“I am a Sincere Believer”: Rethinking Religiosity and Identity in the Early Soviet Union

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On March 26, 1922, a forty-six-old man named Dmitri Timofeivich Chernov was interrogated by an investigator from the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal, a worker at Pharmaceutical Plant No. 1 in Moscow. Chernov was questioned about comments he had made in the headquarters of the plant factory committee (*zavkom*) about the Soviet government’s campaign to confiscate valuables from religious institutions in order to buy grain to feed the millions of people who were suffering from famine in the Volga and Ural regions of Russia.[1]

In Moscow province and the capital city, thousands of Red Army soldiers and members of the local Moscow secret police had been deployed to enter Orthodox churches and confiscate valuable objects—icon covers made of various metals; censers; crosses; lamps; and, most controversially, the various items known collectively as sacred vessels (*sviashchennye sosudy)* used during the Eucharistic rite of the Orthodox liturgy.[2] Violence sometimes broke out during the confiscations, as crowds showed up to observe, cheer, and protest the uniformed men coming to take away the sacred objects, especially the sacred vessels, which were not supposed to be handled by non-clerics.[3]

Indeed, the head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Tikhon, had forbidden believers and clerics from voluntarily handing over the sacred vessels. Citing

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1. The Russian-language scholarship on this topic is vast. Primary sources include: N.N. Pokrovskii and S.G. Petrov, eds., *Arkhivy Kremlia: Politburo i tserkov′ 1922–1925*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1997–98), 1:3–194, 2:5–272; and Aleksandr Mazyrin et al., eds., *Iz′′iatie tserkovnykh tsennostei v Moskve v 1922 godu: Sbornik dokumentov iz fonda Revvoensoveta Respubliki* (Moscow, 2006). Useful secondary accounts include: Natal′ia Aleksandrovna Krivova, *Vlast′ i tserkov′ v 1922–1925 gg.: Politburo i GPU v bor′be za tserkovnye tsennosti i politicheskoe podchinenie dukhovenstva* (Moscow, 1997); Natal′ia Aleksandrovna Krivova, “The Events in Shuia: A Turning Point in the Assault on the Church,” *Russian Studies in History* 46, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 8–38; James Ryan, “Cleansing NEP Russia: State Violence Against the Russian Orthodox Church in 1922,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 9 (November 2013): 1807–26; Jonathan W. Daly, “‘Storming the Last Citadel’: The Bolshevik Assault on the Church, 1922,” in Vladimir N. Brovkin, ed., *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars* (New Haven, 1997), 235–66.

2. For lists of collected items, see Vadim V. Nikonov, “Iz′′iatie tsennostei iz khramov Moskovskoi gubernii v 1922 g. v arkhivnykh dokumentakh TsGAMO i TsGA g. Moskvy,” *Istoriia i arkhivy* 1 (2022): 111–14. For how operations were carried out, see Mazyrin et al., eds. *Iz′′iatie tserkovnykh tsennostei*, 11–17.

3. The commission responsible for confiscations in Moscow province recorded multiple such incidents. See the reports in Mazyrin et al., eds., *Iz′′iatie tserkovnykh tsennostei*.

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a number of canons (church laws, based on the rulings of synods from the first centuries of the church's existence), the patriarch argued that it would be sacrilegious to hand over the vessels, and stated that any person who did so would be excommunicated, while clergymen would be defrocked.[4] Believers thus found themselves having to discern whether to obey the patriarch or the All-Russia Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), which had issued the confiscations decree.[5]

It is understandable, then, that the events that were creating such a stir in the city and beyond should have been the topic of conversation among the workers at the pharmaceutical plant. Chernov had entered zavkom headquarters in search of a newspaper, and had ended up conversing with his coworkers about the confiscations campaigns. He admitted to tribunal investigators that he had spoken to his fellow workers about the confiscations in the context of the 1918 "Decree on the Separation of Church and State and of School and Church." Chernov interpreted this decree to mean that the church, and, presumably, church property was "at the disposal of the clergy," and not of the state.[6] Although the decree had nationalized all church property, which was then to be loaned out to groups of believers at the discretion of the local soviet, Chernov either did not know this, or did not care.[7] In the same conversation he expressed skepticism about whether church valuables would really be used as the Soviet authorities claimed they would be: to help purchase grain for the millions of people starving in the Volga region.[8] For his skepticism Chernov was accused by the tribunal investigator of having conducted "agitation against the confiscations among the workers."[9]

Chernov and fifty-three other defendants were called to appear in front of the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal in what would become known as the "Trial of the Fifty-Four." Held in the largest auditorium in Moscow, that of the Polytechnical Museum, from April 26 to May 6, the trial was highly publicized and heavily attended.[10] It was part of a larger aggressive campaign on the part of

4. Vladimir Vorob′ev et al., eds., *Sledstvennoe delo Patriarkha Tikhona: Sbornik dokumentov: Po materialam Tsentral′nogo Arkhiva FSB RF* (Moscow, 2000), 114–15.

5. For more on Tikhon's clash with Bolshevik authorities over this matter, see Francesca Silano, "'In the Language of the Patriarch': Patriarch Tikhon, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Soviet State (1865–1925)," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2017), 228–80.

6. Tsentral′nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti (TsGAMO) fond (f.) 5062, opis (op.) 3, delo (d.) 102v, l. 8.

7. L.V. Miliakova and Vladimir Vorob′ev, eds., *Otdelenie tserkvi ot gosudarstva i shkoly ot tserkvi v Sovetskoi Rossii. Oktiabr′ 1917–1918 g.* (Moscow, 2016), 131–32, 173–79.

8. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102v, l. 5ob. For the decree see Vorob′ev et al., *Sledstvennoe delo Patriarkha Tikhona,* 850–51.

9. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102v, l. 5ob.

10. Lev Trotskii ordered all the major newspapers to cover the trial. Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Arkhivy Kremlia*, 1:254. It was also covered by the Associated Press. See, for example, "Tikhon Defies Soviet in its Highest Court," *The New York Times*, May 8, 1922, 2. Soviet newspapers claimed that there were a number of religious people in the packed audience, including clerical wives or "matushki" who waited outside to care for the clergy during the breaks: Petr Ashevskii, "I 'sviateishii' i pravitel′stvuiushchii...,'" *Izvestiia*, May 6, 1922, 1; Mark Krinitskii "'Russkii Papa,' pered sudom revoliutsionnogo tribunala," *Izvestiia*, May 6, 1922, 1.

the Bolshevik leadership to eliminate the clergy and hierarchy of the Orthodox Church and also to educate the populace in new Soviet morality and law.[11] In the indictment against them, all of the defendants were charged with counterrevolutionary activity for having protested the confiscations and, by extent, participated in a larger plot by the Orthodox Church hierarchy and its leader, Patriarch Tikhon, to "return Russia to its former position in order to retain all the former rights of privilege and the long-standing wealth which the Soviet authorities are now giving to the hungry in order to save their lives."[12] Chernov was listed among a group of lay people who, "under the influence of agitation on the part of the representatives of the clergy. . . stirred up the population to resistance to the people conducting the confiscations, deliberately spreading false information that the majority of the confiscated property would be plundered."[13]

Although Chernov had not been present at any confiscations, his comments in the factory committee were enough to peg him as an anti-Soviet agitator and counterrevolutionary. Like the other lay defendants, Chernov was portrayed in the indictment as being both a reactionary and a duped minion of a clerical hierarchy. Viewed as such, any religious beliefs Chernov or his fellow defendants may have held were interpreted by the investigators as expressions of their naiveté and/or counterrevolutionary cunning.

