Danila Rygovskiy

Technology and Its Representation as a Source of Religious Experience for Old Believers of Yenisei Region

Danila Rygovskiy — University of Tartu (Estonia). danielrygovsky@gmail.com

The paper discusses an ambivalent interaction between Chasovennye Old Believers of Yenisei region and modern technologies. Old Believers must rely on certain technologies and equipment for survival in the severe conditions of taiga and mountains. Nevertheless, technology is strongly associated with Antichrist and signifies his imminent arrival. The paper is focused on the intensity of usage of certain technological devices by the Old Believers, and how these devices are interpreted in eschatological terms. Technical specifications of various devices therefore serve as mediators in expressing religious emotions and experience.

Keywords: Old Believers, Chasovennye faction, semiotic ideologies, material religion, eschatology, technology.

Introduction and Research Context

I N THIS article, I will discuss Chasovennye Old Believers (autonym "Christians"), who live in taiga settlements on the tributaries of the Yenisei River. The areas under consideration include the upper reaches of the Little Yenisei (Tuva), the southern portions of the Krasnoiarskii krai, and the lower reaches of the Yenisei (Krasnoiarskii krai). In the latter of these regions, there is not only a population of Old Believer lay people (in other words, not monks), but

also the Dubchessky sketes, which are well-known from the works of N. N. Pokrovskii and N. D. Zol'nikova (Zol'nikova 2001; Pokrovskii 1992; Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova 2002). The core of the article is based on my own field notes, which were gathered in 2017–2018.

Recently, Old Believers have become more prominent in the public sphere. Representatives of various confessions have appeared in public platforms and in forums, they are active on social media, and they are featured in educational literature. At the same time, the so-called Chasovennoe faction remains "closed off" in this regard. My interlocutors always showed an extreme uneasiness about the possibility of their names being made public (they were particularly worried about their personal data appearing on the Internet). For this reason, in this article I do not reveal the names of the Old Believers with whom I interacted during the expedition. I also do not name any specific settlements, instead referring only to the name of the region. The conclusions I draw based on this research can be applied not only to the Yenisei Chasovennye Old Believers but can also be extended to other groups within that confession or within other Old Believer denominations. It is also possible that one can observe similar processes outside of Old Rite Orthodox Christianity as well. Nevertheless, my approach consists of concentrating on a specific group, as, following Birgit Myer, I presuppose that religious experience depends on the character of local interactions between people and technological devices (Meyer 2008, 124–35).

Throughout their spiritual movement's history, Old Believers have regarded innovation with suspicion. They may perceive threats in material objects and social innovations of all kinds, from the potato to the census. The interactions between adherents of the Old Belief and technology follow this general tendency. Old Believer instructional texts called on the faithful to renounce the use of radios, televisions, motors, and other "devilish temptations." In spite of this, technology has firmly entered the everyday lives (*byt*) of Old Believers, as have a number of other innovations.

This can be observed among the Yenisei Old Believers, who mostly live on the edge of infrastructure: in taiga villages, in the mountains, along untamed tributaries, and far from other human settlements. Perhaps the only exceptions are the Chasovennye who live in large villages or towns not far from the city of Minusinsk and Abakan, the capital of Khakassia. Old Believer settlements in the southern part of Krasnoiarskii krai and in part of Tuva have access to electricity and some villages have generators. There are refrigerators and

washing machines in nearly every home. In addition, Old Believers skillfully operate heavy-duty trucks, off-road jeeps, and other vehicles, and buy motors for their home-made metal boats. They pass down their habits of technology use from generation to generation along with other forms of "popular knowledge" and their belief system. Contrary to the opinion of N. N. Pokrovskii, the technical and engineering skills of the Chasovennye are amply demonstrated in the Dubchessky skets, where Old Believers have constructed a dock, wood-working and metal-working shops, and a great deal else.[1] During Soviet times, the skets did not have technological equipment; however, Soviet patterns of working with collective farm equipment played an important role in integrating technology into everyday life (*byt*) (Liubimova 2017, 128).

Researchers of the Old Belief have explained the relationship of the Chasovennye to technology in various ways. For example, N. N. Pokrovskii suggested that the Chasovennye proscription against owning televisions and radios are a bastardization of the storylines from Old Russian literature about the "heresy of Skomorokha music" and early Christian eschatology (Pokrovskii 1993, 449). At the same time, Old Believer eschatology is not confined to references to medieval texts; rather, Old Believer methods of interpreting technology as a sign should be understood as a kind of conspiracy theory. As Aleksandr Panchenko notes, Christian eschatology is endowed with "a particular valence toward conspiratorial explanatory models" (Panchenko 2015, 124). One can observe that the frameworks used by the Yenisei Chasovennye do not necessarily contain references only to Old Believer texts. For example, a widespread narrative in Old Believer communities is that of the "Beast Computer," which was ostensibly built in Brussels. The computer collects and controls information about all human beings on earth to prepare for the coming of the Antichrist. The appearance of this legend is connected to ultraconservative Christians in the United States; a Russian translation of the text produced in the U.S. in the 1980s found its way to the Siberian Chasovennye.[2] In spite of its ethnic and cultural foreignness, the "Beast Computer" narrative has not only spread to the Yenisei Chasovennye, it is actively used to

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1. Pokrovskii asserted that boat motors and electronic equipment had spread among the Old Believers, but not within the skets (Pokrovskii 1993, 448).

