

## FAMILY VALUES IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE OLD-BELIEVERS IN BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

This article is based on the field data collected in 2006–2008 in the Old-Believers' villages in Bulgaria (Kazashko, Varna region and Tataritsa, Silistra region) and Romania (Sarichioi, Carcaliu and Pisk, Braila)<sup>1</sup>.

Kinship is one of the major topics in the narratives of the Old-Believers. This is understandable, since the family is highly valued not only among the members of patriarchal rural communities,<sup>2</sup> but among inhabitants of the big cities as well (according to VCIOM's latest sociological survey, of May 2009; see also BCR: 180). In this article, a value implies "*life's senses, which individuals follow in their everyday life, and, which to a great extent determine the relationship of individuals toward reality and specify the general models of social behaviour*".<sup>3</sup>

The article takes into accounts the system of values, typical for the Old-Believers, aged 50–80 years, who, according to S. Nikitina's classification, belong to the upper (the elite, experts of the confessional culture) and middle (participants in the confessional life) stratas.<sup>4</sup>

The data collected gives evidence that the Old-Believers abroad – along with the specific values (mostly of an ethnoconfessional character, which emerged as a result of the complex history of the Old-Believers and their life in the diaspora) – highly appreciate the values, which are common to all patriarchal communities, such as moral and ethnic quantities, hierarchy in the family, etc.

**Family and Kin in the Old-Believers' Communities.** The system of the Old-Believers' kinship abroad has specific features, which influence the axiology of family relations. The communities are small and the Old-Believers, who live in the diaspora, are alienated from them as far as their religion and nationality is concerned. The narratives about the great grandfathers of the Old-Believers give many examples of differences in religion, everyday life, and rituals between them and their neighbours. Such isolated conditions of the Old-Believers create closer relations even between distant relatives.<sup>5</sup>

Kinship (*roda*) includes blood relatives, because married couples had many children (*It is a sin for a man to have safe sex with his wife, EA; my granny had 16 children, DLA*). Spiritual kinship (*krestovaja roda*) is considered equal to or even more significant than blood kinship. This significantly restricts the possibilities of

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<sup>2</sup> Kabakova 2009. 618.

<sup>3</sup> BCR 12

<sup>4</sup> Nikitina 2008.42–43.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasova 1998.; Steinke 1990.

choosing a spouse, because marriages among relatives (including spiritual kin and relatives by marriage) up to the fifth or even seventh generations are forbidden.

*A “pure” marriage, within the Old-Believers’ community, is highly appreciated, which is reflected in many narratives. A strategy has been developed to search for a wife or husband in other Old-Believers’ villages in Romania and Bulgaria. Thus, the narratives depict how the wife (more often) moves to Bulgaria from Romania (interviewee EA) or from one village to another (interviewee DDB) in order to have a blessed “pure” wedding.<sup>6</sup>*

*The narratives allude to many names of relatives. In a two-hour conversation on various topics, Pelageya Eremiya (Carcaliu) spoke about her mother, father, mother-in-law, father-in-law, grandmother and grandfather, husband, his grandfather and grandmother, son, daughter, granddaughter, cousins, godmother and her children. Thus, members of the family – both those, who are alive as well as those, who have passed away – are part of the permanent background of life today – they are so to say present in everyday and religious life, they set the system of family values. Piousness, wisdom, cleverness, severity, and literacy are included among the major positive qualities of the old people, which are supposed to be followed.*

Detailed knowledge of genealogy is a must among the Old-Believers. Brief characteristics and longer biographies are significant parts of the narratives: *Old man Makariy, the grandfather of my wife, was born in 1812 and lived up to the age of 98. He fought in the war in Russia, and was sentenced to be hung three times; My grandfather was born in 1945. In 1945, at the age of 100 he died. He kept saying: “I’ll pass away when our [Russian] soldiers come”, DLA.*

