



## FORUM 34–35: RELIGION, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE ‘ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION’

**Abstract:** This discussion concerns certain important issues in the anthropology of religion. In recent decades, there have been claims in the social sciences that ‘religion’ has outlived its usefulness as a concept, with criticism coming from a range of disciplines. Thus it is reasonable to ask how significant and intellectually credible the term ‘religion’ may be, and how useful to our research and writing. Other questions that may be encountered when studying religion(s) are related to the confessional or non-confessional identities of researchers. In the anthropology of religion, there is particularly extensive attention paid to the personal standpoint of individual scholars and specifically to the extent of their involvement with a given religious tradition. On the other hand, among the specificities of religious fieldwork is the high degree of ‘agency’ of our informants, as expressed especially in the efforts made in a particular religious group to convert the observer to their own beliefs. The participants of the discussion accept the challenges of these difficult problems, and strive to analyze the processes of anthropological and sociological description and interpretation of religion(s).

**Keywords:** anthropology of religion, ethics of fieldwork, religious conversion, epistemology, critiques of the scholarly category of religion, politics of identity.

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## **Participants in Forum 34–35: Religion, Anthropology, and the ‘Anthropology of Religion’**

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### FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

In the latest Forum published by the journal, participants were asked to address key questions in the anthropology of religion, one of the most active fields of investigation in post-Soviet Russia and internationally. The following questions were circulated, though a number of the participants chose to focus on just one of the issues raised, or to give an outline of their own work in the subject. The Forum attracted a record number of answers, not all of which are published in the English version, but we have published a substantial proportion of the material, including the final essay by Jeanne Kormina, Alexander Panchenko, and Sergei Shtyrkov, the organisers of the discussion.

*Albert Baiburin,  
Catriona Kelly*

- 1 *In recent decades, there have been claims in the social sciences that ‘religion’ has outlived its usefulness as a concept, with criticism coming from across the disciplinary range. Examples include the claim that ‘Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes’ [Smith 1982: ix], or Asad’s contention that ‘a transhistorical definition of religion is not viable’ [Asad 1993: 30], or Boyer and Bergstrom’s assertion that religion is ‘a common prescientific category’<sup>1</sup> rather than a useful heuristic concept in scholarly enquiry. How significant and intellectually creditable do you consider the term ‘religion’? How helpful is it to your own research and writing? In what contexts would you use it? Do you consider that it is requisite to employ special methods and approaches in the study of ‘religious’ groups, practices, and movements?*
- 2 *In the anthropology of religion, there is particularly extensive attention to the personal standpoint of individual scholars and specifically of the extent of their involvement with the religious tradition under scrutiny. What, in your view, are the reasons for this? What does this heightened sensitivity to the identity of scholars tell us about the particularities of the religious ‘field’ (or ‘fields’)?*
- 3 *The characteristic practice of anthropological research is that the cultures under study are to a greater or less extent perceived as ‘other’. How significant in your own analytical work is the ‘defamiliarisation’ of the religious cultures that you observe, the preservation (or creation) of distance from the object in view? Or are such issues not of concern in your work?*
- 4 *Among the specificities of religious fieldwork is the high degree of ‘agency’ of our informants, as expressed especially in the efforts made by contacts in a particular religious group to convert the observer to their own beliefs. This is particularly the case when the groups concerned are anyway engaged in active proselytism, as with charismatic Christian groups, for instance [Harding 1987; Kormina 2013]. But this is by no means the only case where members of religious groups may make efforts to make the researcher ‘one of them’. Have you yourself encountered such efforts, and if so, did you follow the path of distance or assimilation? Which strategy is most effective, in your view? Have you ever encountered difficulties because of your refusal to undergo religious conversion of one kind or another?*
- 5 *In the contemporary world, the impact of electronic communication and particularly of the Internet means that it is in principle easy for our research findings to become accessible to members of the groups under study — and we may indeed ourselves pass on our publications and*

<sup>1</sup> ‘The term religion is to an evolutionary anthropologist what “tree” is to an evolutionary botanist, a common prescientific category that may need to be replaced with other, causally grounded, scientific categories’ [Boyer, Bergstrom 2008: 112].

research papers to them. What impact does this have on our research into religious culture? Does the accessibility of research results to informants represent a problem for scholars, or an opportunity?

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## YULIA ANTONYAN

1

The question of the term ‘religion’ is part of a broader academic discussion around the basic concepts of sociology such as ‘culture’, ‘civilisation’, ‘society’, ‘identity’,<sup>1</sup> etc., the use of which is becoming more and more difficult as a result of a growing multiplicity of meanings and resulting vagueness. At the same time it would be even more problematic not to use such concepts at all, since in that case a certain level of abstraction, which is essential to academic knowledge, would be lost. The term ‘religion’ is also stuck in a hermeneutic cul-de-sac: not only, as anthropology has evolved, has its scope been widened and its meanings transformed, but so has the relativity of its ‘direct’ and ‘metaphorical’ usage. It is hard to understand where religion is religion as such, and where it is ‘religion’ in inverted commas, that is a phenomenon which does not seem to be a religion, but which has all the features of one (e.g. ideology). The many attempts to define religion have only made the problem worse. Those definitions which make one think of religion as a term when one reads them are, as a rule,

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a long and extensive discussion of the term ‘culture’ in academic publications (see, for example: [Gupta, Ferguson 1997]); Norbert Elias and Lucien Febvre have written about the relative nature of the term ‘civilisation’ [Febvre 1930; Elias 2000], Bruno Latour has reflected on the topic of ‘society’ [Latour 2005], and Rogers Brubaker has warned against an over-active use of the term ‘identity’ [Brubaker 2004].

very narrow and include only a small part of the characteristics of the phenomenon (such as 'the institution of relationships with supernatural beings'). But when, for example, one reads Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion, which aims to describe the phenomenon as widely as possible, it is extremely difficult to guess what he has in mind.<sup>1</sup> Hence the conclusion that the understanding of religion as a whole continues to be very subjective and specific, despite efforts to expand and universalise it. On the other hand, if we reject the very provisional term 'religion' in favour of a series of more concrete terms, we may be faced with the collapse of the theoretical foundations of the discipline, which may lead to the loss of a systematic vision and the logical connections between a multitude of phenomena which the present-day concept of religion embraces. A multiplicity of new directions will emerge, and each of them will end up inventing the wheel and discovering America, and then conduct long discussions about whether it would not be worth reuniting (which, as we know, is practically impossible for a whole range of technical reasons, as has happened in the case of the separation of sociology and anthropology, which took place accidentally and at the whim of different scholars and institutions, so that now they cannot come together again, although no one can give a comprehensible explanation of what the difference between them is). On the other hand, this 'systematic vision' is also an academic construct, and whether the system really exists is questionable. Indeed, why should we unite archaic magical rites intended to increase the harvest or the fertility of domestic beasts with a collection of social norms such as sharia? What is systematic about that? Only that both are founded on the presence of a world view that asserts the existence of a certain power which is capable of creating and transforming objects, living beings, processes and phenomena? This is very abstract and again begs a lot of questions.

But notwithstanding, none of those who criticise the term 'religion' have, in principle, anything to offer in its place, just as nothing has yet been offered in place of the concepts of 'culture' and 'society'. It may be that from the point of view of scholarship (or simply of common sense?), just reinterpreting a well-known, familiar word, adding new meanings and excluding obsolete ones, offers better prospects than inventing a lot of new terms instead of one old one. Perhaps the fundamental task of the anthropology of religion is indeed the constant renewal of the discourse of the understanding of the term 'religion' through the study of its various facets, manifestations, transformations of old meanings and identification of new ones.

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<sup>1</sup> 'A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' [Geertz 1973: 90].

2

They say that it is the people who need to deal with the bats in their own belfry that become psychologists. To a certain extent this is true of anthropologists and sociologists in the context of their choice of research topics. An interest in a particular sphere of anthropology often develops against the background of the peculiarities of the anthropologist's personal biography or the social milieu in which his / her personality was formed. The connection between anthropologists' and sociologists' personal interrelations with religion was discussed by Evans-Pritchard in his essay 'Religion and the Anthropologists'. He found a certain regularity: most of the anthropologists of religion who had preceded him or were his contemporaries had a completely secular attitude to the object of their research (as an invention, an illusion, in a word, what is now called a social construct), while the religious group of anthropologists were invariably Catholics, which proved, in his opinion, that Protestantism included the premisses for a secular perception of religion [Evans-Pritchard 1960: 104–18]. This conclusion may be related to the fact that the founding fathers of anthropological theories of religion, Edward Tylor, James George Frazer and Émile Durkheim, had all grown up in very religious Protestant or Jewish families. Now too, amongst anthropologists and sociologists of religion one may encounter both religious people who actively practice their religion and completely secular people. But, to tell the truth, I would not speak of any concrete regularity, although, based on my personal observations, the number of secular anthropologists of religion is far greater than the number of religious ones. But again, the manifestations of the religious and the secular may be very ambiguous and individual. One person's religion may be a tribute to his / her family tradition and part of their identity, while another's uncompromising secularity may be a hidden form of religion. Besides, we know of cases when anthropologists have changed their position in the course of their research and become practising initiates of the tradition that they were studying, receiving, for example, initiation as a shaman. It seems to me that often the choice of a particular field or topic of research may be dictated (sometimes subconsciously) by inner problems, contradictions, convictions and spiritual / intellectual searching, not necessarily of a religious character.

In the secular Soviet milieu, an interest in religion as something forbidden but desirable could also manifest itself through scholarship. Moreover, since direct research into religion was also unwelcome to the Soviet academic establishment, religious topics were studied in the wider context of 'archaic traditions', 'popular beliefs and superstitions', folklore, etc. Furthermore, the collection and study of 'traditional' beliefs and practices was often perceived not only as preserving them and saving them from oblivion, but also as material for their potential reconstruction. The ethnographers and folklorists

who had begun their careers in the 60s and 70s became in the 90s initiators of the 'reconstruction' of various practices (magical, shamanic, parochial, festival, etc.). In general, in the 90s the tendency towards the 'rationalisation' and commercialisation of scholarship, in connection with the commercialisation of all spheres of society, was very fashionable — a practical use and pragmatic application had to be found for everything. I myself was given 'advice' on more than one occasion to write something practical and applied, such as a guide to traditional healing practices (while I was writing my dissertation about them) or (while I was doing research into neopaganism) to assist in the reconstruction of some pagan ritual or the details of the cult of some divinity or other. For me, of course, this was just an opportunity for irony, but for many people this sort of activity was part of their personal relation to religion. One of my colleagues, whose field of interest was polytheistic religions, became seriously interested in the possibility of becoming the priestess of a neopagan community.

3

The degree to which one is distanced from the subject of one's research depends, in my view, on the preconditions and context of the research. There was indeed a time when the fundamental idea of anthropology, which was born in the West at the time of modernism and evolutionary theories, was to penetrate 'another' culture (tacitly understood as 'less developed') and try to 'translate' it into the language of 'one's own' culture (correspondingly 'more developed') with the aim of the better understanding of the latter's evolutionary journey. Moreover, the word 'another' was understood literally, and the further it was from the researcher's place of residence, the more unfamiliar, the more exotic, the better. One must without fail journey to the ends of the earth, learn languages that were as different as possible from one's own, and live in conditions which were as dissimilar as possible from what one was used to. Then, when local 'ethnography' arose as a counterbalance to colonial anthropology, its task was the reconstruction, study and interpretation of 'its own' culture (of which the anthropologist / ethnographer considered himself / herself a representative), with the aim, as a rule, of raising its prestige, 'preserving' and 'saving' its traditional forms from the processes of modernisation in the context of nationalist ideologies and movements. However, today both these patterns are losing, or have already lost, their relevance. Now any community or culture is studied as the 'other', in relation first and foremost to the researcher himself / herself, irrespective of the cultural or social milieu from which he / she comes. Sometimes the road to the 'other' is reminiscent of the archaeological method of 'excavation', when the researcher wants to show that in familiar social and cultural surroundings one can find an unfamiliar 'other', little-known or completely unknown, with which most members of the said community do not come into

contact in their everyday lives. Thus the French scholar Jeanne Favret-Saada, who was born in North Africa and worked there as an anthropologist, afterwards ‘unearthed’ in modern France completely ‘archaic’ practices of witchcraft and magic comparable to what they have in Africa, invisible to the eye, not part of everyday life, but incorporated into the context of the social interrelations in the milieu studied [Favret-Saada 2007]. I have found myself doing the same in Armenia, ‘discovering’ magical practices of healing and divination, contact with which gave rise to a feeling of a journey into a mythical ‘timeless’ past, or observing neopagan rituals. Closed communities, to which outsiders and the unconverted have limited access, such as a monastery, may also serve as examples of such an ‘other’. In other cases, anthropological research tries rather to construct (and then deconstruct) ‘the other’ in a milieu which is considered entirely ‘one’s own’ according to its social, cultural and temporal parameters. This is the genesis of research that discusses various mechanisms and subtleties of the formation of religious identity, for example, or religious everyday life, holiday practices, etc., of the average social or ethnic majority to which the researcher himself / herself belongs. In these two cases the problem of distance which the question raises is completely different. In the first case the distance is there from the beginning; both the researcher and the informant are aware of it, and the aim of their communication is precisely to overcome this distance, which was always the traditional aim of anthropology. In the second case the distance is deliberately constructed by the researcher himself / herself, since he / she needs to discern ‘the other’ in a place where there is much more of ‘his / her own’.

4

I have come across situations where my interest in a community, its members, and their ideas and practices has been understood as the interest of a potential convert or at least as that of someone drawn to these ideas if only subconsciously (‘you didn’t come here by chance’), the logical culmination of which ought to be conversion. Thus after a week of ‘visiting’ a community of the newly-formed ‘Spring of Life’ movement, Protestant in character, in the Armenian community of Lebanon, my new acquaintances, who up to then had answered all my questions with enthusiasm, began to display open impatience: ‘You have found out so much and seen so much, now it is time for you to accept Christ into your heart’. I had to reply that I had not yet made the decision and I needed more time. Such an answer was received with understanding. But I never found out how long that ‘understanding’ would have lasted, since my stay in Lebanon was, unfortunately, not long enough. However, I had similar problems lying in wait for me among the neopagans with whom I made friends and in whose community I was, on the whole, accepted as ‘one of their own’ precisely because I never raised objections to anything

they asserted. This was probably perceived as a readiness to convert, since I had only to make certain incautious comments in a recent public lecture concerning the discourse about 'the genetics of the nation' to unleash a storm of bewilderment, disappointment and resentment from my neopagan friends, who suddenly discovered that I did not share some of their fundamental convictions. Judging by some of the comments that reached me, they seem to have decided that this was a temporary madness, the influence of external evil forces. How I shall recover from my 'madness' in order to return to the field I do not yet know.

For me personally the problem is not agency itself, but certain of its forms. 'Agency' may manifest itself anywhere where there is the conviction that this particular religion / ideology / world view is the sole bearer of truth. Vegans, for example, can be no less 'agentive' than Jehovah's Witnesses, even taking into account that the latter are active proselyters as a matter of duty. But this can become a real problem when 'agency' is directed not towards the exposition and apologetics of one's convictions with the aim of attracting other people to one's side, but towards the aggressive identification of those who do not agree, as a result of which the researcher is directly or indirectly required to state his / her position clearly. In this case such a situation makes the research very difficult, and sometimes psychologically impossible. Thus I have understood that I subconsciously avoid contact with aggressively minded personalities and prefer to deal with more liberal informants, which of course might have an influence on the objectivity of the results of the research. But sometimes this is beyond me. Thus one interview with a priest — a militant supporter of the patriarchal family, a homophobe and fundamentalist — during which he set out his convictions and proudly recounted examples of his 'struggle' for them, was so difficult that by the end of it I had a feeling of complicity in his activities, which were not only inhuman but, in fact, criminal. In order to neutralise that feeling at least, I had cautiously to express my attitude to certain of his stories. In reply he started to instruct me in a self-satisfied manner that I was wrong to 'pity them', because 'they are not human beings'. I did not dare to express any stronger opposition for fear of spoiling my field, but I am still not sure that I was right to act as I did. Overall, in such cases I am always faced with the question of where the boundary lies between the researcher and the human being with certain convictions, and in which cases it ought to be crossed, and in which one ought to restrain oneself and remain 'behind the scenes', or even play along with it. And to what extent this can be regarded as hypocrisy. The answers to these questions always depend on situation and context; I hardly think it possible to draw up a universal model for the researcher's behaviour and reactions in such cases.

5

As in everything else, in the situation described one can see both the problem and the prospects. Everyone knows the problems: the reaction of a religious community that is being studied may be completely unpredictable, even to the point of creating obstacles to further contact with them. Naturally, it goes without saying that texts which may become accessible to people who have been subjects of research must be written in accordance with all the norms and rules of ethics (which, incidentally, does not always happen in reality), but even under these conditions it is precisely the neutral, secular tone of description and analysis proper to academic texts that may seem offensive to a religious person. The emphasis that a researcher places on particular materials may also provoke disagreement. Moreover, the reaction is not necessarily from the subject 'being studied'. For example, after one of my articles about neopagans, in which I mentioned that among the neopagan converts there was a priest, I received a phone call from the chancery at Etchmiadzin (the residence of the Catholicos of All Armenians) demanding either that I should give the person's name or else write a denial of this 'slander' on the clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In the process of the interview an anthropologist is often required to give at least an external expression of agreement with the thoughts, ideas and norms that are part of the religious identity of the persons being studied (see the previous answer). The researcher must create the illusion of loyalty, that is pretend that he / she at least has no serious objections. But when we write our texts often what we are engaged in is the deconstruction of what makes up the essence of the convictions and practices of the religious community being studied. When an anthropologist's behaviour is compared with his / her texts it may well create an impression of hypocrisy, and even of malice (if the informants are inclined towards conspiracy theory).

But besides this, the very situation, in which one person is in the position of the researcher, tacitly recognised as a 'high' position, and the other is in the position of 'being researched', which is consciously perceived as a lower position (analogous to the positions of doctor and patient or teacher and pupil) may create an unpleasant feeling for the 'subject', particularly if in his / her opinion the researcher is less intellectually and spiritually evolved than he / she, the informant, is himself / herself. After all, anthropologists are people too (forgive me for being trite), there are those among them who are pleasant and those who are unpleasant, those who are witty and widely educated and those who are less so, winsome, charismatic, and the reverse. But, I think, when in the field, all are visited by the temptation to believe themselves something of a superman (or superwoman), who holds everything that takes place around him / her in his / her field of attention, or even has the ability to change or direct the course of events by means of his / her questions or actions. However, very

often this position of a 'superman' subconsciously or deliberately seeps into the tone of the texts written up on the basis of his / her results, which may upset the informants, whose attitude to the text may be partly based on their personal impressions of the researcher. In a word, it is almost impossible to avoid problems connected with the accessibility of the results of the research to the community that has been its subject, because of the extreme subjectivity and unpredictability of their reactions. As a last resort one might write about very sensitive topics in languages which the subjects of the research cannot for the most part read (assuming, of course, that the researcher is able to do so).

There are without doubt, however, also opportunities in this, including above all reaching a new level of demand for anthropological scholarship and a new interactive research methodology. In the end, any decent anthropological text is an attempt at self-knowledge, speaking in the name of a human community. It may be painful both for the 'subject' and the author, it is true, in rather different senses, and for the author this may go as far as threats against his / her liberty, health and life, if it is a question, for example, of doing research in the fundamental milieu of radical Islam or the militant nationalist branches of Christianity. But perhaps this is a unique means of making anthropology a really necessary discipline, and not a 'glass bead game'. As for the research methodology, the 'etic' approach will be replaced by a dialogue, an interaction between the emic and etic approaches to the topic. The informants' reaction to the research becomes a part of it. In this way the research does not end with the writing up and publication of the text, it continues, one might say, spontaneously, since it is on the basis of informants' reactions that the social discourse on the topic is composed and it is possible to see the real disposition of forces and influences, the distribution, recognisability and similar perception of ideas, practices, signs, stereotypes and so on, and finally identify a series of meanings hitherto unclear and hidden behind the conventions of social interrelationships. At a wider level of comparisons, the 'primary' academic text may become the provocation that models a concrete situation, which gives the anthropologist the possibility of working practically in 'laboratory' conditions.

