



**Ksenia Sergazina. 2017. “*Khozhdenie vkrug*”. *Ritual’naia praktika pervykh obshchin khristoverov* [“Walking Around.” *Ritual Practices of the First Communities of Christovers*]. Moscow and St. Petersburg: Center for Humanitarian Initiatives (in Russian). — 256 pages.**

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Despite an abundance of prerevolutionary publications — both religious studies and journalistic accounts — about the Christovers, works of Soviet religious scholars (e.g. F.M. Putintsev, A.I. Klibanov), and those of modern researchers (e.g. A.A. Panchenko, A.G. Berman, and others) (Panchenko 2002; Berman 2020), the history, everyday life, and ritual practices of the Christovers/Khlysty (who proclaimed themselves the “people of God”) (Reutskii 1872, 4) are insufficiently studied and remain mysterious phenomena. In her monograph on the beliefs and ritual practices of the Christovers in the first half of the eighteenth century, Ksenia Sergazina relies on the corpus of investigative cases from 1717-1757, including those in which authorities accused Christovers of organizing orgies

at night meetings, ritual sacrifices of children, and deifying teachers and “prophets.”

Similar to many scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Christovers attributed the beginning of the movement to the first half of the seventeenth century. There are even Khlyst songs about the legendary disseminators of the teachings of Aver’ianov and Ivan Emel’ianov, one of whom lived during the reign of Dmitrii Donskoi, and the other, Ivan the Terrible (Butkevich 1910, 18-9; Berman 2020, 112-13). Sergazina shifts the emergence of the Christovers to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (while making the reservation that “the question remains open” [22]). By this time, the young movement had attracted the attention of the authorities. The materials

of these investigations became a key source base for studying Christover communities. In this early period, eunuchs had not appeared in the ranks of the Christovers (the first official investigation about eunuchs dates back to 1772) (Rozhdestvenskii 1882, 77); rather, without rejecting the previous foundations of the faith, its devotees placed a special emphasis on emasculation as a radical means of mortification of the flesh.

Before beginning, it is necessary to address terminology. The author deliberately rarely uses the designations “sectarians”, “Khlysty” (“whips”), and Khlystovstvo (“whips movement”), preferring instead the terms Christoverly (literally “Christ-faith”) and “Chrisova vera” (literally “Faith-of-Christ”) (christovshchina). Whereas the desire to avoid the biased “sectarians” is understandable, the rejection of the term “Khlysty” does not seem justified. The author should perhaps address in more detail the origin of the concept of “Christoverly” and its place in scholarly terminology.

The work consists of four chapters and an appendix (newly published archival documents), but in terms of content can be divided into three parts: the history of investigations, analysis of beliefs and ritual practices, and documents. It focuses on two interre-

lated issues: the actual teaching and the practices of the Christovers and the “external view” of them, from which common myths manifested.

When considering Uglich (1717) and other investigative cases, the author reconstructs the course of events in detail, examining when and under what circumstances the authorities became aware of the Christovers, the focus of these investigations, and what information about the beliefs, ritual practices, and personalities of Christovers is contained in them. For example, the participants in the Uglich case not only held secret meetings, but also received Prokofii Lupkin from Moscow (28-29), indicating contacts with believers in other locales. As the investigators became familiar with the new movement, the range of questions they asked the arrested Christovers also expanded.

Of particular interest is chapter four, which examines myths about Christovers in some trials, (for example, they are accused of organizing orgies at night meetings, performing ritual sacrifices of children, and deifying teachers and “prophets”). Subsequently, such myths not only became widespread in oral folklore, but also appeared in religious studies, periodicals, and fiction. The “Khlysty” appear in famous novels: *On the Mountains* by Pavel

Melnikov-Pecherskii, *Old House* by Vsevolod Solov'ev, *Peter and Alexey* by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and others. In the novel *Mirovich* by Grigorii Danilevskii, one of the characters, Kondratii Selivanov, is the founder of a eunuch sect. In Soviet times, Christovers appear in *Shadows Disappear at Noon*, Anatolii Ivanov's popular novel and in Vladimir Kashin's police detective novel, *Another's Weapon*. These works and others in one way or another support the odious myths about the "Khlysty": *Peter and Alexei* and *Shadows Disappear at Noon* include zealous sexual orgies for joy, and *Peter and Alexei* and *Mirovich* feature ritual sacrifices of children. P.I. Melnikov-Pecherskii is more cautious in his accusations: in his novel, *On the Mountains*, the "enlightened" Christovers, apart from Egor Denisov, are chaste, know the scripture and theological books, and interpret them intelligently. However, the people of "lesser authority" blindly believe in legends about the human incarnations of Christ and the Lord Sabaoth, and some engage in zealous self-torture and sexual orgies.