2. A professor at the University of Southern Alabama, Paul Vaulin, published his translation in 1981; another independent translation was made in the 1980s, either by Russian Baptists or Old Believers living in America. (Panchenko 2017, 81).

interpret contemporary social, political, economic, cultural, and historical processes.[3]

One might conclude that the fusion of these specific American Protestant texts with the Old Believer predisposition to interpret innovations in eschatological terms happened seamlessly. I am aware of only one example of a person who tried to stop the diffusion of conspiracy theories among his fellow believers, that of A. G. Murachev, a prodigious Old Believer writer and the author of numerous polemical works in the Chasovennoe confession. In his memoirs Murachev writes about another idea popular not only among Old Believers but among conservative Orthodox Christians as well: that the bar code placed on goods contains "the number of the Beast."

> In 1995 our Christian community was roiled. It started with the sketes,[4] when bar codes began to appear on goods; Baptists and other heretics began to call it the "mark" that had been written about in the Book of Revelation. The magazines and newspapers began to publish a profusion of heretical articles; their sophistry was absolutely not in harmony with the Holy Word. Members of the skete communities, because of their illiteracy, believed in that heretical teaching and began to spread these fantastical lies about the end of the world to the people. Of course, people did not agree about everything: some of them remain with us, devoted to the correct teachings, others turned into a mafia, carried away by heretical teachings they received from the monks (Zol'nikova 2010, 284).

Although Murachev enjoyed great authority within the community,[5] his judgment on this issue found practically no support. Even now those Old Believers who knew him still note that, in spite of his spiritual wisdom, Murachev was not correct in all matters, especially as he did "not fault the bar code," that is, he did not consider it forbidden to use goods on which it is imprinted. Obviously, it was not only

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3. Maria Akhmetova notes that so-called "technological eschatology" is widespread in contemporary Russia. One can find similar stories about computers, televisions, and other technological innovations not only among Old Believers, but among the rest of the Orthodox population (Akhmetova 2011, 144–57).

4. The reference is to the sketes on the Dubches River.

5. This is attested to by the fact that the sepulcural cross at his grave is marked by an epitaph, an unmistakable sign of reverence, in so far as the Chasovennye write epitaphs only for the most significant people. Murachev is called "an illuminator of the twentieth century, a pedagogue and teacher of God's Word" (Author's Field Materials — hereafter AFM, Lower Yenisei, 2018)

a matter of rumors about the bar code, but about its ubiquity and the suddenness of its appearance in everyday life.

Some researchers of the Chasovennoe Old Belief assert that it is being strongly influenced by globalization and modernization and thus could disappear in short order. This line of argument assumes that the Old Believers are waging a tireless struggle to preserve their identity and culture, however. In part, Margarita Tatarintseva utilizes this logic to explain the prohibition against the use of certain devices among Chasovennye believers in Tuva: "Teachers (*nastavniki*)[6] forbade the use of everyday technologies that could threaten the Old Belief ideologically, sow doubts in the souls of believers, and shake the faith" (Tatarintseva and Storozhenko 2015, 79). She also writes about the "canonization of old customs in the everyday": "Strictly following the pre-Nikonian ancient church rules, rituals, and traditions, the Old Believers connected this church ritualism to elements of traditional Russian everyday culture. They regarded the latter's material forms to be a form of divine essence, a part of the Old Belief, and an indivisible feature of Old Belief" (Tatarintseva and Storozhenko 2015, 72). The only part of this explanation one might take issue with is Russian everyday culture (*byt*), which undoubtedly changed not only in the twentieth century, but also two centuries ago. The Old Believers, in the end, purchased and used the same goods as the rest of the population. For example, in Tuva after the revolution, the Old Believers treated Soviet goods with suspicion, as they regarded the Soviet state as "godless;" yet their "ancient" everyday culture was nevertheless filled with other "foreign" goods: home-made or Chinese.

> Monks,[7] who maintained reserves of bread, did not accept as charity the bread that had been marked as subject to taxation; but those who did not have reserves of old bread ate the taxable bread. They did not use those goods that had been produced in Soviet factories, preferring old or Chinese goods. To copy books, they bought paper from the Chinese and made inks from berries and birch fungus. All of this gradually began to die out and the religious [persons] adapted to life and became ordinary and it ceased to seem new or unfamiliar [. . .] (TIGPI RF, d. 503, l. 32).

6. Among the Chasovennye Old Believers, teachers [*nastavniki*] are spiritual leaders of the community; they lead liturgies, hear confessions, and perform religious rites (baptisms, weddings, and funerals).

7. In the twentieth century, the Chasovennye Old Believers in Tuva had monasteries. Today the latter remain only on the Lower Yenisei.