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## SIMON COLEMAN

### Looking at and beyond Religion

1

It seems to me that, nowadays, anthropologists of religion contend with at least three ways in which 'religion' is constructed as an analytical object.

First of all there is what I call the 'historically contingent' approach, expressed by Talal Asad and Jonathan Z. Smith in Question 1, but also proposed by the religious studies scholar Russ McCutcheon in an argument that he originally developed in the academic environment where I work today: the interdisciplinary Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. McCutcheon's basic claim in *Manufacturing Religion* [McCutcheon 1997: viii] is that 'the category of religion is a conceptual tool and ought not to be confused with an ontological category actually existing in reality.'

While this 'contingent' approach denies the existence of religion *sui generis*, it does not negate the value of studying religion as a category that may be shaped and operationalised by numerous interest groups, including religious practitioners, scholars, politicians, cultural entrepreneurs, and indeed people who combine these roles. At times, the 'object of study' becomes precisely how religion itself is constructed *as* an object. This kind of approach is well equipped to examine the apparently contradictory trajectories of contemporary religion — for instance the persistence of models

of secularisation along with the fact that religious discourses retain a powerful role in the public and civic spheres of many societies.

To this intellectual camp should be added the valuable stream of analysis within the emergent anthropology of Christianity that has asked to what extent anthropology is itself partially a product of Christian-inflected thinking. Over the last two decades, this sub-field has encouraged a re-examination of anthropology's origins as well as its historical taboos, highlighting the repressed 'Christianity of anthropology' [Cannell 2005]. Similarly, in Asad's view, our understandings and approaches to religious meaning are likely situated within assumptions about coherence that have roots in manifestations of Christian thought itself [Asad 1993: 29; Tomlinson, Engelke 2006: 3].

While the contingent approach has been important and influential, I am not convinced that the claims to analytical novelty evident in works such as McCutcheon's are quite as strong as they might appear. In practice, most anthropologists have long operated with some version of a contingent, social constructivist view of religion, at least to the degree that they have refused to perceive religion as inherently set-apart, rather than always already embedded within much wider social and cultural frameworks of reference and action. While it is true that scholars have not paid enough attention (in print) to the ways in which the structures of the academy have shaped the latter's concepts, the idea itself is not in itself revelatory. We also need to be careful not to grant religion a particular form of exceptionalism: while scholarship on 'religion' reflects that fact that it is a product of the academy and associated institutional forces, so too does work on 'economics,' 'politics,' and so on.

What is perhaps not fully appreciated in some of these debates is how our new forms of reflexivity about Christianity are also rooted in, and partially emergent from, larger institutional developments and intellectual trajectories in our discipline: the move toward anthropologies of 'home', increased interest in elite forms of discourse, a rapprochement with history, and the relativising effects of an anthropology that is slowly (all too slowly) recognising the influences of its Euro-American institutional roots. Another vital factor, of course, has been the very obvious expansion of Evangelical, Pentecostal, Muslim influences from previously colonised parts of the work into new global diasporas, including supposedly secular northern Europe.

A second anthropological construction of religion as object makes it look very different to the contingent approach. Going beyond older intellectualisms, cognitively-inspired theorists propose that religious dispositions or latent capacities are hard-wired into our mental apparatus as a consequence or side-effect of human evolution

(for a useful and balanced summary, see: [Salazar 2010], for a wide-ranging assessment, see: [Keane 2015]). It seems unfortunate that, with some exceptions (e.g. [Whitehouse, Laidlaw (eds.) 2007]), the cognitivist and the contingent camps have had relatively little to say to each other. Part of the reason for this lack of communication may be that very different temporal and spatial scales are at play. The long *durée* of evolution is revealed through a different observational apparatus than that necessary to provide fine-gained descriptions of specific ethnographic events. But the cleavage also — like the recent emergence of the anthropology of Christianity — exposes one of the repressed paradoxes on which anthropology has tended to rest: the celebration of radical *difference* at the level of culture, alongside the assertion of radical *similarity* at the level of human physiology.

Cognitive approaches to anthropology have taken inspiration from psychology, just as contingent frames have been influenced by, among other things, studies of history and literature. Similarly my third analytical construction of religion does not involve a discrete disciplinary stance, but rather an insufficiently acknowledged tendency. Anthropologists like to tell themselves that their ethnographic methodology marks them out as uniquely grounded and opportunistic ‘data gatherers’ within cultural ecosystems. Yet, at the same time, we have always been more theoretically hybrid than such declarations of uniqueness have implied, ranging from James Frazer’s use of classical scholarship, Evans-Pritchard’s interest in history, philosophy’s effect on Geertz, and so on. Our understandings and experiences of religion are derived not only from the ethnographic field but also from often interdisciplinary conversations. In this sense, one of the more heated current conversations in the anthropology of religion, that between anthropology and theology, is interesting because it re-examines and to some degree re-ignites the original ideological skirmishes out of which anthropology emerged. Whereas the theologian John Milbank [Milbank 1990] has condemned what he sees as the social scientific appropriation of understandings of religion, Joel Robbins [Robbins 2006] has used Milbank’s work as one of the catalysts for considering what it might mean to construct an ethically committed anthropology of Christianity. Since then, work has been produced that assesses the intersections between philosophy, anthropology and theology [Robbins, Engelke 2010], possible rapprochements between anthropology and theology (e.g. [Meneses et al. 2014]) as well as warnings that such dialogue might imply not only rediscovering the Christian roots of anthropology, but also reinserting them [Varisco 2017].

In my own work, I have never made a concerted attempt to provide a ‘definitive’ definition of religion, and nor have I felt it necessary. Although I am an anthropologist of religion currently located

in a department of religion, I do not see my fundamental subject-matter as being 'religion' *per se*. To put the point clearly if crudely, I am an anthropologist first and foremost, and a scholar of religion secondarily. Or, to put it another way, my purpose in studying Pentecostalism or pilgrimage is to learn about how humans organise themselves and their worlds, not to isolate either phenomenon and relegate it to a generic or *sui generis* sphere of religious practice. In this sense, my work appears to lie more in the 'contingent' than the 'cognitive' wing of the discipline, but that is not because I regard the physiological basis of human cultural activity to be irrelevant to anthropology, or beyond what some scholars of religion might be able to comment on. My point is rather that my methodology does not equip me to make sensible comments on the evolutionary basis of whatever might enable or predispose humans to engage in the various activities we currently call 'religious'.

On the other hand, I see my work as having two political implications that are precisely associated with what we might call the *non*-definition of religion. One is that I do not separate the field from the classroom in my work: I see both as inherent dimensions of the role of an anthropologist, for whom communicating about the discipline is of equal value to research in the field: indeed, both are important forms of knowledge production. And, when I engage with my students of 'religion', my task is precisely to encourage them to question what they might mean by the term, using all the comparative means I have at my disposal.

Another implication relates to the fact that, in recent years, social scientists have often allowed natural scientists to hijack definitions of religion in ways that are deeply problematic. Here I refer to the kind of 'science versus religion' discourse that we have seen promulgated by so-called new atheists such as Richard Dawkins in his attacks on creationism. As the philosopher Mary Midgley [Midgley 2008: XVIII] has remarked of the simple binaries involved in such heated discussions in the public sphere, we cannot grasp the range of religion by reducing it to a single local model that is then simply universalised. Dawkins's restricted characterisation of religion certainly illustrates Asad's point about the politics of definition. In my view, a figure such as Dawkins reduces the intellectual force of his own arguments by failing to pay attention to the sociological make up and hermeneutic understandings of the people against whom he pitches his arguments. By so doing, in advancing his version of natural scientific epistemology, he sidelines the importance of social scientific analyses of the world [Coleman 2015]. We should not allow such a simple view of either religion or science to permeate the public sphere: the social as well as the natural sciences should be involved in trying to explain why and how certain people appear to believe as they do.

2

The question of the scholar's religious standpoint obviously raises some intriguing dilemmas for anthropologists. On the whole — despite many exceptions — ethnographers of religion tend to assume a secular analytical stance (e.g. [Stewart 2001]). At the same time, our close-to-the ground, encounter-rich methodology encourages attempts to inhabit the world views of others. While the ethnographic orientation of even secular anthropologists is often colored by post-Romantic notions of religion as an especially effective means of entering informants' life-worlds, as noted I see our discipline as fundamentally concerned with illustrating how religion is *not* most usefully examined as a discrete, exceptional realm of experience, as if it were somehow able to provide more direct or authentic access to human consciousness than experiences of, say, work or family.

There is a wider point to be made here about our involvement in religious traditions, particularly in relation to long-standing insider-outsider debates. While accepting the significance of habitus in providing relatively stable cultural dispositions, I am largely sceptical of the idea that religious 'insiders' inherently possess privileged, consistent, and exclusive access to a realm of religious understanding that is entirely beyond the comprehension of the non-believing ethnographer. In this sense I do not agree with Evans-Pritchard's famous assertion (from the standpoint of a believer) that religion can only be grasped from within. To suggest that the interpretative frames of informants are fundamentally different from or inaccessible to those of the ethnographer specifically *because* of the possession of a mysterious yet substantive thing called 'belief' begs at least as many questions as it answers. Religious commitments ebb and flow, are enmeshed within wider aesthetic practices, are constituted within but also beyond sacred spaces and times, and may be cross-cut by other forms of commitment and experience [Coleman 2014].

Let me give just one example of what I mean. Abdi Kusow [Kusow 2003] describes his experience of immigration from Somalia to the United States in 1984, as a consequence of which he feels himself to be an outsider to his new country in at least three ways: by possessing an accent, by being Muslim, and by being black. When he carries out fieldwork in Toronto among Somali immigrants he finally expects these characteristics to be an advantage, yet soon finds himself prevented from significant interaction with female participants. He concludes that a Western, 'outsider', female ethnographer would in fact have gained better access to, and understanding of, the experience of such Somali women. For Kusow, to assume rigid identity distinctions is to fail to acknowledge that insiderhood and outsiderhood, like all social roles and statuses, are situational, emerging partly from the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context. Our informants, like us, tend to lead lives of multiple and sometimes conflicting political, cultural, and

religious affiliation. While such complexity makes it harder to describe the worlds they inhabit with any sense of coherence, it also implies that at times some 'believers' may have more in common with ethnographers than with fellow members of ostensibly the 'same' religion. As Magnus Marsden and Konstantinos Retsikas have recently argued in a book called *Articulating Islam* [Marsden, Retsikas 2013], anthropologists need to focus in much finer detail on the circumstances in and practices through which Islam is invoked, thus taking account of the existential uncertainties that mark the day-to-day life of humans, as well as the conscious thinking and position-taking of people of Muslim background in relation to particular circumstances and contexts. Such recognition extends the bounds and the challenges of our fieldwork, but it also involves many more points of ethnographic access to a 'religious tradition' than merely attending a mosque or prayer group.

3

I have had to negotiate different forms of defamiliarisation and creation / erasure of distance in my fieldwork career, depending on the form of religion being examined. My study of Prosperity-oriented Pentecostals in Sweden has involved working on believers who have exemplified Susan Harding's [Harding 1991] so-called 'repugnant cultural other': religiously and politically mistrusted at a national level, and actively opposed to many of the forms of cultural diversity espoused by anthropologists. Under such circumstances, part of my work as an anthropologist, in scholarly as well as more public contexts, has actually involved a certain degree of 'refamiliarisation', showing how apparently irrational and extreme religious adherence is both more complex and more nuanced than standard depictions of 'fundamentalism' might suggest. In this sense, my project has some kinship with Vincent Crapanzano's *Serving the Word* [Crapanzano 2000], where he argues that varieties of the literalism that forms part of the rhetoric of Christian fundamentalists are in fact also present in other parts of more obviously mainstream American culture, including legal discourse. In line with my reasoning in answer to Question 2, the point is that 'believers' and 'non-believers' may share more assumptions and modes of expression than initially meet the eye. It is therefore telling that Crapanzano also refers to the problematic nature of belief — its shifts in intensity and responses to the contingencies of circumstance.

Such fieldwork contrasts with my current work on the forms of Christianity practised in some of the great English cathedrals — Canterbury, Durham, York, and Westminster (see: <<http://materialreligions.blogspot.ca/2016/07/pilgrimage-and-city-studying-english.html>>). Such cathedral spirituality is often almost coterminous with aspects of elite English culture, and may seem as much a form of civic participation as overt religious engagement. Here, the ethnographic task is more akin to defamiliarisation (both for myself and for my

argument) in the sense that it is dedicated to finding new frameworks through which to understand parts of a very familiar English ecclesiastical landscape: How, for instance, might a cathedral be compared to a multi-faith centre? In what respects are such cathedrals to be seen not merely as picturesque relics of the past but also as prime expressions of an intensely urban and contemporary form of spirituality? And so on.

4

The groups I have studied have taken very different attitudes toward researchers being ‘one of them’, but not always in ways that I have expected. When I first went to study the Pentecostalist Word of Life ministry in the 1980s [Coleman 2000] I assumed that I would undergo constant pressure to convert. But in fact this was not especially the case, for a reason that was itself ethnographically revealing: the conversionist rhetoric of the group was combined with much looser policing of social and behavioural boundaries around an organisation that at the time was expanding and diffuse in its networks of association. In some respects, my identity as a researcher was much harder to negotiate in the ostensibly less conversionist and more traditional Pentecostalist Church in Uppsala, where social ties and forms of surveillance among members were rather tighter.

I want to add another dimension to this question, beyond the notion of conversion of the researcher. In all of my ‘religious’ fieldwork — in Pentecostal churches, hospital chaplaincies, pilgrimage sites, and cathedrals — informants have themselves been interested in the uses they might make of the anthropological ‘knowledge’ I was producing. In fact, this tendency has been most evident in the least ‘conversionist’ context — that of cathedrals, which are run by staff intensely self-conscious over the role of ‘religion’ in a country such as England. Thus while I have not found pressure to convert, I have had to negotiate the ‘encompassment’ and deployment of my work by informants for their own purposes. This is no bad thing; but it does remind us that anthropological knowledge is not just for anthropologists.

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## DARIA DUBOVKA

1

At the beginning of my anthropological studies I had no interest at all either in the term 'religion', nor in so-called religious groups. I chose my first object of study, Orthodox monasteries, in the hope of reproducing the research methods of the classics of anthropology, who would go off to distant and inaccessible corners of the earth in search of an exotic other. This attitude led to my trying out various research frameworks on the life of monastic communities. For example, my attention would be focused on the monasteries' economic activities, the techniques of subjectivisation of the monks and the peculiarities of everyday communication in religious houses.

I am still a partisan of the approach which does not start by stressing some religious nature of the group, and even analyses a group which identifies itself as religious simply as a group with its own history, power and economic relations, with its own ideas of the norms, its own rituals and folklore, and so forth. The difference between religious and secular groups, or between different types of religious group, will in that case be viewed in the different power dispositions of these groups. This approach follows the focus proposed by Talal Asad [Asad 1993] that is primarily on the structure and legitimisation of power, and refuses to recognise any extra-temporal essence behind the concept of 'religion'. Thus I am against any additional methodological separating out of religious groups, because they can perfectly well draw boundaries and assert their own uniqueness without any help from researchers. Our task is rather to deconstruct their uniqueness than to assent to it.

For me the approach described above is optimal when the scope of the research is a single or a few communities. Sometimes, however, partly for the sake of mental exercise, one wishes to consider the whole of human history as the subject of one's research, and set about the large questions of the nineteenth-century anthropologists, such as what religion is and where it

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comes from. In this case if one defines religion as a belief in certain supernatural beings [Tylor 1871] or invisible agents, new perspectives are revealed especially in the field of cognitive studies, which deals with the human imagination.

Since I came to anthropology as a result of a long-standing enthusiasm for fantasy literature, everything that is connected with the imaginary has a specific interest for me. For example, what is the difference between so-called traditional religious groups and Harry Potter or *Star Wars* fans? Why do fan clubs not last for centuries? Perhaps the reason is that, as Terry Pratchett said, 'the very oldest stories are, sooner or later, about blood' (*Hogfather* 2006), and our humane society has not yet executed a single convinced Potterian. Or, a little more seriously, and continuing Asad's idea, how is the often unconsidered faith of the secular communities of our day in human rights, democracy or the superiority of their own nation essentially different from belief in divinities and spirits? The answer might be found in the different power / personal relations with the supernatural / imagined: one person might be comfortable with a relationship that is as impersonal as possible with the significant imagined, while another prefers a personal relationship, which has the advantage of being able to shatter the statue of a saint who has failed to answer prayer.

Thus religion does not exist as an analytical category for me. All communities have to do with imagined actors, and either we look at how these communities include the imagined in their reality and what power they endue them with, or what these imagined actors, the capacity to invent them or the need for them, give to humanity as a species.

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My first research was carried out in Orthodox monasteries in the Russian Federation, then I did fieldwork in the Orthodox churches in Abkhazia and a Buddhist monastery in Hungary. In each case the research questions, methods and degree of detachment were different. However, if we are to generalise, then for me a researcher's involvement in a religious tradition and proselytism by informants seem to be phenomena with a common basis, namely the conviction that one can understand someone else only if one has similar experience. In anthropology this principle is the cornerstone of many theories, and is the basic method of the discipline: participant observation. I understand the researcher's personal involvement in the sense of a desire and readiness to experience for himself / herself what the informants regularly undergo, be it meditation for many hours or vigil services, the narrativisation of one's life in the Christian categories of sin and virtue, or an idea of the karmic connectedness of one's acts. And in this sense the expectation of a religious community that the anthropologist will follow their practices, at least

up to a point, is a regular expectation, insofar as anthropology is constructed on the same postulate of knowledge through practice.

However, my answer does deny religious groups the right to any special methodology and rejects the insider's privileged access to religious knowledge — anyone can start to practise it. Sex, age, personal characteristics, race and ethnic identity may help or hinder participation in certain practices, but here the situation in the anthropology of religion in no way differs from other areas of anthropology.

There are of course cases where a research question does not require deep immersion in the informants' *religious* practices, for example, if it is the group's economic activities that are of interest, but in most cases they are interconnected questions and in order the better to understand one's informants one has to share their religious experience.

If I engage in a physical, emotional, intellectual or communicative immersion in the community that I am studying, how can I keep my distance as a researcher? The way out for me is a wider synchronic and diachronic context for the research, which allows the group being studied to be relativised. I do not think that there is an even balance between immersion and relativisation: if, for example, according to spiritual practice I should be attending only to my own actions and seeking out imperfection within myself, and at the same time I am studying the hierarchies of power in the community, that is the end of my spiritual career. But most of the people in religious groups are not saints either, so such research will still reflect their expectations and actions. In this way there is a constant switching of perspective: the distancing of the object of study and the immersion of it in a wider historical context, and the closest possible approach to the emic vision — for me this is the basis of any anthropological study.

5

I have answered this question in detail in one of the previous fora [Dubovka 2016], and my opinion has not changed since. The majority of the analytical frameworks of contemporary social theories cast doubt on the uniqueness of religious movements or their direct access to knowledge which is hidden from others. Therefore I would have expected a greater degree of indifference or detachment towards religious communities in academic publications. However, one encounters situations where academic publications are used to increase the symbolic capital of religious groups, so that anthropological / sociological research may be read in quite a different light from that envisaged by its author. In this sense it seems to me that quantitative research, which is sometimes easier for the layman to interpret in the proper light, is more called for.