In Soviet times, despite the prevailing anti-religious ideology, scholars of Russian sectarianism rejected the most controversial accusations against Christovers. For example, F.M. Putintsev, in his report at the Second Congress

of the Union of Militant Atheists (1929) indignantly criticized the myths:

There were many trials before the revolution, and there was never a case when the priests managed to prove that there was a cult of debauchery and orgies during divine services. <...> There have never been any orgies during the divine service, and this can be proven. We have the opposite experience; doctors reported that when examining two Khlysty (one 40 years old and the other 60), they discovered both were virgins, despite the fact that both had been married for decades (Nikolskaya 2009, 83).

The outstanding Soviet religious scholar, A.I. Klibanov held a similar position.

K.T. Sergazina rightly points out that in the twentieth century, the myths transferred from the Christovers to Russian Protestants, in particular Evangelical Christian-Baptists and Pentecostals (120), a phenomenon that requires further study. Stories of sexual orgies survived mainly in folklore, but accusations of ritual murder or its attempt were officially declared in trials during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign. Specifically, in one high-profile criminal case against

Moscow Pentecostals (1961), the preacher Ivan Fedotov was accused of inciting child sacrifice, for which he was sentenced to 10 years in prison (Kruglov 1961, 3; Fedotov 2006, 299-300, 305) (rehabilitated by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of 05/22/1996) (Fedotov 2006, 140).

When considering investigative cases of the eighteenth century, Sergazina wonders if there was any real basis for the emergence of these myths, or if they were constructed during investigations. The author finds no confirmation of these accusations (except for the practice of self-flagellation) and identifies their similarity with the “blood libel” and other pre-existing myths. In addition, the chapter analyzes sources that could have influenced the formation of myths — for example, the writings of Minucius Felix (119). Such an important topic could, however, be considered in more detail. K. Sergazina writes: “The illiterate peasants [...] were even more defenseless in front of the inquiry, which presumed in advance the teaching and praxis of the new religious group” (54). Is it possible to conclude from this selection that the author considers the investigative cases to be largely fabricated? Furthermore, if numerous facts and testimonies contradict accusations of

“mass sexual orgies” (the ascetic teaching of the Christovers, the decline or cessation of birthrates in the “Khlyst” villages, and the emergence of Skoptsy, a movement against violations of chastity, etc. . .), other myths still remain poorly understood.

Sergazina also concludes that the Christovers did not have alternative sacraments, and that they — at least in the period described — neither broke from Orthodoxy (131-132) nor rejected the significance of Holy Scripture and Church tradition (77). Christopher teaching preached the importance of adhering to both the Christian commandments and a strict set of ascetic rules. Already at an early stage, a network of interconnected communities and groups began to form among Christovers: in the absence of a systemic hierarchy, teachers, “prophets,” and “prophetesses” stood out. They enjoyed special respect, but there is no evidence of their deification, and even less regarding their self-identification with Christ or the Mother of God.

The scholarly novelty of the work should be noted; using a wide range of sources, the author creates a multifaceted picture of the life of Christopher communities in the first half of the eighteenth century. The author questions common myths about Christovers and makes an

interesting conclusion that in the eighteenth century the mysterious movement was not as different from Orthodoxy as is commonly believed. The study is also significant for its interdisciplinary approach to the topic: the analysis of material is carried out from historical, religious, and source criticism perspectives. The final of these is especially noteworthy because the methodology for studying judicial and investigative documents (both from the pre-revolutionary and Soviet era) still remains poorly developed.

A notable phenomenon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christovers moved to the sidelines of the Russian religious life in the twentieth, and today even the question of their existence is controversial. As noted by A. S. Lavrov, the author of the foreword to this book, "the Christovers have no living heirs, unless, of course, we count the outspoken imposters" (5). This statement can neither be considered fully proven nor completely erroneous because the process of "extinction" of the Christovers remains a "blank spot" in historical religious studies. Therefore, I would like Ksenia Sergazina's research on the development of the spiritual culture of the Christovers not to be limited to the 18th century, but to be continued.

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