**Oral history and family values.** The history of the family is the main memory of an Old-Believer: among “their own”, order is maintained, which, according to their strong belief, should be untouched. The stability of the basic values – the family, memory, exclusiveness of the Old-Believers, knowledge, tradition – is kept mostly through the family’s narratives. The older generations used to talk a lot with the youngsters. *My mother used to admonish us: “Look, you should do that this way”. She taught us so we could remember for the rest of our lives, PFE.* The narratives were repeated so many times, the child would memorize them: *When I went to Romania, I felt as if I had already been there. My granny used to tell me about Romania, how they lived there, how they went to the church, FF.* The role of family stories for self-identification and embracing the “larger” culture (through the “smaller” one) and, correspondingly, the system of values is very important. The family narratives are connected with the archetypical cultural experience of the whole society.<sup>7</sup>

Family history is one of the most typical genres of the narratives. The stories about migration and the foundation of the villages are accompanied by details about weddings in new places and develop the meaning of important valuable knowledge.

The family stories typically portray the Old-Believers as legendary fugitives for the past few centuries:

1. *My father’s mother was a young girl. She was engaged already, she had a fiancé in Tulcea. Her brother was a soldier. At that time, conscription lasted for a*

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<sup>6</sup> Romanska 1959. 522.; Anastasova 1998. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Sapogova 2002.

period of six years. Her brother could not endure it, and deserted from the army; he went to the Ukraine, then to Russia, and finally came back to Romania. His relatives were wondering what to do with him as he was sentenced to be executed. His mother arranged for a boat and they rowed down the Danube to Bulgaria, in order to save him. They settled down near Varna. Mosquitoes and reed – that was all... No hut, no lamps... FF.

2. My father's parents lived in Turkey. They ran away, because the Turks wanted to convert them to Islam. My father was three years old, when the family came to Bulgaria. My mother's father and mother came here from Romania, from Tulcea. They came here, because in Romania there was a cholera epidemic, FK.

The sub-group of "lipoveni" of Old-Believers in Dobruja (see Prigarin 2008) talks a lot about values such as their "great" motherland, native language, and faith: *The elders came here because of their faith; they were looking for faith, hope and charity. My grandfather used to say that they found faith, hope and charity, but they lost their motherland*, DLA.

Nowadays, there is a growing desire among the Old-Believers to search for their complex identity. Identity, the idea of the exclusiveness of the Old-Believers has been transformed into an important social value, having originated from the inner family sphere. The family history is translated through material values as well. A relic is something, which has a spiritual aspect and at the same time tends to maintain tradition. Objects such as icons and spiritual books were the first things the Old-Believers took with them when they had to move. This includes also the church garments with the obligatory objects, such as the rosary and the belt. [What did you take when you had to move out?] – *The icons and the clothes for church festivals. I have my great grandmother's skirt – my mom gave it to me and I have kept it*, DLA; *The elders took books and icons, and did not leave a single divine object behind. This church jacket comes from my granny*, FF.

**Nurturing family values.** One of the strictest principles of upbringing involves the transfer of different messages, which allude to the system of values or antivalues. All confessional knowledge comes from the elders. There are many memories of how they were trained to pray, to go to the church, to fast, etc. *My grandfather was very strict. He understood that we were young and taught us to go to church, to pray, to respect each other...PFE; My father taught us about religious issues and I remember all of them well*, ANL. Lent and fasting, as part of everyday family life, are mentioned in many narratives about childhood: *My grandmother observed Lent very strictly. You should observe the fast on Wednesday and Friday for the whole year, otherwise you could not take communion*, PFE.

Meanwhile, the value of the information received from the older generation is acknowledged, when the children grow up and become grandmothers and grandfathers themselves, when they start to play the social roles, which their older relatives used to play. In their childhood, they were afraid of their parents and obeyed. Expressions like "You should", "You should not", "It is forbidden", etc., were very frequently heard.

