

SCTMG 2020

International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism»

OLD BELIEVERS' SELF-IMMOLATION AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS ESCAPISM

Natalya Sergeevna Kanateva (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) Astrakhan State University, 20a, Tatysheva str., Astrakhan, Russia, nesy71@mail.ru

Abstract

The article reflects the idea that Old believers' self-immolation, taking place within 230 years after a reform of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1653–1667 as a protest against the reform, is a form of religious escapism. Escaping the world, where the Antichrist had dominion, was consistently the only way out for Old believers to save the faith, the grace and the hope of deliverance. The forms of escaping were different that led to another dissociation of those who did not accept Nikon's reforms. The most radical form of deliverance, salvation from the "seduced" world was suicide, mass or individual. In itself, the phenomenon of religious suicide as an extreme degree of religious escapism is not unique to the Old believers. However, the peculiarity of the "gary" is that mass suicides were the result of internal hard work of the thought of the Old believer community, and this is the fundamental difference between the Old believer suicides from the externally similar, but different in essence suicides of early Christians and sectarians of the New time. On the grounds of literature sources, including those by both authors – Old believers and authors-missionaries – we can see that an attitude to self-immolation became a basis for Old believers' disintegration into several directions and communities. The discussion about the suicide legality became not only a determinant factor in the dissociation of Old believers, but also dictated a fate of "the Old godliness" on the whole.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Religious escapism, Old Believers, self-immolation.



1. Introduction

At first sight “escapism” as a term regarding Old Believers may seem not quite relevant and even wrong. According to the National Political Encyclopedia, “Escapism” (to escape – run away from the reality) is a social phenomenon, reflecting an endeavor of a person or a part of a social group to run away from the common standards of social life. Escapism is based upon a doubt in expedience and as a result, in an endeavor to critical re-thinking of the common norms, expressed in some social ideas”.

The term is close to understanding some of deep processes in Old Belief within several centuries. The endeavor, both of individuals and groups, to go away from the odious Nikon’s standards of the common life made Old believers run and move to other countries, seek for Belovodie and the Opon’skoye tzardom (Chistov, 2011), develop the taiga and islands beyond the polar circle. And the attempt of critical re-thinking often led to the most savage sectionalism and radicalism. Thus, in our view, the term “escapism” is correct for describing various forms of Old believers’ communities. The term “religious” highlights a specific feature of escapism of Orthodoxy supporters before the reform.

Our purpose is not to specify numerous disasters in Russia, caused by 250-years long chase and even liquidation of the most conservative (and at the same time the most educated and the most enterprising) part of the population (Kerov, 2017, 2018; Yukhimenko, 2013) who provided the reliable support for the state. We try to describe the degree of escapism of those who had to live in their country as in an enemy country with an alien religion and ideology, in the context of the most bloodcurdling and expressive phenomenon – voluntary mass suicides – self-immolations.

2. Problem Statement

Old believer self-immolations continued for about 230 years. Having begun as isolated acts of despair, often forced and provoked by external pressure, over time self-immolations for a part of the old believers' community, its most radical views and consents, turned into the highest degree of religious escapism, a necessary and obligatory proof of faith, carried out under the guidance of mentors. Then, with the passage of time and the changes taking place both in the external environment and in the old believers' communities, this impulse inevitably began to fade.

3. Research Questions

Old believer self-immolations as a form of religious escapism

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to determine the role of self-immolations for the old believer community.

5. Research Methods

In the work we use the ideographic (descriptive and narrative), comparative historical and retrospective methods of historical research.

6. Findings

The Old Believers' community was never solid and united and this must be the only assumption supported by almost all researches of the dissent. All creeds were considered heretic, except the own one that was not recognized as a creed but nothing less than a Church (Kramer, 2014).

Apart from the three-level hierarchy loss and recovery, another main issue, splitting Old believers, was the issue about the Antichrist and his power in the world.

The attitude toward this subject became a basis for the way of living, daily behavior and ultimately led to the religious escapism. "... Among supporters of the old clergy tradition of "dissenters" there arose final dissociation between traditional optimists, believing in holy orders and sacrament of the Eucharist and radical pessimists, believing God's grace had waned and neither holy orders nor sacrament of the Eucharist could exist in the fallen world" (Zen'kovsky, 2009, p. 25).

Escaping the world, where the Antichrist had dominion, was consistently the only way out for Old believers to save the faith, the grace and the hope of deliverance. The forms of escaping were different that led to another dissociation of those who did not accept Nikon's reforms.

The most radical form of escapism or salvation from "the tempted" world was suicide, either mass or individual. Foredooming to painful death as a result of desperation and religious fanaticism is one of the features of the Russian history that has astounded so far. Over 230 years from the beginning of the Raskol till 1897, about twenty thousand of Old believers died because of mass suicide (Romanova, 2012).