When interrogated by the tribunal investigator, however, Chernov painted a very different picture of himself. Married with a thirteen-year-old child, he had been born into a peasant family in Penza province, where he had received a basic rural education before moving to eastern Moscow. Although he did not belong to the Bolshevik party, he claimed that he was "obedient" to Soviet power.[14] After answering standard questions about his background and political beliefs, Chernov, like all the other defendants in this case, was asked his personal opinion about church confiscations, about the right of Soviet power to engage in them, and about Patriarch Tikhon's directive that sacred vessels should not be voluntarily given over.[15]

Chernov stated that he had been a member of the choir in a church in eastern Moscow for almost a year. Even as the Bolsheviks engaged in a heated campaign to destroy Orthodox institutions, this worker had been singing in

11. In a now infamous letter to Viacheslav Molotov and the Politburo, Vladimir Lenin explained that the famine provided an excellent opportunity for trying and executing as many clergymen as possible. Lenin to Molotov for Politburo Members, March 19, 1922, in Richard Pipes, ed., *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New Haven, 1998), 153. Throughout the spring of 1922, the political units in the army aimed to gain public support for the ongoing confiscation campaigns by staging mock trials across the country, where the main culprits of the famine were named as Patriarch Tikhon and "imperialist European governments." Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2005), 94. For the early tribunal trial as education, see Matthew Rendle, *The State Versus the People: Revolutionary Justice in Russia's Civil War, 1917–1922* (Oxford, 2020), 98–174, 220–26. See also Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (DeKalb, IL, 2000), 6, 42–55.

12. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d.102v, l. 9.

13. Ibid, l. 12–12 ob.

14. Ibid. d. 102a, l. 9.

15. Ibid, l. 9 ob.

his local church choir.[16] At the end of this first interrogation session, Chernov wrote in his own shaky hand: "I am a deeply religious man" (*Ia gluboko veriuiushchii chelovek*).[17] The first recorded statement of Chernov's second interrogation was: "I am a sincere believer" (*ia chelovek = iskrenno veriushchii*). He was not in favor of giving away "objects that are dear to me" (*dorogikh mne predmetov*), not least because such objects had been handed down "from generation to generation" and were, in his mind, the property of the church.[18]

If not a member of the Bolshevik Party, Chernov was nonetheless meant to be a primary beneficiary of the Bolshevik Revolution: he was a peasant by birth and a factory worker by profession, in possession of no personal property.[19] He had served in World War I and had worked in a pharmaceutical factory throughout the civil war.[20] Both his status as a formerly oppressed person and his civil war service meant that the Bolsheviks looked at him as someone who was likely to support the party and the revolution.[21] He was also a candidate for becoming the New Person that the Bolsheviks set out to produce through "a process of social purification" in the NEP period.[22] The New Person would be, in the words of Igal Halfin, "a strong, free, and conscious creature, totally emancipated from the servile capitalist psyche."[23] Chernov stood to benefit from the favor being shown to factory workers by the new government; he was to be liberated from the old order that had enserfed his rural ancestors. It was these old rulers who, in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, had indoctrinated Chernov and his ancestors with religious beliefs that only served to further oppress them.

Yet, as the interrogation records, trial testimony, and witness testimony from the "Trial of the Fifty-Four" reveal, Chernov and many of the other urban-dwelling lay people (mainly men) who stood trial with him were not easily turned into the kinds of new people envisioned by top Bolshevik propagandists. Some of them continued to describe themselves as "believers" or "religious." Some of them were even members of local soviets or former Red Army soldiers who nonetheless seemed to find their Soviet identity to be compatible with their attachment to Orthodox objects and spaces, Orthodox traditions and/or doctrines, or even to the Orthodox Church hierarchy and its leader, Patriarch Tikhon. Still others reported feeling confused about their religious beliefs, thus perplexing their Bolshevik accusers on the Tribunal. In other words, Chernov and his fellow lay defendants reveal a whole new world of

16. Vera Shevzov, "The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia, 1894–1924," in Caryl Emerson et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (Oxford, 2020), 38–59; Robert H. Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (DeKalb, 2010); William Husband, *"Godless Communists": Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb, 2000).

17. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d.102v, l. 10.

18. Ibid, l. 10 ob.

19. Ibid, d. 102v, l. 12, ob. Searches of most of the other defendants turned up at least some cash.

20. Ibid, d. 102a, l. 9–9 ob.

21. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005), 54.

22. Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, & Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000), 23.

23. Ibid, 1.

urban Soviet subjectivity and religious belief in the early years of the Russian Revolution that, until recently, has been almost entirely ignored by scholars of Soviet history. This article seeks not only to bring that world to light, revealing how definitions of "Soviet" and "religious" were still in flux in these early years of Soviet power, but also reflects upon what studying such types of people might contribute to the study of religion and identity in the early Soviet period.

Lived Orthodoxy in the USSR

Although the last thirty years have seen a remarkable increase in the number of studies of Orthodoxy in the USSR, in many ways this scholarship is still in its early stages. English-language scholars have traced important developments within the institutional church,[24] illuminated the experiences of monks and nuns in the USSR,[25] explained the development of Soviet anti-religious policy,[26] and demonstrated the persistence of belief, especially in the countryside.[27] Recent work has revealed continuities and changes in Orthodox

24. John Shelton Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917–1950* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965); Dmitry Pospielovsky, *The Russian Church and the Soviet Regime, 1917–1982* (Crestwood, NY, 1984); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946* (Bloomington, 2002); Daniela Kalkandzhieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917–1948: From Decline to Resurrection* (London, 2015); Gregory L. Freeze, "Religion and Revolution: The Russian Orthodox Church Transformed," in Daniel Orlovsky, ed., *A Companion to the Russian Revolution* (Hoboken, 2020), 283–92.

25. Jennifer Jean Wynot, *Keeping the Faith: Russian Orthodox Monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917–1939* (College Station, 2004); William Wagner, "The Transformation of Female Orthodox Monasticism in Nizhnii Novgorod Diocese, 1764–1929, in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 4 (December 2006): 793–845; Scott M. Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism and Society after 1825* (New York and Washington, DC, 2010).

26. Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917–1929* (Helsinki, 1994); Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA, 1997); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, 1998); Husband,*"Godless Communists"*; Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, 2018); Shevzov, "The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia."

27. For the persistence of belief, see Gregory L. Freeze, "Counter-Reformation in Russian Orthodoxy: Popular Response to Religious Innovation, 1922–1925," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 305–39); William B. Husband, "Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance, 1917–1932," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 74–107; Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia*; S. A. Smith, "The First Soviet Generation: Children and Religious Belief in Soviet Russia, 1917–41," in Stephen Lovell, ed., *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York, 2007), 79–100; S. A. Smith, "Bones of Contention: Bolsheviks and the Struggle Against Relics 1918–1930," *Past and Present* 204, no. 1 (August 2009): 155–94; Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars*; Catherine Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Washington, DC and New York, 2012); Maksim Kail, "Women's Piety in a Post-Revolutionary Russian Province: Self-Identification and Social Practices," in Natalia Novikova and Marianna Muravyeva, eds., *Women's History in Russia: (Re)Establishing the Field*, ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 2014), 67–85; Christine D. Worobec, "Lived Religion Gendered: Representations and Practices of Russian Orthodoxy," in Adele Lindenmeyr and Melissa Stockdale, eds., *Women and Gender in Russia's Great War and Revolution, 1900–1922* (Bloomington, 2022), 105–22; Page Herrlinger, "Russian Orthodox Women in Unorthodox Times: Patterns of Female Agency and Authority in the Revolutionary Era, 1917–1927," (forthcoming). For

thought in the Soviet era.[28] Russian-language scholars have produced a number of important works on the church hierarchy from the beginning to the collapse of the USSR, on church-state relations, and, more recently, on questions concerning Orthodox parish life and property in the early revolutionary years.[29] As Gregory Freeze points out, however, scholars continue to ignore the importance of religion, and of Orthodoxy in particular, for understanding the drastic changes that occurred in the former Russian empire after 1914, not least because scholars who study the church have not always demonstrated its importance for understanding the revolution.[30]

