“[I]f one could travel back in time and ask the inhabitants of a nineteenth-century Russian village who they thought they were,” esteemed Russian historian Orlando Figes suggests, “the most likely answer would be: ‘We are Orthodox, and we are from here.’” Though Figes is merely speculating, his commentary is nonetheless very telling. The Russian peasant assimilated himself, first and foremost, with Orthodox Christianity. Religious identity trumped national, village, even familial identity. In fact, the very meaning of ‘peasant’ in Russian, ‘khrestianin,’ roughly translates to ‘Christ-like.’ As Chris Chulos explains, “with few exceptions,” the Russian peasantry “failed to see themselves as anything other than Orthodox Christians.”

Despite the peasantry’s intimate identity with Orthodoxy, contemporary intelligentsia and other members of Russia’s obshchestvo nonetheless classified their faith as backward, superstitious, and even nonexistent. In his letter to N.V. Gogol, V.G. Belinskii claimed the Russian peasantry “is by nature a profoundly atheistic people. It still retains a good deal of superstition, but not a trace of religiousness.” Parish priest I.S. Belliustin offered a similar observation, claiming “[I]n Russia...two-

2  Chris Chulos, “Myths of the Pious or Pagan Peasant in Post-Emancipation Central Russia (Voronezh Province),” Russian History, 22 (Summer 1995), 207.
3  “Obshchestvo” translates to “society,” or educated Russia. “Narod,” on the other hand, denotes the Russian “people,” referring to the peasantry.
4  Belinskii, V.G., to N.V. Gogol. July 1847. V.G. Belinskii: Selected Philosophical Works, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, Russia. Belinskii, a literary critic and prominent member of the Russian intelligentsia, was responding to Gogol’s claim that the Russian peasantry “is the most religious in the world.”
thirds of the [peasantry] have not the slightest conception of faith.” 

More recently, Russian and Western historians alike have sought to establish the concept of dvoeverie, or dual faith, arguing the peasant was actively devoted to both Orthodox and pre-Christian pagan beliefs. As G.P. Fedotov, prominent scholar of Russian Orthodoxy, contends: “the Russian peasant has been living in the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century.” 

There is widespread agreement amongst both historians and contemporary observers that the peasant identified himself with Orthodoxy. His adherence to that identity, however, has remained in question.

In order to fairly and accurately assess the Russian peasantry’s religiosity, it is necessary to define Orthodoxy as it was conceptualized by the peasant himself. Here it may be useful to consider Leonid Heretz’s definition. “The key here,” Heretz explains, “is to define Orthodoxy broadly as a civilization comprising not only a set of canonical beliefs but also a very rich popular/apocryphal tradition.” 

Heretz concedes, in accord with the prevailing opinion of the field, the nineteenth century Russian peasant’s belief system was permeated with folkloric and paganistic tradition. The presence of such beliefs is clearly illustrated in many traditionally Orthodox stories, as will be seen. Nonetheless, their mere presence does not suggest an active embrace of these elements, as the dual faith theory would suggest. To the contrary, the peasant was a devout adherent to his unique system of beliefs and practices which he interpreted as conventional Orthodoxy. “In his own eyes, the peasant was an Orthodox Christian and believer in the only true faith.”

When considering several realities of religious life for the nineteenth century peasant, the fact that his conception of Orthodoxy was permeated with folkloric and paganistic elements is hardly surprising. First, the severe deficiency of local priests; estimates suggest that in late nineteenth century Russia, there was an average of nearly 1,600 peasants for every one pop, or village priest. Nearing the turn of the century, the gap had steadily widened to over 1,800 to 1. Surely the dearth of village priests would have hindered the transmission of canonical Orthodoxy to the peasantry. Another factor hindering the transmission of Orthodox theology to the peasantry was the prevalence of illiteracy amongst the Russian peasantry. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of peasants were illiterate. For the literate peasant, a Bible was virtually impossible to come by. As late as the 1870s, there was no Russian Bible, only a Psalter and a Book of Hours.