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## AGNIESZKA HALEMBA

Michael Lambek asserts that the problems with our use of the concepts of religion and secularity have much to do with the fact that those are nouns [Lambek 2012]. Within a particular semiotic ideology, which might be, according to Lambek, termed the ideology of modernity, setting clear boundaries between entities or objects is one of the basic principles and this is done, among other things, through the practice of naming. Religion, he suggests, rather than being seen as a sphere of life, understood through and delineated through its mutual relations to the secular, could be more usefully conceived as a discursive regime of truth production, one of many such regimes that can have more or less affinity with each other, depending on particular historical, temporal and social circumstances. They can be activated rather than simply present, and they can moreover make use of each other — as in those cases when a religious specialist mobilises scientific research to support his / her truth claims [Lindquist 2002; Ngo, Quijada (eds.) 2015]. In this view religion and secularity are not exclusive and do not always oppose each other. This kind of approach is already a well-established one within a field of the anthropology of religion.

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However, because of the long-debated Christian, and in particular Protestant, bias in social anthropology [Cannell (ed.) 2006; Robbins 2014]

a religious regime of truth-making is often imagined with this particular religious tradition in mind, which leads to recurring doubts in the minds of many researchers when it comes to anthropological use of the term 'religion' in reference to such phenomena as spirit possession, shamanism, or New Age practices. Lambek's main concern is a reflection on anthropology's stand vis-à-vis the religious / secular divide and with respect to this issue his approach is genuinely helpful. The world seems immediately much more interesting if we get away from a binary opposition of religious / secular and instead talk about various discursive regimes of truth. The boundaries become then less rigid, especially if we understand discourse as and through practice.

All the same, this does not solve our problems with using the concept of 'religion' within the field of anthropology of religion, so to speak. What we could of course say is that the various religious traditions should be conceptualised as divergent regimes of truth making. Which is in itself a valid approach, but why should we call them 'religious' in the first place? Especially that as Lambek notes, some other truth producing regimes that usually fall outside the interests of anthropologists of religion seem to activate processes of truth-making that at a closer look are very similar to those regimes that one would usually include in this field. Lambek mentions law as one such regime, but there is a variety of phenomena on various level of analysis from football [Davie 1993] to nation [Anderson 1983; Eriksen 1993] to political ideologies [Kula 2005] in which researchers noticed many elements akin to religious truth-making. This shows us that the term religion and its usage in social science, including anthropology, is not a simple matter that could be solved with a relatively uncontroversial move from entity to process or from structure to performance. Those moves are helpful, but still leave us without a concept of religion as an analytical term.

And most probably this is the state of art for today. We do not know how in general religious truth-making looks like, in the similar manner as we did not know how to define religion, when we still actually tried. Adding 'religion' to our analytical toolkit in a given case does not move us forward towards better understanding the phenomena we observe. Granted, the term has a heuristic value internal to academia — it can be helpful in locating similarly minded researchers when you advertise a summer school, international conference or a special issue of a journal. But even here its value is limited — under this label one finds studies and approaches so diverse that it leaves one wondering why they are clustered together. What does link a study of the role of a church in a nation-state with an analysis of prayers of religious virtuosos? One reviewer commented for example on my fairly recent book on Catholic Church management of apparitional cases as belonging rather to political

anthropology than anthropology of religion [Halemba 2015]. It is understandable because her own main concern within the field of anthropology of religion is experience — therefore she was surprised that I devoted relatively little space to the experiences of the visionaries, focusing instead on the negotiations concerning the establishment of the pilgrimage site taking place between church authorities on various levels, local believers and pilgrims. Still, on the other hand, scepticism towards the focus on organised structures of power and authority was one of the most important reasons why the term religion was rejected by people working on modern Western spirituality [Fuller 2001]. This leaves me wondering — what makes a particular work located within the field of anthropology of religion?

As this essay was not commissioned to provide an analysis of existing approaches in anthropology of religion but rather a personal standpoint of an anthropologist who works in the area, I asked myself: what kinds of works I am looking for when I search for relevant literature which corresponds to my research interests? The short answer is that I am looking for works that deal with social relationships, practices and networks that at one stage or another make reference to realities that are beyond everyday human experience, and which to a significant extent are considered as either requiring special skills to deal with or as being beyond human influence. For this reason I found already many years ago interesting and illuminating Michael Taussig's work on devil cult and baptism of money, where the ways in which South American peasants and miners deal with questions of success, growth and profit are juxtaposed with views on the workings of capitalism in the West [Taussig 1980], or the Comaroffs work on occult economies [Comaroff, Comaroff 1999]. For similar reasons, I am fascinated with recent works on the workings of religious imaginary under Soviet socialism [Panchenko 2012; Wanner (ed.) 2012; Kormina, Shtyrkov 2015], which show how the ambient faith [Engelke 2012] understood here as a feeling that there is some reality beyond everyday human experience, has been reproduced in tourist guides or scientific institutions and among people who did not necessarily take part in worship at places designated within the USSR for religious practice.

The seminal work of Talal Asad on the historical genealogy of the concepts of the secular and the religious as mutually constitutive, forms nowadays a basis for most of the approaches in the anthropology of religion. Most researchers accept that religion is a historical category. Still, this does not stop us from applying this term to other times and places or at least from understanding when other people talk about religion in ancient Egypt or China. One solution to this would be to say, and I admit it is very tempting solution, that we should skip the term altogether and talk about different regimes of truth making. It is easy to see that within one historical tradition,

such as Christianity we have very different regimes of truth-making — a point which Chris Hann repeatedly tries to bring across to the growing field of anthropology of Christianity with reference to eastern Christianity [Hann 2007; Hann, Goltz (eds.) 2010].

Still, I admit that this solution is not to my full satisfaction. However different are the religious regimes of truth-making, there seems to be a level of Wittgenstein's family resemblances between them. Those regimes might be very diverse, but in most general terms, they seem all to refer to some kind of realities that are deemed to exist in various ways and to varied extent, apart from everyday immediate experience. It is very important to note that this characteristic provides links between religious regimes, but it is not exclusive to them. One can find references to such realities in all kinds of regimes of truth-making, so this criterion is for me rather a rule of a thumb, a heuristic tool, which helps to direct my gaze in a particular direction than a defining feature of religious regime. Moreover, religion is also not a phenomenon which waits out there to be described but it is social through and through. To understand that claim, I propose to pay more careful and critical attention to the underdog of contemporary anthropological studies on the matter, namely, the cognitive studies of religion.

In my view, the most annoying, confusing and scientifically unhelpful feature of the interdisciplinary field of cognitive studies of religion, of which anthropology is an important part, is its marketing strategy. Cognitive studies of religion (CSR) have been criticised for reductionism, overemphasis on evolution and narrowness of focus. Those criticisms were addressed and answered to a reasonable extent in [Cohen et al. 2008]. Still, despite the fact that most of the people working in the CSR would agree with Justin Barrett's assertion that 'rather than specify what religion is and try to explain it in whole, scholars in this field have generally chosen to approach "religion" in an incremental, piecemeal fashion, identifying human thought and behavioral patterns that might count as "religious" and then trying to explain why those patterns are cross-culturally recurrent' [Barrett 2007: 1], the very same people tend to advertise their works and research projects as 'Explaining Religion'<sup>1</sup> (see also: [Boyer 2001]) or telling us why anyone would believe in god [Barrett 2004]. In practice those researchers do nothing of the sort and moreover, if you look inside their works and research projects, they even do not claim to do so. This is just a marketing strategy. What they do is to focus their research effort on a number of cognitive mechanisms that underline certain kinds of religious thinking and practice (especially cooperation and ritual) but that underline also many other forms of human

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/explaining-religion>>.

thought and behavior. There is nothing intrinsically 'religious' about the mechanisms they focus on. Cognitive approaches at the most only touch a social level, on which religion appears in the first place.

The process of ascribing 'religiousness' to a particular experience (based on cognitive processes) is, on the other hand, the main concern of the work by religious studies scholar Ann Taves [Taves 2009]. She says that 'if we want to understand how anything at all, including experience, *becomes* religious, we need to turn our attention to the processes whereby people sometimes ascribe special characteristics to things that we (as scholars) associate with terms such as "religious", "magical", "mystical", "spiritual", et cetera' [Ibid.: 8]. Her own answer is, in my opinion, straightforwardly Durkheimian — she starts from the assertion that 'religious' refers primarily to phenomena deemed 'special', 'set apart', and 'exceptional' [Ibid.: 26–48], which corresponds to Durkheim's definition of religion as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things set apart and forbidden' [Durkheim 2008 [1912]: 47].

In my reading of Taves, the very process of attributing 'specialness' to something (a 'thing' is not necessarily an object; it can be an event, a phenomenon, or a process) is a social process. Still, setting them apart as 'special' does not make them religious. 'Religiousness' is an attribution that appears on the next level of analysis, which looks at how the 'special things' are recognised socially and, what is more important, how 'special paths' — that is, 'sets of practices that individuals or groups view as effective in attaining goals associated with special things' — are built [Taves 2009: 47]. This process can be called the institutionalisation of religion, if we understand social institutions as relatively stable social mechanisms patterning human behavior — and at the level we can begin talking about religion for the first time. Social institutions are, however, most often explicitly demarcated from the flow of everyday life and from each other, not by the people who structure their lives according to their patterning mechanisms, but by external observers — foremost among them social scientists trying to describe recurrences in human behavior. This is the basis of the critique of concepts referring to particular social institutions that appear in social anthropology and related disciplines — calling some pattern 'kinship' or 'religion' is, according to such critiques, a way of effectively creating a social institution by abstracting some aspect of behaviour from the flow of everyday life (see, e.g.: [Schneider 1972; Atkinson 1992]).

Although such critiques are useful in warning against the possibility of compartmentalising social life and separating aspects that are in practice intertwined, if we remember that 'institution' is an analytical concept and not an attempt to define social facts ontologically, then

we can productively retain it for analytical purposes. In the case of studies of religion, the institutionalisation of religion and the development of religious institutions would refer to socially recognised ways of dealing with special things and making truth-claims, or, to use Taves's terminology, of building 'special paths'. Importantly, on this level religious activity does not require that each person have the immediate experience of the 'special things' — people can vicariously experience 'special things' through following 'special paths'. This is the level on which most anthropological studies of religion have been located to date — they focus on socially widespread and enacted ways of understanding the special things that can be, under some conditions, called religious, although they do not have to be understood locally as constituting a clearly delineated area of life. To give just one example, the Siberian Yukaghirs usually follow a number of rituals before hunting that are directed at spiritual beings. People roughly know what to do in such instances, but they perceive these rituals as an integral part of the hunting process (which is conceived as a kind of interaction between various kinds of persons inhabiting the tundra — humans, animals, spirits), and not as a special, separated 'religious' area of their lives [Willerslev 2004]. Because those rituals patterns ('special paths') are fairly stable, their religious life can be analyzed as institutionalised at least to some extent.

Another crucial distinction for me is the one between religious institution and religious organisation, as well as 'institutionalisation' and what I call 'organisational embracement'. One can have a social religious life without religious organisations but not without institutions. The basic and most important difference between institution and organisation is, in my understanding, related to the respective level of recognition of a given pattern of social behavior as separate from other aspects of life. Organisations are here understood as mechanisms structuring social action that are clearly identifiable for the involved actors and within which and through which particular norms of action are clearly and explicitly defined and can be enacted in practice. These features of organisations were noted by David Gellner and Eric Hirsch, who wrote that organisations are many and various, but they all have explicit rules, a division of labor, and aims that involve acting on or changing everyday life [Gellner, Hirsch (eds.) 2001: 2]. This does not mean, however, that all actors taking part in organised activity can at any point explicitly express all the rules of a given organisation. Still, those who act on behalf of a given organisation have a feeling that behind their actions stands a clearly definable, bounded entity that can be invoked and named, and that influences what counts as true. Organisations are perceived as agents. Although anthropologists would be quick to point out that organisations are arenas of intense differentiation,

struggles, networking, alliance formation, and so on, it is important to note that they are perceived locally as if they were actors — the university, the church, the school — are talked about as if they were giving opinions, issuing decrees, hiring and firing, involving themselves in public issues, and so on. Moreover, organisations are objectified not only and not primarily by researchers, but by the people involved in their operation. This is the basic difference between institutions and organisations, at least in the religious sphere: both are complex patterns of human behavior, arenas in which negotiations and redefinitions of roles and goals take place, but organisations are both internally and externally clearly objectified, whereas institutions are not. While institutional rules are largely implicit and have to be extracted by a researcher from actions and people's accounts, organisational rules are explicitly defined and often even codified in writing. This does not presume that all actions undertaken within or in relation to an organisation are always shaped according to these explicit rules. On the contrary, those rules can be subverted, challenged, or ignored by various actors — in fact, this is one of the ways in which social institutions interact with and challenge organisations.

To return to the example of the Yukaghir hunters, one would say that the organisational aspect starts to have influence on their religious life, if, in a discussion concerning the practicalities of conducting this or that ritual, the authority of some formal body is evoked — e.g., if one is advised to carry out a particular ritualised action because the local council of shamans recommends performing it in a given way. Of course the ethnography usually shows how this or that action is the result not of abstract organisational rules, but an effect of complex actions of concrete people under particular circumstances. Nevertheless, the existence of organisations and their explicit rules can always be used in arguments concerning a particular course of action.

Let me explain this with an example from my own fieldwork among the Telengits-Altaians in Southern Altai [Halemba 2006] (see also: [Broz 2009]). One of the biggest surprises for me as a student of anthropology in the 1990s, were repeated declarations of some of my interlocutors in Southern Siberia that they, the Altaians, do not have a religion. They said this both while using the Russian and while using the Altaian language, but when talking in Altaian they used the Russian word *religiya*. The Altaian word *jang*, which is used in many translations as an equivalent to *religiya*, is actually employed locally to describe any specific way of doing things — by a given person or within a particular system of reference. *Agnieszka jang* would therefore denote the specific set of qualities and aesthetics of my own being in the world, while *Soviet jang* would refer to values, procedures and actions considered appropriate for a Soviet citizen. Hence,

obviously Altaians themselves have *jang* and they use a phrase *Altai jang* which in most contexts means as set of convictions and practices locally understood as typical for Altaians. Part of the *Altai jang* refers to special, socially recognised ways of dealing with realities that go beyond everyday experience, such as when you meet a strangely behaving animal in the mountains or when you are kept in place and cannot move because of a phenomenon called *turgak*. A denial of having *religiya* was surprising for me as a young researcher and external observer, because from my point of view, their life was full of religious behaviours, beliefs and beings. The mountains, rivers and trees of Altai were considered living beings, people made offerings to the various kinds of invisible powers, they repeatedly narrated to me stories about meetings with beings that could only be perceived by people with special abilities locally known as *biler ulus* ('knowledgeable people'). I felt surrounded by people with heightened religious sensibilities. And yet, many of them thought that there is no religion in their lives and some of them even decided to take up Buddhism and Christianity, since in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union religious belonging was seen as something that one should take up in order to secure a purpose and direction in individual and social lives, especially with reference to national identity. Some others tried to make explicit some basic rules and principles of *Altai jang* in a hope that it would *become* religion. I argued in my book that this was an outcome of a specific Soviet attitude to religion which linked this concept to the presence of religious organisations and deemed this presence an important precondition both for national identity as well as personal development.

This example shows us that there is one more important difficulty with a concept of religion. It is a widely used term, both outside as well as inside academia. It is used by the people we study. As in the Altaian case, even if the local language does not have an equivalent term, it can be borrowed from a different language. It is difficult to keep 'religion' as a scholarly concept apart from its public and local uses. One can say that this is a case of many other concepts, a concept of 'nation' being the most obvious example. Still, the notion of 'nation' within academia has a much more limited scope than the term 'religion'. These days, I would say, most researchers understand 'nation' through reference to a specific type of modernisation. It is of course a commonplace to talk about multiple modernities and by extension to talk about nation-building in non-Western contexts, but even then, the usage of this notion does not seem to encompass so much at once as in the case of 'religion'. At the moment it is in practice difficult to stick with 'religion' as an analytical concept. Still, we should not give up on it just yet, because at the same time it does seem to point towards an important and special part of the lives of humans.

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## MICHAEL LAMBEK

I am very pleased to address the questions posed by the editorial board of the *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. These are questions that are good to think with rather than ones that can be definitively answered. Perhaps they are not only 'good' but necessary; questions that need to accompany us as we plan, conduct, and write up our research and that we never surpass. As such, they also need to be considered by each new generation of anthropologists. As each generation draws on the debates previous generations have held — continuing the conversation as it were — they may refine or improve upon the prior answers, possibly even overturn them, but they must work the questions through for themselves.

I begin with the first question and my response will use up my allotted space. This is because my response cannot be straightforward. I think that the concept of 'religion' is still necessary, but also problematic. It is valuable for some uses and less so for others. I have relied on it in editing *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* [Lambek (ed.) 2008 [2002]], a compilation of articles that I consider both classic and illustrative of the range of topics anthropologists have addressed more or less under the rubric of 'religion' and of various means by which they have done so. More recently I co-edited *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion* [Boddy, Lambek (eds.) 2013] that brought together original articles on a range of current issues, albeit not without raising some scepticism with respect to the category of 'religion'. Although I compiled these collections enthusiastically, both books were the idea of a publisher whose aim is sales and profit, and the titles and formats were largely imposed by the publisher. In part, the publisher was responding to the way that anthropologists divide up their field and departments construct and label their courses. Marketing shapes reception but it also corresponds to demand. 'Religion' sells. By contrast, my ethnography *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte*:

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*Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* [Lambek 1993] tried very hard to be true to its subject matter and ignored the word ‘religion’. Because I failed to place it in a specific sub-discipline (like ‘the anthropology of religion’) or aim it for a specific undergraduate course (like ‘medical anthropology’), the book was largely overlooked. I do not think either of the strategies could be considered ‘wrong’ but they do have different implications. I also think there are positive intellectual reasons to embrace ‘religion’ as a category or field that I will come to below.

In general, the social sciences have a problem distinguishing ‘common sense’ words found in ordinary language from analytical terms and maintaining the boundaries between them. But the search for a purified language is a spurious one. Our fields are not sciences in the sense of the natural sciences and to suggest that a concept like ‘religion’ is ‘prescientific’ is absurd. We can try to develop more refined analytical categories from ordinary usage but we cannot replace them with ‘scientific’ ones, whatever that term is supposed to mean in a field like ours. Indeed, in some respects the issue is the opposite from that of the natural sciences. The more precise, fixed, and ostensibly universal our terms become, and the more they appear to presuppose objective referents, the more problematic they are.

Before jumping on the bandwagon of rejecting ‘religion’ as either too commonsensical or too reified an abstraction, we might consider the fate of ‘kinship’. David Schneider [Schneider 1984] appeared very avant garde when he overthrew it. But he left behind a vacuum that was only some decades later filled by people who did not want to give up study of the things that had been situated under the umbrella of ‘kinship’ and who made new arguments for its relevance. Perhaps most surprisingly, one of Schneider’s former colleagues (Schneider had died in the meantime) wrote a book that purports to tell us *What Kinship Is — and Is Not* [Sahlins 2013]. Sahlins replaces Schneider’s cultural relativism and nominalism with a universalism based on a kind of ethical sociality but he continues Schneider’s strong rejection of scientism and the presumption of an unmediated biological base. Kinship comes back into intellectual existence but does not become a bounded natural object than can be clearly distinguished from other objects. We should try for something equivalent with respect to ‘religion’. Moreover, just as Sahlins affirms that kinship is cultural not natural, so must anthropology affirm that religion is cultural not natural, and moreover, not the product of transcendent beings or some culturally unmediated experience.

I take anthropology as a tradition — a long multi-generational series of intertwined conversations and their entextualisations — that builds around certain core questions and problems. This is comparable to — though obviously also different from — the way, in Lévi-

Strauss's schema, systems of myth build up dense interrelations among various attempts to resolve certain underlying binary oppositions. The binary oppositions are at once the source of the question and the means of response. Moreover, if at the heart of Lévi-Strauss's Amerindian mythological system was the opposition between nature and culture, so too is this one of the principal oppositions lying at the heart of anthropology. Of course, 'nature' and 'culture' are two of the most contested words in our field, even more so than 'religion', but it is not the meanings attributed to the individual terms that is continuously subject to reflection but rather, as structuralism would say, the relationship between them.