Moreover, as compared to the work done on the imperial era, we still have a very limited sense of how Orthodoxy was lived by believers in the USSR, and particularly in the early, pre-Stalin Soviet Union. Although we have begun to become aware that many places in revolutionary Russia experienced a revival of Orthodox practice both in the years leading up to the revolution and during the first years of Bolshevik rule, with the exception of the few works cited above, we still know little of the myriad ways in which Orthodox religious practice persisted, and how its practitioners conceived of themselves.[31] If we *have* considered how Orthodoxy was lived by regular people after the Bolshevik revolution, we have tended to assume that those who thought of themselves as Orthodox after October of 1917 did not simultaneously consider themselves "Soviet," however they understood that term. In contrast, scholars have shown the myriad ways Soviet Jews in the early-Revolutionary period conceived themselves as both "Soviet and kosher."[32]

Thus, Orthodox belief, especially among lay people, is often considered through the lens of resistance to the Soviet state. This may partially explain why the persistence of Orthodox belief and/or practice among lay people in the USSR has come to be seen as an especially female phenomenon. Village grandmothers (*babi bunty*) protested against relic confiscations and collectivization campaigns that targeted churches, and women in general were considered to be less susceptible to retribution from authorities should they

an analytical survey of the scholarship on confessions in the USSR, see Gregory Freeze, "Confessions in the Soviet Era: Analytical Overview of Historiography," *Russian History* 44, no. 1 (2017): 1–24.

28. Patrick Lally Michelson and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, eds., *Thinking Orthodox in Modern Russia: Culture, History, Context* (Madison, 2014); Emerson et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, 565–44.

29. For an overview of the Russian-language literature, see Gregory L. Freeze, "'Votserkovlenie' 1917 goda: Tserkovnyi krizis i prikhodskaia revoliutsiia," in *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 2019, nos. 1–2 (June 2019): 30–57. For parish life, see, for example, Iuliia Belonogova, *Prikhodskoe dukhovenstvo i krest'ianskii mir v nachale XX veka: Po materialam Moskovskoi eparkhii* (Moscow, 2010); A.L. Beglov, "Pravoslavnyi prikhod Rossiiskoi imperii kak ob''ekt fiskal'noi politiki svetskikh i tserkovnykh vlastei v kontse XIX–nachale XX v.," *Vestnik PSTGU II: Istoriia* 57, no. 2 (2014): 56–81.

30. Freeze, "'Votserkovlenie' 1917 goda," 31–33.

31. The religious revival has been relatively well-documented. See Worobec, "Lived Religion Gendered," 121n53.

32. See, for example, Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, 2006); Arkadii Zel'tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki 1917–1941* (Moscow, 2006**);** Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, 2013);

publicly expose their Orthodox beliefs.[33] It was the Bolsheviks, first of all, who argued that religion only continued to survive among "old women," and "hysterics."[34]

These characterizations often tell us very little about Orthodox women themselves. As Page Herrlinger argues, "women's beliefs and behaviors have been analyzed with respect to the expectations of either the Bolsheviks or Church authorities, while their own perspectives and priorities have been for the most part marginalized or ignored."[35] If women, as Herrlinger argues, are rendered "one-dimensional" by scholars of Orthodoxy in the USSR, laymen are barely present. Yet, the majority of lay defendants in the confiscations trials were men, precisely because women were less likely to be prosecuted for their lived religiosity.[36] Perhaps we have not tried to know these subjects because we ourselves have been shaped by the Bolshevik portrayals of lived Orthodoxy in the USSR.[37]

So who were these people? What became of the baptized Orthodox who maintained some attachment to their Orthodoxy and did not necessarily become party members, but who also did not necessarily oppose the Soviet state? What of those who went to church and who also joined the local soviet; those who, as Christine Worobec argues, "still needed the religious rites, prayers, and symbols that helped them make sense of their sorrows and gave them comfort"?[38] What, especially of those ordinary people who grew up in the twilight years of the Russian empire in a largely Orthodox world, where Orthodox religious observance, which may have been on the decline in some areas, was much higher than Christian religious observance in the rest of Europe?[39] What about those who took part in the massive religious processions (*krestnyi khody*) in urban centers throughout the former empire in 1918, or the parishioners who, while perhaps being more anti-clerical, also rose up to defend their clergymen after the Bolshevik Revolution, or those who flocked to confession and the sacraments in the early years of the Bolshevik regime?[40] How did they think about themselves as Orthodox people, as believers, as

33. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York, 1996), 188–203; Husband, "Soviet Atheism;" Smith, "Bones of Contention," 175–78.

34. Quoted in Greene, *Bodies like Bright Stars*, 204.

35. Herrlinger, "Russian Orthodox Women," (forthcoming).

36. See, for example, the lists of defendants in the Moscow, Shuia, and Petrograd trials in Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Arkhivy Kremlia*, 1:175–77, 2:148–49, 2:274–85.

37. Gregory L. Freeze, "Critical Dynamic of the Russian Revolution: Religion or Irreligion?" in Daniel Schönpflug and Martin Schulze Wessel, eds., *Redefining the Sacred: Religion in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), 52.

38. Worobec, "Lived Religion Gendered," 121.

39. Gregory L. Freeze, "A Pious Folk? Religious Observance in Vladimir Diocese, 1900–1914," in "Themenschwerpunkt: Religion und Gesellschaft in Rußland vor der Revolution von 1917," a special issue of *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 52, no. 3 (2004): 323–40.

40. Worobec, "Lived Religion Gendered"; Francesca Silano, "(Re)Constructing an Orthodox 'Scenario of Power': The Restoration of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate in Revolutionary Russia (1917–1918)," *Revolutionary Russia* 32, no. 1 (2019): 19; Patrick Brown, "The Orthodox Church in Revolutionary Cheliabinsk: Reform, Counter-Reform, and Popular Revolution in 1917," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des slavistes*

Soviet citizens? Surely the answers to such questions are not of interest only to scholars of religion or Orthodoxy, but to any scholar of the USSR, especially in the wake of the turn towards the study of Soviet subjectivity and identity. Perhaps we have had difficulty in asking these questions, not only because sources are hard to come by, but also because of a limited understanding of what being Orthodox, or even religious, meant in the early Soviet period.

Rethinking Religion and Identity in Revolutionary Russia

For years, the study of Orthodoxy in Russia was marked by artificial binaries that often clouded our understanding of lived Orthodoxy in medieval and imperial Russia. Whether it be the notion of *dvoeverie*, the idea that "popular" and "official" (clerical) Orthodoxy were two distinct categories that were often in contention, scholars often unwittingly accepted the Bolshevik narrative of religion as dichotomous class struggle between elites and masses, educated and un-educated, clergy and peasants.[41] Scholars of the imperial period have long since adapted a much more nuanced framework, viewing religion as "fully and deeply entangled with the world. Belief, spirituality, and the sacred are seen not as separate, clearly bounded spheres . . . nor as mere reflections of social and political life but, rather, as powerful and complex cultural expressions of transcendent meanings, passions, and beliefs entwined inescapably with the whole of life, in Russia and beyond."[42] These scholars have sought out "sacred stories," and have demonstrated how modern identity in the late-imperial period was deeply shaped by religious practices, convictions, and experiences.[43]

On the one hand, then, this nuanced mode of thinking needs to be brought to bear on our studies of religion in the early Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Soviet period, which was marked by the Bolshevik desire to break sharply with all institutions, beliefs, and practices of the past, provides its own challenges and opportunities when it comes to the study of religion. The subjects of this article gave their testimony under threat of death, imprisonment, or exile. Although religious freedom was officially protected in the USSR, there can be no doubt that, as Vera Shevzov has argued, the Bolsheviks sought to "spiritually colonize" the former empire and the minds of its subjects through

59, nos. 1–2 (2017): 70–100; "Freeze, "Religion and Revolution," 283; Nadieszda Kizenko, *Good for the Souls: A History of Confession in the Russian Empire* (Oxford, 2021), 274.