Due to the scarcity of village priests, compounded with high illiteracy and the lack of scriptural resources, a reliable means by which to become educated in Orthodoxy was hard to come by for the peasant. As a result, explanations derived from Russian folklore would often supplement the peasant’s lax understanding of a certain Biblical phenomenon. In a sense, the peasant’s lack of Orthodox theology effectively enabled the transmission of popular folklore posing as Orthodoxy. Notwithstanding the fact that these beliefs deviated from scripture, they were nonetheless fundamentally Christian. As Heretz explains, “Although the story might seem to be very far from Christianity, this is an illusion created by the use of non-Biblical symbolism, underneath which its basic premises are typically

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6 G.P. Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity, the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries (New York, 1960), 3. Fedotov is referring to the elements of the peasantry’s religion inherited from its Kievan Rus’ pre-Christian heritage. See The Christianization of Rus’ According to the Primary Chronicle (978-988). Orlando Figes agrees, arguing “Only a thin coat of Christianity had been painted over [the peasant’s] ancient pagan folk culture.” Figes, Natasha’s Dance, 319.


8 Linda Ivantis, Russian Folk Belief (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), 37.

9 Chris Chulus, Converging Worlds: Religion and Community in Peasant Russia, 1861-1917 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press) 58. In 1870, the ratio was 1,586:1; in 1888, 1,833:1; by 1914, it had increased to 2,178:1. These figures are for Voronezh province, a rural province; other rural provinces likely had similar figures.

Christian.”

In seeking a better understanding of the Russian peasant’s peculiar faith, it may be useful to compare his beliefs to canonical Christianity. In comparing several major tenets of Christianity which are oft present in popular peasant culture, we begin, appropriately, with the Creation Story. First, let us consider an account recorded by ethnographer A.I. Ivanov of a creation story popular amongst the Russian peasantry at the turn of the twentieth century:

[Before the creation of the earth] God was floating [over the primordial sea] on a white rock. He spat, and that’s what the Devil [here symbolized by an aquatic duck] came from. The duck dove, but couldn’t reach the bottom; he dove again and grabbed some sand, but the water washed it out of his hands. At God’s command, he dove a third time and brought up five grains of sand in his mouth. He gave God four, with which God created the Earth, but hid the fifth for himself. That’s why there is mainly evil in the world, because the sand for the creation of the earth was brought by the Devil.

There are several notable scriptural deviations in this account of the Creation Story. For one, the Devil is depicted as a duck (as opposed to a serpent). In addition, the Earth is created from four grains of sand. Ignoring some semantic inaccuracies, however, this account parallels the scriptural account of creation in Genesis. This story depicts God as “floating” prior to the creation of the Earth. In the scriptural account of the Creation, “waters under the heaven” did in fact precede God’s creation of the Earth.

Moreover, this narrative seeks to explain not only the creation of the Earth, but also the world’s inherent evil. According to scripture, it was a serpent [the Devil] who led Eve to explore her temptations and ultimately cause the world to be inherently sinful.

The above account, similarly, allocates the causality of the world’s evil to the Devil. A portion of the account’s distorted semantics may be explained by an emphasis in Russian popular folklore on water creatures. Still, there are clear thematic similarities between this popular peasant belief and the scriptural account of creation in Genesis.

A similar story recorded in the Poltava province in the late nineteenth century details the creation of man. In accordance with Christian theology, it conceptualizes man as inherently flawed, but alludes to a different explanation:

Having created the Earth, God went to work creating man...Satan came by to see what God had created, and he saw man lying there, beautiful and clean, and this made him sad. Having stood there sadly for awhile and having thought it over, he threw up all over man...God saw that Satan had wrecked things, but there was nothing He could do: once God has made something, He doesn’t make it over again. But the Lord didn’t want to just leave man all covered in vomit, so He turned him inside-out. And now our bodies are inside out... And when you think about it, what do we have inside? Guts, intestines...And don’t all sicknesses start inside? That’s all because of the Devil’s mischief.

Like the first story, this account of the creation of man conveys, at the very least, a rudimentary understanding of God. He is a single God, a Perfect Creator, and He is not to bare the blame for the tainting of man. The Devil, too, is...
depicted quite accurately according to scripture. He is the originator of man’s inherently flawed nature, and His “mischief” is the source of man’s misery in the form of “sickness” and other misfortune. While this account lacks a coherent conception of original sin, it does serve to explain man’s innate imperfections. This narrative, popular amongst the Russian peasantry, seems to convey a thorough understanding of the dynamics of God and the Devil as depicted in the Pentateuch, particularly in the Book of Genesis.

Another major tenant of Orthodox Christianity, partially derived from the concept of man as inherently sinful, is the constant battle between Good and Evil. A folk tale below recorded in the Tambov province in the late 1880’s illustrates this concept as it was understood by the Russian peasantry:

God...assigned each person a guardian angel...and flew away from the Earth for good. Satanail [Satan] put his own demon/tempter at the side of every person and went to his kingdom- tartary. And the two powers fight, but neither God nor Satanail come to the Earth themselves. They will come for the last time at the end of the world and divide up the righteous and the sinners between themselves: whoever has more will win. But man is giving in more and more to the Devil. The angels are leaving for Heaven, and when they all do that will be the end of the world.  

