

Stella Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia: 'Double belief' and the making of an academic myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 234 pp.

I was recently in Russia after a long absence. I took many diverse impressions away with me from that trip, but was particularly struck by the blossoming of witchcraft as a social institution. Wizards and witches are numerous and operate openly. Newspapers and the Internet are overflowing with their advertisements, where they even call themselves wizards and witches, and proudly emphasise that permission for their activities has been granted by the Moscow city government. It was the first time I had encountered an instance of a government of the capital city of a large country openly encouraging witchcraft. This same government resurrected the magnificent Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, and I don't doubt that the wizards and their clients consider themselves to be practising Christians. And further: in Russia, photographs of its president, naked to the waist with excellently developed muscle tone, like a pagan god but for the cross on his chest, are very popular. The people do not comprehend that the cult of the body is at odds with Christianity. 'My strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). Ancient paganism is concealed under the cloak of Christianity in Russia, as it was throughout the preceding millennium.

Such a phenomenon is often called double belief. Stella Rock's book is devoted to the history and analysis of this concept and its interpretation by numerous authors, from medieval preachers to modern historians. The bibliography includes the all major sources on the theme, right to the most recent. From the first chapters, we learn that authors from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries

understood double belief differently to the representatives of more recent historiography, for whom double belief represents the predominance of pagan survivals in a Christian setting, or the syncretism of Christianity and paganism, or their opposition as distinct religious systems. The platitudinous notion of paganism's tenacity and wide distribution in the centuries following the adoption of Christianity, said to make Russia dissimilar to Western countries, the book's author calls an 'academic myth'. She strives to refute this myth, primarily analysing medieval Russian written sources. She concludes that they don't provide convincing evidence of paganism's preservation as a religious system co-existing with Christianity, and that the very words 'double belief' were understood differently at that time than they are today. It was only in the nineteenth century that the myth about people who retained completely and purely religious traditions originating in the pre-Christian past was created. It was only then that the words 'double belief' took on their modern resonance. The works of historian Sergey Solovyev were concerned with the resistance of the simple people, who strove to preserve their ancient beliefs in the face of an alien Christian elite. According to the following generation of historians, the protracted process of Rus's Christianisation came to completion with the joint adoption of Christianity and paganism, their mutual influence occasionally having a creative character, facilitating the formation of new cults. To some degree, Soviet Marxist historians returned to Solovyev's concept: the retention of pagan survivals right until our era was evidence of the people's active opposition to the Orthodox Church and the ruling classes. A re-evaluation of the concept of double belief began in Russian historiography only in the post-Soviet period, although a beginning was made significantly earlier by Dmitry Likhachev. The works of Western historians show that processes similar to those which occurred in Russia also took place in Europe. There also, the process of Christianisation was accompanied by the extended preservation of pre-Christian cultural traditions.

We note that the book's author, in accordance with her sources, calls 'Christians' people who formally adopted Christianity, observed the rite of baptism, and identified themselves as Christians (cf. p. 152). It is hardly productive in works like this to rely on such formal signs. What do they say about the real spiritual world of people who call themselves Christians? Stella Rock's book is primarily a source study and historiographical research work. A critical attitude towards both one's sources and predecessors' works is an indispensable quality for an

historian, which the book's author possesses in full. 'Clearing out' the research field, and the critical analysis of scientific terminology, are absolutely necessary. But if you are essentially interested in a history of Russian popular religion, you should consult other books.

However, the author is not entirely consistent in achieving her stated goal. Waging an uncompromising war on the term 'double belief', Stella Rock generously employs the term 'paganism', not calling it into the slightest question, although the concept 'paganism' encompasses the endless diversity of pre-Christian religions of all times and many peoples. She does this – as many others do – probably because this archaic term is habitual and convenient. The terminology of humanities as a whole is often polysemous and customary, which one must learn to live with.

The term 'double belief' is unfortunate. In reality, we mean the product of the interpretation of Christianity in a popular *milieu* with its considerable, original, age-old culture. It is a special, complex and dynamic world, in which Christianity and ancient pre-Christian faiths and cults appear as a kind of organic whole. It is the world of popular or ethnic Christianity, analogous to popular or ethnic Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism. It may be that only thus can a religion be realised as a world religion. Encountering a new ethnos on its historical path, it acquires a unique, ethnically hued facet. This is the very form of a world religion's existence. In the history of religion, the tendency towards universalism is combined with the tendency towards ethnomorphism. This isn't the co-existence of two religious systems, but a particular state of social consciousness. This is how everything concealed beneath the terms 'double belief', 'religious syncretism' and so on appears to me. It is a problem which demands a complex historico-ethnological approach.

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