41. For a review of how the study of religion in Russia has changed since 1991, see Heather J. Coleman, "Studying Russian Religion Since the Collapse of Communism," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 25, no. 2 (2014): 309–18. For challenges to this dichotomy, see, for example, Vera Shevzov, "Letting the People into Church: Reflections on Orthodoxy and Community in Late Imperial Russia," in Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, eds., *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (University Park, PA, 2003), 59–77. For *dvoeverie*, see Stella Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia: Double Belief and the Making of an Academic Myth* (New York, 2007), 94–111.

42. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, "Introduction: Rethinking Religion in Modern Russian Culture," in Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, eds., *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia* (Bloomington, 2007), 1.

43. Ibid.

a "sociocultural engineering project" that employed violence, propaganda, and incentives to eradicate institutions of religion, the "powerful communities of feeling" that religions often are, and, at various times, clergy and lay people who professed themselves to be religious.[44]

In such a context, it is all the more difficult to try to get at what religion or religiosity might have meant to a Soviet citizen who was also a believer. As David Morgan explains, religion is not just about articulating what one believes; after all "human beings do not translate everything significant or compelling into words."[45] For the subjects in this study, the material objects and concrete spaces of their churches elicited in them a range of emotions, thoughts, opinions, actions and reactions, some of which might have been contradictory, halting, and even not understandable to the subjects themselves. The study of material religion moves beyond that of "belief," insofar as the latter is limited to "propositional claims about knowledge and belief."[46] Orthodoxy in particular, with its robust liturgical life, cannot be reduced to what its participants can express in words. It engages all the senses, calling the participant into intimate communion with God and human beings, often through materials like icons, water, relics, the eucharistic bread and wine, bells, and incense.[47]

In the case of sacred vessels, in particular, the combination of fear, respect, and awe that the objects elicited in the defendants also led them to form the conviction, whether vague or firm, that such objects should not be touched by lay people like themselves. As baptized Orthodox, they would likely have attended church at least once a year until 1917, where they would have become familiar with the iconostasis that separated the lay people from the clerics. The lay people in the Moscow trial carried these experiences with them, and clearly felt there was some barrier that ought not to be crossed, some shred of reverence that had to be maintained, when dealing with objects deemed sacred. They may very well have been anti-clerical, as a growing number of workers, soldiers, and peasants seem to have been after the February Revolution.[48] But whether they knew, had a relationship with, liked, or respected their local clergymen or not, many of the accused expressed in more or less cogent ways the sense that certain objects should not be touched by non-clerics.

44. Shevzov, "The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia," 50. See also Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, 2005), 157–61.

45. David Morgan, "Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London, 2010), 10.

46. Jeremy Stolow, quoted in Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, "Introduction: The Body of St Cuthbert," in Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, eds., *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred* (London, 2017), 6.

47. Sonja Luehrmann, "Introduction: The Senses of Prayer in Eastern Orthodox Christianity," in Sonja Luehrmann, ed., *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* (Bloomington, 2018); Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, 2005), 313–14.

48. Brown, "The Orthodox Church in Revolutionary Cheliabinsk"; Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 53–54.

Such an experience of the sacred cannot be entirely captured by the notion of private vs. public, institutional vs. non-institutional, or pro-or anti-clerical belief, or even of parish lay vs. clerical power.[49] This is not to claim that these concepts are not helpful, but to suggest that to speak of religiosity and the sacred, especially in this period of historical flux, is to face what Mark Steinberg, referring to proletarian worker writers, calls "the challenge . . . of trying to comprehend clearly how people handled an elusive and ambiguous form of knowledge" that was central to how they conceived of themselves.[50]

The thirty-two lay people who were put on trial along with twenty-two clerics in the Trial of the Fifty-Four in Moscow were a diverse lot. The youngest was eighteen and the eldest sixty-two. Ranging from students to professors, metalworkers to locksmiths, some had moved to Moscow from surrounding provinces, while others had been born in the city. Some of them were more educated than others; some described themselves as religious; others did not. Still others gave changing and even contradictory accounts of their religious identities and of their involvement (or lack thereof) in attempts to save the sacred vessels from confiscation. There were no graduates of seminaries or theological academies, or people who worked in professional fields related to the church. They were all, however, responding to the way that objects deemed sacred in the Orthodox tradition were being treated. These objects were not merely signifiers of articulated beliefs, but often the very source of beliefs, attitudes, and emotions.[51] They were things that Chernov could describe as being "dear to me."

The defendants also expressed varying degrees of enthusiasm, attachment, loyalty, indifference, hostility, perplexity, and ignorance about and/or the Soviet authorities. They were new at being Soviet subjects, living only five years after the revolution whose victory had been secured in the civil war, and a few months after the formation of a new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Although they may not have been engaged in the kind of active reshaping of their identities that was undertaken by committed Bolsheviks, these people had still passed through years of chaos that had nonetheless offered them new opportunities and new ways to think about themselves. They were likely already aware that being able to claim a proletarian identity was of great advantage to them, especially in 1922 when the Bolsheviks were eager to both rebuild the "disintegrated" industrial working class and to claim workers' support.[52]

As city-dwellers stationed in the capital, they lived in a place where the Bolshevik project was more advanced. As their interrogation records, statements at the trial, and official appeals show, many of these people already knew how to think about, or at least present themselves as Soviet subjects,

49. See, for example, Wanner, "Introduction," to Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion*, 9–14; Freeze, "Subversive Atheism: Antireligious Campaigns and the Religious Revival in Ukraine in the 1920s," in Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion*; and Brown, "The Orthodox Church in Revolutionary Cheliabinsk."

50. Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, 2002), 9.

51. Hutchings and McKenzie, "Introduction," 5.

52. Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, 52–3.

precisely because this was a time when what it meant to be Soviet was still being worked out on a public and personal level. The defendants presented themselves as both Soviet and religious, sometimes negotiating their identities in real time in the courtroom. Let us turn, then, to these subjects, and examine how these different facets of their identities emerged in the interrogation room and on trial.

Educated Believers in Religion and Revolution

The defendants in the Trial of the Fifty-Four fell into one of two general groups. The first was composed of people who had attended meetings at their local parishes that had been organized by the parish soviet. Since 1918, the parish soviet, "an elected committee of core parish activists" had taken over most of the responsibility for parishes.[53] At the meetings, the attendees discussed the VTsIK decree ordering the confiscations of church valuables, read the patriarch's message aloud (as they had been instructed to do by the local leaders of the Orthodox Church in Moscow) and decided whether or not to hand over the sacred vessels, especially since the patriarch had forbidden doing so.[54] The second group was made up of people who had gathered outside of churches during the confiscations, and who were accused of some form of agitation against the soldiers carrying out the confiscations, or against the Soviet authorities in general.

People in the first group were treated much more harshly by the members of the tribunal. As educated men who had, in some cases, been beneficiaries of the old regime, or who were now serving as "bourgeois specialists," or were intellectuals working as lawyers or professors, or even as independent tradesmen, they were considered likely to be counterrevolutionaries.[55] Most defendants in this group, regardless of the parish meeting they had attended, reported a similar series of events: they had gathered to discuss the confiscations, and most parishioners had expressed a desire to help the starving and to give over church valuables. When the patriarch's message was read aloud, however, the parishioners resolved to try to find a way to give over all the items except for the sacred vessels. Some groups of parishioners followed the suggestions of the deans of the Moscow churches and sent a form letter to VTsIK. The letter stated that it was the "moral duty" of Orthodox believers to protest the confiscations and asked VTsIK to reconsider a decision that was "deeply offensive to the religious feelings of millions of believers and contrary to the principle of freedom of conscience and freedom of religious worship."[56] Parishioners sometimes proposed sending items or money in exchange for the sacred vessels.[57]

In the case of this first group, the tribunal wanted to determine how the defendants reacted to Patriarch Tikhon's message forbidding believers from voluntarily handing over the sacred vessels. The tribunal members were

53. Freeze, "Subversive Atheism," 30–31.

54. In many cases, the parish soviets "mounted a fierce defense of church valuables." Ibid, 31.

55. Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, 57–62.

