

The (Non-)Orthodox Tradition, the (Non-)Orthodox Everydayness

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Abstract:

What is the relation between the Christian Orthodox tradition and people's everyday lives? The volume, *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, edited by anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann, aims to "describe the workings of prayer in a tradition where hierarchies and prescriptions matter but where they are deployed through flexible and highly personal relationships" (p.12). In doing so, the authors of the chapters argue that living 'the perfect Orthodox' life is made both possible and difficult through the everyday interactions that people develop during their prayers. Hence, what people hear, see, and say even when they privately pray can be considered continuous relational milieu for negotiating and determining the 'right' ethical norms of the Christian Orthodox tradition.

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Abstract:

What is the relation between the Christian Orthodox tradition and people's everyday lives? The volume, *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, edited by anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann, aims to "describe the workings of prayer in a tradition where hierarchies and prescriptions matter but where they are deployed through flexible and highly personal relationships" (p.12). In doing so, the authors of the chapters argue that living 'the perfect Orthodox' life is made both possible and difficult through the everyday interactions that people develop during their prayers. Hence, what people hear, see, and say even when they privately pray can be considered continuous relational milieu for negotiating and determining the 'right' ethical norms of the Christian Orthodox tradition.

In her edited volume, *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann collaborates with a group of ten anthropology professors and students to investigate the significance of praying among different Orthodox Christian populations and communities across the globe. By bringing together different case studies from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, the authors of book's chapters link their various empirical ethnographies to extensively understand the theological, political, social, and economic nuances that constitute the 'right' prayers together with how such acts are connected to the 'Orthodoxy' of people's everyday sensorium.

In her introductory chapter, Luehrmann illustrates that making sense of an everyday life that is lived with and through a religious tradition is not exclusive to her book in particular or to the sub-discipline of anthropology of (Eastern/Orthodox) Christianity in general. In earlier academic scholarship, the advocates of an anthropology of Islam have researched how the hierarchical and prescribed tradition of Islam could be linked to and made suitable for mundane and ordinary lives, practices,

and experiences. In this regard, Luehrmann borrows one of her main analytical key concepts from prominent anthropologist Talal Asad who has primarily noted that Islamic texts and rituals should be regarded as a “discursive tradition” that is less about the “repetition of an old form” than about the “practitioners’ conceptions of what is apt performance, and how the past is related to present practices” (p.13 in Talal Asad: “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.” *Qui Parle* 17(2), (1986) 2009, 20-21). Hence, Luehrmann points out that the acts of prayer reflect people’s agential skills in discursively weaving ‘the Orthodoxy’ that “can produce quite strong distinctions from non-Orthodox outsides” (p.16). As will be identified throughout this essay, these ‘outsides’ are both reasons and causes of the ‘Orthodoxy’. Moreover, at the end of the text, I will shortly comment on how the book has the potential to open pathways for further examinations of such ‘outsides’ in future research.

To be sure, the agency that Luehrmann explores is not ultimately based on people’s free will. Moreover, the volume’s writers also examine the ‘Orthodoxy’ of people’s everydayness, that is, the ‘right’ way of living a life by placing people’s prayers within a web of authoritative conditions and circumstances that guide their senses and, hence, their spirituality. For instance, in his chapter that is based on a transnational fieldwork study conducted in Ukraine, Romania, and South India, Vlad Naumescu refers to how the process of becoming ‘Orthodox’ requires people’s “mastery” (p.29) (i.e. familiarity) of the necessary knowledge that would cultivate their religious-selves. Nevertheless, this ‘mastery’ cannot be interpreted without a “mystery” (p.31) that usually embraces aspects that are beyond one’s logic but that guarantee the ‘appropriateness’ of such tradition. Put differently, Naumescu states that the “actualization of tradition is a matter of everyday practice, whether through performance...or personal reflection” (p.46). However, he manifests that a Christian Orthodox who wishes to pursue the ‘perfect’ image and likeness of God should develop everyday interactions with the divine that are ‘strange’ to and that cannot be fully grasped by her/his empirical sensorium. In my opinion, it is this space between what is ‘familiar’ and what is ‘strange’ as Naumescu puts it, where the core arguments of the rest of the book are more or less positioned.

To begin, similar to Naumescu’s ‘mysterious’ interaction with God’s ‘perfect’ nature, Angie Heo’s chapter describes the everyday relationships that Coptic Christians in Egypt form with the ‘sacred’ icons of the Saints in order to emulate them. By praying in front of the icons using ritual scripts and pedagogies, Copts “remember human capacities to become divine through concrete techniques of the imagination” (p.85). This imagination starts with touching, kissing, and lighting candles in front of the ‘sacred’ icons. It continues when Copts read the hagiographies of the Saints during the communal liturgy or as part of their individual prayers. However, in doing so, Copts wait for the holy personhood to be enacted upon them from elsewhere. Beyond what they see, hear, and say, the ‘Orthodoxy’ of their prayers has to be mutually confirmed through the “supernatural agency [of the Saint] in

the material world and acts with extraordinary authority...such as cures and healings, prophecies, exorcisms, visions, and visitations from beyond” (p.92).

