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**RELIGION AND MAGIC IN
SOCIALIST AND POST-SOCIALIST
CONTEXTS I**

Historic and Ethnographic Case Studies of
Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Alternative
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With a foreword by Patrick Lally Michelson

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Foreword

The chapters collected in *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts* are informed by two political events of the recent past: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Without those events and the sociocultural dislocations that ensued, interest in religion and magic in Eastern Europe very likely would have remained displaced by the more familiar stories, at least among Anglo-Saxon scholars of secularization and disenchantment. Instead, the upheaval of those years helped reveal an array of transnational, national, and regional cultures in Eastern Europe that, like cultures around the globe, are permeated by religion and magic. In turn, this resiliency of religion and magic in the broad geography of Eastern Europe has brought a new set of questions about the region to the fore of scholarship, including the chapters collected in this volume. What roles, for example, have religion and magic played in the formation of cultural norms and the social psychology in Eastern Europe after the discourses and practices of state socialism broke down? How did religion and magic preserve aspects of popular culture for successive generations, despite concerted efforts by atheistic states to lead their citizens beyond practices and epistemologies deemed superstitious, bourgeois, and reactionary? Do religion and magic transgress sociocultural and political boundaries in Eastern Europe, or do they help reify those boundaries? Are popular and elite cultures cleaved by competing notions of religion and magic, or do shared practices across that divide blur the analytical binary of the popular and elite? How might religion and magic constitute forms of resistance to cultural, institutional, and political power, or, conversely, how do religion and magic reinforce those very same power structures in acts of accommodation, legitimization, and privileging?

In the most immediate sense, the questions asked in this volume help reinforce a two-track shift in anthropological and ethnographic studies about Eastern Europe. The former took shape in the late Soviet period and has since claimed a leading place in contemporary scholarship about Russia and Eurasia but has come late, or not yet, to studies of

Eastern Europe. Starting in the 1980s and finding sustained academic interest in the early 2000s, this return to anthropology and ethnography has sought, among other things, to account for regional and historical variety among the many peoples who inhabit the post-Soviet space and its peripheries; situate local practices and traditions in the larger frame of comparative politics; and track alterations and continuities in culture following the political, socioeconomic, and ideological ruptures of 1989–1991 (Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy 2011). “Religion,” “morality,” and “community” are key categories to these studies and have been used by historians and social scientists to study how ethnic Russians and other citizens of the Russian Federation have reconfigured traditional modes of social and cultural practice, sometimes even generating new forms of practice, so as to “give” meaning to their post-Soviet experiences, thereby generating a sense of belonging in an age of uncertainty (Steinberg and Wanner 2008; Zigon 2011). At the same time that religion has come to the fore of anthropological and ethnographic studies of post-socialist Russia and Eurasia, so too has disciplinary self-consciousness. As anthropologists and ethnographers of religion, morality, and magic expanded their studies into Eastern Europe, they also began to interrogate the intellectual and institutional histories of their own discipline. The result has not just been renewed interest in religion. Scholars now focus on the ways in which anthropology, including the anthropology of religion, has long been implicated in the ideologies and practices of power, knowledge, and empire maintenance (Cvetkovski and Hofmeister 2014), including the modes of linguistic and ethnic analysis first established in the 19th century by Russian Orthodox missionaries as they appropriated “locally generated” categories of distinction (Graber and Murray 2015).

The fact that religion and magic now resonate in anthropological and ethnographic studies of Eastern Europe is reminiscent of the so-called religious turn in the study of modern Russia, which began in the 1990s as part of an academic response to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Whereas *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts* largely concentrate on the post-history of state socialism’s demise in Eastern Europe, the religious turn in Russian studies is mainly interested