As we question the meaning or value of a term like 'religion' we have to do so with respect to a theory of language. Is the central issue the relationship of signifier to signified (word to referent) according to a correspondence theory of language? If so, then one way to read Talal Asad's argument [Asad 1983] — which has been one of the most provocative and consequential interventions in the anthropological conversation concerning 'religion' — is that the central problem with the term or concept is that it does not correspond to the phenomenon we assumed it did, which is actually something else. But a more pragmatic or Wittgensteinian approach to language suggests that the meaning or referent is found in the use of the term rather than in a single or stable object, something autonomously out there in the world and waiting to be apprehended by the right word or classificatory label. Attending instead to the uses, effects, and language games to which terms like 'religion' apply is a more sophisticated approach than one focused on correspondence. It affords a different and more subtle reading of Asad but one which then equally provides a means to offset the critique of Geertz. From this perspective, what Asad is doing is offering a different use for the term 'religion' than the one famously applied by Geertz [Geertz 1973] and what we have to compare are their respective uses, not the validity of a correspondence to a stable referent. (With respect to reference, a Wittgensteinian approach would acknowledge a polythetic class in which each member referred to by the term 'religion' has something in common with at least one other member but not necessarily with all; thus some members of the class might share nothing directly with each other.) It is not that one use is 'right' or 'true' and the other 'wrong' or 'false', but that we want to evaluate in each case the use or ends to which the term is put or what the term in each case accomplishes. Uses may be incommensurable to one another rather than contradictory or mutually exclusive.

Once we start with language use rather than more narrowly with reference we don't need to worry so much about consistency or precision, although, of course that could be one of the uses, one of the language games, to which the word is applied. We should

not ignore these matters but try to make our assumptions self-evident and our conversations with one another as clear as possible; that is part of the language game of anthropology. It is said that you cannot have both maximal consistency and comprehensiveness at the same time but must sacrifice one for the sake of the other. With respect to using the word 'religion' we need to continuously think about the balance we want between these ends and be aware of how well we achieve it.

It should be evident then that I do not advocate a single, consistent, or policed definition of religion, the sort of definition one might find in a dictionary or elicited on an exam, as though a single term could correspond to a single, stable object. I reject such a definition on two grounds: it is not possible and it is not useful. I think it was Nietzsche who said that only something that has no history can be put under a definition. I phrased my 'Introduction' to the *Companion* [Boddy, Lambek (eds.) 2013] with the question not what is religion, but rather, what has religion been for anthropology? Instead of throwing out the word (to be replaced by what?) I continue, in certain contexts, to put the word to use.

For one thing, I have taken the term 'religion' as a placeholder for many of the human phenomena I find most interesting and challenging to understand — things that have also been called, with varying degrees of contestability of their own — myth, ritual, world view, cosmology, ontology, witchcraft, sorcery, magic, curing, animism, pilgrimage, sacrifice, etc. — in sum, for the constitution and navigation of distinctive worlds as well as for some of the original practices found within them. This covers both the flow of what is generated by means of human imagination and the processes by which certain imaginative forms become not only represented through public symbols but objectified and institutionalised — and, more significantly, how they come to authorise other projects and activities, how they come to establish certainty and truth.

It has been remarked that in Geertz's definition of religion one could just as well substitute the word 'culture' for what he calls religion [Seeman 2010]. I am in some sympathy with this, and viewing Geertz's essay in this way would considerably undermine Asad's critique. But at the same time, I think that for Geertz 'religion' points not to culture in general but to a particular aspect, property, feature, or function of culture, namely the way it anchors itself and asserts what is most fundamental to a given world, how it produces credence, plausibility, direction, and meaning to a given way of life; what, as Geertz says, links the model of how the world is with a model or models for how to act in it, as well as those ideas and practices which acknowledge paradox, scepticism, irony, and contingency. It is evident that such a picture of 'religion' is abstract and is developed

by means of theoretical reflection rather than by simply describing or attempting to generalise about observed 'objects'. It does not begin, as many naïve definitions do, with things like 'belief' in the 'supernatural'; and it does not presume the irrationality of religious ideas and practices.

If this is a productive use of the term 'religion', it invites close inspection on how truth is constituted (found, revealed, established, acknowledged...) and consideration of how to distinguish the nature and kinds of truth productions and certainties established by, say, Islam or Christianity from those established by science or by law. How, in the modern world, are these different and incommensurable modes or regimes of truth and the competing or complementary invitations or demands to accept them articulated in social life? How too does this articulation differ from life in other kinds of societies where science and law have been less fully abstracted, objectified, and institutionalised, or simply less powerful? In contemporary society, the truth claims of science (including here the means of discovering, knowing, accepting, or experiencing what is true) are understood to be distinct from those of religion — indeed the contrast between them is exactly what helps to constitute 'religion' and 'science' as such today. In this respect, I side with Asad [Asad 2003] when he suggests that within modernity there is a good deal 'outside' religion and hence that the term does not apply (or not in the same way) to societies where this has not been the case. For Asad it is primarily the state and the law which attempt to regulate religion in its multiple forms, each objectified as *a* religion; hence those encapsulate religion and are able to assert a deeper or stronger truth or regime of truth than that found in religion. To this picture it must be added that even within 'religious' traditions like Christianity or Islam there is not a single monological formation of truth or means to discover it; rather each of these traditions is constituted through debates around these matters. Hence the point in Shahab Ahmed's recent book [Ahmed 2015] is not to equate Islam with the law and its interpretations but to give equal recognition to Sufi forms of encountering truth.

Though briefly tempting, there is little point in attempting to use 'religion' to express something abstract enough to comprehend all regimes of truth equally — law, science, and the church. That would not only violate common sense usage but it would blur the distinctions among the different means and modes of truth formation and the different kinds of truth produced.

I would, therefore, return to the book that has shaped my thinking about these matters no less than the respective positions of Geertz and Asad, and that is Roy Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* [Rappaport 1999]. One of the foci of this large,

complex, but rigorous and brilliant book, is that of the sacred and sanctification (as he develops these terms). Rappaport shows how the performance of ritual, especially ritual embedded in a liturgical hierarchy of rituals — produces a certain kind of truth. This sacred or sanctified truth is different from logical and empirical forms of truth as Rappaport is at pains to show. So, religion shares with science or philosophy attempts to discover, ground, or value truth, but the kind of truth in question, and the human relations to truth, are different in each case. Moreover, if for Asad, religion in modernity is subordinate to secular law, Rappaport points to the way such law might itself be sanctified or draw authority through sanctification.

Another helpful point about Rappaport's model is that it does not try to distinguish what is 'inside' religion and what is 'outside' it (say, specific political, judicial, or economic practices) but rather examines the ways in which practices and activities are more or less sanctified by the ultimate sacred postulates whose performances form the core of the liturgical order, i.e. that are relatively deeply or superficially embedded within it.

Rappaport, like Geertz, thereby uses the term 'religion' to refer to something more or less universal rather than exclusively to practices that have been expressly identified as 'religion' or 'religious' by a state authority, or even a theological one, and then within public discourse. Rappaport's model is formal (as well as functional), and intended to apply equally within modern and small-scale societies and both within the Abrahamic, textual traditions (with which, especially Judaism, it has obvious affinities) and with oral or other traditions outside the Abrahamic sphere (such as the Maring of Papua New Guinea from whose ethnography Rappaport also developed his model).

Both Geertz and Rappaport point to historical moments where the processes of establishing the grounds of truth or certainty and of locating other acts and utterances with respect to truth break down. This is in fact where one might expect more heightened or explicit 'religious' activity, in the form of what was once called revitalisation movements, to fill the gap in confidence and order. For Geertz, this would happen when the models for acting in the world are no longer compatible with the models of what the world is like, that is, when one or the other proves stronger than the way religion has until then managed to put them together. For Rappaport, this happens with a breakdown in liturgical order, whether because the core rituals are no longer performed or because of inversions of or distortions to the liturgical hierarchy, in what he calls idolatry. This leads not to the disappearance of religion but to religious turbulence, much as we see today. A question we might pose to both their models is whether the lack of fit, disruption, turbulence, or disorder has not in fact been

more characteristic of human history than the ideal and abstract models suggest.

If religion is viewed from this kind of perspective it is only in formal or analytic rather than substantive terms that it can be decisively distinguished from the rest of social process, from politics, economics, kinship, or art. Hence to focus on religion substantively is not to disregard these other phenomena but to see them in light of, informed by, and with respect to religion (and conversely).

What I am pointing to here is an analytical conception of religion, one that is not based on a correspondence model and one that is different from both common-sense usage and from the way the term 'religion' is applied by the discursive practices of the state. But this approach need not overlook or violate these uses and meanings. Indeed, attending to official and vernacular uses is critical.

One of the helpful things about an approach informed by the work of thinkers like Geertz, Lévi-Strauss, and Rappaport is that it can bring back together the study of smaller scale societies with the current anthropologies of Islam and Christianity that have become each increasingly caught up in their own worlds, internally referential, and hence sometimes ignoring the otherness and defamiliarisation that was once a hallmark of anthropology and to which your remaining questions turn. But I must leave these questions for others to address.

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## ART LEETE

**1** I agree that for cognitive reasons, in principal, the term 'religion' is not often necessary. During my field studies, we rarely touch upon this concept while discussing with field partners their world understanding. Most things I want to know can be reached without using this abstract expression.

All the same, there are certain situations where 'religion' enters explicitly on the scene of ethnographic inquiry. Protestant groups in Russia must be very careful with the political and legal framework of their practice. It means that they are very well informed concerning the fact that they are players on the religious field. They consciously recognise their role as subjects of religious actions or, perhaps, objects of religion-related official arrangements. Or, at least, the leaders of these communities certainly do.

In today's world, people are well aware that their agency is not only local but also influenced by 'events happening elsewhere' [Marcus 1998: 118]. This concerns people's practical existence as well as spiritual arrangements. At the same time, if I make notes among the Khanty or Komi hunters about their thoughts and observations concerning forest and animal behaviour, it is useless to attempt to discuss it with them in a 'religious' context. But even this, supposedly religion-free understanding of the world of non-human agents, is not straightforward. Some hunters like to read ethnographic literature and know something about our way of approaching their minds.

After scholars have released a concept, one cannot take it back anymore. We must recognise that it is not reserved exclusively for our theo-

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retical discussions. 'Religion' is very much part of actual political and social practice. If we aim to follow real social discourses, it becomes impossible to throw the concept away. We can use the term in the way it is positioned in actual social practices and ideological debates as much as it concerns our ethnographic fields.

2

Some founders of the discipline (Max Weber, Émile Durkheim) dreamed about using science as a lethal weapon against religion, which they saw as an outdated way of explaining the order of things. They thought that if you approached Christianity or Judaism in the same way as 'primitive' beliefs, it would help to put the religion in its rightful place. As this desire was very much driven by their personal experience of growing up in a rather strict religious environment, this intimate relationship to the topic was encoded in a discourse that was aimed to demolish religion scientifically.

I would say that there is something different in religion as a topic of scholarly investigation, if compared, for example, with economics or social structures. It is not so easy to stay an indifferent bystander in the study of religion in the field. People may drag you into the process of existential decision-making in one way or another.

For example, once I was visiting a granny in a Komi village. She belonged to the Bursylysyas vernacular Orthodox movement. They had acted for decades without a priest nearby, and had developed rather independent theological perspectives. (Anyhow, even hundred years ago, the Bursylysyas preferred not to listen to the priests too carefully.) That granny asked me whether I believed in God and started waiting: which sin would I choose to commit? She even gave a hint that it would be better to tell a lie and claim that I believed because that was a less serious sin than renouncing God.

So one cannot always avoid choosing sides. People simply wrap you into the process of believing and you must take some standpoint, even if you simply try to please people or avoid insulting them as far as it is possible in these situations.

According to my experience, required involvement is really a challenge while studying Christianity. But if I work with people in Siberia, it appears that they do not really care about my religious convictions or lack of those. As long as I respect their way of doing things, that is really all right. It is much easier to approach animistic perspectives in this sense. If we are at least partly sympathetic towards animist views we do not risk harming somebody as easily as it may happen while doing anthropology of Christianity. Added to that, other scholars are unlikely to take seriously the possibility that one of their colleagues would genuinely consider the possibility of commitment to any animist way of understanding the world. But they become much more suspicious if one starts studying what Christians believe.

Our colleagues and readers pay attention to this reflexive element of our studies, wanting to be sure that we have not betrayed the scientific world view. We are, so to speak, x-rayed all the time and from all kinds of different angles concerning our scholarly-religious commitment. It is somehow odd that when the official census takes place, I am allowed to decline to answer the question concerning my religious preference but in scholarly practice it is examined rather carefully and confidentiality is not the issue.

**3**

If we consider that scholarly investigations must be based on a scientific world view, then all religious groups constitute some kind of 'other'. At the same time, I suppose that we do not think about this strict division between science and religion consistently during our actual research practice. As my region of studies is in the Russian North and Siberia, I am not conducting a form of anthropology at home, and no specific defamiliarisation effort is needed in the course of field contact. It is not surprising that the people I work with look at the world a little bit differently from me. As I have not adopted the faith of the Christians I study, a certain distance remains between us in any case. I do not aim to grasp at any cost what is hidden in these people's minds. It is quite enough for me just to document their social action and the ideas they are willing to share.

Again, it is rather different while working among the hunters in Siberia or the Republic of Komi. They have never tried to clarify my personal approach to spiritual matters too exactly. As long as I am ready to participate in sacrificial ceremonies, collective prayers and to follow everyday behavioural (scientifically speaking, rather 'religious') rules, everything seems to be just fine.

**4**

These efforts to integrate me more tightly are quite usual during my fieldwork among the Protestants. As my interest in Protestant practices is actually rather loose, I am not motivated to become spiritually as close as possible with them and so my choice is to draw some kind of a line I do not pretend to step over. Mostly, I just remain hazy in explaining my commitment or lack of it. I suppose that it actually suits the Protestants, as well, if I claim that I do not know yet how I feel about taking Jesus into my heart. In this case, only God knows. But over the years, people become somehow sceptical as no change in my attitude can be detected. Apparently, they think that God is supposed to act more quickly than that. That said, their everyday social environment and the officials who deal with them are not particularly friendly to the Protestants, and I am accepted as a friend, anyhow. For the Protestants, everybody with a positive attitude towards them counts. Sometimes Komi grannies still try to bring me into my senses by warning that God is near and the clock is ticking.

I suppose scholars may be able to collect more intimate information if they choose to use the tactic of assimilation to a group. But I am quite happy with the distance and restrict myself with the degree of access I reach in this way. I consider this approach even somehow honest, as I keep my spiritual confidentiality and leave some to the Protestants, as well.

5

I have shared my research papers with one Evangelical pastor who has a degree in English language and literature. His reactions to these articles have been always rather indifferent. It seems the scholarly way of discussing different aspects of their activities and ideas is not of particular interest for him. But in a more general context the Evangelicals seem to be happy if treated as 'experimental animals'. If educated people indicate interest towards them, it provides proof that they are doing something really meaningful. It may help Protestants to feel evaluated as their pro-Orthodox social surrounding considers them suspicious and dangerous. The pastor recently told that if needed, he could come to some scholarly meeting and declare to everybody that all we have written about them is 100% true. It seems that in a more general sense we have certain mutual understanding and are able to support each other in gaining the recognition we may need.

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## SONJA LUEHRMANN

### Dilemmas of Recognition

In his contribution to the longstanding debate about the usefulness of a universal category of religion, the sociologist Martin Riesebrodt makes an original argument [Riesebrodt 2003]. He acknowledges that any attempt to define religion is historically specific and reflects the biases of particular theological and political traditions: 'Any definition of religion is therefore in danger of achieving little more than the linguistic veiling of the prejudice or wishful thinking of the author' [Ibid.: 1] (see also: [Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005]). Nonetheless, he points to situations of encounter between practitioners of different traditions to argue that a category of religion emerges not only from nineteenth-

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century armchair scholarship, but from a more organic source: the mutual recognition of ritual experts who see similarities between their own ways of engaging with the sacred and things that strangers or newcomers do: '[A]ctors and institutions usually referred to as "religious" by academic disciplines actually tend to recognise each other and are recognised by third parties as being similar across historical and cultural boundaries, and express this perceived similarity in the ways they relate to each other' [Riesebrodt 2003: 2].

Riesebrodt's examples of such 'mutual references of religious actors' [Riesebrodt 2003: 3] include the distinctions drawn in the Hebrew Bible between the Judaic cult of Yahweh and Egyptian and Canaanite cults, as well as Confucian and Shinto reactions to Buddhism's entry into China and Japan. In each of these cases, religious experts recognised each other, and were recognised by third-party observers, as doing comparable things. This recognition enabled mutual borrowings but also arguments about who was getting it right or wrong. In this interpretation, religion (along with its cognates in other languages) is an inherently comparative category that emerges out of encounters between strangers.

I do not know if Riesebrodt is right in positing a universal mutual recognition of religious actors — would a scapulomancer of antiquity recognise lighting a virtual candle on a website as an act of worship? But his argument makes sense in relation to world regions where people of different faith traditions live in proximity, as is true of many parts of Russia. On the Middle Volga, for example, comparison and mutual referencing is very much a part of how people form an understanding of 'religion': the half-moon pendants of Muslims are equivalent to the crosses worn by Orthodox Christians, not just as markers of identity, but also in the protection offered by words engraved on the back. The sacred groves of indigenous pagans are treated as comparable to churches and mosques as sacred spaces that call for particular norms of dress and comportment for those who enter them. People also attach value judgements to these comparisons, calling groves either superior ('closer to nature, less costly to maintain') or inferior ('less artistically satisfying, more difficult to demarcate and protect'). Differences in the details notwithstanding, kneeling and bowing are recognised as postures of prayer in all local traditions. At a more bureaucratic level, officials charged with administrating religious life strive to give roughly equal resources to those religions they recognise as traditional, assuming that each contributes to maintaining social cohesion and moral behavior among members of a particular ethnic group.

For the ethnographer who seeks to understand this economy of cross-referencing, it is impossible not to be assigned a place in it. 'And what is your faith?' is a question I almost invariably encounter

in Russia when I introduce myself as a foreign researcher interested in religious life. My answer, that I am Lutheran Christian, fits with local expectations, because as an ethnic German I confirm the assumption that there is a link between religious and ethnic belonging. The next question then becomes why I am curious about faiths other than my own, or, from a less anthropocentric perspective, the reason why God might have brought me to the doorstep of a particular adept or congregation. What might I be looking for, and what might God be expecting my hosts to tell me?

These are questions that arise for my hosts because of the embodied character of ethnographic research — different from archival researchers, experimental psychologists, or sociologists conducting phone surveys, anthropologists enter the territory of our research interlocutors with our whole bodies. Our comportment provides as many clues to why we are there as our verbal explanations. In my case, my willingness to dress according to the norms of my hosts and my interest in their symbols and practices has prompted many hopes: was I looking to convert to Islam and Orthodox Christianity? Was I ready to learn to pray in tongues in order to add the 'baptism by the Holy Spirit' to the baptism by water that I was assumed to have received as a fellow Protestant? Was I tired of scripture-based religion and ready to see the true scientific value in venerating energy-laden sacred sites? In my recent research on Christian family values activism in Russia, the religious question is joined by questions of moral values: what is my stance on abortion, how many children do I have, what do my husband and children think of me traveling around a foreign country? Ethnographic research is a back-and-forth, where the researcher is asked at least as many questions as he / she can ask others, and this makes it both more equitable and perhaps more ethically difficult than standardised survey research.