The source of this report was the Old Believer E. D. Pazderin, who witnessed the changes in everyday life that took place among the Tuva Chasovennoe denomination after 1917. He wrote his memoirs during Soviet times, and thus the reasons that the monks "maintained the old ways" were left fairly vague. Surely the difficult relations between the Soviet state and the Chasovennye only strengthened the latter's rejection of "unfamiliar" objects. Nonetheless, as Pazderin writes, the Old Believers "adapted to life." In other words, there was a "canonization" of certain material forms on the one hand, and, on the other, the continual transformation of that "canon" related to the proliferation of innovations.

What shapes this process? In her work on labor ethics among contemporary Chasovennye in Tuva, Galina Liubimova notes the paradoxical co-existence of ideas about technology's sinfulness and its widespread utilization within Old Believer settlements. This state of affairs is justified by the fact that technology is used exclusively for the purposes of labor, in so far as without it, it is impossible to ensure the material existence of the community, especially in the conditions of the taiga. The author draws on Valerii Kerov's conception of the "blessed fault," i.e. the Old Believers' religious and ethical justification for the use of technology if it is necessary for economic development or entrepreneurial activity (to a great extent, this enabled the modernization of agriculture on the part of Old Believers) (Liubimova 2017, 126, 129). Thus, the exigencies of survival led to sharp changes in the Old Believer system of prohibitions, compelling them to reconsider their own views on contemporary technology.

At the same time, there are certain reasons to think that this concept does not fully explain the internal conflict within the Old Believer worldview. First, the "blessed fault" is not an "emic" concept to the Yenisei Chasovennye. The connotation of "blessed," that is approval by a higher power, is out of place. A "fault," or to be more precise the fallenness of various objects, exists as a religious practice of the Chasovennye: any potentially dangerous objects, whether they are bank cards, goods with a bar code, documents (especially electronic documents or those that contain biometric data), among others, have to be "acknowledged as fallen." That is to say, it is necessary to acknowledge them as unbeneficial to the soul and to repent the necessity of their use. That being said, a full renunciation of similar items is regarded as the ideal. Secondly, this does not refer simply to items that make housework easier. Chasovennye have a similar relationship to mobile phones, for example. It is problematic to explain their widespread use,

when telephones are associated with the sphere of entertainment and not with one's own work. Thirdly, it is worth mentioning that certain prohibitions within this system are more common than others. Certain items are actively worried about and spoken about; they are discussed and can be regarded as a part of an active eschatology. Other prohibitions, on the other hand, even if they were articulated in the decisions of communal councils, are not as acute and are more or less forgotten. It is appropriate to recall the struggle of Chasovennye teachers (*nastavniki*) against the radio and two-way radio communication, which they waged for the entire second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The polemics against these devices quieted down after the appearance of a new threat: mobile phones. What is more, radios and two-way radio communication persisted among Old Believers: for example, two-way radios remain a necessary means of communication in taiga settlements. Yet no one sees them in eschatological terms any longer. In other words, economic necessity does not fully justify the use of technology, and the relationship of Old Believers to technology is not fully captured using the proposed terms.

Analytical Method: Semiotic Ideologies in the Concepts of Webb Keane and Birgit Meyer

Apocalyptic prophecies presume that signs of the end of the world will appear in the real world in tangible, material forms. Thus, technological devices can appear, in Webb Keane's terms, as a *sign vehicle* of divine presence and the fulfillment of prophecies. Keane calls this method of interpretation a "semiotic ideology," or the sum total of people's ideas "about what signs are, what functions signs serve, and what consequences they might produce" (Keane 2018, 64).

I will demonstrate the fundamental workings of this mechanism through the example of texts about the dangers of using radios. In the "Tale of Miraculous Occurrences," a Chasovennye collection of historical/hagiographic stories, there is a story of a mother named Evstoliia, in whose life radios appear in very dramatic circumstances. In the first place, Evstoliia's marriage was not working out, as her husband not only took a mistress but brought her into the home and forced his spouse to "serve them as a slave." The husband had a radio, the "evil sounds" of which the devout woman hated. The second moment occurred when she was incarcerated in a labor camp and had to listen to the radio while the barracks were searched. Evstoliia related how, in the first and second instances, the radio went silent when she made

the sign of the cross over it. After she did this, no one could turn it on again (Pokrovskii 2014, 267). This story not only illustrates the power of the sign of the cross; it also demonstrates something about the radio. If it is commonly accepted that devils fear the cross, and the radio stops working when the sign of the cross is made over it, it all adds up to the conclusion that the radio has a demonic "nature." It is no accident that the collection's authors placed the story into the category of "demonic miracles giving way in the face of the profession of the Orthodox faith," alongside the story of an oracular doll that broke due to the power of prayer (Pokrovskii, Zol'nikova, and Zhuravel' 2016, 88).