in the prehistory of a different chronological marker: the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. As the consequences of communist revolution in Russia seemed to come to a close nearly seventy-five years after its triumph, historians in North America, Europe, and Russia became more liberated from émigré and Cold War narratives about the course of Russian history. In the wake of this reconsideration about the meaning of 1917, scholars began to rediscover that the Russian Empire was a variegated religious habitus, that is, a multivalent cultural topography populated by an array of religious modalities, identities, and cosmologies. Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, as well as the many other faiths and religions have been practiced in the empire and its peripheries. These then often became analytical categories through which historians would explore Russia's imperial space. Almost a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, lived religion, especially lived Orthodoxy, assumed a central place in scholarship about Russian history. These studies explained that the discrete cultures of Russia's Orthodox heartland, as well as Russia's imperial borderlands, were thoroughly religious, in the sense that religious experiences, practices, and attitudes shaped behavior, psychology, and perception at both the individual and societal levels, and that Orthodoxy simultaneously constituted a source of cohesion and a source of disruption. Religion, in other words, informed the prosaics of everyday life, providing a seemingly fixed and culturally acceptable way to act in and make sense of the world, while at the same time calling into question the sociopolitical structures that underlay local and imperial communities (Worobec 2006; Werth 2011).

One result of this historiographical development has been to make religion a key to understanding and narrating the course of Russian history. Scholars of Orthodox Christianity in the late imperial period have shown how an imperative to recover what was imagined to be authentic Orthodoxy eventually became an ideological competition over tradition, practice, and authority within the Russian Church, gradually fracturing that institution into an array of antagonistic groups, each of which laid claim to representing and embodying "right belief." What was intended to generate unity and community among the Orthodox faithful, imagined by

its advocates as the pillar of some sociocultural Russian Orthodox order, lead to fragmentation and cacophony (Shevzov 2004; Dixon 2006). Historians of Muscovite and imperial Russia have similarly turned to the study of magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and folk medicine to explore how historical actors responded to and tried to make sense of daily hardships; to bring into relief the opaque contours of a mostly oral culture; and to elucidate modes of resistance to patriarchy, patronage, and serfdom (Ryan 1999; Worobec 1999; Smilianskaia 2003; Kivelson 2013). These studies similarly cast a light on the everyday lives of the Orthodox faithful, whose experiences and interpretations of the world were deeply shaped by a non-canonical sense of enchantment, while also demonstrating how attempts by church and state to regulate or eradicate such practices played a role in reconfiguring, but not eliminating, magic as practice and experience (Lavrov 2000). Collectively, these studies have helped blunt the precision by which historians had used political chronology to demarcate historical change in Russia and have helped situate Russian culture in a pan-European context, thereby bringing previously ignored currents of Russian history into the frame of comparative analysis.

This digression into the particulars of religion and magic in the study of Russian history illuminates a central feature of this volume. The anthropological study of religion and magic in contemporary Eastern Europe does more than recover cultures theoretically long neglected and illuminate societies in transition. In giving a voice to “native ethnographers” and in focusing on the “native subjectivity” of those who live religion and magic at the local level, *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts* is participating in the decolonization of historiography. It reveals, for example, the resilience of the idea of backwardness in academic and journalistic accounts of Eastern Europe, which frequently use such categories of “interpretation” to rank, evaluate, and plot the course of Eastern Europe; and these findings demonstrate that sociocultural trends in Eastern Europe still largely remain “under Western eyes” (Malia 1999), an interpretative gaze that, for more than two centuries, has premised Western Europe’s pride of place in schemes of enlightenment and civilization on the assumption that the oriental other occupies lower rungs of those schemes (Wolff 1994; Todorova 1997). Read

in conjunction with anthropological, sociological, and psychological accounts of religion and magic in Western Europe and North America (de Blécourt, Hutton, and La Fontaine 1999; Orsi 2005; Urban 2015), this volume demonstrates that such practices do not make Eastern Europe exotic or primitive, but rather part of a practical and epistemological continuum that stretches well across the hermeneutic divide of East and West. More broadly, *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts* challenges the ways in which scholars and commentators have commonly read sociocultural change in Eastern Europe as a move toward “post-socialism,” a seemingly 19th-century trajectory broadly dependent on political events that did not always substantially alter local society and culture, as partly evidenced by continuities in the practice of religion and magic in Eastern Europe before and after 1989–1991.