56. Vorob′ev et al., *Sledstvennoe Delo*, 115–16.

57. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102a, ll. 108–10.

convinced that the church was a counterrevolutionary organization in which the believer-soldiers served at the whim of the patriarch. Yet, the defendants revealed themselves to have a much more complex relationship with authority (both political and religious) than their interrogators bargained for. In describing it, moreover, they revealed that one aspect of belief in this period concerned precisely the way a subject imagined himself in relation to authority.

One defendant, Kirill Asafov, was a twenty-six-year-old employee in the State Historical Museum manuscript department and secretary of his parish soviet at the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God "Unburnt Bush" in central Moscow. In a meeting about the confiscations, members of Asafov's church decided unanimously to petition VTsIK, asking them to respect their freedom of conscience. Under interrogation, Asafov admitted that he had personally drafted the appeal, and that he had referenced the same canons as Patriarch Tikhon when explaining why it was forbidden to give over the sacred vessels. He did not, however, see his actions as being what he called "purely religious" or as counterrevolutionary:

> because we never thought of refusing to help the starving. It is necessary to take into consideration the fact that on the one hand we stood before the religious considerations of the spiritual authority, and therefore signed an appeal to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee; on the other hand, we stood before Soviet power and therefore we unconditionally handed over our valuables to the authorized persons.[58]

Bolshevik investigators could make neither heads nor tails of such a statement, as they demonstrated during the trial.

The tribunal was headed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bek, who was assisted by the leading procurator in the trials against the church, Anatolii Lunin, and a people's accuser, Anton Loginov, a well-known anti-religious activist.[59] Bek opened the questioning of Asafov, asking if there had been a protest at Asafov's parish, to which Asafov replied that there had been a "lecture" about what the parishioners should do with the church valuables. Already wedded to the notion that religiosity and resistance went hand in hand, Loginov jumped in and argued that holding such a meeting was akin to running in the streets and screaming about "blasphemy and what you think is sinful;" it was "agitation," plain and simple.[60] But Asafov chafed against this characterization of himself and his actions:

> If I marched out of here and shouted that, it would be agitation, but I am talking about the parish soviet. I want to clarify my words: I say—I said this to the members of the parish soviet . . . "you must discuss . . . whether or not to call this meeting and how to conduct it" that's what we talked about.[61]

58. Ibid, ll. 59–60.

59. Vladimir Mikhailovich Syrykh, "Lunin, Anatolii Vladimirovich," in V.M. Syrykh, ed., *Pravovaia nauka i iuridicheskaia ideologiia Rossii: Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' biografii, Tom 2*, 4 vols. *(1917–1964 gg)* (Moscow, 2011), 2:465. For more on Loginov, see Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 42, 54–57. See also L.N., "Itogi Protsess: Beseda s predsedatelem Revtribunala t. Bek," *Izvestiia*, May 10, 1922, 3.

60. TsGAMO f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102 g, ll. 6.

61. Ibid.

Asafov was clearly perplexed by the idea that discussing specific questions related to church valuables in a parish soviet meeting could be likened to resistance or counterrevolutionary activity. Rather, he felt that having such a conversation was incumbent upon him as a believer.

Bek, meanwhile, charged Asafov with misusing the rights of the parish soviet. Instead of discussing "religious" questions (as they were allowed to do), the members of the parish soviet had instead taken up political ones by discussing Patriarch Tikhon's message, and especially the canons that the patriarch had cited. Asafov, however, fundamentally challenged Bek's definition of religion, explaining that they were discussing "on a purely religious, canonical plane." For him, the two were not contradictory, nor was a discussion of canons and confiscations a non-religious question.[62]

Indeed, the confiscations seem to have pushed Asafov to reflect upon his relationship to sacred vessels, canons, church authority, and the relationship between secular and sacred authority in ways that he may not have had to before. He explained that he was "against the taking of sacred vessels" and that the patriarch had cited sacred canons, which had confirmed Asafov's own thinking. "So you accepted his proclamation on faith?" asked Bek, "Yes." "Which means that you are persuaded of this even now?" asked Bek. "I'm not a theologian," answered Asafov, "but I don't think the chalices should be given away." "Were you persuaded of this?" Bek pressed on, "Or did you take it on faith?" "On faith and canons," replied Asafov. "So you obeyed mechanically?" Bek countered. "That is not mechanical obedience," answered the young museum worker.[63]

Bek was baffled and pointed out that Asafov had testified earlier that he was not familiar with canon law. "I consulted a book," explained Asafov, which explained that "it is forbidden to use sacred objects for non-sacred purposes." "What does that mean?" asked Bek, "Why is it sinful to take those or other valuables?" "Because they are sacred," Asafov responded.[64] He went on to explain that people in his parish signed their petition to VTsIK "out of morality," and that he sincerely believed that he could write to VTsIK to ask them to confiscate everything save for the sacred vessels out of the confiscations. Such a decision was not primarily political, he explained, but had political consequences. He had not listened to the patriarch "mechanically," he repeated, but had concluded that he had to write to VTsIK "in order to have a peaceful conscience."[65]

Asafov had revealed his continued belief in the sacrality of material objects and in the necessity of respect for the Orthodox liturgy. In so doing, he showed himself to be neither a slave to the hierarchy, nor a rebel; neither an educated *intelligent* who scoffed at the idea of the transcendent, nor a counterrevolutionary fanatic or member of the "backwards masses." He was, rather, a young man who was trying to make sense of how to live out his religious convictions in a new environment, and was doing so with some discernment and through his own initiative, which included studying canon law, something

62. Ibid, 10.
63. Ibid, ll. 6–9.
64. Ibid, ll. 5–9.
65. Ibid, ll. 10–11.

that he may not have had reason or occasion to do before the confiscations prompted him to. In front of a courtroom of one thousand people, Asafov challenged not just the Bolshevik narrative of belief, but also a very restricted notion of what it meant to be religious.

The tribunal was faced with a number of subsequent defendants who did not fit their image of what it meant to be religious. They were perplexed that the accused, especially those who were active members of their parish soviets, had differing positions on the patriarch's message and its significance for them as both believers and Soviet citizens. Some explained that they felt sympathy with the patriarch, but that they were still "wholeheartedly for" confiscations.[66] Others, like the sixty-year-old Stepan Petrovich Chernyshev, a professor at Moscow University, expressed their strong disagreement with the patriarch.[67]

Evgenii Nikolaevich Efimov, a lawyer and professor at the Karl Marx Institute of National Economy, was a member of the parish soviet at the Resurrection Church on Kadashi Sloboda. He had read the patriarch's message aloud at a general meeting of parishioners that was attended by hundreds of people. During the trial, Efimov, who described himself as "a very religious person," stated that he did not consider Tikhon's message to be political agitation.[68] He admitted, however, that the message had riled believers to action. Under interrogation, he explained that he felt that VTsIK's decision to confiscate church valuables was "incorrect" but also "quite justified." The government had the authority to order the confiscations and, as a believer, he felt obliged to obey the order; to not do so "would be a resistance to the authorities, which does not correspond to the spirit of the Orthodox religion."[69] It was for this reason that he urged his fellow parishioners to petition VTsIK and ask them to reconsider their decree. For Efimov, writing the petition was not an act of religious resistance, but one of deference to earthly authorities that he believed was prescribed by his Orthodox faith.