The concept of "semiotic ideologies" suggests that the accepted methods of interpreting signs in one society can differ substantially from the explanatory mechanisms in another, which becomes particularly clear, in Webb Keane's view, at the moment of conflict between two interpretive frameworks. Moreover, the sign itself is unconventional in the sense that the symbolic meaning can be ascribed to the subject by some and can be rejected by others (the author notes this in relation to iconoclasm) (Keane 2018, 81). The Old Believer attitude toward innovation, including technology, can be explained by a similar mechanism of semiotization. If one considers how much the Yenisei Chasovennye discuss the spread of electronic devices, then it follows that technology constitutes an important source of religious experience in that society. Keane's concept of "semiotic ideology" allows scholars to approach the Old Believers' use of technology — with its attendant eschatological fears — a little bit differently. Namely, they can differentiate between those situations in which technology is perceived as a sign of the self-fulfilling apocalyptic prophecy, and those in which technology is accepted for what it is rather than as a mediator of the activities of the Antichrist. The feelings that arise as a result of such interactions will be negative, in the sense that it is a feeling of danger, of the threat of being led away from salvation. These fears are all the more important, because they serve as a reminder of that same danger.

In so far as it was media devices — televisions, two-way radio communication devices, radios, mobile phones, and computers — that fell under Chasovennye canonical prohibitions (that is, prohibitions that were adopted collectively at a council of the confession and were codified in writing in the form of a legal code), I have chosen an analytical approach that arose from studies of the interaction between religion and media. In addition, I was interested in how these devices are depicted in Old Believer communities, whether in narratives or in wall prints. In a similar vein, Birgit Meyer examines how television, art objects, and ra-

dio are used not only by "traditional" religions like Christianity and Islam but also by comparatively recent religious movements (i.e. New Age). In this sense, it does not matter whether media elicit religious excitement or offend the feelings of religious people; the main thing is that they create a certain experience. Meyer also understands media broadly, as "those artifacts and cultural forms that make possible communication, bridging temporal and spatial distance between people as well as between them and the realm of the divine or spiritual" (Meyer 2008, 126).

The Computer

Among the Yenisei Chasovennye, drawings on spiritual and moral themes are quite popular. Aleksandr Kostrov and Ekaterina Bykova call these drawings, not quite correctly in my view, "popular prints" (Kostrov and Bykova 2016). In the following, I will use the term "wall sketch," which is mentioned by the art historians E. I. Itkina and Z. A. Luchsheva in their works (Itkina 1992, 6; Luchsheva 2006, 196). Most interesting to me of these is the drawing "Two Roads, Two Paths," published and described by Kostrov and Bykova:

> The field of the popular print [. . .] is divided into three main sections: a textual segment below two visual sections titled "the righteous path" and "the path of sin." [. . .] The upper portion of the popular print is dedicated to the "sinful world." [. . .] The motif connecting them is a "smooth and broad path," which appears in the form of a bright yellow road, upon which people are traveling from the top of the page downward by various means of transportation (cars, buses, motorcycles) and on foot. These persons are dressed fashionably and carry trendy bags and tape recorders. A lit cigarette emits smoke as it hangs in the mouth of one of these characters. At the end of the path, they tumble into the wide-open void called "Satan's realm." Their movement is accompanied by several scenes of sin, which are juxtaposed with the righteous scenes on the opposite side of the page (Kostrov and Bykova 2016, 182, 186).

In the center of the "path of sin" is an enormous spider symbolizing the "diabolical networks," spread out over the world's capital cities (which are depicted in the form of their major tourist attractions: the Kremlin, the Statue of Liberty, etc. . .). One of the spider's legs is coming out of a cross-shaped building labelled "Beast." This is the same Brussels super-computer, which, according to the Old Believers, was built to trap the souls of Christians (see ill. 1, 2).
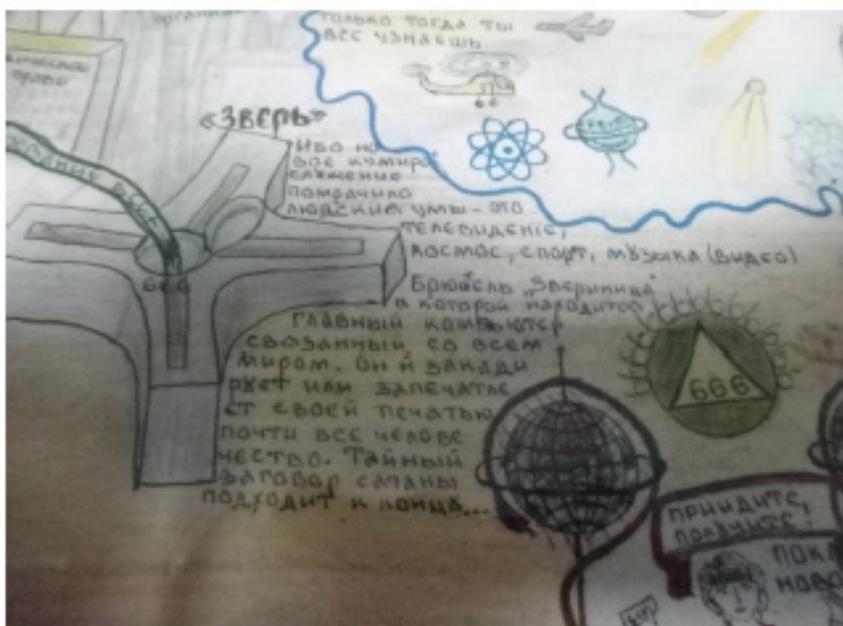
Illustration 1,2. Details from the wall sketch "Two Roads, Two Paths." Photo: Doctor of History A.A. Prigarin, August 2018, Krasnoiarskii krai.