By slotting me as a Lutheran, a mother, a professor, and a foreigner, the religious actors I meet during research are practising the recognition and mutual referencing described by Riesebrodt. I, in turn, participate in the referencing by deciding on the level of peripheral participation that I am comfortable with in a given context. Some anthropologists deliberately stand back during occasions of embodied worship, allowing their visible non-participation to be a mark of their identity as a researcher [Engelhardt 2014]. Others find it easier to participate in embodied acts such as singing, dancing, and holding hands, presumed to be less ideologically charged than sermons, personalised prayers, and verbal testimonials [Coleman 2008]. I, by contrast, am very conscious that I tend to enter a mode of prayer when others are praying around me, no matter what theological differences or closeness I feel with them. When I am surrounded by people who pray, I tap into a trait that the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann calls absorption, drawing on a concept developed

by the psychologist Auke Tellegen: 'a disposition for having moments of total attention that somehow completely engage all of one's attentional resources' [Luhrmann 2012: 199].

Absorption, Luhrmann argues, is a 'proclivity' that not everyone shares, a kind of intense attention that can be directed to the outside world as well as to an inner state [Luhrmann 2012: 208]. It is a way of being associated with novel-reading and listening to music, but also a precondition for the disciplined practice of the imagination that Luhrmann found among North American Evangelicals as much as among the British New Age witches she studied earlier [Luhrmann 1989]. For high-absorption individuals, the state of focused attention can become an object of comparative recognition in its own right, linking seemingly disparate practices. I do not just recognise the placing of candles, prostrations, and kissing of sacred objects as acts that are comparable to folding my hands to pray as I learned it in my Lutheran childhood. I also feel the mental exertion that goes along with these acts for those who are prone to become absorbed in them.

Over the years, I have learned that the capacity for absorption is something I need to manage as part of my field research persona. It can be a way of breaking down barriers of distrust, but also a source of misunderstandings. 'When Sonja is here, she prays with us,' said a Baptist prayer group leader I met during dissertation research. 'So we know she is not some kind of foreign agent coming to spy on us.' More impatiently, an Orthodox priest once drenched me soaking wet with holy water during vespers at his church, asking when I would finally get baptised in the Orthodox Church, since I looked 'as if I was drawn there by a string'. Strikingly, the other worshippers (all of them baptised Orthodox Christians) immediately drew near and asked to be showered with holy water as well, since physical contact with this substance is always considered a happy occasion.

Ideally, managing absorption means being conscious of its pull, but controlling how far to follow it. I try to play whatever visitor's role my hosts assign to me, for example, enjoying the assumed comfort of a bench in the women's part of a mosque while the women around me got down to the ground for the movements of prayer. Accompanying a small group of Pentecostals on a night-time 'prayer patrol' during which they prayed over street corners where they hoped to place evangelising preachers in the future, I was conscious that I was somehow part of their scheme of altering the energy of a place, even as I doubted the Manichean view of good and evil involved in their concept of 'spiritual warfare' [McAlister 2016]. When attending a worship event, I know that I have a hard time snapping out of prayerful absorption and exercising the outsider's prerogative to ask nosey questions. I sometimes need to come back another day, when the conversation is not tied to ritual participation.

What insights can one gain by getting absorbed in other people's prayer? First of all, it would be mistaken to generalise too much. As Tanya Luhrmann notes, not everyone has a proclivity for absorption, and it would be wrong to see a contemplative monastic in every person who places a candle in a church, plucks a sacrificial goose near the bubbling meat pots in a sacred grove, or stops by a mosque to contribute *zakat* (alms). For me, one of the main insights gained from allowing myself to get absorbed is that prayer is not empty time, but work. Mental exhaustion from the effort of maintaining focus and equanimity during prayer is as real as physical exhaustion from standing with heavy ritual regalia or walking miles on an empty stomach. It helps explain some of the more shocking moments of research on Orthodox family values, as when priests are in a grouchy mood after hearing confession or leading penitential prayers, openly yelling at parishioners who ask them additional questions: 'It's your sin, so you deal with it!' There is misogyny in these moments, fueled by the gendered dynamics of a church whose all-male clergy does not always valorise the concerns of a lay base in which women predominate [Kizenko 2013]. But there is also simple human exhaustion from a kind of emotional labour and care work that is exercised, quite untypically, by males on behalf of females [Theodosius 2008].

Thinking about the work of focused mental presence also helps make connections between prayer and other kinds of skill, such as the intuitive knowledge of a hunter of the movement of prey through the landscape, or the way carvers and stonemasons sense the possibilities within their materials [Ingold 2000; Khosronejad 2013]. As practiced skill but also charismatic gift, absorption depends on the recognition of others, and most religious traditions have ways of distinguishing good prayerful concentration from an excessive shadow side: loss of self-control through unwanted trance, self-aggrandising claims to spiritual insight that are known as *prelest* in the Orthodox tradition, or psychosis induced through drugs or deficient brain chemistry. Often, 'who' gets absorbed counts as much as 'how', when it comes to distinguishing genuine from faulty claims: as with visions and other unusual sensory experiences, the age, gender, ethno-confessional belonging, and lay or ordained status of the person who has the experience can be crucial for the judgement of others [Christian, Klaniczay (eds.) 2009]. In reformation era Britain, there was a time when closing one's eyes during prayer changed its meaning from shutting oneself off from the community of worshipers to expressing sincere devotion [Craig 2013]. Similarly, in Russian churches there are ways to venerate holy objects that are in synch with what a community of worshippers is doing, such as crossing oneself at appropriate moments in the choir's litany, reading the text of the service in a booklet, or standing in line patiently to kiss,

venerate, and light candles before, an icon. There are also ways that push the boundary toward the eccentric, as when individual worshipers begin to sing hymns to the icon after the official service is over.

This distinction between communal and eccentric absorption brings me back to the embodied nature of interreligious encounters, of which ethnographic research on lived religion is a special case. As professional strangers, ethnographers' attempts to stand apart or to join in will always look a bit off centre. As we aim to learn not just from the words of our 'informants', but from participating in their actions, our bodies inform on us as much as they help us understand others. And even as disagreements remain at intellectual and visceral levels, researchers are changed in their own sensibilities. Despite my Lutheran scepticism, I have learned to feel reverence through kissing and touching sacred things. But I still draw the line at icons of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, which are popular among Orthodox family values activists but remind me a bit too much of portraits of Kaiser Wilhelm from history textbooks. I can approach some of the 'moods and motivations' [Geertz 1973] of the religious activists I study through peripheral participation in their practices, many others remain closed.

Not all scholars of religion need to be high-absorption individuals. Max Weber famously claimed to be 'tone deaf' (*unmusikalisch*) when it came to religion, which did not prevent him from making observations that continue to inspire researchers. No matter where they score on Tellegen's scale, ethnographers who seek to understand worlds they do not fully share enter difficult ethical territory, where their own vision of what they are seeking may never fully match that of their interlocutors. But in a world where we increasingly tailor our sources of information and inspiration to our own pre-existing interests, there may be value in this experience of indeterminacy. Different from social media feeds and web forums for like-minded people, doing ethnography requires us to put our own point of view at risk even as we impose it on the lives of others.

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## IGOR MIKESHIN

1

I agree completely with the way the question is asked. The problem with the use of 'religion' as an analytical category is not so much the vast degree of generalisation and the vagueness of criteria and definitions, as the context of the concept itself. The fact is that all the definitions of religion on offer today, especially those offered by the classics of the social sciences, beginning with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber,

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are christianocentric. The impression is created that every social theoretician, when defining religion, is trying to compare the phenomenon that he / she is studying with Christianity, and moreover with that treatment of Christianity with which he / she is most familiar.

In my studies on Evangelical Protestantism I have come to the conclusion that not only does the term 'religion' create more problems in the conceptual apparatus than it solves, but that its place is gradually being taken by the narrower concept of 'Christianity'. This concept is so diverse, and the communities brought together under this name so different in their ideology, theology, ecclesiology and hermeneutics that it sometimes becomes an impossible task to identify the distinguishing characteristics of Christianity as a social phenomenon. Against this background some sort of working definition of religion for social research looks completely utopian. Besides, for many Evangelical communities 'religion', as opposed to 'the true faith', is a derogatory term, meaning a formal and superficial faith without any spiritual transformation of the believer.

Further confusion is often introduced by the use of the term 'religion' in different branches of the social sciences. The traditions of the use of the term in the legal, political, economic and historical disciplines — not to mention the diversity of discourses in the social sciences — are often areas that intersect but by no means coincide. This is particularly palpable at interdisciplinary conferences, when representatives of one discipline construct complicated models on the basis of a concept which seems completely artificial and cut off from social reality to their colleagues from other departments. For me, as an anthropologist of Evangelical Christianity, the term 'religion' does not usually offer any research interest, and serves only as a marker of an extended disciplinary community with its thematic conferences, publications, grants and vacant posts.

2

I would not go so far as to say that there is greater attention paid to the identity of the researcher in the study of religion than in other fields of study — at least, not in anthropology. In general, the methodology of anthropology is very heavily dependent on the specific research, and so the justification for the use of any methods and the degree of immersion is reduced in the final analysis to the principle of 'case specific'. The use of an emic approach to the study of social reality is characteristic of the methodology of modern anthropology, so that if interaction, and especially ethnographic immersion in the community being studied implies a reassessment of personal boundaries and an active interest in the researcher's personality on the part of the informants, the ethnographer has no choice but to analyse the interaction between his / her own identity and the community being studied in the most profound manner.

Religious groups may be very roughly and provisionally divided into orthodoxic and orthopractic. Whereas the first focus on correct doctrine, the second focus on proper behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Disproportionately more attention is given in contemporary anthropology of Christianity to orthodoxic tendencies, primarily in connection with the rapid growth in influence of charismatic groups. Such groups in principle consider any contact with outsiders as an opportunity for evangelism, and view anthropological research as God's work through people and circumstances to bring the anthropologist to Christ. In this connection, the most serious (and, in the opinion of many outside observers, the most unceremonious) attention to the personality and personal convictions of any potential convert, including ethnographers, is characteristic of these groups. Therefore one might get the impression that the inclusion of the identity of the researcher in the analytical model is particularly characteristic of the study of Christianity. However, both studies of orthopractic religious phenomena, such as pilgrimage, religious education or monasticism, and non-religious topics such as the breeding of deer and hunting, coalmining or political activism also include the identity and convictions of the researcher as one of their most important analytical categories.

3

Again, in the question of detachment I do not see any specific distinctions between the study of religious groups and any others. As I have already said, the methods of anthropological research are to a great extent often chosen on a case-specific basis (if we ignore pressure from disciplinary traditions and supervisors), therefore the degree of detachment in the presentation of the researcher, like the extent of his / her immersion in the field, are in most cases dictated by the community being studied. This may be expressed both in the resistance of informants to an attempt at too deep an immersion, and in colleagues' scepticism of too superficial an analysis when they consider the degree of detachment to be excessive. In principle this problem is as old as anthropology itself and has been examined in one form or another since the problem of 'participant' versus 'observation' was first stated.

I have certainly had to take such decisions in every research project in which I have taken part. For example, when I was studying the rehabilitation service of the Church of Evangelical Christians — Baptists, most of my informants were about the same age as I was and had been born and grown up in the same, or very similar, socio-cultural conditions, but at the same time they had the experience of drug dependency, imprisonment, and religious conversion that was foreign to me. Therefore the extent to which I was one of their own

<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that such a division is also christianocentric in its nature.

or an outsider for my informants, and to which they were my own or outsiders for me, was one of the key questions both in the methodological and in the ethical part of my project.

4

I have had to do with communities ‘that practise active proselytism’ in my research on Baptists in Russia and with the English-speaking church in Budapest. This activism is one of the characteristic and distinguishing peculiarities of Evangelical Protestants, and for the people around them it sometimes becomes the inevitable context for contact with them. Of course, Evangelicals living in the conditions of modern secular society have to find a balance between essential everyday contact in completely secular situations and the fulfilment of the commandment to ‘go and teach’ (Mt. 28:19). A genuine interest, even if it is a research interest, in the Christian sphere of life of these people inevitably leads, and of course led me, into a constant situation of evangelism, the preaching of the gospel and calls to repentance, to which I was forced to respond.

I cannot say that I had a great choice of strategies for contact with informants in the context of evangelism. In the situation of ethnographic research into Evangelicals this sometimes becomes the only possible regime of contact in principle, because Evangelicals explain any interest in them as a social group and in the processes that are taking place within it as God’s call, which, unfortunately for them, not everyone interprets correctly.

In this way, the choice of strategies becomes not a methodological problem, but rather a moral and ethical one. Personally, my choice in answer to questions about my own view of the world and my ‘relationship with God’ was a passively open position: I answered only what I was asked, but answered sincerely. An insincere answer would have contradicted the ethics of ethnographic research and my own personal moral principles, and too detailed a discussion of my views of how the world is constructed without being asked for it could have been seen as hostile, since I do not share the Baptists’ faith.

5

In this I see both a problem and a motivation for the anthropologist. For much anthropological research an activist position and the popularisation of the interests of the groups being studied is virtually the basic reason and motive for carrying out the research. Researchers into religion most often do not belong to the group that they are studying (at least, immediately to that community), and so a defence of its interests is not a priority for them. Besides, when a researcher has convictions which are different from his / her informants’, he / she will inevitably treat the phenomena that he / she observes differently.

When I discussed a video of my public lecture on the process of conversion in the rehabilitation service for people with dependencies

with a member of the Baptist Church, she was highly critical of my position. She pointed out that I give too much attention to secondary details, while treating the underlying basis of the whole process — God's work in people's hearts — as theological context. The obvious divergence in the positions of the observer sometimes leads to opposite opinions on the essence of the phenomenon being observed, which can lead to certain problems. In my case the argument ended happily, because we both recognised the difference in our starting positions. However, in the situation of one of my colleagues, a condition for whose work was that all her publications should be censored by the leader of the community that she was studying, such divergences could have put a stop to her whole project.

The main principle to which I would like to direct attention is the concept of 'informed consent' familiar to all anthropologists. I am convinced that both the community studied and its individual members who are informants have an absolute right to know the results of the research, the publications and public presentations. The community and its individual members are not obliged either to participate, or to give consent for the research to be conducted, and they also have the right to withdraw their consent at any stage. Therefore informants have the right to keep control over their participation and the degree to which they are kept informed.

'Fortunately' for many researchers, whose treatment of the phenomena they observe is different from their informants' position, by no means all informants are interested in the results of the research. For example, my informants often expressed support and curiosity about some details (the use of names and photographs), and also asked me to formulate a general conclusion for the whole project. However, if any of the participants in my research had asked me to show them the public materials of my project (publications, topics and details of public presentations), I would have had no moral or professional right to refuse them.

## ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA

1

I have my doubts about the designation of any group or practice as religious or non-religious. There are many unspoken conventions about what or whom we researchers consider as religious. We are inclined to accept the older conventions uncritically: was all know (somehow) that the Zoroastrians are a religious group and the Stoics are not, or that St Symeon, living on his column, was engaging in a religious practice, while Diogenes, living (perhaps) in his

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barrel, was not. We all know the kind of atheist who preaches his / her atheism with a genuinely religious fervour. More recent or less well-known phenomena fall into a grey area between religion and non-religion, but so much has accumulated in this area by now that our criteria of what is religious appear ever more dubious. Take what Eric Voegelin called political religions, such as communism. If someone who is in Paris visits Lenin's flat (not out of idle curiosity, but as a spiritually significant object), can we call that a pilgrimage? If so / not, why (not)? Is Lenin's mausoleum a religious object? And does not the proposal to demolish it count as an offence to religious feelings? A small movement arose among the Russian communists in the 1990s to have communism recognised as a religion, and it is hard to give a logical explanation of why they were wrong. Voegelin did not leave us any analytical instruments, and his concept does not let us understand why communism or fascism are political religions, and humanism, say, is not, although 'humanist chapels' officially exist, but so far, it would seem, there are no communist chapels.

Nationalism and everything connected with it is in the same grey area as the 'political religions'. We somehow know that nationalism is an ideology, not a religion, even though it does not look much like a classical ideology (for example, it does not express any class interests), and it does have quite a strong flavour of what we unanimously define as religion. The nationalist cult is indistinguishable from the religious cult: in both we see certain obviously 'sacred' objects (if only we knew what that meant!), all kinds of holy places, hagiographies and complex ritual practices. Hence arose the concept of civil religions, another category of non- or not quite religions. It looks like a joke, but for researchers the worship of a macaronic monster is a religion, but worship at the graves of fallen national heroes is not a religion. Only these jokes have very serious legal consequences, in the form of actions against offences to religious feelings, incitement to religious hatred, etc.

Returning to the question of whether any special methods are necessary for the study of religious phenomena, it should be noted that methods are determined by the aims of our research. If the aim is to grasp the religious element and separate it from the non-religious, then of course they are necessary. But it is impossible to understand what they would be.

**2**

What we call religion contains many internal components that are not particularly suited to external expression. Participant observation is no help here. A person may have a profound emotional connection with the objects of religious worship which he / she, subjectively, experiences no less strongly than his / her connections with the people close to him / her. If the researcher does not know such feelings, there is a strong possibility that he / she will not understand

them and will not even believe in their existence. In one of Chesterton's novels a young man from provincial Scotland reads something indecent about the Virgin Mary in an atheist paper and feels just as offended as he would have been if it had been about his own mother. Will the researcher, even the well-disposed researcher, be able to take such emotions seriously? For me this is an open question. Mystical experiences of various kinds are also encountered in the life of religious people. I have in mind not only the complex visionary experience of Swedenborg or Daniil Andreev, but the everyday mystical experience that accompanies religious practice. If the researcher is a complete stranger not only to the religion that he / she is studying, but to any religion at all, there is a chance that he / she will be unable to fit information of this kind into his / her conception, or will even discard it as an illusion.

There is also a practical benefit from a researcher's personal involvement in practice: an inner understanding of what works and how it works will be of more benefit than observing other people's behaviour and mechanically reproducing their actions. A researcher who, though uninitiated, engages in a practice, gets little out of it for his / her academic purposes and risks provoking an incorrect understanding of his / her actions and intentions. It was awkward for me, for example, when I was observing the Anglican liturgy, carefully following my book and partly imitating the behaviour of the worshippers (standing up when they stood up), and after the service people started to thank me for 'praying with us'. The reverse perception is also possible — that the researcher is, at best, insincere, and at worst profaning the rituals.

I do not mean that research into religious practices should be carried out by the initiated themselves. As Ivan Steblin-Kamenskiy used to say, not every fish can be a good ichthyologist. It all depends on our research tasks. A religious group may be studied like any other group: power relations within it or economic activity. But if the aim is to penetrate the inner world of a religious person, that can probably only be done by a researcher who has analogous experience of his / her own.

3

A researcher must maintain a certain distance from his / her subject. For this reason it is always so difficult for us to engage in self-analysis or to analyse the behaviour of people who are close to us. An entire profession, that of psychology, has come into being in order to help us solve problems of that sort. It is relatively easy for a social anthropologist to study communities to which he / she does not belong, up to the point when he / she crosses the border and feels that he / she is a member of the community. I do not really understand how one can extricate oneself from such a situation honourably. The successful anthropologist looks like a monster who worms his / her way into

people's confidence, making them think that he / she is one of them, but at heart he / she is observing them with the detached gaze of an analyst. But if you have always belonged to the community, it is not altogether clear what psychological or methodological technique will help you to 'alienate' familiar and accustomed things. I think that the wider the researcher's horizons and experience of life, the greater his / her opportunities to understand the distinguishing peculiarities of his / her own culture or subculture.

4

I have not encountered attempts at religious proselytism. But in the course of my research I have had to do with people who professed non-standard doctrines. Sometimes they professed them aggressively, so that dialogue with them was impossible until you acknowledged that they were right. It seems to me that here one needs to shift the focus from the subject of the conversation to the person. It is not my job to dispel other people's errors, but to understand what moves a particular person and how he / she constructs his / life. It will be intellectually productive to leave off discussing doctrine and move on to the mechanisms by which the community functions and other subjects which do not require the researcher to share the point of view of the people in whom he / she is interested. It seems to me that the scholar should have the skill to direct the conversation and prevent it from getting stuck in a rut of discussions that are meaningless for research and sometimes completely mad. I have myself, unfortunately, not always succeeded in this, and whole conversations have gone 'down the drain', turning into an insistent exposition of the views of the person being interviewed.