However, it should be noted that as well as any statistics with regard to Old believers this information could not be considered credible. According to other researchers, twenty thousand people died within much shorter period. They state that before 1690, within 37 years since 1653 (the year of the beginning of Raskol) twenty thousand people had died as a result of self-immolation. And despite the enormity in the number of suiciders the authors believe the data is not full (Vurgaft & Ushakov, 1996).

The religious suicide as a radical form of religious escapism is not only common for Old believers. The Christianity had a lot of such examples: from the suicide of three women-residents of Antiochia, described by Eusebius of Caesarea, to the suicide of 778 residents of Uganda, followers of the sect "The Movement to Restore 10 God's Commandments" in 2000 (Romanova, 2012).

However, "those were singular events, caused by missionaries' teaching who at least in 20th century had goals not connected with apocalyptic discourse" (Romanova, 2012, p. 72), while in Old Belief a mass suicide became a part of the apocalyptic doctrine.

Self-immolation and other forms of mass suicide were not a respond to some external irritants, victimization or harassment by the government agencies or the result of a mentor's authority who called to "the fire death". The mass suicide was the result of the hard internal brainwork of the Old believers' community that is the main difference between Old believers and early Christians and dissidents of the modern period. "This feature is a mechanism, produced by the Old believers' culture itself and exercising a certain function in it" (Romanova, 2012, p. 92).

Oppositely, "the reason for mass self-immolation among Old believers was not their suicidal tendency or religious fanaticism, but the inhuman policy, pursued by the politicians and the ruling Church against the best of the Russian people who left no way out for them" (Kozhurin, 2007, p. 36).

Mel'nikov (1999), a historian of the Old Belief, wrote: "The only way out is to the fire and water".

The issue of self-immolation, by the old evil tradition, became another stumbling stone on the way to uniting. The number of self-immolations and participants increased so fast that the moderate traditional Old believers, accepting holy orders and a possibility of the normal Christian life, understood they were out of the way with those gloomy fanatics, believing the Christian history of humankind was over and the satanic host became impassable (Zen'kovsky, 2009).

“Traditionalists” belonged to the clergy creeds as a rule and the attitude to mass suicides, this “ominous spirit illness” finished the process of dissociation of the two most numerous communities of Old believers – povpovskaya (priest's) and bespopovskaya (non-priest's) (Zen'kovsky, 2009).

Vurgaft and Ushakov (1996) call mass suicides “a self-destruction epidemic” and “an irrecoverable tragedy” and note that firstly only representatives of the non-priest's creed called for “fire suffering” and since self-immolations had appeared they were contested by many influencers of Old Belief. And such an important for the priest's creeds document as “Zhalobnitsa”, made by Pomorian elders was actually written against self-immolations. In 1691 an absentee priest's council took place where self-immolations were also condemned by majority vote. The same year a monk Evfrosin (1895) wrote a critical treatise “Reflecting Writing about a Newly Invented Way of Suicides”.

The content was very challenging as in “Writing” Evfrosin (1895) was opposed to the most “fire-burning” archpriest Avvakum (2011) who at that time had been already acknowledged as a saint martyr for Old Belief. Avvakum hymned self-immolation, believing it was the performance of real Russian religious courage.

Founding on the Holy Book, Evfrosin (1895) states the participants of self-immolation are self-killers and they violate the Christian dispensation. And forbidding suicide the Church can not acknowledge them as saint martyrs for the faith and moreover the Church should not allow praying for souls of those who decide to die of their free will.

At that Evfrosin (1895) points clearly that not all self-immolators are equally responsible for mass self-immolations. There is a floc and a pastor. According to Evfrosin the ordinary believers do not quite understand the problem of faith while the initiators of self-immolations doom quite consciously to awful death of those, who believe and follow them (as cited in Zen'kovsky, 2009).

The “initiators” appearance among the non-priest's creed, who made self-immolations really mass and who often left the fireplaces uninjured to find and call desperate people again for the next “fire participation” at a new site, was admitted by Old believers (Vurgaft & Ushakov, 1996).

The supporters of self-immolations tried to escape blaming for the sin of suicide and they invented a deceit: “they put a lighted candle on the bar which locks the door and throw straw on the floor. After pushing the door the candle fall down and the fire starts” (Vurgaft & Ushakov, 1996, p. 73).

According to Pul'kin (2013), the discussion about the suicide legality became not only a determinant factor in the dissociation of Old believers, but also dictated a fate of “the Old godliness” on the whole.

Any toping issue abates as time passes. By the middle of the 19th century during the times of so called “Nikolai's scarcity” (Mel'nikov, 1987) the issue of self-immolation was thoroughly sidestepped. Pavel Melnikov, alias a writer Andrei Pecherskii, tells about Old believers' council in skeetes of Nizhnii Novgorod in his tetralogy “In the Forests” and “On the Mountains” and mentions self-immolations,

described by an elder Kleopatra Erakhturka “she stood up and putting her bony hand with a two-fingered cross up got over all the voices with her trembling voice:

-You should remember, fathers, mothers, the old times and the old reverend fathers! You should read Avvakum’s, a saint martyr, letters who had words with a wolf Nikon... He sings praises to self-immolation for Christ and Old godliness...