This awareness of the ways in which Eurocentric, often Protestant, categories shape the study of religion and magic (Fitzgerald 2000; Styers 2004; Masuzawa 2005; Keane 2007), not to mention how those categories inform the study of non-Western cultures and societies, draws our attention not only to the subject matter examined in this volume, but also to the nativist framing devices used here. As this volume directs the study of religion and magic in Eastern Europe to beyond the contours of Western scholarship, it implicitly raises the following question: Why other narratives such as “post-secular” offer a more meaningful description of contemporary Eastern Europe? Many of the chapters, for example, suggest that 20th-century Eastern Europe was far from a secular habitus, that the practice of religion and magic was a cultural constant in the years prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. So why should any political event like the demise of the Soviet Union be considered the start of a post-secular moment in Eastern Europe? Is it because religion and magic have now become mainstream after decades of state-sponsored censure? Is it because the state and other institutions of power have appropriated religious rituals and practices in the symbols and ceremonies of officialdom? But why should the shift from private, often clandestine, practice to public performance determine claims that a previous moment in historical time was secular and the present moment is post-secular? To raise questions about academic narratives previously ascribed to the historical trajectory

of Eastern Europe is also to raise fundamental questions about such narratives.

Similarly, claims that Orthodox Christianity constitutes a type of religion that generates cultures and societies distinct from those generated by Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are largely the result of earlier attempts to make the dominant confessional religion of Eastern Europe into some kind of discrete, determinative force, an argument that appears not only in the work of Western European thinkers seeking to distinguish West from East or Central European thinkers hoping to lay claim to belonging to the West, but also in the work of East European thinkers who sought to rank their own cultural geography over that of the West. This particular conceptualization (the last) of Orthodox Christianity is especially evident in the privileging of native modalities and “popular belief” in ideological struggles against cultural imperialism from the West. Such privileging initially found discursive viability during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855), when a small number of educated Russians, most notably the Moscow Slavophiles, responded to the assertion that Russia was a backward culture that resided in the philosophically moribund East and/or that it resided outside the flow of historical time altogether, with counterclaims that Russian Orthodox culture was both distinct from and superior to Western culture. These counterclaims soon gained credence in capital-city society and in institutions of higher education, as the cultural and epistemological integrity of the Russian people (*ruskii narod*) was increasingly perceived to be under threat from the West (Gerasimov, Glebov, and Mogilner 2013), a concern that was exacerbated by Russia’s disastrous campaign in the Crimean War (1853–1856). The result was the formation of a new discourse among educated Russians organized around the advantages of backwardness, the vitality of native culture, and the centrality of folk Orthodoxy (*narodnoe pravoslavie*) in understanding Russian culture.

The paradox then, as it is now, resides in the fact that this invitation to reconsider the idea of backwardness and the invitation to study native culture and popular belief are indebted to categories and narratives largely derived from the West. Among the Slavophiles, whose theories once again resonate in Russia, this new narrative entailed the inversion

of philosophical, theological, and historical trajectories first articulated in Germany and France, whereby Russia succeeded Europe as the vanguard of history (or an agent of Providence), and the East was to triumph over the West in the study of national and civilizational cultures (Michelson 2010). To be both the other and to reclaim interpretative authority regarding local culture meant, in this context, relying onto plot devices inherited from ostensibly alien cultures and confessions. Virtually all attempts to decolonize methodology, historiography, and narration both in the past and in the present are thus almost always wedded to the imperialist, rationalist, world-historical, and Western categories they seek to displace, including the very notion of decolonization (Shepard 2006). What this volume helps reveal is scholarship's long reliance on Western or Protestant modes of analysis and narration when it comes to magic and religion; the necessity to challenge those modes of interpretation by drawing on countervailing theories and by turning to native sources, and to acknowledge the likelihood that such shifts in scholarship and hermeneutics almost always subvert the epistemologies that they seek to overcome.

Patrick Lally Michelson

January 2017