5

Establishing relations of trust with members of the group that you are studying inevitably leads to your finding out far more about their life than you intended. You may accidentally discover information that is discreditable to the group or shows it up in a bad light. If you make this information public, this will be the only time you will do this research. Those people will not let you near them in future. Sometimes there is no way that excellent research results can be published, because there are no secrets in the modern world, and the group will find out very quickly what sort of information you are disseminating about them. Even if you publish in a foreign language, that will not solve the problem. All you can do is console yourself with the thought that this secret knowledge makes your idea of the group being studied more comprehensive and exact, that is, it is an indirect aid to the achievement of better results.

## VLAD NAUMESCU

This forum invites us to reflect on the relevance of 'religion' in our practice today but our practice has been shaped by anthropology's troubled relationship with religion for a long time now. In a book discussing anthropology's relationship with Christianity, religious studies scholar Timothy Larsen [Larsen 2014] writes that even notable figures such as Mary Douglas, Evans-Pritchard or Victor Turner whose faith influenced significantly their works were swimming against the current since anthropology is (isn't it?) a secular discipline pervaded by a healthy scepticism towards things 'supernatural'. Larsen illustrates this with a quote from LSE anthropologist Jean La Fontaine: 'Once you stop religious thought, you start thinking anthropologically' [Ibid.: 167]. Whether this should be taken as an epistemological claim — that only a non-believer can understand belief — or a methodological position bracketing the truth value of religious beliefs similar to Peter Berger's methodological atheism [Berger 1990] is not really clear.<sup>1</sup> What is evident however is the renewed anthropological interest in religion and especially Christianity, which led to a reconsideration of our epistemological and methodological positions in recent years. This interest has been driven by a fascination for the 'exotic other' — famously coined 'the repugnant cultural Other' in an essay by anthropologist Susan Harding [Harding 1991] — the fundamentalist, conservative Christians who seem to represent the very opposite of what anthropologists imagine themselves to be. Much of this effort to rethink our position towards Christianity required a systematic exploration of Christian cultures and a more serious engagement with theology and practice. The theoretical model generated this way drew heavily on studies of Evangelical Christianity, particularly Pentecostalism, one the fastest growing religious movements in the world. The Protestant bias of

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<sup>1</sup> See also special issue of *Social Anthropology* (2001, vol. 9, no. 3) grappling with the question whether anthropology is inherently secular.

the anthropology of Christianity attracted a fair amount of criticism but what made this new field different was the shift (or return) to a culturalist approach to religion. First articulated in critiques of classical works such as the Comaroffs' famous study of the encounter between Christian missionaries and Tswana natives in South Africa [Comaroff, Comaroff 1991; 1997], anthropologists in this field argued that materialist approaches explain religion away [Robbins 2007]. Instead, they claimed, only by admitting our epistemological biases — for example the continuity thinking of anthropology — can we start taking religion seriously in our explanatory models. I take his argument to be as much about epistemology and method as about the ethics of representation (or misrepresentation) and will address both aspects in the following.

In the postsocialist context where I started research on Eastern Christianity the dominant approach was political economy inherited from anthropologists doing research under socialism. By searching for explanations of religious change in the social-economic transformations that defined postsocialism they failed to consider religion as a potential drive for social change. Religious commitments were read as signs of something else, whether self-interest exacerbated by the new market economy, identity politics or ideological commitments and often misinterpreted in the search for continuities with the socialist system and its materialist underpinnings. Conversion might have been the turning point for anthropologists to start taking individual agency seriously within the broader structural processes that defined this period. Encountering so many conversion testimonies and stories of self-transformation, they noticed distinct paths to moral formation and conceptions of personhood that accounted for religious subjectivities beyond utilitarian approaches. For the new converts religion was an opportunity to become someone else, someone better and conversion a clear moment of rupture in their lives but also in the continuity presupposed by the term 'postsocialist'. This is where anthropologists started to question whether the concept of religion is adequate enough to grasp people's conscious orientation towards different ideas of good, proper or virtuous and turned to the language of morality and ethics instead. Morality also seemed to reflect better not only individual transformation but everyday realities on the ground: the times in which old social contracts were discredited and new ones were not yet in place, when the language of change was itself moralising and the new politics were articulated in an ethics of reform.

The anthropology of ethics became thus a common ground for scholars of postsocialist religion and those studying Christianity who embraced this frame to understand moral transformation and cultural agency in the colonial encounter. And while it seemed that a meaningful conversation across the 'posts' has just started [Zigon

2007] one difference was already visible: anthropologists of Christianity used ethics to better understand Christianity while post-socialist scholars chose morality over religion. This distinction was evident in works such as Jarrett Zigon's on an HIV / AIDS rehabilitation centre run by the Russian Orthodox church [Zigon 2010a] and life stories of Muscovite middle-class [Zigon 2010b] or Douglas Rogers' historical ethnography of Russian Old Believers in the Urals [Rogers 2009], which proposed new conceptual vocabularies that replaced 'religion' (and culture) with ethics. Drawing on different theoretical approaches they found the ethical in moments of rupture or moral breakdown (Zigon) or in the continuity of social practice that sustained Old Belief over three centuries of shifting political regimes (Rogers). While each approach has its merits and both provide a nuanced understanding of the moral communities and religious subjectivities under study, an anthropologist of religion might be left wondering whether the object of study remains the same when ethics shifts to the foreground and religion to the background of analysis. In Robbins' terms, foregrounding religion means to engage with its cultural logic, intrinsic values and hierarchies, the underlying temporalities and representational economies that define it. This certainly exceeds the ethical domain but it is not devoid of ethics since religion offers conditions of possibility for different kinds of moral experience and ethical practice. Ethics, on the other hand, pervades all social life. The two are not commensurable and yet can be productively engaged by examining their historical articulation in particular cultures rather than abstracted from it.

I have taken such an approach in my research with Russian Old Believers in Romania, looking at Old Belief as a religious tradition that provides the possibilities and criteria for ethical formation [Naumescu 2016]. This approach put Old Believers' actions and their shifting commitments during socialism and after into a broader perspective, underlining the historical conditions that enabled or constrained them to pursue the values or virtues pertaining to their tradition and the pragmatic choices that helped reproduce a religious community in the midst of the secular world. Continuities in ethical practice could explain how religious subjectivities have been shaped historically but also constantly negotiated in a space of contradictory moralities. In this respect, the turn to ethics also offered the possibility to explore the shifting borders of religious and secular domains and thus go beyond problematic dichotomies inherent in this field. Despite the state-enforced atheism, socialist states have not so much eradicated religion as transformed and domesticated it. The implications of this process were often overlooked by those studying religion with tools borrowed from elsewhere, whether theories of modernity and secularisation or Cold War studies. By focusing on processes of moral formation one could grasp not only how religious

subjectivities were formed through the ethical repertoire of a religious tradition but also the ways in which the socialist modernity contributed to it. The secular humanism promoted by the socialist state tried to reclaim human agency as the engine of social change and placed personal transformation at the centre of its pedagogical project [Luehrmann 2011]. In the postsocialist context this has made particular modes of self-cultivation more popular than others, allowed people to recycle their pedagogical skills and set the ground for more individualistic religions to flourish. The particular configuration of religion and secular ethics in the socialist space could explain the postsocialist interest in practices of self-cultivation, the fast growth of the Evangelical movement in the postsocialist context [Wanner 2007] and the great appeal of charismatic practices in traditional churches [Naumescu 2010; Pop 2018].

Ethics can provide thus a meaningful lens to approach religious phenomena in the midst of socio-political transformation and conflicting moral frames without preempting a serious engagement with religion. Navigating between these frames proved as confusing for people living in those times as for the anthropologists studying them, and the lack of consistency in their narratives has often been forced by us into neat explanations about neoliberal subjects, rational choices etc. This brings me to the second aspect I want to address here, the ethics of representation and relationality. I see the turn to ethics as more than just a theoretical choice since it also refers to the people we encounter in the field, relationships we establish with them and our interpretations of their words and actions in the analyses we produce. It helps us grasp not only the position of our interlocutors but also their 'heightened sensitivity' towards our own position, as the conveners of this forum notice in their introduction. In times of social change when people become more conscious of their choices they also hold an acute sense of moral concern and self-interrogation. Many of us experienced it in our own researches but it is also visible in ethnographic works like those mentioned above that generated deeper moments of self-reflection or complex life stories and brought out the moral dilemmas people face. In such contexts of heightened moral consciousness our stance towards certain values, whether religious or not, matters more and we can rarely afford to remain neutral. But there are also religious cultures that actively cultivate a moral tension at the core and thrive through the constant witnessing of their members, which may provoke our secular sensibilities. The kind of ethnographic seduction described by Susan Harding [Harding 1987] in another well-known article centred on her meeting with a Baptist pastor is not confined to religious encounters [Robben 1996]. Here the anthropologist's desire to participate or become the other [Berliner 2013] clashes deeply with the 'repugnant Other' and everything it stands for as Harding illustrates

so well in this story of an attempted conversion. Many of us have encountered similar situations which can be very challenging for the anthropologist. And yet I find such situations more productive than withdrawal, deceit or pretense from our side.

In a recent article on the relationship between anthropology and conservative Christianity, Simon Coleman [Coleman 2015] takes up Harding's story to explore potential responses that are constitutive of our ethical practice. One is a moral relativism which is somewhat reflected in the methodological atheism mentioned earlier, another is a critical engagement deriving from our secular sensibilities and the kind of moral-political stance that defines our discipline today — here the Comaroffs could be a good example. There's also a third one, a productive engagement with this radical otherness that triggers self-reflection and the unveiling of our moral prejudices — something that stands closer to Robbins' call to consider the (epistemological) biases inbuilt in our ethnographic practice. I find the last one appealing not only because it questions the nature of our relationship with religious others but it also destabilises our epistemic position by forcing us to consider other (committed) subject positions within the discipline [Howell 2007] and alternative social ontologies [Robins 2006]. In doing so it opens new possibilities for engagement and a potential rethinking of the anthropological project and knowledge produced.

Our suspicion towards religious others, the tendency to ascribe different meanings to their words, or intentions to their practice, to restrain or postpone judgment to a later moment or to an academic audience has a history too. In the early days of the discipline anthropologists found themselves competing with missionaries in the field, a rivalry (antagonism) that lingers today and reemerges in encounters with religious others. This mistrust extends beyond relationships in the field, making problematic any conversation between theology and anthropology. This may explain why we read the works of Douglas, Turner and the like with no recognition of their sustained engagement with Christian theology and practice and its influence on their theoretical insights. But even if not embracing such position how can we overlook theology if we want to understand a religious culture better? Eastern Christianity for example has an impressive theological tradition which is not the exclusive domain of theologians. Many Orthodox Christians today are conversant with their rich spiritual tradition, frequently quoting church fathers and theological writings, and expertly observing ritual practice even if not always paying attention to the words. All religious communities have a longstanding tradition of self-reflection articulated in their writings and practice what Asad called a 'discursive tradition'. In our field research we become conversant with this tradition, observe the language ideologies and translate their words into ours, deciding on the weight

we want to give to them in the ethnographic description. Is it upon us to decide how substantial this conversation should be. In a recent text for an edited volume on Eastern Orthodoxy [Luehrmann (ed.) 2018] I have used the insightful observations of an Indian Orthodox theologian to outline a model of human flourishing which is shared by different Orthodox traditions. For this I could have drawn on the well-rehearsed language of the anthropology of ethics which itself uses Aristotelian terms like *poiesis*, *phronesis* and *eudaimonia* to describe the moral formation of character through the practice of virtues. This move however seemed to detach both his considerations and the ethical reflections permeating Orthodox tradition from the historical conditions and actual position of these churches. I chose instead the terms used by a practicing Christian from South India that resonated with my ethnographic observations and the theological sources he and other Orthodox Christians casually employ. And, like my fellow anthropologists, the theologian had the opportunity to read and engage with my argument during the writing process.

While collaboration and co-authorship became more widespread in anthropology these days, one rarely (if ever) sees meaningful exchanges with religious others. Some of the reasons are by now obvious but there is also an apparently incommensurable distance between the religious and ethnographic languages which cannot be bridged in our ethnographic accounts. For one thing we seem to have in common is the strong emphasis we place on words and their true meanings in relation to a reality out there (despite the tendency to veil our anthropological arguments in a language inaccessible to outsiders). For this reason, I find the new possibilities afforded by the internet, visual and social media an opportunity to break through this impasse. In my own practice I tried to engage communities I have worked with in a conversation that extended beyond fieldwork and academia by sharing films and blogs with them and inviting further reflection (see for example the Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer portal: <<http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/>> developed with colleagues as part of a collaborative research on prayer in Eastern Churches). This requires a greater responsibility from our side but promises more substantial conversations and increasing relevance of our work — at least for the people we work with if not for more. Anthropologists of religion should be among the first to acknowledge that these possibilities can transform anthropological practice as much as they have already shaped the way people practice religion.

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### ROBERT A. ORSI

The critique of the concept 'religion' that has taken place over the past three decades was long overdue. It resulted in a tectonic shift in the study of 'religion'. Its arguments and conclusions are well known by now, as this forum's first question suggests, and I will not rehearse them here. According to Miriam Webster's dictionary, scare quotes around a word indicate 'skepticism or derision concerning the use of the enclosed word or phrase.' That I find it difficult today to write 'religion' without scare quotes on the page or to think the word 'religion' without them in my mind is evidence of the effectiveness of the critique. It is — or it ought to be — impossible to use the word 'religion' without paying attention to the history it bears or to its political implications. It ought to be impossible to use the word 'religion' innocent of its role in the many forms and occasions of modern violence, because today, at this moment in history, 'it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself' [Camus 1951: 4]. Using the word consciously and critically, without innocence, is different, however, than not using it at all.

As the editors write, 'there have been claims in the social sciences [and in the study of religion broadly, I will add] that "religion" has outlived its usefulness as a concept.' That some hold this position is true. No sooner had the study of religion trained a critical gaze inward that

the end of the study of 'religion', and of 'religion' itself no less, were announced. Such futility and nihilism are familiar from the recent pasts of other academic disciplines. Across the social sciences and humanities, late-twentieth-century critiques of 'culture', 'history', 'science', 'literature', and 'law', which were in every case necessary at the start, led to the conclusion that not only were these terms useless for theory; the lived realities they were once thought to name did not exist either. It was finally religion's turn to fall into this black hole.

The common denominator among disciplines is the assumption characteristic of certain strains of late-modern critical theory that there is no reality outside language, that the only proper subject of inquiry is discourse itself. 'Religion', as J. Z. Smith declared, exists solely in the scholar's study [Smith 1982: IX]. Whatever its original critical intentions, in my experience Smith's assertion that 'religion' exists only in scholars' studies has served primarily to reassure scholars unwilling to leave their rooms that to study language is to study the thing named. In this way, the world shrinks to the space of the scholar's mind. Karl Marx's critique of the young Hegelians has never lost its salience.

Such claims indicate not the uselessness of the word 'religion', in my view, but the failure of the contemporary theoretical imagination at the very point where new possibilities for theory and research have opened up. It would be a tragedy not only for the study of religion but for the social sciences and humanities too — and for critique — if the years of self-reflexive criticism ended in such a dark and narrow cul-de-sac [Asad et al. 2009]. Critique has opened a path to a clearing. Now what? This is really the only useful question in the theory of religion today. But to ask this question confronts us immediately with a conundrum.

Political and historical genealogies of 'religion' have shown among other things how deeply implicated the modern study of religion was in the construction and maintenance of certain boundaries, between present / past, for instance, here / there, oneself / another, body / mind, living / dead, and public / private. 'Religion' secures the slash. These binaries are fundamentally constitutive of modern consciousness and subjectivity, of modern ways of being-in-the-world. Theories of magic, fetishism, ritual, and sacrifice, as well as normative definitions of what 'religion' is and especially what 'religion' is not, got written over the polymorphous and perverse abundance of the world's religious practices, at home and abroad. The well-policed border between 'religion' and its others underwrote racism, imperialist violence and theft, gender inequalities, and cultural hierarchies (even as particular practitioners of 'religion' used the language of their respective religious traditions to contest these forms of oppression).

Race was religionised even as religion was racialised [Johnson 2015]. As a reward for its good behaviour, 'religion' in its modern formulation was allowed a place in secular university classrooms, where its study contributed to sustaining and authorising the modern project. The scientific study of religion translated lived religion(s) into social and psychological functions; the discipline of comparative religion constituted as it examined the distant past of myths and rituals; anthropology was assigned the task of studying religion's various others in their assigned places at the edges of the modern world that modern academic disciplines themselves had so authoritatively mapped, using 'religion' as a metric.

In this way, theories of religion created the historical unconscious of the discipline and contributed to the making of the unconscious of modernity itself, into which disallowed, terrifying, disruptive, and 'irrational' religious practices were stored. The discipline's theoretical categories and languages functioned as hysterical symptoms, reaction formations against the distress caused by the unsayable and unsaid, by the unthinkable and unthought known. The unsayable and unthinkable tended to speak up, however, or to break through, in descriptions of real world religious practices, in distant places and closer to home, by ethnographers, travelers, missionaries, criminal authorities. This was the return of the repressed. It was the discipline's task to control its appearances by language and theory.

Here is the conundrum, then: how are scholars of religion to generate alternative and productive theories of religion that will open up new horizons of research when the academic discipline of religious studies of which they (we) are licensed practitioners was so central in establishing and maintaining modernity's hierarchies and limits?

This is to ask us scholars of religion to pit ourselves against our deepest academic values and assumptions in order to think what we have been disciplined to think of as unthinkable in ways that are disallowed. One might look to non-Western (a problematic term, I know) scholars as a resource in this undertaking, but because modernity is a global, not local, project, the minds and bodies of young people in societies identified as 'traditional', 'primitive', 'pre-modern', have been subjected to the fiercest and most unforgiving discipline in educational institutions staffed by representatives of imperial powers. The result, as many of these intellectuals have described in memoirs, is a deeply internalised conflict vis-à-vis the modern, necessitating intimate work to think beyond the internalised modern (see, for instance: [Kakar 1983; 2014]). Nor is the task of finding new theoretical paradigms for the study of religion simply a matter of switching categories, of replacing the mentalist and intellectualist orientations of the old paradigm with embodiment, for example, aniconism with images, practice in place of belief. While

productive research agendas have emerged in this way, it merely retains the modernist paradigm in inverse. The result is often the same or worse for the study of lived religion: the critique of the centrality of 'belief' as a category in the study of religion, for example, threatens to turn religious practitioners into mindless subjectivities, fully disciplined, without ideas of their own. It is no wonder that dismissing religion altogether becomes the easiest way out of this conundrum [Orsi 2014].

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The questions posed by the editors of this symposium arise straight out of the normative paradigm of the study of 'religion'. Responding directly to them would only further entangle me in the authority and limitations of this paradigm. But let me approach the questions in turn here obliquely. To begin with, the issue of the 'personal standpoint' of the scholar, referenced in the second question, is a problem only when knowledge broadly, of knowledge of religion in particular, is situated within the semantic range of objective / subjective. The theorist is forced by this inbuilt constraint to replay endlessly well-worn conversations rather than to break out of the binary, objective / subjective, altogether. In the constricted space between objective / subjective, moreover, our relationships with the persons among whom we go to pursue our questions, in the field or archive, are conceivable only in terms of our obedience or our rebellion: either we submit to the objectivist side of the paradigm, treating our interlocutors like data, or we revolt against the well-established prohibition against 'subjectivity' by blurring the difference between them and us. In this way, the 'otherness' referenced in question three appears to be a permanent quality of the populations studied. What becomes of 'them' is up to 'us'. But 'otherness' is the political creation of modernity's authoritative mapping of the world's religions. Implicit in the fourth questions is the anxiety that 'they' will suborn 'us' into 'their' world, that almost against our wills and intentionality, we will slide from our world into theirs. Again, it is as if this duality, their world / our world, was somehow given in the nature of reality.