Count Leo Tolstoi, one of the most esteemed writers in the history of Russia, offers a telling analysis on the peasant’s conception of the struggle between Good and Evil. “Heaven is occupied by the heavenly, righteous and divine forces, while Hell... [is] the domain of the unclean and dark powers.” As illustrated in the above narrative, “Earth is the place of combat between these two worlds and principles.” Here again, God is depicted as righteous (assigning “each person a guardian angel”) while the Devil represents temptation (He “put his own demon/tempter at the side of every person”). Such concepts are heavily steeped in Christian theology. Thus this narrative suggests the peasant possessed a fundamental understanding of the perpetual struggle between God and the Devil; Heaven and Hell; Good and Evil.

The above passage is also indicative of how the peasant conceptualized his role on Earth. As Chulos suggests, peasants “understood life as a constant attempt to curry the favor of benevolent supernatural forces and to combat evil forces.” Though God would not occupy Earth in His physical manifestation, it was nonetheless crucial that the peasant fight to preserve His righteous ideals. The claim that “man is giving in more and more to the Devil” offered an even greater imperative for the peasant to resist the Devil’s temptation and uphold God’s righteousness. Ultimately, those who combated evil and led righteous lives would be divinely rewarded. Here we see how the peasant identified his earthly calling; his niche in the Divine’s grand scheme of things. That identity, it seems, was shaped by a fundamentally Christian theology of resisting temptation and embracing righteousness.

While earth was conceptualized as the arena for the struggle between good and evil, many peasants considered it to be holy in itself. A popular Russian folkloric tradition was the belief in Mat’ syra zemlia, or “Mother Damp Earth.” Peasants, Ivantis explains, “ratified oaths by swallowing a mouthful of earth...measured boundary lines by walking them with a clump of earth on their heads; and...protected villages from cattle plague and other epidemics by plowing a furrow around them and thus releasing the life-giving properties of the earth.” Moreover, in the absence of a priest, peasants would confess their sins to the earth, and ask for its forgiveness prior to death. Though such rituals appear inherently paganistic, considering peasants’ veneration for

19 God as righteous is one of the most frequent associations in the Bible. The Devil representing temptation is prevalent throughout scripture as well, from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, to Jesus in Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 4.
20 Chris Chulos, “Myths of the Pious or Pagan Peasant in Post-Emancipation Central Russia (Voronezh Province),” Russian History, 22 (Summer 1995), 214.
Mary as the ‘Mother of God’ may yield useful insight into understanding their worship of the earth. It was not uncommon for peasants to believe a third of the Holy Trinity represented this maternal element. In her memoir, Yakov Dragunovskii makes reference to “‘mother, Christ, and God,’ and all that is good.”

To a degree, this recognition of the Madonna was sanctioned by the Orthodox Church. Peasants celebrated official Church holidays venerating Mary and worshipped icons of the Three-Handed Mother of God and Dostoino est’. The peasants, however, “insisted on tying the maternity of the Mother of God to...the soil and likened her Christian law of brotherly love to the veneration of the rod under the aegis of Mother Moist Earth.”

Peasants lived in a predominantly agricultural society. Given the centrality of the earth in peasant culture and everyday life, it is hardly surprising it factored so greatly into their religion. Though this concept appears to stray from canonical Orthodoxy, it actually illustrates the association peasants made between their Christian spirituality and the earth, a concept central to their everyday lives. Reverence for “Mother Damp Earth” demonstrates not an active embrace of the earth as intrinsically holy, but rather the peasant’s recognition of the sanctity of the Mother of Christ.

Another explanation for the earth’s centrality in peasant culture may rest in the peasant’s inability to conceptualize abstract concepts. Such is the case with the peasant’s notion of the afterlife. “Orthodox peasants,” Chulos explains, “adhered to this vision of the sacred earth while searching for heaven in or above the clouds or beyond a rainbow, ‘a radiant place, where trees with beautiful fruits...flowers, and berries grow.’”

Figes characterizes the peasant’s notion of Heaven in a similar manner, explaining he “believed in a Kingdom of God on this earth.” To the peasant, Heaven was “an actual place in some remote corner of the world, where the rivers flowed with milk and the grass was always green. This conviction inspired dozens of popular legends about a real Kingdom of God hidden somewhere in the Russian land.”

