

REVIEWS

Crummey, Robert O. *Old Believers in a Changing World*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. Notes, Bibliography, Index, 270 pp. \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-87580-650-1

Robert O. Crummey, a leading scholar of the Russian Old Believers and a distinguished historian of Muscovite Russia, has gathered together in this volume a number of his published studies dating back to 1988 and two works not published before. Several of them will be of particular interest to the folklorist interested in the Russian North or in the historical background to much Russian folklore collected over the past two hundred years.

As Crummey points out in his Preface, his interest in the Old Belief is somewhat curious: he is a Canadian, (and therefore had not the access to Soviet archives afforded US scholars as a result of the various academic exchange programs, especially IREX), and a Christian in the western tradition, with no background in Russian Orthodoxy or Russian history. But as he points out, he did have a certain amount of luck in addition to his excellent training, and he soon became a scholar of renown with the publication of his *The Old Believers and the World of Anti-Christ* (1970).

The book opens with an informative historiographic essay that sets the stage for the eleven articles to follow. The second essay in the book, "Old Belief as Popular Religion," was published in 1993 during the heyday of, especially, European studies of popular religious movements, particularly in the Roman Catholic parts of Western Europe. Soviet-era contributions to the discussion, one has in mind here the outstanding contributions of Bakhtin and Gurevich, by and large avoided any serious study of possible homegrown popular religion in the Russian Church, largely for ideological reasons. Crummey's essay was then a welcome addition to the subject, however tentative it may have been.

He points out that the Old Belief originated not among the laity but among the middle ranks of the clergy and that it certainly was not originally a mass movement at all. In time it came to be supported across the social spectrum but it remained a highly

conservative phenomenon that soon fractured into several distinct groups. In time, the Old Belief did become a popular religious presence at the village level but it remained at its heart broadly based, often highly literate, and with considerable support not so much among the laity as among the clergy. It was always highly Orthodox, in its understanding of the term.

Crummey calls for more research from across the academic community, mentioning only the *dukhovnye stikhi* as an area where folklorists might make a contribution. There are certainly others.

In a subsection of the book devoted to the origins of the Old Belief in the seventeenth century Crummey again touches on the topic of popular belief (Chapter Three). Here Crummey is particularly concerned with “the interaction between the leaders of Russian Orthodoxy and ordinary parishioners” (31), from the earliest manifestations of the schism into the eighteenth century. The author treats his subject broadly: the various strands of religious heterodoxy in all of Russia. Noting the rapid spread of ideas associated with the Old Belief due to the impact of exiles, both political and ecclesiastical, and of agitators, whose itinerant lifestyle spread the new ideas (or were they old ideas?) quickly throughout that vast land, Crummey brings to the attention of the English-reading public research that has uncovered much new evidence in recent years. (This essay was first published in 2004). He points to the prevalence in the seventeenth century of manifestations of what can only be called the original “Old Belief.” For the most part pre-Christian in origin, these observances had worried the official church since the reception of Christianity.

It is often assumed that with Vladimir I’s decision to adopt Christianity in the tenth century the East Slavs willingly abandoned the old ways and became uniformly Christian. Folklorists and historians of the Russian Church know that this is far from the case. Either covertly or overtly or by a process of synthesizing (the so-called *dvoeverie*) much of the old faith and numerous old practices survived into our own times. Today the Russian Church has apparently given up hope that these survivals from a distant past will disappear and it continues the ancient

REVIEWS

practice of co-opting the festivals and customs of its predecessors, while fighting contemporary social beliefs and practices with which it finds fault.

Crummey rightly points out that there likely never was a common pre-Christian religion as such. Efforts to reconstruct the old belief have most proved elusive, despite vigorous attempts by many distinguished authorities over many decades. The historian suggests that efforts to reform the Russian Church taken in the seventeenth century, efforts that led to the schism and the phenomenon of the Old Ritualists/Old Believers, bear marks of a centrally-directed campaign and thus much of the evidence that the folklorist might glean from documents of the era must be treated with caution.

The author is on most solid ground in discussing the actual attempts at reform and the reaction of what was to become an opposition to them. Many of these “reforms” were part of an effort led by the Patriarch Nikon and with the connivance of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to bring practices of the Russian Orthodox Church into line with those of the Greek Church, which was thought to have preserved Orthodoxy where the Russian Church had permitted alterations to creep in. It soon becomes obvious, both from Crummey’s well-documented study and from other works, that the real interest in the official church ceased to be in stamping out remnants of the pre-Christian practices and instead a heavy-handed attempt to impose the Greek practices on the Russian church throughout the empire. All this makes for fascinating reading in this, Crummey’s third selection.

Of considerable interest to the folklorist is the chapter entitled “The Origins of the Old Believer Cultural Systems,” number five in the collection. Clifford Geertz’s formulation of a cultural system becomes Crummey’s cultural systems: “Cultural systems ...are clusters of symbolic expressions, including religious rituals, that help men and women explain and give meaning to their lives” (68). Crummey’s use of the plural “systems” is central to his notion that the Old Believers developed a number of distinct cultural systems, beginning in the last third of the seventeenth century and extending into our own era. True, the author is

primarily concerned with the creation of a written canon that was used to support them in their long struggle with the official church but the picture Crummey presents of Old Believer writings does much to bolster the view that the Old Believers possessed powerful polemicists who did indeed challenge their opponents in the official church on solid intellectual grounds.

Subsequent chapters of Crummey's work further develop his interests in his subject and here and there the folklorist will again find suggestions for thought about aspects of Russian folk life that bear on the study of Russian folklore. Scrupulously researched, eloquently presented and persuasive, this collection of essays is a lasting contribution to a much studied but often misunderstood aspect of Russian cultural history.

Jack V. Haney
Seattle, Washington, USA