Some defendants embodied any number of these positions. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bryzgalov, an engineer who worked for the electrification commission in Moscow and was also a faculty member at the Moscow Higher Art and Technical Institute (VKhUTEMAS), explained under interrogation that he had attended two different meetings at two different parishes at which confiscations were discussed. In order to both aid the starving and also assure the protection of the sacred vessels, he had proposed an alternative plan whereby believers abroad could supply the funds to help the starving and thus save the vessels that, in any case, he had calculated had very little value.

In explaining why he had devised such a plan, Bryzgalov seems to have been surprised that his behavior could have been construed as anything but helpful. He had assumed "that Soviet power was always ready to accommodate all proposals of practical value."[70] As someone who worked alongside avant-garde artists at VKhUTEMAS, helping them to select the right materials

66. Ibid, d. 102a, l. 264.
67. Ibid, ll. 13–14.
68. Ibid, ll. 200–01; d. 102g, l. 20 ob.
69. Ibid, d. 102a, 200–01.
70. Ibid, ll. 215–17.

to produce monuments and frescoes for the revolution, Bryzgalov was convinced that his very approach to saving the sacred vessels was a fundamentally Soviet one that could not possibly be construed as an act of resistance.[71] Like Asafov and Efimov, Bryzgalov's testimony reveals a man carefully weighing his obligations, risks, and religious attachments in response to government and church authorities. Like them, he seems to have conceived of himself as a religious man in a country on its way to communism, who believed that he could exist comfortably within both of these worlds. Perhaps the trial disabused him of these notions; such was certainly the case for Efimov.

In his final statement before the court, Efimov expressed his frustration and disbelief in the "difficult, morally difficult trial." What most irritated him, he explained, was the prosecution's whole "ideology" of class.[72] The theories of the accusers had become a prism through which they had interpreted all the evidence. He offered a different vision of social life, based on what he called "my teaching."[73] "Besides the two classes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat," he explained,

> there is a third class, a third category of people who work, who create a cultural life. This work has nothing to do with power[.]. . .I welcomed the October Revolution, because the change of conditions gave me the possibility to work freely in cultural life. . . .In this respect, the accusation is highly erroneous, because it finds a counterrevolutionary undertone in my activity, when I had a completely principled attitude; if I had thought to engage in counterrevolution, why should I come to parish meetings? I could have found another audience.[74]

Efimov saw himself as both a believer and a Soviet citizen; in articulating his self-understanding, he not only challenged the idea that one could not be both of these things, but also the narrow ideas of class that shaped the tribunal members' assumptions and goals during the trial. Both he and Bryzgalov demonstrate both the varieties of religious identity in this time period, and also the flexibility of Soviet identity.[75] If highly educated people were able to articulate such complex understandings of their religious and political convictions, however, the defendants in the second group—those who showed up to confiscations and were arrested for agitating against them—reacted instinctively, and sometimes violently, to the confiscations, thus exposing

71. The rector of the institute later wrote to the presidium of the tribunal, begging for Bryzgalov's release precisely because of the work he was doing with fresco painting—what the rector called the "brainchild of the revolution." Ibid, d. 102v, l. 275.

72. Ibid, d.102d, l. 103ob.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Bryzgalov, Efimov, and Asafov were also the lay people who were most heavily criticized in the Soviet press. Portrayed as out-of-touch intellectuals and ridiculed for their testimony and concluding addresses, they were characterized as "little prophets" who, as one writer put it, "thanks to NEP are once again going around in polished slippers." Mark Krinitskii, "Kontr-revoliutsii pod tserkovnym flagom: Mezhdu dvukh beregov (Portretnye nabroski)," Izvestiia, May 9, 1922, 3. See also, for example, L.N., "Iz zala suda: Svidetel′skie Pokazaniia," *Izvestiia*, May 6, 1922, 1–2; and the series of articles by B. Barankovskii, "Tserkov′ i umiraiushchii. Soratniki patriarkha Tikhona pod sudom," *Bednota*, May, 1922, 2, and May 8, 1922, 2.

them to both external and internal questioning about their religiosity and their attitudes to Soviet power.

Varieties of Religious Identity among Protestors

The defendants who were arrested for agitation were overwhelmingly of worker or peasant origin and were not highly educated. Like the members of the first group, they expressed differing opinions about the Soviet authorities, but it was only members of this group who declared themselves active supporters of the Bolsheviks, or who had fought in the Red Army during the civil war. Unlike the members of the first group, most of these expressed their support for the confiscation of church valuables. Their qualms, if they admitted to having them, were with the way that the churches and the objects were treated by the soldiers, who frequently disrespected both.[76] In the case of such defendants, the members of the tribunal clearly saw the trial as an educational opportunity, one that would help to liberate the defendants from the last fetters of religion and usher them into a new social order and political consciousness. They were also to serve as an example to the spectators and newspaper readers of the follies of religion and belief, and the cruelty of the church hierarchy and intelligentsia, who had taken advantage of people whom a reporter for *Bednota* called "unconscious" and "uncultured" in order to undermine Soviet power.[77] In attempting to do this, however, the tribunal members appear to have drawn out a religious consciousness of which the defendant may not even have been aware he possessed.

The two Bashkirov brothers, Vladimir and Aleksandr, were twenty and twenty-two years old respectively. Aleksandr had served in the Red Army from 1918 to 1921, when he was discharged in order to complete his education.[78] In their pre-trial interrogations, the brothers both explained that they had passed by the Church of the Ascension while Red Army soldiers were carrying out confiscations. Vladimir had wondered aloud why soldiers were smoking and wearing hats (a sign of great disrespect in a church building), while Aleksandr commented that the soldiers should have come at night when no one was there. When asked how they felt about religion, both brothers answered: "I was raised religious."[79]

During the trial, the tribunal members gave more attention to Aleksandr, presumably because with his Red Army background, the optics of him repudiating his lingering religious attachments in front of the large audience were hard to resist. Unlike his brother Vladimir, who testified that he sometimes went to church and who identified himself as a "believer," Aleksandr stated that he had not been to church since 1914. Bek asked him his opinions about the confiscations: "Do you think the [sacred] vessels can be given over, or not?" "I didn't think about it. As a lay person I cannot decide this question,

76. Pokrovskii and Petrov, *Arkhivy Kremlia*, 2:140; Freeze, "Subversive Atheism," 31–32.

77. B. Barankovskii, "Tserkov' i umiraiushchii," *Bednota*, May 4, 1922, 2, and May 5, 1922, 2.

78. TsGAMO, f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102a, l. 239 ob.

79. Ibid, ll. 237–40.

this is a question of a strictly theological nature," Aleksandr replied, perhaps unwittingly speaking about himself according to categories that made sense only within an Orthodox worldview.[80] "I am asking you as a lay person," countered Bek, "even a lay person can make his own judgement." Bek was extending to the young student the chance to free himself from the oppression of the church hierarchy, the beliefs of his parents, and the practices of his youth once and for all. "In my opinion," Bashkirov responded, "they could have left only the necessary valuables; the rest could have been taken."[81]

Having fought a bloody civil war with the Red Army for three years, and having not attended a church service in almost ten years, Bashkirov was still stubbornly shaped by the notion that some objects were "necessary," and was disturbed by their being treated so disrespectfully by his comrades in arms. Pressed to pronounce on the "theological" issue by Bek, however, he said more than he had under interrogation, calling himself a "layman" and confirming the notion that some objects were "necessary" to Orthodox life. In his case, the tribunal's attempt to usher him towards a stronger revolutionary consciousness seems to have instead forced him to express himself as a religious subject.

