speaking, only narratives such as Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina's (1964), which was publicized by the Church, or those from isolated religious communities such as the Old Believer Lipovans, continue to focus on the neglect of prayers, fasting and religious festivals [Gubanov 2000; Paunova 2001:195].(12) In oral texts there often appears to be no distinction between religious norms, social conventions, or ritual prescriptions connected with the mythological world view. In some narratives from Kargopol'e, where this process seems to have developed the furthest, what worries visionaries most are offences against the rules of everyday household existence such as not washing tablecloths and underwear together [Moroz 2000:200]. The explanation for this change seems obvious: seventy plus years of socialist rule, the closure of churches and absence of priests. The decline in the Church's influence has allowed the broader folk concept of sin to penetrate the oral religious genre of the *obmiranie*. The result in the narratives from Kargopol'e is an emphasis on sins related to doing the laundry, or loaning a neighbour the broom used in baking bread (*pomelo*), as well as those from other areas expressing dislike of modern ways, such as of women who do not cover their heads [Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 5]. All of these at the same time reflect the role of gender in the genre [Wigzell 2003].

Drunkenness is a sin that is extremely important to the moral world of visionaries. The well-known legend about the drunkard who had to act as the devil's carthorse may have encouraged its appearance in the *obmiranie*, but Slavic Orthodox tradition had long held that drinking led to perdition, and indeed was a form of suicide [Vlasova 2001:129-30]. Long a social problem, efforts to combat the love of the bottle were hampered by obligatory ritual drinking at Church festivals involving the village priest and adult male villagers, together with the general Russian perception that a capacity for hard liquor is a part of national identity, at least for men [Kormina 2001: 234-38]. The drunkenness of husbands is an acute problem for women and their families; hence it is not surprising that female visionaries, both before the Revolution and since, should mention the fate that befalls alcoholics [Zheleznov 1910/1992:346; Paunova 2001:195; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:nos 6, 10; Vinogradov 1923:313; Panteleimon 1996:46]. Fedotov also incorporates what he calls this "Russian sin" into his picture of folk Orthodoxy, citing a song in which the Mother of God condemns drinking for its impact on society [Fedotov 1935/1991:90], and noting that it is also among the sins listed in the song about the Last Judgement. In this respect the two genres agree.

A key element of folk piety for Fedotov concerns an emphasis on social injustice, especially the mean and heartless treatment of the poor and innocent by the rich and powerful. The strong sense of social justice and sympathy for the suffering are common to many folk genres, and in pre-Revolutionary Russia at least were viewed as a facet of the national character. *Obmiraniia* from that period are no different: cruelty and uncharitable behaviour land the guilty in hell, and, conversely, acts of charity bring salvation. Thus the novice Fekla learns in her vision that the scarf she once gave a poor woman outweighs her sins [Panteleimon 1996:45; see also Gritsevskaiia, Pigin 1993:60; Shevchenko 1999:28; Bilyi 1930:70]. Nonetheless, with the exception of the Ukrainian text published by Kulish [Kulish 1856], this motif is generally much less prominent in visions than in the *dukhovnye stikhi*, for the obvious reason that the *kaleki perekhozhie* were dependent for survival on alms. In the Soviet and post-Soviet periods lack of charity only features in visions emanating from pious Old Believer and Orthodox milieux, notably those of Klavdiia [Gubanov 2000:12] and Agniia [Pokrovskii 1997:40]. Elsewhere, however, lack of charity has faded from view. Today it is proving hard to reintroduce Russians to the concept of charity, which for decades was replaced by state responsibility for welfare; such attitudes have evidently also impacted on the countryside. Just one narrative refers to the meanness of a woman's father towards those in need [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 4], while another even condemns begging [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 2].

Scandal mongering (*kleveta*), as Fedotov indicates, is related to lack of charity because it offends against the Christian injunction to love thy neighbor [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. He also observes that this is the only kind of lying condemned in the songs, just as it was deplored in visions of the afterlife in the Byzantino-Slavic Orthodox tradition. Spiritual songs and visions are alike in virtually ignoring the sin of lying. In the pre-Revolutionary period they also both highlighted scandal mongering, though in visions it is mainly a feature of those recorded from active churchgoers, monks or Old Believers who are closer to the written tradition [e.g. Vinogradov 1923:313; Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:5; Panteleimon 1996:44; Shevchenko 1999:28]. However, in

the modern period scandal mongering seems to have ceased to bother visionaries. It would be absurd to assume that the reason is that life in villages since 1917 has become more harmonious. If we take into consideration the paucity of reference to scandal mongering in lay visions from the pre-Revolutionary period, it would be more sensible to conclude that this is a traditional Orthodox sin not seen as a major problem among the laity. The theme of scandal mongering in *dukhovnye stikhi* and also in Fedotov's analysis of folk Orthodoxy would then appear to result from the singers' greater familiarity with the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