In fact, the Chasovennye of Siberia rarely have many interactions with computers: they agree to keep them in their schools, where they instruct their children in the worldly sciences, only because Rosobrnadzor requires it.[8] It is quite telling that the computer is part of the Old Believers' direct contact with the state. However, as one of my interlocutors (one of the Tuva Chasovennye's teachers [*nastavnik*]) noted, in this case, the state itself is not so much at issue as it is the computer as a means of collecting data:

> Well, this is, as it is said . . . Contemporary science has proved it and it is coming true according to the Apocalypse [here and throughout, the emphasis was on the final syllable. — D.R.]. For example, in the Book of Revelation, it is said . . . they can only find shelter in the mountains and the caves. And in our times, you can be found anywhere over the Internet. From space. Oh, and now they are even talking about new passports. They have those magnetic ribbons and that's it. [. . .] And then, when you, for example, are buying tickets or picking something up, and you hold your passport up to the computer, it's invalid without those ribbons. It happened that some of our people took them and scraped them off — and that's it, it is not valid without that ribbon. Thousands of words are contained in those ribbons [. . .] Where the Antichrist reigns, the world will be charmed. Almost . . . very few will be left who will not be under his control. That is, with all of those electronics (AFM, Tuva, 2018).

The Tuva teacher (*nastavnik*) repeated the narratives, widespread among the Chasovennye, about contemporary biometric passports being created specifically for the purpose of tracking the movements of religious people. In addition to this, the Old Believers are convinced that when biometric data are given, the forehead and hands of the person are marked with the Antichrist's number, "666." This prompts them to, if not to renounce passports and other documents entirely, then at the very least to treat their use and safekeeping with caution. Few renew their passports immediately when they are lost. Not all of them have documents and others treat their use (i.e. to buy tickets) with apprehension, preferring to get around in their own vehicles, either cars or boats.[9] Accordingly, in spite of the fact that transporta-

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8. Rosobrnadzor is the government agency responsible for overseeing schools [— Ed.]
9. Travel is indispensable when it comes to great distances; for example, the road north from Tuva, to the Dubchessky sketes, is more than 1,200 km.

tion is a part of the image of the sinful world, its use, in practice, allows one to escape other more serious dangers, from the point of view of the Chasovennye.

The same teacher asserted that the technical powers of computers to track people are "proved by science." At the same time, the Old Believers do not simply accept the judgments of outside experts (or their interpretations of those opinions), but rather try to understand how those judgments are formed. For example, another of my informants appealed to "common sense":

> He [the Antichrist — D. R.] must tempt. And what a temptation has come about. The telephone and whatnot. Do you know the telephone well, then? They are written about in the prophesies. There will come a time when the Antichrist will unite the faraway with the nearby. You can speak with whoever, like you and I now. And, see . . . You know more than I do, Skype or whatnot [. . .] There is the Antichrist! And you are a clever man, you ought to know how it works? There is this little trick, you put it in, and it plays up to a thousand songs or films. How can it do this? It can't do it without an evil spirit. Or a computer — this is a mind. But a metal mind also cannot create the mind of a man. Little switches, that's it, that's all it is. . . . But this all comes from the Antichrist. All of this is trickery and sophistry. Somehow they worked. For example, if the refrigerator were heated up, the heat switch would turn on. This is all clear. There are some other contraptions, too. And then you have this little trick, and how does it work? Can metal, even with all those microchips, can it become a mind? Man has never and will never re-create the human mind. But with the devil's power. The devil's power helps.[10] And in all this rubbish a human mind is created, that's that. And the telephone, that's that. All of that is the devil's weapon and the devil's power. If someone uses it and does not stop, he will bring them to him, and that's it. With both hands. "You used my instrument!" And the computer, too. The computer comes out . . . The computer and the television — the icon will emerge from the sea. Well, this is written in Apocalypse. The computer and television are this icon, it's understood. And people will bow down to it. That is to say, they will pray to it. You see how it is now. You come home from work, maybe you yourself, and you have to go to the computer right away. Watch-

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10. One of the widespread judgments among the Yenisei Chasovennye: three sixes are stamped inside computers. If these are removed, then it will stop working.

ing something, your email, Skype . . . all kinds of correspondence. You know all of this. Right away you can't tear yourself away. You eat quickly, quickly and go right back to it. Now, the icon gets its adoration. And the icon . . . The sea — this is the people, a large sea. And he came out of the people, an icon Television at first, and then icons and then all people . . . Well, the television, as you can see, it would be great if people became addicted, and everyone needed it. But it became a nuisance. Now, some people watch, some don't watch. Now it's the computer. And the computer, you see, it sucks people in up to the limit, such that a person cannot tear himself away. When does he pray? And it is for this that the Antichrist made the computer and the television, so that people do not pray. Because God does not take people, he only accepts those who are willing. And he [the Antichrist] is trying to have people not pray (AFM, Tuva, 2017).