There were those, however, like Dmitrii Chernov, whom we met at the outset of this article, who could not express any coherent thoughts on sacred vessels or confiscations in general, but whose obvious emotion about the items made them particularly problematic for the tribunal members. Another such was Mikhail Frolovich Talagaev, a forty-four-year old illiterate man, born into the peasant estate, who had migrated to Moscow, where he had worked in construction before becoming an independent locksmith. On March 31, he had passed by the Church of Basil of Caesarea where he was dismayed to see the soldiers confiscating property. Witnesses, including his fellow defendant and co-worker, Maksim Petrov, reported that Talagaev had wept profusely as the soldiers carried out their work.[82] In his pre-trial interrogations, the locksmith admitted that he had stated that confiscations were not necessary. When he was told by the crowd that they were, he explained, "I offered to give my tools and flour; I said that bread from abroad would not come for a long time." He also admitted that he personally owned an icon of Christ the Savior, which was rimmed with metal and jewels.[83] Talagaev was one of the few defendants whom the investigator recommended should be released prior to the trial, "taking into account his social position."[84] Perhaps the investigator hoped to ease Talagaev into repenting his actions, or perhaps the tribunal did not want to be seen as too harsh to a member of the working class. Whatever the reason, when Talagaev actually testified at the trial, his emotional distress only served to undermine the educational efforts of the tribunal members.

One of the first things the tribunal established was that Talagaev was illiterate. Bek had to read him the indictment, explaining what Talagaev had been charged with. "Why were you crying?" asked Bek. "It was because of the starving [people]," Talagaev responded. "I myself know it well. There was a crop

80. Ibid, d. 102g, l. 68ob.
81. Ibid, ll. 66–69.
82. Ibid, d.102a, l. 290 ob.
83. Ibid, l. 292 ob.
84. Ibid, l. 300.

failure in '93, and I remember it. . ." he continued. What followed was a confused back-and-forth between Talagaev and his accusers, where the distressed man offered garbled answers. The tribunal was most concerned with establishing why he had wept.[85] "Did you cry?" he was asked, more than once. "I was crying for those starving people," he explained. "It would have been very good if you had laughed," Bek replied, referring to the idea that the starving were finally going to be helped by the confiscations, "but I state that you cried, and I ask, how could that happen?" "I have a nervous temperament," the defendant stammered. "Well then who did you feel sorry for?" Bek pushed on. Talagaev's defense advocate intervened, trying to establish that his client, traumatized by the memory of an 1893 crop failure, had cried for the starving, and not because of his attachment to the sacred items.[86] The tribunal, however, wanted desperately to disprove this, so much so that they called on another defendant, Maksim Petrov, a friend of Talgaev's, who had been with him on the day of the confiscations, to confirm that Talagaev had, indeed, been crying over the confiscations.[87] Although the Bolsheviks hoped to break the hold that sacred items had on believers by demystifying such items, they also clearly felt the need to prosecute such an emotion, considering it a danger to citizens and the populace at large. Emotion, after all, could quickly spur people to violent reaction.

Indeed, in the case of some defendants, their emotional reaction to confiscations was expressed through strong anti-government language. Eighteen-year-old Moscow University student Petr Iurgenson was arrested for agitating against the confiscations at the church of Basil of Caesarea. His parents had owned a music publishing house prior to the revolution, and he was a hereditary honored citizen, a member of that tsarist social estate that most resembled a middle class or bourgeoisie.[88] In two separate interrogations, Iurgenson admitted that, swept up by passion about the confiscations, he had shouted out that the confiscators were "Red gendarmes"—violent oppressors of the civilian population. He described himself as a regular churchgoer and "Orthodox believer" who "sympathiz[ed] with the Russian Communist Party except for religious questions."[89] Perhaps it was the very act of thinking through this identity that convinced Iurgenson that he could no longer present himself as being both of these things.

Prior to the trial, Iurgenson expressed his regret over his words, claiming that he had "behaved recklessly towards the guards." In his second interrogation, however, he repented not just his actions, but his mindset and thought process: "I consider my actions to be criminal. I acted incorrectly [and] feverishly."[90] Iurgenson's regrets have the ring of the self-reflection and

85. Ibid, d. 102g, l. 90.

86. Ibid, ll. 90–91.

87. Ibid, l. 92. Talagaev's illiteracy and "nervous temperament" were seized upon by the press in order to portray him as a helpless worker who had been taken advantage of by clerics. An. Charov, "Sudebnyi otdel. Popovskie podvigi," *Pravda*, April 29, 1922, 4; Barankovskii, "Tserkov' i umiraioshchii," *Bednota*, May 4, 1922, 2.

88. Alison K. Smith, "Honored Citizens and the Creation of a Middle Class in Imperial Russia," *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 327–49.

89. TsGAMO, f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102a, ll. 246, 254–55.

90. Ibid.

repentance that were crucial to the Orthodox believer making a good confession, a practice with which any even nominally Orthodox Christian would have been familiar at the time.[91] In fact, when under interrogation, some of the defendants used the skills and language that they had most probably used when preparing for confession in order to demonstrate to the Tribunal their repentance and desire and willingness to change.[92]

Becoming Soviet Subjects: Repentance, Conversion, and Refashioning

As much as the trial was a forum for educating observers, condemning defendants with suspicious class backgrounds, and demonstrating the counterrevolutionary nature of Orthodox belief, it also meant to educate those defendants who could potentially become New Soviet People, and to try to bring about their transformation. Some of the defendants seem to have undergone a process of internal transformation over the course of their arrest, interrogation, trial, and sentencing.

Stepan Ionov, a sixty-six-year-old metal worker, was born a peasant in Saratov and moved to Moscow at twelve in order to help support his family.[93] Present during the confiscations at the church of Basil of Caesarea, Ionov was accused of agitation for having shouted that the Red Army guards outside the church should have been removed during confiscations because their presence was unnecessary. During his pre-trial interrogation he described himself as a "worker and citizen" who would never insult the Red Army. He claimed that he had only been suggesting that all citizens should have been helping with the confiscations in particular, and with famine relief in general. His peasant parents in Saratov were suffering the famine, and he knew that the people needed help. He had never attended a meeting at a church, he stated, but he did go to a church every year to get his *kulich* (Easter bread) blessed.[94]

After being convicted for counterrevolutionary activity and sentenced to a year's imprisonment, however, he spoke about himself differently. In a letter to the tribunal asking for pardon, he not only highlighted his proletariat status, but also tried to show how his worker consciousness had evolved since his arrest:

> I am now fully aware [*vpolne soznal*] that it was criminal of me to say anything inappropriate at the church during the confiscations. I sincerely repent my deeds and ask you to believe my words. I am a metal worker who has worked in factories since I was small, and I have no education. . . . I cannot be against the Workers' Power, but nevertheless, I could not understand in that moment [during the confiscations] the impermissibility of my words due to insufficient political consciousness [*ne polnoi politicheskoi soznatel'nosti*].[95]

91. Kizenko, *Good for the Souls*, 196.

92. Similar dynamics of confession and repentance were beginning to take root within the Communist Party; See Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1919–1938* (Pittsburgh, 2007), 137–38.

93. TsGAMO, f. 5062, op. 3, d. 102a, l. 321.

94. Ibid, l. 322.

95. Ibid, d. 102v, l. 166.

Eschewing his peasant identity and his attachment to Easter bread, he now presented himself as a worker transformed—converted—into a fuller class consciousness through the throwing off of the last vestiges of belief.

People like Ionov and Iurgenson may have genuinely transformed their thinking, or just as easily learned how to write petitions in convincing language, or perhaps both. One defendant, however, found himself pushed to refashion himself during the trial itself. Nikolai Motylev endured a questioning that saw him emerge from the courtroom, if not a different man, at least a man with a different way of describing himself and his beliefs. Motylev, a thirty-six-year-old former member of the executive committee of the Zamoskvorechye Soviet, head of the financial department of the district, accountant at the Pavlovsk hospital, and secretary of the parish soviet at the hospital's chapel, came from a peasant family.[96]

When the members of the parish soviet gathered to discuss confiscations Motylev suggested that they separate the sacred objects into three categories: objects necessary for the liturgy, objects that were archeological treasures, and objects to be given over to the commission for confiscations. He helped the members of the parish soviet write a petition to VTsIK explaining why they wanted to deal with the objects as Motylev had advised them.