Fear of the ontological 'other' is palpable in this question, 'Have you ever encountered difficulties because of your refusal to undergo religious conversion of one kind or another?' The question would be more provocatively and productively posed as, 'Have you ever encountered rejection, contempt, and humiliation among your academic colleagues when you displayed your willingness to enter the religious worlds of others on terms that refused to translate them into the categories of modern analysis that reassure your colleagues of the givenness of their world?' The question as originally formulated presumes a magical efficacy on the part of the religious other, who is

endowed with the malignant power to speak directly to the scholar's unconscious, where the unacknowledged desires that impelled him / her to this particular field-site or historical event reside, and thus transforming the scholar into the very subjectivity he / she fears to become (but by which he / she is so fascinated). Surely scholarship on religions may be freed from these tortured psychodramas! Finally, question 5 displays the anxiety that the old topography of the globe, in which 'they' were 'there' and 'we' are 'here' has dissolved so that for the first time in history 'they' have access to what 'we' are saying about 'them', which we shared with others like ourselves who were not likely to question the interpretive moves we made upon the world of the other, what we made of them in our language. What we say about them is no longer our secret.

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What is the alternative then? The search for a path to new theories of 'religion', I want to suggest, goes *forward to the present from before modernity* — not the 'pre-modern', which belongs to modernity's own normative temporality — and *winds its way through religions as they had developed to that point and as they were then, their ontologies and anthropologies, ideas and practices*. This is what Talal Asad does in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, of course, although he does not thematise it [Asad 1993]. Asad looks to medieval Catholicism and Islam to locate his critique of Clifford Geertz's seemingly unconscious identification of liberal Protestantism with religion itself [Geertz 1973]. He finds in Catholic monasticism an exemplum for his contention that discipline within particular arrangements of social and religious power, rather than meanings or ideas, constitutes religion. Asad's claim made particular sense to me as a scholar who works primarily on Roman Catholicism. Modernity does not have a single origin or trajectory, but it is nonetheless the case that at its historical core and in its development from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the once and future necessary other of 'modern religion' was Roman Catholicism. Islam and Judaism had their own roles to play in shaping modernity and 'modern religion', but neither was as fundamental as Catholicism. Catholicism was the pivot around which normative ideas of modern religion were first spun. This is so deeply embedded in the histories of modernity generally, modern religion in particular, that it is routinely ignored.

In my recent book, *History and Presence* [Orsi 2016], I argue that the Eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth centuries contesting the meanings of the words Jesus spoke to his disciples at the last meal they shared before his crucifixion were central to the formation of modern religion and more broadly of modern consciousness. Here is the scene as described in Mt. 26:26–28, 'Now as they were eating,

Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And He took the cup, and when he had given thanks, gave it to them saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." At the Council of Trent in 1545, Roman Catholics reaffirmed the doctrine of Jesus's 'real presence' in the sacrament of the Eucharist; it is not necessary here to trace the development of this doctrine over time, only to recall its authoritative formulation at this turn in world history [O'Malley 2013].

Among the reformers, Martin Luther held steadfastly to the theology of real presence. But as theological debates and political conflicts dragged on and religious violence escalated across Europe, the relationship between Christ's literal body and blood and the bread and wine of the Eucharist, between flesh and sign, began to come apart [Wandel 2006; Juster 2016]. Throughout the sixteenth century, Christians searched for new ways of conceiving and imagining the divine body in the Host. Or not in the Host. New knowledge about the natural world and the human body, profound changes in the arrangements of society, and the emergence of new schools of thought in philosophy all contributed to raising or reviving troubling questions about the nature of the Eucharist. Because of the momentousness of what was being debated — how the divine and human stand in relation to each other, how the divine is present to the human amid the affairs of everyday life — conflict over Christ's real presence in the consecrated Host was implicated, then and since, in other exigent human concerns, such as the relationship between spirit and matter, between the past and the present, between representation and reality, between one person and another, and between political leaders and those over whom they exercised different forms of authority. Protestants had their own ways of understanding God's presence in the world — in the order or nature, for instance, or the gathering of the saints — but presence in the sense of God's blood and body consumed, and more broadly, of the Virgin Mary appearing on earth, the actual presence of the dead in the affairs of the living, a saint's presence in a chip of bone or bit of cloth, in the space of a shrine, or time of year — presence in *this* sense was Roman Catholic. Presence in the specific Roman Catholic sense increasingly took on a historical trajectory different from presence in its Protestant meanings. Catholics entered the modern world as the people of presence par excellence.

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What would have remained an internecine metaphysical quarrel among western European Christians was carried out to the rest of the world by the agents first, of Catholic, then later, of Protestant, empires, where it was taken up into local histories, conflicts, and

cosmologies. The Europeans understood indigenous peoples' interactions with their respective supra-human figures of power — gods present in matter; things that lived (the fetish, for instance); blood sacrifices to the gods — through the lens of Protestant / Catholic conflict. The idea that 'modern religion' is a variant of Protestantism, a commonplace following Asad's critique of Geertz, is only half-true, and as such it is more a distortion than a clarification. 'Modern religion' is the product of Catholic / Protestant conflict; key to this was the doctrine of real presence. What Europeans 'saw' out in the world through this lens became the data for early religious theorists, and in this way, Catholicism got built directly into the foundations of the modern.

Religious practice and imagination, to modern theorists of religion, are about something *other than* what they are about to practitioners. This something other may be human powerlessness, false consciousness, ignorance, hysteria, or neurosis; it may be a social group's shared identity of itself; or it might be about functioning of the brain, with religion piggy-backing onto the developments and movement of human cognition. Whatever it is, religion is not about itself, and it is surely not about the gods — a synecdoche here for all suprahuman figures — present to humans, the gods really present, in the Catholic sense, in matter, in things, rituals, in history and in society. And Catholicism was the past; its imagining of a god's body and blood materialised in bread and wine was primitive.

As a result, 'religion' in its normative modern sense may be, and has been, talked about, defined, and studied, without the gods *really present* in the Catholic sense. The gods appear as tropes, metaphors, and distortions of language in philological, ethnological, and folkloric scholarship on ancient myth and ritual in various cultures. There are anthropomorphic theories of religion, certainly — although such gods are said to be disappearing as humans evolve, just as Protestantism gave way to — but to say that the gods are function of cognitive processes contributes little to understanding the intersubjective interactions between gods and humans present to each other and the consequences of such encounters. Gods make no appearance in Geertz's theory of religion nor in Asad's critique of Geertz. Against Geertz, Asad asks, 'How does power create religion?' Not, 'How does power create the gods?' which would have raised the further theoretical question of whether, once created by power, the gods do not turn around and thwart power's agendas [Asad 1993: 45]. 'Religion' as a modern construct comes already fully contained within its limits. The gods were obsolete according to modern theologies and theories, already on their way out as living entities involved in the real lives of men, women and communities, and they remain largely absent from theories and histories of religion today.

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I think the idea of real presence would be a good place to begin reconstructing the concept of 'religion' in a way that is not derivative of a modern world that has long ago lost its prestige and privilege. This does not mean resorting to a 'prescientific' concept, if by this is meant unempirical. Rather, I am proposing a radically empirical approach to religion. When an actor in a particular social world says, 'god / the goddess / the ancestors / the dead... commanded me to do x,' with x including loving the neighbor, killing the neighbour, fasting, dying for the gods, consuming the natural world, guarding the natural world, and so on, instead of translating this into a social and political event, we will remain in conversation with the practitioner in his / her world, not in ours. By this I do not mean 'taking his / her religion seriously'. This phrase carries all the condescension of modern theories of religion, delaying only slightly the imposition of the theorist's world onto the practitioner's. I mean, instead, theorising at the intersection of different worlds of meaning and practice, without transposing either into the other, without taking one as really real the other real for them. This is not to imply a) that discrepant ontological worlds are utterly discrete; they rarely are; or, b) that practitioners and scholars alike may not have involvements, more or less deep, in both worlds. Rather, it is to underscore the relationality that characterises research in the humanities and social sciences.

I do not want to lose sight here at the end of this essay of returning to the real presence of the gods (in the Catholic sense) to any revisionist approach to religion. To review one last time (which I do because this is so often misunderstood): while *I do not deny that modern religion has generated its own forms of the sacred presences, these are fundamentally alien to what Catholics meant by 'real presence' in the late sixteenth century, the rejection of which was a signal move in the making of modernity*. Real presence means: the gods accessible to human senses; the gods as external to humans, not as reflexes of human interiority, or indices of human society, but as entities separate from humans; the gods bring their needs, fears, angers, desires, understandings to the encounter with humans, so that the encounter represents something unforeseen by the humans involved (even if it was expected), something that requires time for these humans, including scholars, to understand, which they do in conversation with others who likewise expect the gods to behave this way (in other words, with others who share their memories, subjectivities, formations, disciplines, and their relationship to power on various levels, domestic, social, and religious). It also means that the gods have histories and lives independent of the humans who at any particular moment encounter them.

This will lead us to inquire, for instance, into the implications for social and political life not solely of religious ideas, but of the

population of suprahuman confronting humans as well. Religions other than 'modern religion' are generally understood to be indubitable. What a god orders in 'primitive' environments, 'primitive' humans do, whether in politics, domestic life, sexuality, etc. This predictability is what accounts for religion's functionality. But seeing gods and humans as distinct from each other dissolves this fixity. In its place, we must pay more attention to process, to doubt, to the ways humans interpret the speech of the gods, as well as to how humans resist, thwart the gods, or contend with them. Contingency is fundamental; relationality contextualises doctrine. The gods are not free of social and political entanglements. They may be suborned, manipulated, and coerced. To approach religion through what I have called a 'matrix of presence', restores the dynamism, and the danger, of religions to human experience [Orsi 2016: 249–52].

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I am aware that I write here for Russian readers among others. So, by way of closing, I want to raise some questions about the religious tradition that has been largely absent from theoretical formulations of 'religion', namely the varieties of Orthodoxy. 'Christianity' in the modern study of religion tends to mean, first, liberal Protestantism; then, the more politically and ecclesiologically conservative Protestants; followed explicitly and implicitly by Roman Catholicism. As theological study lost its role in the scholarly training of most scholars of religion, though, such precise distinctions, or the awareness of them, dissolved before a hypostasised 'Christianity'. In its ethnic particularities, its theologies, varied state affiliations, structures of authority, and elaborate rituals, Orthodoxy exists at a great remove from 'modern religion', even more so than Roman Catholicism perhaps. But I wonder whether a theoretical engagement with Orthodoxies, in all their internal complexity and geographical diffusion, might not offer another perspective from which to generate other-than-modern theories of religion. I have in mind in particular the lived experience of the theology of icons; practices associated with saints and shrines; the place of prayer in everyday life; patterns of authority, submission, and discipline; encounters over time with Muslims and Jews; and the differing relationships with various states. I know that there is far more than I am aware of when I raise this possibility. But other religions have been mobilised to decentre 'modern religion' [Ahmed 2012; Josephson 2012; Batnizky 2013], and I would be curious to see Orthodoxy enter this conversation, in one way or another.

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Religious scholarship depends on the critical traditions of the European enlightenment(s) in their elaboration over time. I am not

proposing a rejection of these traditions. The approach to religion I gesture towards is not an antimodern romanticism. The work of generating new theories of religion will necessarily entail using the critical tools of modernity itself, albeit it without taking them for granted. Nor am I saying that religions other than the normative modern 'religion' are in any sense good. Such a judgement reproduces the penchant of the modern study of 'religion' to distinguish between good and bad religions under the guise of value-neutral scholarship. What I am calling for is the discovery of new theoretical possibilities for the study of religion in the wake of the sustained critique of the past decades by looking for theoretical provocation to the very forms of religion modernity designated as alien to itself. By going back, I am hoping that we find a way forward beyond 'religion' and its contemporary discontents.

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## LEONARD NORMAN PRIMIANO

### **Encountering the Female Divine... Literally: Ethnographic Writing about Mother and Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement**

I would like to address as a part of this Forum the relationship of ethnographers with the religious individuals that we study, the issues of fieldwork and agency among 'informants', 'consultants', or 'contributors', and how these issues specifically relate to ethnographic writing. As I am trained in folkloristic ethnography and in the field of religious studies, my round-table comments address the contributions I see folkloristics making on my work as an ethnographer of religion. My response in this Forum discussion of recent debates in the anthropology of religion is rooted in a series of papers I have been presenting concerning issues in fieldwork methodology and centred in my study of the expressive culture of the American sectarian religion known as Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement. My underlying argument in these papers has been consistent: to study American religious communities, one needs to be attentive to the dynamic quality of what I call 'vernacular religion', i.e., religion as it is lived and negotiated, interpreted and created in human institutions and everyday life [Primiano 1995; 2014a]. One of the most effective ways to appreciate the sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle, affectively public or powerfully private, nature of vernacular religion is first and foremost through a determined and sensitive consideration of the expressive culture found in a community of individuals, certainly including traditions and uses of belief, foodways, speech and song, dress, architecture, art and craft, notions of healing, etc. I want to reiterate how important it

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is to state and re-state this basic folklife studies theoretical and methodological orientation to the study of religion.

In this case, I have been working within an indigenous, celibate, utopian American religion. The Peace Mission is a movement which could be described as 'alternative' to conventional American society and conventional American religious structures. It is a movement which also could, perhaps paradoxically, be understood as 'emergent' given new innovations in its religious life that I have observed, even as it has been receding and declining in membership over the last forty years.

Contemporary studies of American religious folklife place an emphasis on describing, analysing, and comparing the culture of communities defined by their religious belief systems. Such communities can also be defined through shared geography; age; gender; economy; occupation; leisure; and medical, political, or other beliefs. Religious folklife stresses the significances of aesthetic or artistic creativity and creation; historical process; the varieties of construction of mental, verbal, or material forms; and the enduring relationship and subtle balance between utility and creativity to such forms within cultures. The methodology of religious folklife includes exhaustive historical research using all available sources as well as field studies including ethnographic observation, thick description, and interviewing. Often taking a reciprocal or collaborative ethnographic approach, this method and subsequent analysis allows people to speak for themselves using their own aesthetic and classificatory systems — at times influenced by, but often outside of, reified institutional or intellectual structures — to explain their religious belief and practice, and influence those scholars who have been given the privilege to know, understand, appreciate, and learn from their religious lives. These principles of the folklore and folklife approach to ethnographic method and analysis have been very influential for me as I formed my own approach to studying a challenging and remarkable American religion.

For the last twenty-four years, I have been doing ethnographic work with the remaining members of the indigenous American intentional religious community known as Father Divine's International Peace Mission Movement. Belonging to a tradition of American innovative, radical, positive religious communitarianism, such as the Oneida Community, the Harmonists, and the Shakers, the Peace Mission Movement was organised in the first two decades of the twentieth century around the charismatic African American minister, the Reverend M. J. Divine, better known as 'Father Divine'. A few dozen elderly members, for the most part, currently live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the celibate movement relocated in the 1940s from New York City. It is the conviction of Peace

Mission followers that Father Divine is God. Peace Mission beliefs are a unique formulation of Father Divine's personal spiritual insights, as well as his synthesis of several religious traditions in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America: Adventist, Holiness, Roman Catholic, black church, storefront Christianity, and the New Thought Movement. Father Divine came to public attention in 1920 in Sayville, Long Island, when he gathered around himself and his African-American wife, Peninnah, a multi-racial group of followers. He physically and spiritually transformed these individuals into a religious cooperative which emphasised moral living, hard work, social justice, racial equality, and peaceful coexistence with the world. He banned smoking, drinking, gambling, swearing, and sexual relations, living by what he deemed the 'International Modest Code'. By working to 'harmonise with Father's spirit', followers were taught that they would achieve lasting health, increasing prosperity, and ultimate salvation in his oneness. His ideology of positive thinking promised economic success in life and personal empowerment. He gained tens of thousands of followers not only in the continental United States, but also in Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, France, England, and Panama.

My work with the contemporary, largely female congregation has been filled with elation, complexity, and calories, as anyone who has attended a three-hour, multi-course Peace Mission Holy Communion Banquet Service can testify. A unique exhilaration and complexity is the fact that chief among those remaining followers that I have had the honour to consult is 'Mother Divine', Father Divine's second wife, his 'spotless virgin bride' according to Peace Mission theology. Since their marriage in 1946, the greatest theological reflection, expression, and enumeration within the movement has been about the celibate, spiritual marriage of the sixty-eight year old Father Divine to this white twenty-one year old Canadian woman, and her role as Mother Divine within the Mission. Mother Divine died in March 2017 at the age of 91, obviously, a time of great sadness for her followers / spiritual children. (See two relevant obituaries: [Grimes 2017; Whelan 2017].) She continues to be observed as both the reincarnation of Father's first wife, Peninnah, and the incarnation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is understood as the unifier of the international, universal, and interracial hallmarks of the religion, and the exemplar of the feminine ideal as the celibate bride of God, Father Divine. Mother Divine was a living divine maternal figure for the membership and will be in the future available for harmonious contact by all believers and friends of the Movement, as is Father Divine. Mother Divine's role as divine principal and religious innovator is complex and worthy of serious scholarly attention in itself [Primiano 2014b], but for this present discussion I would like to explore the complications her role as a living divinity

presented to me as an ethnographer studying this aging, but still vibrant and expressive American religion.

As a part of my scholarship on the Peace Mission over the last two decades, I was faced in 1998 with the intriguing prospect of preparing a short entry on Mother Divine for Sirnity Young's *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* [Primiano 1998]. Well aware of the Movement's disdain for past scholarship and coverage in the popular press, and particular dislike of articles treating Father and Mother Divine personally, I knew this assignment would pose a challenge. My solution was to employ the ethnographic method known as 'reciprocal ethnography' (used to great effect by [Lawless 1988; 1993; Lassiter 1998; Hinson 1999; Campbell, Lassiter 2014], for example) in the preparation, writing, and editing of the article.

The Peace Mission's history and contemporary presence has fascinated scholars of American religion since its inception. First, sociologists of American 'sectarian' religion studied Father Divine as a figure representing Max Weber's notion of the 'charismatic' religious leader. Secondly, historians have chronicled his work analyzing the success of his overall political and social agenda as well as investigating the historical roots of George Baker, the man who it is believed became Father Divine. The most prominent histories have been authored by Robert Weisbrot (namely *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* published in 1983 [Weisbrot 1983]) and Jill Watts (*God, Harlem U.S.A.* published in 1992 [Watts 1992]). These scholarly texts are but two of many volumes published on Father Divine including what could be described as examples of descriptive sociology (such as William Kephart's article in his collection, *Extraordinary Groups: The Sociology of Unconventional Life Styles*, currently refreshed by Richard T. Schaefer and William W. Zellner in a 2011 edition of the text [Schaefer, Zellner 2011]); evangelical Christian tracts against this American 'cult', such as 'I Spent the Night in the Devil's House' [Gardner 1952]; as well as exposés by major publishers on the abuses and deceptions of the Movement, such as John Hoshor's 1936 *God in a Rolls-Royce: The Rise of Father Divine, Madman, Menace, or Messiah* [Hoshor 1936]; and Sarah Harris' 1953 *Father Divine: Holy Husband* [Harris 1953]. Father Divine's role in 'influencing' Jim Jones and the formation of his People's Temple of the Guyana Tragedy / mass suicide fame is recounted in David Chidester's insightful *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown* [Chidester 2003].