In this extended discussion, there are not only references to the Book of Revelation, but the speaker also reflects upon his own interactions with technology. The principle of the refrigerator's functioning is clear to this contemporary Old Believer, so even if one takes into account that the "previous generation's" technology was also created under the influence of the Antichrist, such influence is not taken seriously. The refrigerator, as a familiar and domesticated device, cannot call forth fears. This takes place with practically any technology with which the Old Believers have direct experience or wish to use for economic purposes. For example, damless hydropower plants or solar panels are ordinary topics of discussions in the Yenisei taiga, just as is debating the advantages and disadvantages of old Soviet outboard motors and new Japanese motors.

I would like to turn attention to the fact that technology exists in two capacities. Switching between these two happens in relation to the material embodiment of the device. A specific vehicle that one uses, maintains, and swaps will only weakly remind one of the Book of Revelation. It is an entirely different matter for a vehicle that comes up in an educational circle or that is depicted in a popular print. This explains why a computer appears "dangerous," while a refrigerator and other technologies do not. the computer practically does not exist in the lives of Old Believers, and if it does appear, it is only in specific contexts that are connected with the collection of personal data. This does not contradict judgments about the idleness of those who keep a computer in their home, it merely confirms that similar objects are the "weapons of Satan."

The Television

Above, I cited a fragment of a field note, in which one of my interlocutors spoke of addiction. The television, like the computer, in his mind, constitutes an icon of the Antichrist. The television has found a similar place in the Old Believer popular print: "Next to the television, on which devils show their ruler with a crown and the number 666, there is a sign that says 'Come bow to the new tsar! And 'God'?" (Kostrov and Bykova, 187). Yet, television does not have the same destructive power. Televisions may not be widespread in their everyday lives, but Old Believers can watch television at their non-Old Believer friends' homes or while traveling. The experience of one Yenisei teacher([*nastavnik*]) is quite telling. He and his wife were arguing about the "nature" of the television. She regarded the television, according to traditional ideas, as an icon of the Antichrist. The teacher, on the other hand, said the television itself was not yet an icon but rather a portent of a thing that will hang in the air and be called an icon.

Here, as with the means of transportation depicted by the author of the popular print, the semiotic meaning of the television changes according to the various contexts and material forms in which the device appears. As is clear from the example, direct contact with a device does not necessarily become a source of religious experience, that is to say, it does not evoke such emotions. The experience comes about when the narrativization or visualization of the contact is filled with eschatological anxieties. In some way, the Yenisei Chasovennye living on the taiga create their own "mediators" around contemporary media and technology, in which the latter belong to the world of the Antichrist. In its essence, this is no different than a city-dweller interpreting the world in a mediated way, via news channels and informative programming, yet simultaneously maintaining their own direct experience of contact with that world.

At the same time, I am not suggesting that the Old Believers' real interaction with technology is completely detached from their mediated one. These are intersecting planes. For this reason, when reflecting on the fact that they nevertheless make use of technology, the Chasovennye underscore that their ideal is a full renunciation of it. It is another matter that the task of providing for their families does not allow for it; from this condition comes the necessity of mediated images of various devices: they serve as a reminder of approaching apocalyptic events.

This is not the only intersection between two images of technology. The adoption of certain devices — the "accommodation" of their

existence in the world — lowers the degree of their eschatological charge. It is possible that this explains the historical shifts in the relationship of Old Believers to innovations (as in their change of views on the radio and two-way radio communication). The object that becomes a familiar and accepted part of everyday life cannot be a source of religious experience and disappears from the eschatological or conspiratorial narrative. For example, this took place among the Pechora Old Believers with the potato. "According to the testimonies of researchers and travelers, who visited Pechora krai at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, local authorities took extensive measures to make the potato widespread in their territory; potato cultivation had already become customary for other inhabitants of Russia. In spite of the administration's aggressive measures and the efforts of the intelligentsia, the Ust'-tsilemites[11] at first refused to even cultivate them on their lands" (Bobretsova 2001, 91). According to Elena Smilianskaia, among the Old Believers there was once a widespread belief that the potato had appeared as the result of "unholy intimacy" between a woman and a dog. This legend supported a prohibition against using the potato in food. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, the potato had become an increasingly important part of the Old Believer diet in Pechora, and thus a countervailing text appeared, which related how members of skete communities had used the potato long ago (Smilianskaia 149–50).

Does this mean that in time the television will stop being associated with apocalyptic prophecies and the Chasovennye will stop depicting it in their wall sketches? One should not give a simple answer to this question, as the interpretive frames around each material form follow their own trajectories. Alongside "accommodations" of items that were earlier forbidden, prohibitions on formerly accepted devices can also occur. For example, it had become customary in the sketes to use LED flashlights. One hegumen, however, reported having a dream,[12] after which these lights were all replaced by *zhuchki*, a Soviet-era flashlight powered kinetically by squeezing a lever. This is another example demonstrating that if two devices serve the same purpose, the more progressive one is designated as sinful.