Allowing it to be considered synonymous with “paradise,” an interpretation of the peasant’s depiction of Heaven is more subjective. Considering peasants conceptualized Heaven as a physical place somewhere on the Earth, describing it in terms of a “paradise on Earth” does not necessarily suggest a deviation from scripture. It appears the peasant also had a grounded conception of Hell as “a dark, terrible place in whose depths burned an inextinguishable fire’...Located in the nether regions of the earth, hell was likened to a boiling

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24 See discussion of icons, p.12-14.
26 Chris Chulos, Converging Worlds: Religion and Community in Peasant Russia, 1861-1917 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press), 38.
cauldron of unbearable heat and darkness.”

This description, too, is fairly consistent with scripture, as the association between “Hell” and “fire” are made several times throughout the New Testament.

Guided by a strict distinction between Heaven (“a Kingdom of God”) and Hell (“a dark, terrible place”), peasants possessed a coherent conception of the afterlife. Despite the peasant’s notion of Heaven and Hell being physically contained on Earth, their descriptions nonetheless adhered to scripture. Such a conceptualization of the afterlife is impressive, especially considering the lack of attention it was given by the clergy. As Heretz explains, the Book of Revelation “was not read in church, and consequently it did not figure prominently in popular consciousness.”

The apocalypse factored greatly into the religious consciousness of the Russian peasantry, as is evidenced by the prominence of apocalyptic folk narratives in peasant culture. Here again, the embracing of apocryphal explanations likely served to supplement the peasant’s lack of scriptural theology. Such is illustrated by the popular peasant interpretation of a traditional apocryphal story, Prenie Gospodne s diavolom, in which the Devil reins the Earth for 3 years. The Prenie details the “awesome image of the sky being rolled up like a scroll and the earth being fired like iron.”

Below is a “trickled-down” account of an elderly peasant from the Tver region’s interpretation of the Prenie:

The sky will be rolled up like a tablecloth; this old earth will be burned away, and there will be a new one, on which the Lord will set up paradise… And it’s been determined that the world will last seven thousand years: they say that now the eight thousand is coming, and maybe that’s all true. The Lord said: ‘I can add on [years], or take away,’ if I see that man is worthy of it. One can clearly note the distortion in the latter story. Heretz offers his explanation, explaining “Russian folk eschatology is derived from…the basic ideas of Orthodox Christianity, with an admixture of elements from the old apocryphal tradition, which provided detail on questions left unanswered in official Church teaching” into their culture. In short, the peasant would satisfy his curiosity about the apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ by ‘filling in the gaps’ left by his lack of Orthodox theology with popular apocryphal explanations. Nonetheless, focusing on the peasant’s broad understanding rather than minute details, there emerges a clear conception of a Christian apocalypse. For one, he clearly understood God as Sovereign and the Determiner of man’s fate. Also, quite remarkably, he depicted Heaven on Earth similar to the scriptural account in Revelation, a book he was

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29 Chris Chulos, Converging Worlds: Religion and Community in Peasant Russia, 1861-1917 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press), 38. It appears peasants possessed a concrete conception of the afterlife. As Chulos notes, however, examining linguistics may also be beneficial—“Words provide a sense of this cosmic geography. Rai (literally, Paradise, or Eden, related to raion, region, or area) was a more educated way to refer to heaven, while zagrobaia zhizn’ (life beyond the grave), tot svet (the other world), and budushchii vek (the coming age) were more common expressions of concrete distinctions between two states of being.”


31 Leonid Heretz, Russia on the Eve of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104. The Book of Revelation contains the most vivid and thorough discussions of the afterlife in the Bible. The word “Heaven” is mentioned 44 times in the Book of Revelation. As Heretz explains, “This point bears stressing, so that the reader does not project onto Russian culture the great centrality of Revelation in Western Protestant (and especially American) popular religiosity.”

32 “[T]his time-span being a corruption of Revelation,” Heretz notes. Leonid Heretz, Russia on the Eve of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106. Revelation 13:5 states “And there was given unto him [the beast] a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months.” King James Version

33 Sakharov, Eskhatologicheskie skazan’ia, 288; as cited in Leonid Heretz, Russia on the Eve of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106. This depiction has scriptural basis—2 Peter 3:8,10 King James Version.


35 Leonid Heretz, Russia on the Eve of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 118.