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REFERENCES

Chris J. CHULOS, ***Converging worlds. Religion and community in peasant Russia, 1861-1917***. DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2003, 201 p.

- 1 Chris Chulos's study of peasant religious practice in the late imperial period makes a distinctive contribution to the enthusiastic, multi-voiced chorus of new works on Russian Orthodoxy. Chulos begins with a refreshingly personal and direct criticism of the artificial, but fervently sustained division between intellectually informed Orthodoxy and "unschooled faith." As he eloquently suggests, peasant practitioners of Orthodoxy easily integrated ritual and theology; their religion was no less real than that of intellectuals and church authorities schooled in religious thought. Chulos is similarly and satisfyingly critical of the secular prejudices of historians and ethnographers. Their disparaging categories, such as "*perezhitki*" (vestiges), relegated religious practice to an outmoded, superstitious past.
- 2 Freed from these conventions, Chulos focuses on religion in peasant villages of Voronezh province-chosen for its related images of backwardness and authenticity-over the last half century of tsarist rule. *Converging Worlds* describes peasants' engagement with Orthodoxy through several fascinating lenses. Most evocative of the ways that ordinary Orthodoxy was practiced in the provinces are Chulos's accounts of peasants' pilgrimages to shrines, their campaigns to control "their" local icons, their willingness to spend time and resources on persuading church authorities to rid them of egregiously incompetent priests, their efforts to build or move local churches. These homely, personal stories provide a sense of everyday ways of religious expression and organization in the Russian countryside.
- 3 As the title of the book suggests, Chulos puts these stories of religious expression into a larger context. He argues that events such as canonization of local saints bound peasant communities to the empire. The localization of Orthodox religious symbols in these

celebrations “helped to create a mosaic of unequal and adjustable parts that came to signify Russia” (p. 5). Local stories about place names with their references to heroes and achievements of Russian history are cited as further evidence for the connection of remote villages to the larger polity.

- 4 The thesis that religious activism enhanced linkages between peasants and the state is persuasive and important, but it is not consistently maintained throughout the book. Instead, Chulos also tries to fit his story into more conventional narratives of secularization, modernization, imperial doom, and national identity. His convincing description of peasants’ vigorous religious practice, their political activism through petitions and their energetic efforts to control resources clashes with a second line of argument that reduces sixty years and several generations of peasants’ experiences to a struggle between stable, comforting “tradition” and cold, urban “capitalism.” This baffling reversion to conventional and highly abstract characterizations of both peasantry and economy may be connected to the uneven source base of the book. The strongest parts of the text derive from Chulos’s readings of peasant petitions and local newspapers, while other sections are drawn uncritically from contemporary or later ethnographers who had their own views of peasant culture or from secondary sources. Chulos falls into the all too frequent practice of claiming to know what peasants thought, rather than basing his analysis more cautiously on what they wrote or did.
- 5 Despite these vestiges of secular historiography, *Converging Worlds* effectively displays the vitality of popular religious practice in the post-emancipation period. It is not an easy task to uncover the ways that rural people practiced Orthodoxy, but this book offers a glimpse of the hundreds of thousands of individual peasants who participated in canonizations, traveled to shrines, purchased pamphlets describing lives of saints, borrowed books from parish libraries.
- 6 As Chulos shows, many peasants cared enough to petition authorities to improve the quality of religious services; they made legal efforts as well to contest the allocation of land between villages and priests. These actions speak not for a single peasant way of life, but for the multiple and varied interests of rural people, and their informed engagement with administrative and religious institutions. *Converging Worlds* makes this dynamism, energy, and knowledge central to the ways that peasants practiced Orthodoxy.