11. Ust'-tsilemite was the autonym of the *Pomortsy* faction of Old-believers living on the Lower Pechora. See (Bobretsova 2001).

12. Unfortunately, the content of the hegumen's dream remains unknown to me.

The Mobile Phone

Among all technological gadgets, the cell phone occupies a particularly important role in the life of Old Believers. They own almost no computers; telephones, however, are ubiquitous. At the same time, their role is not concretely defined: on the one hand, it is a "toy" since it is not an absolute necessity for living on the taiga; on the other hand, the telephone is used widely in certain circumstances, including for economic purposes (calling family members, negotiating deals, etc. . .). Even in monasteries, located many kilometers away from cellular service, telephones are given to boat operators during their travels. At the same time, use of the telephone is censured. Thus, after returning to the sketes, boat operators are required to perform penance for their use of telephones. It is worth adding that the Chasovennye usually have the "old-fashioned" phone models with physical buttons. Sometimes this is imagined as a form of compromise, since these kinds of phones do not have access to music, the Internet, or other "temptations." That being said, I should note that I mostly observed the older and middle generations; smartphones are popular among the youth.

Old Believers practices of using mobile phones depend directly on the degree of infrastructural development in the region. For example, in the upper reaches of the Little Yenisei, only three villages have reliable service and access to 3G Internet, and even that is only from a single provider, which does not guarantee service in the entire region. Many Chasovennye living upstream cannot freely use a digital connection at home. In the southern Krasnoiarskii krai, the situation is inverted: among the Old Believers of the Lower Yenisei, service exists only in the largest settlements; in the remainder, it does not exist at all or it is very weak.[13]

In Old Believer testimonies, even minimal interaction with phones is described as spiritual degradation and evidence of the coming of the Last Judgment. For example, they believe that phones influence the next generation and explain widespread alcohol abuse among young people. Small children also appear very dependent on telephones. The older generation of Old Believers make the following judgment from observing children interacting with gadgets: "in the main, the young

13. The following example will give some idea of the level of service experience by the Chasovennye: in one of the villages on the Lower Yenisei, mobile phones are attached to certain windows of the home using tape. This is the only way to "catch a signal." If a person needs to make a call, they dial the number without detaching it from the glass, and then turn up the volume to the limit in order to have a conversation.

ones are pulled toward that phone" (AFM, Lower Yenisei, 2018). According to older people, the mobile phones influence children and make them "uncontrollable," which is to say that they stop listening to adults. As my informants noted, this happens because children cease fearing God and they "become godless." Young people's use of digital devices causes great consternation among the older generation. As numerous informants told me, they suspected boys and girls used them to watch pornography. This all strengthens the narrative that the mobile phone was created with the goal of separating people from God, polluting their minds, and taking over their will:

> A person becomes dull if they use the Internet or that computer. A person simply becomes dull. He cannot do without it. Then, if he is deprived of it, he becomes hysterical. It is that way. One can explain it like this. If a person is constantly connected with it, he has become a slave to it. And when he comes to the last days, when he comes to the Apocalypse, he will not be able to distance himself from those documents, cards or whatever, and that is how he will be sealed. He will not be able to. He is always drawn in, drawn in, and he will approach the end without realizing it. That is terrible. The Antichrist will send a message throughout the world. If one becomes sealed, then he is already dependent on it. But it is gradual. One is lured, one is baited, and then one's mind is darkened. He does not understand anymore how terrible it can be. This is already demonstrated by science, it's being described on all programs, in the newspapers and journals, that whoever uses the telephone, their conversations are all being recorded. Whether it's about religious topics or making deals or whatnot, it is all recorded and then that person can be traced, where he is and all of those conversations (AFM, Tuva, 2018).

In this testimony, mobile phones appear as instruments of the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies, as the acceptance of the seal of the Antichrist. In my interlocutor's opinion, and that of many other Chasovennye, this is connected to the coming persecution of "Christians." Many Old Believers hold their ground against the charms of the Antichrist, but so that their views do not outrage others, they can cast them off. I will note that these convictions complicated my interactions with the Chasovennye to a certain extent, as they not only told me about their fears, but also expressed to me that I could cause them harm if I published recordings of their conversations on the Internet.

The proliferation of mobile phones and concomitant ideas about their dangers have caused the Yenisei Chasovennye to adopt new in-

tra-confessional rules of living. In part, this problem was discussed at councils along with other "dangerous" objects: bar codes, bank cards, individual tax numbers, etc. . . At one Yenisei council, which took place in 2014, the question was raised about prohibiting the use of mobile phones. As my interlocutors noted, "lawmakers" that wanted to confirm this prohibition were unable to do so, but they did not declare "permission" to own phones either.

> [There was a council here where they were deciding whether the use of telephones should be allowed or not?] No such decision was made to allow them, this permission was not given. Nobody agreed. But if someone uses them, let them repent of it (AFM, Tuva, 2018).