Everyone looked at one another and feathered words died on their lips. No one said a word as if they all died. No rejection, no consent” (Mel’nikov, 1987).

That was the superioresses’ reaction to the fanatic elder’s call. There was not anyone willing to be burnt in sufferings even at Kerzhenskii pillars of Old Belief.

According to some researchers, mass suicides of Old believers happened in the 19th century as well, but they were markedly different compared to the events in the 17–18th centuries.

The diversity of Old believers’ eschatology was written about earlier by a researcher Plukhanova (1895) and she pointed to the differences in the apocalyptic attitudes and compared Old believers’ doctrine with the apocalypticism in the 15th century. In contrast to the tensed and tragic waiting for “the last times” by Old believers, Maria Yaroslavna, a grand prince Vasiliï’s widow, had been ordering philosophically and rationally her distribution to the Kirillo-Belozerskii Monastery by September 1, 1492 – a date of the end of the world. This coming and inevitable event “in the hagiography and evangelical literature was mentioned smoothly as a normal state of things (Plukhanova, 1985), and with an important difference: without the Antichrist’s appearance to the world.

At the 17–18th centuries Old believers’ self-ruinous behavior was motivated by “apocalyptic texts, hagiography and traditional idea about the righteous death”, while mass suicides in the 19th century. However, the archive data, provided by Romanova (2012) do not even allow confirming that the initiators were Old believers. And the mass suicide ritual was more similar to the traditions of Enokhovtsi’s eschatological sect. The author notes: “...a leader’s actions are not connected with eschatology at all, they are like implementing the ideas which appeared at the Old Covenant interpretation” (Romanova, 2012, p. 108).

So, in our view, the mass suicide in the 19th century and referred to the Old believers’ apocalyptic doctrine cannot be considered such to be.

7. Conclusion

Using “escapism” as a term when describing various forms of Old believers’ communities’ existence is adequate and correct enough. The definition “religious” highlights the escapism character of the Orthodoxy supporters before the reform.

The most radical form of escapism from “tempted” world was a suicide, mass or individual. In Old Belief a mass suicide became a part of the apocalyptic doctrine.

Self-immolations and other forms of mass suicide were not a respond to some external irritants, victimization or harassment by the government agencies or the result of a mentor’s authority who called to “the fire death”. The mass suicides were the result of the hard internal brainwork of the Old believers’ community that is the main difference between Old believers from early Christians and dissidents of the modern period.

The discussion about the suicide legality became not only a determinant factor in the dissociation of Old believers, but also dictated a fate of “the Old godliness” on the whole

The mass suicide in the 19th century and referred to the Old believers’ apocalyptic doctrine can not be considered such to be.

References

- Avvakum (2011). *The life of Archpriest Avvakum, written by himself*. Eksmo.
- Chistov, K. E. (2011). *The Russian Folk utopia (Genesis and function of social utopian legends*. Dmitrij Bulanin.
- Evfrosin (1895). *A wonderful Scripture about the newfound path of suicidal deaths. //Monuments of ancient Russian writing*. St. Petersburg.
- Kerov, V. (2017). Russian Old Believers Case: Technical Innovations as Inadmissible "Devil" Loans. *European Business History Association. EBHA 21st Annual Congr. in Vienna “Transformation in Business and Society: An Historical Approach”*, 1–7.
- Kerov, V. V. (2018). *Government persecution, confessional values, or communal corporatism? In the book: Russian old believers in the history of modern Russia* (pp. 849–881). The First Model print. house LTD,
- Kozhurin, K. Y. (2007). *The spiritual teachers of sacred Russia*. Piter.
- Kramer, A.V. (2014). *The Split (Raskol) of the Russian Church in the middle of the XVII century*. Aletejya.
- Mel'nikov, F. E. (1999). *A brief history of the old Orthodox (old believer) Church*. The BGPU Publ. house.
- Mel'nikov, P. I. (1987). *Upon the Forests*. The “Pravda” Publ. house.
- Plukhanova, M. B. (1985). On some features of folk eschatology in Russia XVII–XVIII centuries. *Problems of typology of Russian literature. Works on Russian and Slavic Philology. Literary study*. Univer. of Tartu.
- Pul'kin, M. V. (2013). *Self-immolation of old believers (mid XVII–XIX centuries)*. The Russ. Foundat. for ed. and sci.
- Romanova, E. V. (2012). *Mass self-immolations of old believers in Russia in the XVII–XIX centuries*. Publ. house of the Europ. Univer. in St. Petersburg.
- Vurgaft, S. G., & Ushakov, I. A. (1996). *Old believers: people, objects, events and symbols. Experience encyclopedic dictionary*. Chapel.
- Yukhimenko, E. M. (2013). *Rahmanovy: the old believers-merchants, benefactors and collectors*. The Tonchu Publ. house.
- Zen'kovsky, S. A. (2009). *The Russian Old Belief*. The Instit. DI-DIK, The Quadriga Publ. house.