Motylev's lengthy pre-trial interrogation and tribunal testimony reveal a man in the process of renegotiating his own beliefs and identity in a rapidly changing world. In his pre-trial interrogation, he described his devotion to his work in the Zamoskvorechye Soviet, and then turned to his religious convictions, on which he elaborated at length with an often-confusing rhetorical flourish. "I belong to Christianity with a direction of thought in the spirit of Lev Tolstoi," he began. He deplored the clergy, whom he saw as "exclusive materialists at heart, thinking only of their own benefits, and therefore steadily leading to the perversion of Christ's ideas." In 1919, he had been elected secretary of the parish soviet in the hospital, where he claimed "religious questions were not discussed. . . . I am of the opinion that for sick believers, the fulfillment of their religious needs is necessary as a means of helping them to physically endure their illnesses." Meanwhile, relatives of the sick could find comfort in Orthodox rituals if they were believers. He, of course, thought this was all rubbish and explained: "I thought that this was all rubbish and explained that he supported antireligious propaganda 'but not at the bedside of the sick when people's loved ones are dying.'"[97] Motylev was absolutely confident that his reasoning would make sense to his interrogators.

Of all the defendants, Motylev was most challenged to articulate his beliefs during the trial, a process that both he and the tribunal members found to be confusing and often contradictory. When Lunin asked him if he was a believer, he responded: "I have a Tolstoian bent," although he qualified it by saying that "I don't exactly know Tolstoi's point of view." Again, he qualified his statement: "I am not a Tolstoian; more precisely, I am a shallow Orthodox believer." Bek asked if Motylev considered Tolstoi to be a Christian. Was he, Motylev, an unconvinced Tolstoian? "I am not much of a believer in

96. Ibid, l. 28–28 ob.
97. Ibid, l. 29–29 ob.

the sense of conviction," explained Motylev. But was he not the secretary of the parish soviet? Did the priest of his church know that he was not much of a believer? "Yes," replied Motylev.

Motylev's questioners were utterly perplexed. "Do you have a weak faith?" asked Lunin, "a weak faith in spirits?" "I cannot say," responded Motylev. Bek intervened, explaining that Lunin was simply trying to get things straight because the ideas were too contradictory: "a shallow believer who still divided the church valuables into categories." Loginov jumped into the fray, asking "Do you recognize spirits? Do you have doubts?" "Yes. I doubt I consider myself religious," replied the Motlyev. Bek tried to get Motylev to pin down precisely "what state you were in at the time, because your psychology is decisive. . . . Your beliefs are similar to those of the counterrevolutionary clergy; can we assume that you've made a lapse in judgment?" "Yes," said Motylev, "a political and tactical lapse." To the persistent questioning about how he could have helped write a petition objecting to VTsIK's approach to the confiscations, Motylev explained that the matter of the objects was one, but the matter of association with the "organization" of the Moscow clergy was another. "I consider such an alliance shameful. Since I became a member of the (Zamoskvorechye) soviet, there was too great a change in me for me to be an opponent of Soviet power." He now "repented" his association with the organization of the clergy because he had come to recognize that it was an "unacceptable association that I did not recognize before."[98]

Motylev's interrogation concluded with input from his defense lawyer and Bek. Did Motylev understand that there was a great difference between Tolstoianism and Orthodoxy? His defense lawyer accused him of throwing around words like "atheist" and asked him. "Do you know what a pantheist is? A Deist? Have you ever studied theological questions?" "No," replied Motylev. At that point, the defense advocate asked him about his social background. Motylev admitted that he was a peasant.[99] It was in the interest of both the tribunal and the defense advocate to paint Motylev as a confused peasant who was incapable of truly grasping the nature of religious belief. They portrayed him as person who was on the way to becoming a New Soviet Man when the counterrevolutionary organization of the Moscow clergy had gotten its talons into him.

Motylev's actual testimony, however, reveals a much more complex story of religiosity and belief. In 1922, a thirty-six-year-old former peasant who was quickly climbing the social ladder could conceive of himself as any number of things: a religious believer, a Tolstoian, a Christian, a shallow Orthodox believer, a believer in spirits (but perhaps not), a member of the local soviet, a supporter of Soviet rule and a defender of sacred objects. In their quest to educate the spectators, Bolshevik procurators had taken great pains to separate one religion from another, one worldview from another, and declare them contradictory. It is precisely this notion of belief and religion as things that can be articulated and categorized that has so dominated even historians' understanding of Soviet believers. It seems more likely, however, that

98. Ibid, d. 102g, ll. 62–65 ob.
99. 1bid, l. 66.

hundreds if not thousands of Motylevs must have existed in these early years of Soviet Communism: people who carried within themselves, however passively, the frameworks of belief in the transcendent but who were not used to articulating it, nor explaining if and exactly how they had changed with the revolution.

On the other hand, Motylev's testimony also portrays the agonized reflections of a person in the state of becoming a "revolutionary subject."[100] The very act of having to articulate beliefs upon which he had perhaps not ever reflected very deeply may have forced Motylev to see the tensions between religious belief and Bolshevism that he had not before recognized or consciously acknowledged. Motylev was undoubtedly afraid on the stand, and many (if not all) of his statements may have been made for the sole purpose of self-preservation. Nonetheless, their confessional tone reveals how powerful the Bolshevik system of belief had already become by 1922. Long before the Stalin years, Motylev seems to have been one of those individuals, who, as Halfin explains,

> began asking themselves how they could transcend the gap between their concrete selves and whatever notion of Man the savants of their time had proposed to them. To become oneself meant to take a stance—self-consciously so—on a variety of philosophical issues. Self- awareness may have been an elusive goal, but it was required, for without it no personal journey could be regarded as complete.[101]

Motylev's philosophical stances were muddied and contradictory, so unused was he to needing to have them. Yet, his statements have the ring of truth to them insofar as they are remarkably different from those of the other defendants, and reflect a subject in conflict with himself who emerged from cross-examination with an entirely different definition of himself as a believer and a person than he had when he stepped into the courtroom.

The stories of the defendants in the "Trial of the 54" reveal the complexity of early-Soviet subjectivity. Their experiences certainly add to the growing body of evidence that undermines secularization theory's claims that "secularization was an inevitable outcome of modernization . . . a byproduct of increased urbanization, education, and bureaucratization."[102] More intriguingly, however, they demonstrate that both Soviet and religious identities were being constantly fashioned and refashioned within people who were living in a society that was undergoing rapid change. By broadening our categories of what we consider to be "religiosity" or "belief," and considering that a significant portion of the population of the former Russian empire had some familiarity with Orthodox notions of the sacred, it becomes increasingly plausible to consider that large swathes of the early Soviet population might have existed on the same spectrum as our defendants. They were likely people who were attached to Easter bread and who also supported the Soviet government;

100. Igal Halfin, "Introduction," in Igal Halfin, ed., *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities* (London, 2002), 3.

101. Ibid., 3–4.

102. Wanner, "Introduction," 5.

people who maintained a lingering respect for sacred spaces, even as they hated clerics; people who slowly realized that they had to learn to talk about themselves in different ways; and people who truly began to think of themselves in different ways. These people resist the strict categorizations of the Bolshevik tribunal members, Orthodox hierarchs, and historians. As Page Herrlinger argues, turning our eye towards them "will inevitably force us to engage in some much needed *ostranenie* (or de-familiarization) with respect to the way we think about, and ultimately understand, the revolutionary era as a whole."[103] Indeed, these people invite us to consider more deeply the role of the sacred and of religiosity in the process of revolution, and invite us to a more profound and nuanced investigation of religion, religiosity, belief, and identity in the early years of the Soviet Union.

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103. Herrlinger, "Russian Orthodox Women," (forthcoming).