The Chasovennye tried to regulate the use of communication devices earlier, prior to the arrival of cell phones, when it came to the use of two-way radios in the conditions of the taiga. As it was in the story of the computer, the concern had to do with the way "Christians" spent free time:

> On almost every holiday, the inhabitants of the village or farm gather around the radio and begin to share news with one another. The majority talk about useless things and sit next to the radio for long periods of time, hours even, passing the receiver to one another [. . .] It also happens that people get on the radio in a drunken state in which they really cannot hold their tongue about gossip [. . .] And yet in Christian homes and in some houses of prayer there are still two-way radios. [. . .] Radio stations are also a diabolical idol (Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova 2002, 97).

An important distinction between the two-way radio and the telephone is the "individuality" of the device. Prohibiting it, then, carries with it a measure of personal responsibility. In a certain sense, the telephone, or more precisely, the limits on its use becomes a kind of mechanism for the formation of subjective religious experience and agency.

> [So people are expelled from the brotherhood for using a telephone?] Expulsion is not out of the question, but it is, so to say, on the conscience of each person [. . .] From our point of view, it is forbidden for a Christian. And even though we use them... a person should consider these things. A person should make penance. And if a person accepts it all without any qualms, well then, they are slowly going downhill. It seems

like it is not noticeable, but from a distance it's clear that they are going downhill (AFM, Tuva, 2018).

The cell phone, then, is not only technologically a more complex device then a two-way radio, but it is a more semantically rich object. Various characteristics of the *mobil'nik* attract eschatological motifs and conspiracy theories. And its very ubiquity charges everyday life with apocalyptic drama. At the same time, the telephone is capable of producing fairly strong eschatological anxieties, which correlate with the Old Believer's ideas about faith and its meaning in people's lives.

Conclusion

The concepts of Webb Keane and Birgit Meyer are important for research into the relationship between Old Believers and technology, in so far as they show that any material forms can become a source of religious experience. In addition, this experience can be positive (for example, rapture from contact with the divine) or negative (terror at prophecies realized, in the case of the Chasovennye). For this reason, telephones, televisions, and computers are worth considering as material forms of the incarnation of divine signs and prophesies. They become mediators of religious experience, producing certain kinds of experiences of the divine. Nonetheless, this does not lead to the exclusion of technological devices from the everyday life of the Yenisei Chasovennye. Old Believers create their own "mediated" images, as I call them, of technology, which allow them to maintain a balance between their everyday needs and their apocalyptic belief system.

The Chasovennye Old Believers appeared in the upper reaches of the Little Yenisei (that is, in Tuva) more than one hundred years ago, and in the lower reaches during the Soviet period. Some villages are just thirty years old. They independently built roads, created river routes, connected themselves to electricity, and introduced and utilized technological devices in their settlements. That being said, one of the most important specificities of the Old Believer worldview is the inclination to notice potentially dangerous objects, which often include various technological devices and innovations. Returning to the concept of semiotic ideologies, it is worth emphasizing that Old Believers are intent on recognizing the activities of the Antichrist in the material world. Above all this means that Old Believer communities are more suspicious of the absence of such threats than their continual presence. The paradox consists of the fact that technology occu-

pies an important place in the lives of the Chasovennye; furthermore, concrete things only play the role of dangerous objects temporarily, as prohibitions on their use can be forgotten.

I explain this paradox through the coming together of several interpretive frames. Technology constitutes simultaneously a sign of the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Apocalypse and a necessary tool of survival. In contrast to Protestants, the Chasovennye do not consider economic success a sign of one's chosenness. Their ideology does, however, contain an instruction toward economic autonomy. In this article, I cited the example of personal transportation, which allows the Old Believers to move around without coming into contact with the state (that is, showing a passport to buy tickets) or the outside world (eating in road-side cafes). Then again, this instruction is not simply about wanting to avoid contact. Food sold in stores or a government pension are considered "ruses" against which true Christians must steel themselves. Accordingly, one ought to rely on one's self, though it is impossible to produce the necessary amount of food and to earn a living without using technology.

The latter circumstance should not be considered the only thing that explains the widespread use of technological devices in Chasovennye settlements and monasteries. The multiplicity of explanations are suggested by the material forms themselves, in so far as they create various trajectories of interaction with technology. For example, the refrigerator mostly fulfills a single purpose, which is strictly defined as economic. It is also relatively simple to operate, all the more so in a rural setting. With the phone, it is much more complicated. Also important is the frequency with which Chasovennye come into contact with one item or another. For example, familiarity with the computer and the television develops indirectly for the most part. At the same time, it is precisely these items that are on the "leading edge" of eschatological anxieties. In such cases, religious experience forms not as a result of real interaction with a device, but rather through visual images, such as wall sketches, narrative sources like the "Tale of Miraculous Occurrences," or oral narratives. Separately, I will note that regardless of the source, i.e. the material form that contains the religious symbol, the interpretive frames that allow a device to be regarded simply as a device, on the one hand, and as a symbol of the end of the world, on the other, are not isolated from one another. Thus, for example, the most ambiguous object for Old Believers remains the cell phone, which according to the descriptions in the Book of Revelation ought to be understood as "the Anti-

christ's weapon," but at the same time is a necessity in everyday life. This makes the telephone a powerful source of personal religious experience, causing its user to experience doubts practically every day about the necessity of its use.

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