Apart from differences of emphasis, there are sins frequently mentioned in oral visions that do not appear in the religious verses. In modern *obmiraniia*, especially but not exclusively those recorded in Poles'e, visionaries observe the fate of sorcerers, in particular those who have caused cows to become dry or made a twist [*zalom*] in a plant to spoil the crops, [Tolstaia 1999:nos 4, 5, 7 and 8; Zinov'ev 1987:no. 437; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 5; c.f. six examples in Bilyi 1930:79]. As a social sin, sorcery is akin to scandal mongering, since it is perceived as being based on envy or anger. Those phenomena attributed to sorcery, whether the economic importance of the fully functioning cow, some other misfortune, or the illness of persons, crops or animals can cause real distress. The genuine fear of being "spoiled" (hexed), which is still alive in Poles'e and elsewhere today, is understandable in the context of both the traditional worldview and the harshness of life in rural Russia. One may speculate on the reasons why sorcery does not appear in the *dukhovnye stikhi*. This may perhaps reflect the perception on the part of the *kaleki perekhozhie* that they were godly Christian folk; one of their songs suggests that Christ himself approved their profession. As such, they were protected by their lifestyle and their prayers from attack by sorcerers, and simply did not take the problem seriously. What is more, since they did not have families or possessions and relied on alms, they possessed nothing that could easily be "spoiled."

Suicide is also commonly mentioned in the *obmiranie*, albeit slightly less frequently than drunkenness [Pokrovskii 1997:40; Paunova 2002:194; Shevarenkova 1998:no. 157; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 10]. Killing oneself has traditionally been regarded with particular horror by Orthodox believers; there is plenty of evidence to show how seriously Church and laity in imperial Russia regarded suicide [Paperno 1997]. Furthermore it also features among the most frequently mentioned sins in research carried out in Kargopol'e [Moroz 2000], though it is ranked after such sins as swearing or quarrelling. A. B. Moroz suggests that the reason for its high profile is that suicide is no longer a civil crime [Moroz 2000:202], but, while this fact may have contributed to its elevated ranking in the list of deadly sins, the strength of tradition should not be ignored. So deeply held were beliefs about suicide that its absence in the spiritual songs, and so in Fedotov's folk moral code, demonstrates very effectively the incompleteness of the picture. It is more than likely that the *kaleki perekhozhie*, had they been asked how they regarded suicide, would have expressed strong disapproval.

The relative unimportance of sexual sins in the Orthodox tradition (outside monastic culture), at least by comparison with the Catholic tradition, means that they are not a major theme in either the spiritual songs or contemporary visions, although they do feature more in pre-Revolutionary *obmiraniia*. Fedotov notes that the various references to breaches of moral purity are insufficient to argue for an ascetic moral law in folk

Orthodoxy, although there is room in hell for fornicators, adulterers and pimps according to the songs about the Last Judgement [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. In *obmiraniia* from both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries adultery and fornication are gendered sins, applying almost exclusively to women [Vinogradov 1923: 313; Panteleimon 1996:45, with an oral retelling in Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 2; Paunova 2002:194]. For example, a visionary from Vokhomskii region in Kostroma oblast' learned that women who run after other people's husbands will end up tied to a column of fire [Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 10]. The gendering of this theme fits conventional views about male and female sexual morality, which need not be discussed here. Only two pre-Revolutionary monastic *obmiraniia* condemn male sexual sins: masturbation and male infidelity [*Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz* 1915:6, 8], and sodomy [Panteleimon 1996:46; *Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz* 1915:6, 8]. Overall, however, it is not infidelity and fornication that are the most commonly mentioned sins against moral purity in the visionary tradition, but sexual relations between godparents, and between godparents and godchildren. This theme appears in pre-Revolutionary texts, both oral and those written, where the subject comes from an urban environment [Panteleimon 1996: 47; Vinogradov 1923: 313; Bilyi 1930: 80]. It accords with folk Orthodoxy as a whole, where, as Ol'ga Belova points out [2002: 173], the sexual transgressions of those whose relationship is not a blood one are viewed as being at least as serious as incest. The sins of godparents are not mentioned by Fedotov, and incest only in the context of those who cause the death of family members [Fedotov 1935/1991: 82]. The reason may well be that *kaleki perekhozhie* were not themselves family men.

