

Александр Б. Страхов. Ночь перед Рождеством: народное христианство и рождественская обрядность на Западе и у славян. (A. B. Strakhov. Christmas Eve: Folk Christianity and Christmas rituals in the West and in Slavic cultures.) (Palaeoslavica XI. Supplementum 1). Cambridge: 2003. 380 pp. ISSN – 1070-5465.

For almost two centuries the concept of *dvoeverie* (double belief) has been used by scholars to characterize popular religion in Russia. It was widely believed that from its origins until well into the nineteenth century, Russian Christianity, in contrast to religious practice in Western Europe, was never fully accepted among the folk, but existed side-by-side with pagan beliefs. Much scholarly energy was expended on identifying pagan elements in Russian culture and religion, and in the Soviet period, continuing pagan practice under the tsarist regime was often interpreted as opposition on the part of the lower classes to the power of the state. In the last fifteen years, however, some scholars have begun to question the pervasive presence of paganism throughout the history of Russian Christianity. In the book under review, Aleksandr B. Strakhov has made a very significant contribution to this process. Strakhov has compiled a vast amount of material on popular Christian beliefs associated with Christmas, not only among the East Slavs, but also throughout Europe and even North America. As a result, Strakhov directly challenges what might be called the two guiding principles of traditional *dvoeverie* based scholarship: the uniqueness of Russia's popular religion, and the pagan origin of its religious practice among the folk. He convincingly demonstrates, by citing beliefs and ceremonies in Orthodox as well as Catholic countries, that Russian practice is neither unique nor pagan in origin, but, like popular Christian religion practiced throughout Europe, was the product of a folk interpretation of Christian belief that is best understood within the context of a shared Christian heritage developed in socially similar conditions, rather than a common Indo-European past.

Noch' pered Rozhdestvom consists of a short foreword by the author, eight chapters and an extensive bibliography. There is no index, but the table of contents identifies the main topics within each chapter and provides page numbers. The chapters, despite the book's title, all deal with the Nativity broadly construed, that is, from the end of November to the middle of January. The discussion is wide ranging, however, and often addresses Christian celebrations practiced at other times in the liturgical calendar. Chapter themes include: miraculous

blooming and fruit-bearing plants, the transformation of water into wine, the birth of Christ in a cattle shed, the symbolism and magic of fertility and birth, as well as the dark side of Yuletide, which derives from its nature as the period when Christ was yet unbaptized and the spirits of the dead were liberated each year for a short time to roam about the world. By limiting the scope of his study to the Christmas period, Strakhov provides it with a clear focus, but, at the same time, is able to discuss those topics most closely associated with pagan beliefs, namely, veneration of the clan and ancestors, and commemorations connected to the yearly agricultural cycle.

Strakhov's typical method in this study is to begin with a chapter theme and provide several examples from a range of countries and traditions. As new thematic threads emerge in the course of the discussion he examines each and moves forward to additional related themes. For example, in Chapter III "The Birth of Christ in a Cattle Shed," the basic premise is that the presence and correct behavior of certain animals at Christ's birth and during the Holy Family's escape from King Herod have obtained for them certain privileges. In contrast, the absence of other animals during these events brings negative consequences. Pork, for example became the traditional New Year's Day meal rather than beef. In the course of the chapter the discussion ranges from the speech and prophetic powers of favored animals such as cattle, to the wolf as a symbol of Herod, who persecutes the "lamb" of God. At various points in the chapter, Strakhov challenges the views of scholars who affirm the pagan origins of popular religion. Thus he promotes the explanation that peasants fed their domestic animals high quality feed or ceremonial fare at Christmas as a sign of their respect for the role they played in Christ's birth, and rather contemptuously rejects the notion that the practice should be viewed as a means of giving their dead ancestors ritual food, as some scholars maintain.

Strakhov's knowledge of popular religion and his command of source materials in close to a dozen languages are quite remarkable. As a compendium of folk beliefs related to the Nativity it is hard to imagine that this study could be surpassed. The only significant problem I see in the work is a failure to engage meaningfully with the "pagan" school. Strakhov makes the case for the Christian origin of most popular religion very well, but his insistence on only one system to the exclusion of the other does not allow for any overlap between the two. The discussion is frequently polarized and only the more extreme examples of pagan-based theory are given, generally as objects of ridicule. In the brief Foreword,

he mentions the origin of the pagan tradition in Romanticism, but says nothing about its rather complex development in the Soviet period, including among such semioticians as Boris Uspensky and Yury Lotman, as well as its embrace by Western feminists like Joanna Hubbs, who sees an opposition between a patriarchal Christianity and a more feminine paganism. The influence of paganism has certainly been exaggerated in many of these approaches, but they are still able to shed some light on the nature of the syncretism that did occur. As Eve Levin has pointed out, one must recognize in some cases the possibility of beliefs that draw on pagan as well as Christian concepts. Curious in this regard also is the absence in the lengthy bibliography of Levin's excellent article or those of other scholars, such as Stella Rock, who have questioned the predominance of pagan beliefs in the formation of Russian popular religion (Eve Levin, "Dvoeverie and Popular Belief," in Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, ed. by Stephen K. Batalden, Northern Illinois University Press, 1993, 31-52; Stella Rock, "What's in a Word: A Historical Study of the Concept of Dvoeverie," Canadian-American Slavic Studies, 35 1 (2001):19-28).

Despite this caveat, Strakhov's strong contribution should not be underestimated. He is no doubt correct when he declares that popular Christian culture is much more complex than we have been accustomed to think. It has evolved over centuries in a spiritual milieu where miracles, magic and the correct performance of rituals and recitation of prayers were much more important than orthodox theology. As we seek to understand the nature of Russian popular religion, highly creative, comparative studies like Strakhov's are an essential part of the process.

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