Despite some reservations in the younger generation, maintaining the hierarchy in the family was regarded as positive behaviour. *Mom would make us pray all the time, but we did not want to. She would approach us and say: "Go and pray to*

*such and such a saint". We would start praying. Then she would come to us again and say: "I forgot about this saint. Go on praying" DLA; Our mother used to tell us: "You should not go to bed or sit at the table without offering prayers", UNM.*

The grounds for religiosity were transferred to the children in many pedagogical ways, such as vivid didactics, jokes and lies: *My grandmother taught me that if during the Liturgy I make a wish, it will come true. They lied to us, so we would go to the church more often, and we believed them. Grandmother would ask me: "What is your wish?" and I used to answer: "I want a new dress". She would tell this to my mother, who would sew me a new dress, PFE.*

Information about daily life was combined with sacred knowledge, like in this story about the first menses: *Mom started to tell me: "Be careful now! Be clean, so that the nobody would not see you. This was given to us by the Lord. Do not touch the icons up to the 8<sup>th</sup> day. You are not a baby now, you are a grown-up girl. She frightened me so much; I will never forget this conversation", UNM.*

The main characteristics, valued by Old-Believers' children were: industriousness, chastity, honesty, eagerness to help other people, accuracy, purity, prudence and modesty.

Literacy among them was a very important value. The narratives depict the efforts of a mother to teach her child to read Church Slavonic, in a period when religion was forbidden: *Do you know how difficult it was to teach my son Church Slavonic! At that time I was pregnant with my daughter. I would carry my son on my back in the darkness. He would say: "Az, buki, vedi, glagol" [the first letters of the Church Slavonic alphabet] and it made me so happy. There were many people in the village who taught Church Slavonic. But there were also betrayers. One of them – Pavel – was a communist. He would show us a portrait of Stalin and say: "He is the only God. Pray to him. Do not teach your children to be Christians", AFS.*

Secular literacy was not that valuable. The narratives express the hard feelings of the interviewees toward their parents, who did not let them go to the cities and study: *"Where will you go? Among the Romanians you will forget everything we have taught you", PFE.* Nowadays, the situation has changed: education and a good command of modern Russian are the most desired qualities. The elders have now written the prayers in modern Russian, so their children, who prefer Bulgarian or Romanian, would read them in Russian Cyrillic. Now, not knowing Russian is a significant disadvantage. *"My grandson was born to a Bulgarian-Old-Believers family. He speaks only Bulgarian. I feel so sorry about it.", AFS.*

**Instructions, guidance and values.** Old Believers' typically converse and communicate in didactic mode. It can be felt in the speech and admonitions of relatives: *My daughter, remember all your life..., My goddaughter, I will die, but you will live and remember, FF.* Admonitions are quoted in the narratives on childhood, religious and folk rituals at home, etc. – their major function is to maintain general values. Thus, the instructions during the wedding are an important genre, which are remembered by the bride and the groom throughout their life and are reproduced many decades later: *When the newlyweds come home after the church wedding, the father offers them wine saying: "Live together in joy and sorrow, go to the church regularly, pray to the Lord, listen to your mother and father. This was said and they obeyed", AFS.*

**Antivalues: the sinners and the unclean.** Constant communication between the youngsters and the elders helped the children grasp the confessional rules. The sins were discussed quite often as an antivalue and this is reflected in the narratives: *My father used to say: "What is a sin? Everything is sinful. You take a step and you commit a sin. How will a boy kiss you? This is sinful until you are married"*, SGV.

"Everything is sinful" was the keynote in the instructions of the elders. The list of the sins, typically Old-Believr's ones, known from childhood, is very long: shaving for men, short haircuts for women, offering prayers in trousers for women (*to pray in men's dresses means seven years without communion*, ANL), divorce, and many others. All these are illustrated by narratives about the punishments or suffering of the sinful: *I am repeating what my grandfather used to say. He was illiterate, but he knew all the laws. He used to tell me: "My daughter, remember, it is a sin to expel somebody from the Lord's house. The man will die, and all his sins will fall on you"*, AJI<sup>8</sup>

Words denoting folk traditions and rituals, such as uncleanliness, heresy, stupidity, etc., are synonyms for sins. The folk interpretation of dreams falls into this category: *I saw the Virgin in my dreams, but it is sinful to think about dreams – that is what my grandmother told me: My grandmother used to tell me: "If you start interpreting a dream it will come true. This is unclean*, FF (regarding the attitude of the Old-Believers toward the interpretation of dreams; see Sedakova 2008). Beliefs about the evil eye, witchcraft and evil spirits, in spite of their wide popularity in Bulgaria and Romania, were also considered to be sinful. Meanwhile, knowledge of rural rituals of childbirth, weddings, funerals, medicine and charms was considered very valuable.