The above is not an exhaustive survey of the sins mentioned in the *obmiranie*, but covers the commonest and most distinctive ones. It is clear that the ethical values of the *dukhovnye stikhi* and the *obmiranie* have much in common, but also differ in important ways. To be fair to Fedotov, he made it clear in *Stikhi dukhovnye* that the *kaleki perekhozhie* were a distinctive group, more knowledgeable about Orthodoxy than the average peasant. Although aware that these songs are not entirely typical of folk Orthodoxy (citing the image of Christ as a severe judge in the songs, as opposed to the loving intercessor of folk religious legend (*legenda*)), Fedotov does not pursue the differences much further [Fedotov 1935/1991: 123]. He admits that the singers' social ideals reflect their position as itinerant professionals surviving on alms, but restricts their significance to one ethical area: "The high value placed on begging and poverty is characteristic, of course, of the people as a whole and of Christianity in general, but the emphasis, particularly the loving treatment of this theme in the songs, is to be explained, perhaps, by the social origins of the singers" [Fedotov 1935/1991: 15].(13) As has been seen, charity is rarely mentioned nowadays by visionaries, further underlining the significance of social factors. Despite these caveats and the recognition that poetic licence may mean that the songs should not be taken as a completely accurate reflection of singers' views, he nonetheless regards the spiritual songs as "expressions of the deepest subconscious element in the religious soul of the Russian people," a somewhat Romantic view [Fedotov 1935/1991: 16, 123-24].

Reality is more complex, as the contributors to the volume on the concept of sin in Slavic and Jewish traditions have shown recently [Belova 2000]. Though some of the areas of moral concern shared by *dukhovnye stikhi* and visions are typical of folk Orthodoxy, each genre has its own focus. For example, folk religious

legends which include popular accounts of the Fall emphasize sins such as disobedience or incest [Belova 2002]. Particularly interesting in this respect is the analysis of the use of the word “sin” in data collected on expeditions to Kargopol’e, 1993-1999, by folklorists from the Russian State University for the Humanities, together with the results of a questionnaire asking villagers directly what for them constitutes a sin. Such a conclusion cannot pretend to be valid for Russia as a whole, or even exhaustive for Kargopol’e, but offers a corrective to the analysis of moral emphasis in both the spiritual songs and the *obmiranie* [Moroz 2000]. Examining the ways in which the word was used in everyday speech resulted in the following ranking of the deadliest sins in descending order of frequency: envy, swearing, scandal mongering, quarrelling, passing judgment, sexual license, abortion and suicide. The list does not entirely coincide with another compiled after informants had been asked directly to name the deadliest sins. Here in descending order of gravity we find cursing, quarrelling, lying, abortion, sexual license and suicide [Moroz 2000:20]. Ritual sins, which are prominent in the *obmiraniia* of the area, appear in a comprehensive list of sins, but do not have the same importance that they have in local visionary tradition, demonstrating yet again the difficulties of presenting a picture of folk religious ethics from any one source.

The ethical values embedded in the contemporary and pre-Revolutionary *obmiranie*, as in the spiritual songs, should not be seen as an authoritative expression of the ethical values of *narodnoe pravoslavie*. As a predominantly feminine genre, the *obmiranie* reflects the moral perspective of women rather than of men. Narratives about male visionaries (monks apart) have differences of emphasis that demonstrate this point: male visionaries tend to focus on their own fate [Strannik 1865, 1866], describe the punishments but not the reasons for them, or focus on the failings of friends and family [esp. Strannik 1862]. When men mention specific sins, it is sorcery in particular that they highlight [Wigzell 2003]. In any case, what values are omitted or deemphasized change not only according to gender, but also over time and place (in both geographic and social terms). Furthermore, most informants are elderly, often very elderly, and so are not necessarily representative of the moral worldview of the majority of Russian peasants today. What gives the *obmiranie* some additional authority is the fact that it directly reflects the experience of individuals and is therefore subject to considerable personal variation.⁽¹⁴⁾ This is in contrast to Creation legends which are an inherited religious narrative with limited opportunities for an individual narrator’s own preferences. Fedotov’s essay is a superb evocation of the moral world of the *kaleki perekhozhie*, but its wider relevance is highly dubious. Question marks have to be raised over its applicability to popular Orthodoxy as a whole in the pre-Revolutionary period, and even more to Russian popular Orthodoxy today. A full picture of folk morality in Russia requires much more research. As Russian scholars begin at last to study folk and vernacular religion more widely, we may be able to form a more accurate understanding, at least of the contemporary situation