It should be noted that the “extraordinary authority” (p.92) that helps in determining the ‘insides’ and the ‘outsides’ of the Christian Orthodox tradition does not necessarily have to exist in the ‘heavens’ and in the hands of divine beings. Other chapters in the book emphasize that humans within the empirical world might hold this authority. Within this context, in their two chapters about Orthodox Christians in Russia, Sonja Luehrmann and Jeanne Kormina illustrate the ability of their interlocutors to “tailor their prayers to their needs and demands...with or without the blessing of a priest” (p.124). Through personalizing “the texts provided by the prayer book” (p.124) and by constructing a space that translates their imagination of “belonging to the institution of the church” (p.144), Luehrmann and Kormina consecutively refer to the ‘mastery’ of their interlocutors to live as ‘good’ Christians. Paradoxically, both chapters also focus on the voluntary submission of Orthodox Russians not only to the authority of priests but also to the one of their elder relatives. By “delegating” (p.128) others to pray for them and by accepting the orders of the Church clerical hierarchy that their “everyday life... should be concentrated on serving the local parish church” (p.151), Orthodox Russians admit their ‘limitations’ of knowing *everything* about the ‘Orthodoxy’ of the tradition of prayer, and about how it should effectively work in their lives.

Finally, some chapters demonstrate that the cultivation of the ‘true’ ethical norms of an ‘Orthodox’ life happens not only when admitting one’s relative ‘ignorance’ of and ‘unfamiliarity’ with what ‘Orthodoxy’ is, but also when fully ‘estranging’ and ‘abandoning’ the ‘non-Orthodox otherness’. As William A. Christian Jr. explicitly elaborates in his epilogue, “Orthodoxy...after all, like all other great traditions, arose defining itself against what it was *not*” (p.250, emphasis added). For example, Jeffers Engelhardt observes how constructing “projects of everyday self-fashioning through Orthodox media” (p.76) in Greece is made possible when the “unbeneficial noise of urban life” (p.77) is defined by practitioners in opposition to Christian Orthodox prayers. Similarly, Tom Boylston shows how the Christian Orthodox soundscapes in Ethiopia are manufactured through their differentiation from the melodies produced by the Islamic mosques and their aural expansion in the city via loudspeakers. In parallel, Daria Dubovka asserts that the ‘modern luxurious’ “technological innovations” (p.204) happening ‘outside’ contemporary Russian convents explain the ‘non-Orthodox’ phenomena that urge the nuns to paradoxically preserve the ‘Orthodoxy’ of the ‘traditional’ and ‘humble’ everyday prayers ‘inside’ the convents. Last but not least, the chapter by Simon Pop displays dichotomous features of the “revivals” (p.227) of the Orthodox tradition in Romania such as ‘modern’ and ‘anti-modern’, ‘political’ and ‘apolitical’, ‘lay’ and ‘clerical’ among many others that people raise while debating the ‘righteousness’ of their prayers.

In short, Luehrmann's edited volume is a profound yet accessible invitation for anthropology and religious studies scholars and students to look at Christian Orthodox tradition in terms of its everyday importance and relevance to the lives and the senses of the believers. The chapters highlighted in this review in addition to the six very interesting ethnographic vignettes and fifteen impressive photographs that I did not have the chance to mention in this text reveal that traditions in general are by no means a dead matter from the past. On contrary, the Christian Orthodox tradition is discursively produced as a result of imaginations and debates of the 'Orthodox' everyday prayers and, more importantly, in opposition to the 'non-Orthodox outsiders'.

In this regard, one important thing that this book in specific together with the relevant literature in general could have benefited from is to further have a look on what would happen when/if the same people who would attempt to weave an 'Orthodox' everydayness- as Luehrmann notes in her introduction- would simultaneously develop relationships and interactions that are *not* part of such everydayness. Accordingly, I suggest pluralizing the concept of everydayness as Talal Asad did with notion of the tradition. In other words, thinking through a discursive set of *everydayness(es)* could reflect the tactics people adopt while pursuing 'the perfect' Christian lives on one hand and while equally cultivating other non-Orthodox' ways of being and becoming on the other hand. These tactics might be useful ethnographic methods to trace Orthodox Christians' agencies and authorities that are located 'outside' the everyday 'Orthodox' life *for their own sake* and not only in opposition to the 'insides' of this tradition. Moreover, such tactics could present tools to research the 'Orthodox' sensorium without essentially belittling or pointing out to 'negative' aspects about the affects of 'non-Orthodox' stories that people see, hear, and say.

German Abstract:

Die (nicht-)orthodoxe Tradition, die (nicht-)orthodoxe Alltäglichkeit

Welche Beziehung besteht zwischen der christlich-orthodoxen Tradition und dem Alltag der Menschen? Der Sammelband *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* beschreibt mit anthropologischen Mitteln das religiöse Beten als eine in flexiblen Kontexten, Hierarchien und persönlichen Beziehungen eingebettete Praxis. Die Autoren der Kapitel argumentieren dabei, dass ein ‚orthodoxes‘ Leben durch die alltäglichen Interaktionen, die während der Gebete entwickelt werden, einerseits möglich gemacht, andererseits jedoch ebenso erschwert wird. Was Menschen hören, sehen und sagen, selbst wenn sie privat beten, kann daher als kontinuierliches Beziehungsmilieu angesehen werden, in dem die ‚richtigen‘ ethischen Normen der christlich-orthodoxen Tradition verhandelt und bestimmt werden.

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