To conclude, family values are based on visions of order. Each change, especially in the religious sphere, correlates with the last day. The eschatological mood is typical for all the Old-Believers. In his article on the Old-Believers in the Baltic region, A. Belousov, describes the "*desolate atmosphere of the Anti-Christ kingdom*" and argues that "*deep and extreme pessimism lies in the background of the Old-Believers' culture*".<sup>9</sup> This is confirmed in the narratives of the Old-Believers of Bulgaria and Romania. They are associated quite often with the stories heard in childhood. These narratives have similar features in various regions where the Old-Believers live, and usually they are correlated with the violation of the system of values. My interviewees were surprised that their elders, despite being illiterate, were able to predict many aspects of modern life: *They did not know that life will develop in this way, but they told us about it very accurately*, EA. One of the main signs of the Last Judgement, as the elders used to repeat, is the imminent total change of the world order: *My granny explained it to us. The time is coming, when the woman will become a man, and the man will become a woman. We were young then, and I asked: "How will this happen? How will they change?" My grandmother did not know what to answer. However, now girls wear trousers and cut their hair short, and boys wear earrings and have long hair*, EIS. Thus, the contrasts "male-female", "old-young", etc., are disappearing. We can compare this with Belousov's comment: "*Neutralisa-*

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<sup>8</sup> about other sins see: Anastasova 1998. 61–67.

<sup>9</sup> Belousov 1991. 9–10.

tion of fundamental contrasts has become more distinct in the utterances of the interviewees, regarding people's interrelation during the apocalyptic period".<sup>10</sup>

Lack of religiosity and avoidance of prayers as predicted by the elders as a sign of the end of the world make the Old-Believers think that the end of the world is close: *My grandfather used to say: "Remember, my girl, during the last days you won't hear the Lord's word". We are witnessing this now. Where will you hear the Lord's words?, EIS; Nowadays, only we, the elders, have faith. When we die, the younger generation won't know how to make a cross or how to pray. They won't have a church wedding, they won't pray – they know nothing", AFS.*

Maintaining the order and reproducing the old religious and cultural models is one of the most frequent topics in conversations with the Old-Believers. My interviewees would repeat *I am blessed to live like my parents used to, DDB; I live how my grandmother taught me (FF) and consider that their children and grandchildren (or sometimes about younger brothers and sisters) do not have faith, they have lost it, ANL.*

Interestingly enough, this has not appeared recently. The Old-Believers comment: "Teach a child, but he would live his way", "We were all taught to be religious, but not everybody remembers": *My sister does not know a single prayer. I ask her "How do you live without prayers? How will you die without prayers?" I keep telling my children: Why do you seek only material interest? You should think about your soul", PFE.* Such instructions often lead to results, at least the children and grandchildren in the house of this interviewee try to keep her order.

As they become older, many people participate more in the religious life of the community and observe the Old-Believers confessional rules at home. Thus, the system of family values is circulating in time, and being reproduced and remembered by the younger generations, turns into a very important one for almost every Old-Believer.

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<sup>10</sup> Belousov 1991. 25

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#### LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

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AFS	Anastasia Fedulovna Simeonova, 1928, Tataritsa, Bulgaria.
AJI	Agrippina Jakovleva Ilieva, 1938, Kazashko, Bulgaria.
DDB	Domenika Denisovna Borisov, 1948, Braila (b. in Carcaliu), Romania.
DLA	Danila Lazarevitch Artemiev, 1940, Braila, Romania.
EA	Evdokia Akhej, 1956, Tataritsa (b. in Carcaliu, Romania), Bulgaria.
EIS	Evfimija Isakovna Sidorov, 1926, Braila, Romania.
PFE	Pelageia Fedorovna Eremia, 1940, Carcaliu, Romania.
SGV	Sidor Gurievitch Vasiliy, 1933, Sarichioi, Romania.
UNM	Uliana Nikitovna Mitrej, 1942, Sarichioi, Romania.
FK	Fevronia Kritskaya, 1941, Kazashko, Bulgaria.
FF	Fekla Filipova, 1940, Kazashko, Bulgaria.