NOTES

1 My thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their support in facilitating the research for this article.

- 2 *Dukhovnye stikhi* were also sung by Old Believers, as well as by some epic singers (many of whom were Old Believers), and in certain Orthodox villages. Fedotov based his conclusions on Bessonov's edition [Bessonov 1861-64/1970], choosing those songs that were, in his view, part of the repertoire of the blind singers. Whether he was always correct in his selection or not is irrelevant to the points being made in this essay.
- 3 Fedotov himself saw *Stikhi dukhovnye* as a preliminary to *The Russian Religious Mind* [Fedotov 1935/1991:156].
- 4 Although the otherworldly journey is the conventional conception of what happens in an *obmiranie*, other visions are possible, as, for example, in V. I. Dal's story "Obmiranie," where the subject sees his own house and his relatives.
- 5 It is clear from Bilyi's analysis of 69 Ukrainian *obmiranie* narratives [Bilyi 1930] that differences are minor. Local Russian traditions also vary; for example, in Kargopol'e in the north of Russia, social and ritual prohibitions are the commonest moral failings mentioned, while in Poles'e it is the practice of sorcery.
- 6 While oral texts are those recorded directly from an informant, written texts are of various kinds: a written record made by the visionary, a friend or relative, or a report by a local priest, and may have been recorded for private reading or for publication. Most oral narratives were recorded in the last thirty years, while written narratives are more common for the pre-Revolutionary period, where they appeared in religious journals or as pamphlets. I have included Vinogradov's texts from 1923 in the category of pre-Revolutionary *obmiraniia*. It should also be noted that a few "texts" are retellings by ethnographers and folklorists. I have not included the recent publication of a fictional *obmiranie* written in France by a Russian émigré [Voznesenskaia 2002].
- 7 Just occasionally in oral visions is it suggested that the severity of the punishment can be altered, whether by the actions of those on earth in praying for the dead, or in the case of an unbaptized child by getting a newborn infant to wear the dead child's cross [e.g. Cherednikova 2001:234; see also Wigzell 2002a]. The question of whether an unbaptized baby would inevitably go to Hell was a troubling one, and the motif of altering the fate of this category of sinners has precedents.
- 8 The instruction to return, often to repent of one's sins, is a traditional motif, found also in a number of written *obmiraniia* from the nineteenth century. So far, however, I know of only one earlier text, where it is the Mother of God who despatches a sinner back to earth. In the seventeenth-century "*Skazanie o chudesakh ot ikony Tikhvinskoi Bogomateri*" [Account of the miracles associated with the icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God], one tale recounts how a monk was sent back to this world by a voice saying that the Mother of God had interceded for him, and he was being returned to earth for several more years]. The MS from which this is taken is sob. Titova, no. 3373, l. 118 in the Russian National Library. My thanks are due to Dr A. Pigin of Petrozavodsk State University for this information.

- 9 Mothers are not always angels, at least in religious legends; witness the tale, recounted by Grushen'ka in Dostoevskii's Brothers Karamazov, of the mother who fails to be pulled out of hell by her son because she is too mean.
- 10 Bilyi [1930:68] notes in his survey of Ukrainian *obmiraniia* that visionaries may see parents, siblings, in-laws, children or acquaintances, but most commonly acquaintance and then parents. He does not, however, distinguish between reunions and images of torment, in which fellow villagers and other acquaintances, for obvious reasons, appear more often than relatives. Communication with dead relatives is characteristic of Russian oral oneiromantic tradition as a whole, as well as of folk beliefs surrounding death [Tolstaia 2001: 205-11]. Many of A. N. Redova's dreams, in which there are only glimpses of the visionary tradition, concern her meetings with her family and others she has known [Semenova 2000:II].
- 11 This was an extremely common motif in Ukraine according to Bilyi [1930: 80], who lists seven texts mentioning abortion, the majority contemporary with his study.
- 12 An exception is the male visionary from Sudogda region in Vladimir oblast', who learned his father's sins included non-attendance at church and not crossing himself [Dobrovol'skaia 1999: no. 6], or the woman from Iaroslavl' oblast' who criticized women who went to church without washing [Dobrovol'skaia 1999: no.5].
- 13 Translations of quotations from Fedotov's text are my own.
- 14 Of course it is not just possible, but even likely, that some narratives contain elements of fiction. Since the popular expectation is that anyone in a coma will have an experience of this kind, it may be assumed that those to whom it does not happen often fall back on the strategy of saying that they were forbidden to relate the details of their visit (a common motif). In Kargopol'e it is apparently a common assumption that those who come out of a coma have been forbidden to say anything at all about their experience (see the *obmiranie* texts in the Folklore Laboratory database). Alternatively, visionaries may be tempted by the fame and respect attendant upon the *obmiravshii/aia* to fulfil an audience's expectations with details drawn from their cultural stock. The absence of these among the Kargopol'e texts referred to above may indicate less familiarity with the visionary tradition.

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