After more than half a century of such publications, the response of Peace Mission members to the suggestion of further research about Father Divine or the movement is not particularly positive. Mother Divine, for example, told me how much she disliked the books by

Weisbrot and especially Watts, a work she felt took tremendous liberties in its history of George Baker, identifying him as the man who became Father Divine. The Peace Mission had denied this identity for Father as far back as a famous 1936 two-part *New Yorker* magazine report on him, 'Who Is This King of Glory' [McKelway, Liebling 1936], when he was a major political and economic force in Harlem. Members, in fact, will not even say the name George Baker uttering the initials 'G. B.', only when they must, and Mother Divine once informed me that she hired a lawyer in 1979 to make the Library of Congress delete the name, George Baker, from the subject category in the collection's card catalogue. This deletion was successfully accomplished in 1982.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is not surprising that the contemporary Peace Mission dislikes and distrusts scholars and the process of scholarly research when one realises that, though this religion has in fact existed almost as long without Father Divine being alive as with him being physically present, scholars of American religion essentially abandoned them as a viable American religious community after Father Divine's death. Could this lack of attention to the religious leadership of a woman and the lives of the mainly female followers be an indication of scholarly chauvinism on the part of academics, I have often asked myself? I should add that there has been an additional historical study of the Peace Mission's Western New York state agrarian utopian communities written by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Carleton Mabee, *Promised Land: Father Divine's Interracial Communities in Ulster County, New York* [Mabee 2008]. The followers see this book as a more positive contribution, but one still filled according to followers with inappropriate references to Father Divine as a human being and not as an incarnational figure.

A particularly vivid example of the distrust which the Peace Mission has for people who wish to 'study' them can be seen in the experience of my fellow folklorist, Deborah Bailey, who worked intrepidly with the Mission in the late 1980s at the University of Pennsylvania on a paper for Professor Dell Hymes' graduate course on the ethnography of speaking. Bailey was given permission to do ethnographic work on the religious speech acts of members, only if she promised the follower assigned to her, Miss Heart, never to publish her research. Bailey, ever the ethical folklorist, in a very early example of a feminist and morally responsible ethnographic approach to issues defined by people being studied, went on to produce an over 100-page paper which she never published in fulfillment of her vow made at the time concerning her ethnographic work. This story, of course, stands in stark contrast to another researcher of the Peace Mission that

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<sup>1</sup> See: <<http://peacemission.info/sermons-by-father-divine/copy-of-letter-from-the-library-of-congress-about-its-catalog-heading-for-father-divine/>>.

I encountered, a woman, ostensibly a graduate student at New York City's New School for Social Research, who showed me the hidden tape recorder she was employing at Banquet Services to tape testimonials of members to use for her master's thesis. I am happy to report to you that after having this woman proudly reveal to me her hidden microphone at a second banquet, I informed a follower of her unethical practices and greatly enjoyed never seeing her again at their services.

The act of finally putting into print my own research on Mother Divine and the Mission certainly posed a challenge. This publication would not merely be an article on the movement, but a biographical entry on the spotless Virgin Bride herself. My solution was to prepare the article employing an approach which I instinctively felt was the only way to proceed: a dialogical method of writing about this figure in American religion using her own knowledge and her own sense of how she wanted to be represented, along with material that I had researched, to flesh out an article that would have scholarly integrity and not be insulting to the subject of the biographical essay. Influenced by the work of folklorists Elaine Lawless and then Glenn Hinson and anthropologist Luke Eric Lassiter, I came to the awareness that the method I needed to use in the preparation, writing, and editing of the article, what I had to do by necessity, was the ethnographic method known as 'collaborative' or 'reciprocal' ethnography. This method growing directly out of the sensitivities learned by folklorist David Hufford's 'experience-centred approach' [Hufford 1989] to belief studies has been beautifully described by Luke Lassiter as 'a model that explicitly seeks to resituate control and authority within the ongoing dialogue about the evolving ethnographic text itself rather than with the single-voiced author... [here] dialogue is not just represented but sought at every point in the development of the ethnographic text' [Lassiter 2000: 605].

My search for a method to have Mother Divine assist me in telling the story of her own life climaxed one fall afternoon in 1997 at Father and Mother Divine's office on the seventh floor of the unfortunately now closed Divine Tracy Hotel near the University of Pennsylvania campus; one of a series of integrated hotels of quality and safety the Mission ran according to Father Divine's strict moral codes in Philadelphia, Newark, and Jersey City, New Jersey [Primiano 2004]. I had mailed Mother Divine a copy of the rather short encyclopedia entry — it was no more than two and one-half single spaced pages. I arranged this meeting for what I hoped would be a review of the piece with a discussion of what changes needed to be made to improve it, to correct it, to 'bring it up Father's standards'. This was God's wife who I was going to interview according to her followers and I equally appreciated the fact that this occasion presented to me the significant opportunity to interview and speak with a personality in

the rich tapestry of figures important in the narrative of American religion. There is a wonderful song that is sung in the Mission: 'There ain't no heaven in the sky'. That is because God is right here on earth in their belief, and Mother Divine is the human embodiment of that divine principle.

Mother met me with her secretary, Miss Edna Mae Claybrook, and one of her trusted advisors, Miss Anita, also seated in the room. To say that I was very curious to hear her opinions of the article was a bit of an understatement. Instead of critiquing it, Mother Divine simply announced, 'Very good, Dr. Primiano, would you read the article to us.' So there in front of God's wife, with the sunlight streaming through the curtains, I slowly read an encyclopedia article that I had written about her to her waiting for her response. It was as ethnographically surreal a context as one can possibly imagine. As I read over the article, Mother would sometimes nod, sometimes shake her head no, sometimes she would exchange glances with the others, once she chuckled, and once she grunted. I finished my recitation and Mother responded: 'OK, Dr. Primiano, now please re-read the article, sentence-by-sentence, and we will comment.' I could not tell if Mother was using the royal 'we', if she was speaking for all the ladies assembled in the office, or if she actually was referring to Father Divine and herself. So that is what I did — the ethnographic writer taking his deserved medicine from the living folk. That began an approximately two hour review of the article where we addressed words, phrases, facts, and ideas. We had a dialogue, for example, over the way the occupation of Mother Divine's father was cited, and more significantly how I described Father Divine. In this instance, I had written that Father Divine was a charismatic African-American religious leader. Miss Edna Mae was troubled by this statement, asking me why I could not simply refer to Father as an 'American religious leader'. Conscious as Peace Mission members are to avoid references to race, she asked whether I really needed to bring this element of his race into consideration. This issue is a major point of contention and a real moment where compromise would be necessary to embody what I feel is a socially just ethnographic method. 'Well, Miss Edna Mae,' I explained, 'wasn't the fact that Father appeared as a man of dark complexion [the term employed in the Movement to refer to African Americans] important to the basic message of Father Divine, that God had come in the body of a humble, dark man?' 'Well, yes,' Miss Edna Mae agreed. In this way we came to a point of understanding, and she respected the decision I made to describe Father Divine that way, and she was satisfied that I had taken the time to understand their theology enough that I could discuss it with her in an informed manner.

So we went through the article line by line and we discussed its content and I made changes and argued its integrity until all were

satisfied. I felt happy that the entry could appear and that I could show it to them without any reservations. Mel Prideaux has noted with regard to reciprocal research relations and the study of religion: 'Without reciprocity — without receiving something in return — we risk alienating and abusing the communities we seek to understand' [Prideaux 2016: 337]. What I hope as an informed non-member that I gave in return to Mother Divine and the Peace Mission in the process of reciprocal ethnography was an expression of recognition, respect, and deference to this woman revered as a female divine, using a demeanor these believers seek and interpret as appropriate.

I asked for a photograph of Father and Mother to accompany the piece, and on a later date we examined over fifty photos to choose just the right one. As with the photo, we had literally worked together on the project, and I felt satisfied that this piece of writing had maintained the integrity that I would give to any piece of scholarship, but even more I felt happy that Mother would continue speaking to me after the encyclopedia was available to the public.

This article went on to be published and I have proceeded with three other articles using a similar methodology of collaboration: an article on what I call Father Divine's 'vernacular architecture of intention' [Primiano 2004], and the creativity of their voluminous tradition of religious music and song [Primiano 2009], and foodways traditions [Primiano 2014b]. I am presently working on articles on their use of photography, as well as their treatment of flowers in my general study of their religious expressive culture. The complexities of a collaborative approach are many and need to be further outlined in future publications, but what pleases me is that I feel that this approach of representation, translation, and analysis of their religious beliefs and practices is working towards a socially just longitudinal study of their religious culture. I can maintain solidarity with them over the length of this study, adding a critical voice — a voice to which they can respond. Such work is in no way easy, and presents consistent questions and challenges. I am especially indebted to the anthropological approaches of Luke Eric Lassiter elucidated in many articles and books including his *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* [Lassiter 2005] for a more explicit and deliberate practice of collaborative ethnography, while continuing to explore the folkloristic contributions and parameters of such ethnographic method.

My visits to the Peace Mission usually include attendance at their Holy Communion Banquet services where I sit with them in their sacred space and essentially do my ethnographic work alongside them. On such occasions, I openly take ethnographic notes, and 'testify' about my upcoming professional talks about the community.

This approach of being consistently mindful about who has control of their story grows organically out of folklife studies' sensibility and sensitivity to representing the lives of others. Such a reciprocal ethnography embodies social justice and advocacy for our contributors which vivify contemporary concerns in folkloristic ethnography, as well as the moral concerns of the Roman Catholic liberal arts university where I am presently employed. This approach has allowed me to sustain a form of positive, honest, and respectful insider / outsider relationship with the community and with their leader, Mother Divine. It was an honor to know her and to have her act as a 'contributor', not merely as an 'informant' or 'consultant' to my bibliographic work on her life and ministry.

Kim Knott in her evocative essay on insider / outsider perspectives when studying religious communities has observed 'that the problem of the insider and outsider is as vital now for understanding the theory and method of religious studies as it was when the latter first emerged as a discipline separate from theology more than a century ago' [Knott 2010: 271]. My lengthy fieldwork experience with the Peace Mission has allowed me to maintain both an insider and an outsider relationship, a process, I think, that they have used in the past to accept non-members that they designate as 'harmonisers'. My own appreciation of the complexities of such a complex insider / outsider bond has assisted my analysis of how this movement and other communities understand religion and most valuably what I consider the art of doing folkloristic ethnography about religion. I have stated openly to them that I am not a follower of the Peace Mission, that I, in fact, belong to a different religion. Still, in their belief system only someone who was the reincarnation of a former member could appreciate the theological outlook of Father Divine as much as I do. Rather than feel uncomfortable about their interpretation of me, I have been honored by their trust, and it is this trust which has allowed me to undertake reciprocal ethnography with the community. Their creative understanding of how belief is expressed exemplifies vernacular religion, and a native category of interpretation concerning my presence among and interest in them.

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## ANDREI TIUKHTIAEV

1

Even though it may seem curious to entertain doubts about a term that is part of the name of the research area to which you consider yourself as belonging, I nevertheless prefer to do so. Sometimes it seems that religion as an analytical category is only fit for showing external observers less what anthropologists of religion actually do, but that there are such people in existence. Moreover they study all the social phenomena that at first sight may belong to the sphere of religion. But very serious difficulties may arise if it is necessary to discover common features in such different phenomena as, for example, and

Orthodox parish and a club of people who like meditation. Nevertheless both may be the object of study for an anthropologist of religion.

My main research interest at present is the New Age movement, and the specifics of the New Age movement as an object of study to a great extent determine my attitude to religion as a term. I still do not have much research experience and I have never engaged in 'classical' anthropological fieldwork, including the religious field. Neither as a researcher nor as a private individual am I profoundly immersed in the life of the major faiths or 'world' religions, nor have I ever been in the 'traditional' cultures that are famous for their rituals and beliefs, which may perhaps reinforce my frivolous attitude to such powerful analytical categories as religion. The New Age movement is a predominantly urban phenomenon which has features some of which are recognisable as religious and some as secular, which overall does not bestow any clarity upon it. The New Age movement rarely acquires any distinct organisational forms and does not presuppose the presence of a strict identity discipline. It is not even clear what to call the New Age — a movement or a religion. The term 'New Age' itself refers to an esoteric eschatology and does not embrace all the properties of the phenomena that it is called upon to designate. I use the term myself and sometimes even call it a religion, but for me that is to a great extent a discursive figure intended to show the potential reader that I am, after all, an anthropologist of religion. All in all, the term 'New Age' is akin to the term 'religion' for me. Therefore there is some point in juxtaposing them in order to find out possible ways of conceptualising both of them.

There are many anthropological and sociological definitions of religion, but four that have become more or less canonical, viz those of Edward Tylor, Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Talal Asad. The first, which comes down to the identification of all religion with a belief in the supernatural, is of interest nowadays only from the point of view of the history of social thought, though such a view of religion, it seems to me, is still popular in the informational sphere. Émile Durkheim's definition of religion is perhaps one of the most famous in the social sciences. As we know, Durkheim saw religion as the collective rituals that serve as a means of sacralising collective values and of cementing societies [Durkheim 1995]. In this case it is not religious ideas that are the basic analytical unit, but a particular group of people. Religion itself begins where there is a stable community united by common ideals and practices. However, in the case of the New Age it is hard to speak of any persistent communities. More characteristic of the New Age are privacy and individualism [Heelas 2009]. Even in those cases where the New Age movement takes on visible social forms and produces whole groups of people united, for example, to bring into being projects for ecological

settlements, it is rare for any single community to be formed. For example, one should rather speak, in the case of the Anastasia new religious movement, of social networks in which belonging to a strictly defined community is not compulsory [Andreeva 2015].

The definition of religion given by Clifford Geertz deserves special attention here, since it has influenced the way the New Age movement has been described in contemporary religious studies. Geertz's explanation of religion starts from its ability to endue people's actions with meaning, and also to form a stable and consistent picture of the world which legitimises social reality. Religion is for Geertz primarily a system of symbols capable of making someone believe in the reality of his / her culture's shared ideas [Geertz 1973]. The student of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, one of the best-known researchers into esotericism and mysticism, has used Geertz's ideas to give meaning to the concept of religion in general and New Age religion in particular. Somewhat modifying the definition of religion given by Geertz, Hanegraaff sees this phenomenon as 'a symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities of ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning' [Hanegraaff 1999: 147]. Defining religion in this way as some sort of universal phenomenon, Hanegraaff is also trying to define the particular manifestations of religion ('a religion'), expanding the definition given above with the proviso that a religion as a symbolic system is embodied in a specific social institution. Moreover, religion does not exist by itself, it derives its symbols from what Hanegraaff calls spirituality (a word which it is hard to translate into Russian). Unlike religion, this phenomenon is not a symbolic system, but an individual practice that connects the everyday and the meta-empirical levels for a particular person. From Hanegraaff's point of view New Age is religion that is not embodied in separate social institutions (that is, has not become 'a religion'), and, besides, exists more at the individual level, that is in the sphere designated as spirituality. Being religion at its most individualistic, the New Age derives its symbols from various sources, both religious and secular. This last circumstance allows Hanegraaff to call the New Age movement a secular religion.

Leaving aside the 'religious versus secular' dichotomy, which I find dubious, I would like to remark that when Hanegraaff constructs his analytical scheme, he detaches it from its social context, that is the world in which religious and non-religious symbols exist and form the basis for both individual and collective religious behaviour. Although Hanegraaff does attempt to explain certain New Age peculiarities such as the private nature of such religious behaviour and its lack of any institutions, this nevertheless sheds little light on how the New Age functions as a social phenomenon. Relying as he does on Geertz's definition of religion, Hanegraaff takes no account

of the critique of this definition given by Talal Asad. Asad has noted that, elegant though Geertz's scheme may be, it nevertheless leaves open the question of where the system of symbols comes from and who creates it [Asad 1983]. The New Age is rich in a diverse symbolism that contains images from ethnic traditions, esoteric ideas, elements of scientific discourse and much else. How then are they set in motion to construct religious behaviour and why do they act as they do and not in some other way? Why, for example, is ethnic nationalism characteristic of some New Age followers, and not of others? Why do New Agers avoid institutionalisation and do they create any alternative forms of organisation? Are all New Age practices individualistic? How does communication take place in the New Age milieu, who produces the symbols and meanings, how is expert knowledge constructed? Geertz's and Hanegraaff's definitions do not answer these questions.

In his critique of Geertz Talal Asad occupies a relativist position. From his point of view there can be no definition of religion as such, we can only define religion with reference to its specific historical and cultural context [Asad 2009]. In such a case religion is regarded rather as an emic term. It seems to me that at present most anthropologists of religion take a similar position and therefore often ignore attempts to give religion any all-embracing definition. The constructivist approach to a large extent suggests observing what is happening in the field of social practices, grasping the processes whereby the boundaries of the religious and non-religious are defined and redefined, and then describing them [Beckford 2003]. Such a perspective absolves us from the necessity of giving universal definitions of what is, firstly, constantly changing, and secondly, is not a single indivisible entity. Thus the term 'New Age', as noted above, does not cover all the features that we ascribe to it. There may be some point in speaking of the New Age as a discourse formed around the area of texts and practices such as channelling or pilgrimage to 'places of power' [Wood 2007: 15–6].

But the creation of etic terms to describe social reality does not seem useless to me. On the contrary, rejecting them leads to the impossibility of generalising and seeking the universal principles that lie at the root of anthropology as a science. And, given that the terms 'religion' and 'New Age' have many weaknesses, perhaps they should be dissected into taxonomic units and a basis for conceptualising the social practices being studied sought among these latter.

As an example of such a unit which may be an effective etic category, I can suggest pilgrimage. Anthropologists have been actively studying pilgrimage for almost four decades, and over that time the anthropology of pilgrimage has become a research area with its own specific discussion, authorities and approaches. One important idea developed

in the framework of the anthropology of pilgrimage is derived from the work of Victor Turner and proposes that pilgrimage as a practice offers the opportunity for a special experience which is distinct from that of everyday life [Turner, Turner 1978]. In particular, one modification of this idea is reduced to the definition of pilgrimage through the concept of performance, proposing that pilgrimage may serve as a means of playing out the pilgrim's identity [Coleman, Elsner 1998]. Various pilgrim practices create a space in which the affirmation and / or reassessment of identity is possible, the potential for the solidarisation of the collective and reinforcement of existing values or else, by contrast, some sort of social experiment. Such treatments of pilgrim practices are certainly etic in character and are capable of opening up the cultural logic that lies behind the practices.

2

I do not think that a heightened sensibility of the scholar's identity is the prerogative of religious groups. For example, in the case of research into ethnic nationalists this problem will be just as acute. (Admittedly, ethnic nationalism and a certain religious tradition often go hand in hand.) This sort of sensitivity is often conditioned by anxiety about the legitimacy of one's own religion, tradition, etc. A researcher who is recognised as 'the other' may pose a threat, through his / her research, to the legitimate status of what he / she is studying. If the anthropologist of religion is an atheist or represents a denomination which may be regarded with dislike or mistrust by the people whom he / she is researching, his / her objectivity will be called into question in all manner of ways.

It once happened that I spent a week going to see the dolmens of Lazarevskiy District, Krasnodar Krai, with a group of members of the Anastasia new religious movement. All this time I was viewed with suspicion, and by the end of the trip one of the reasons for this became clear. At the very beginning I had introduced myself as an anthropologist, and despite what I thought was a detailed explanation, this had evoked among my informants associations with physical anthropology and evolutionist ideas. It should be pointed out that followers of Anastasia typically believe that history is not progressing, but regressing from the moment of the fall of the mythical civilisation of the Golden Age. Consequently my informants did not believe in evolutionary biology, nor that modern human beings are descended from other species of hominid. As a result, some of the participants in the trip had decided that I was intending to describe their views, which contradict official science, with the purpose of disproving them.

3

As is evident from the example adduced above, my otherness against the background of the people being studied is obvious. However, in other situations my academic affiliation is an advantage. Thus, given that traditionalism plays an important role in the New Age movement,

being introduced as an 'ethnographer' often produces a positive reaction in this milieu. Ethnography, as something associated with the description and preservation of traditions, is an ally in the eyes of New Agers. Furthermore, the attention of an ethnographer to New Age initiatives, which are often positioned as 'a renaissance of tradition', may be extremely pleasing to New Agers because it acknowledges their 'traditional status' and helps to legitimise it. Detachment in this case may be simple or complicated. It all depends on the situation, the specifics of the interrelations with actual people. On the whole I have been successful in explaining, even to those informants who had an interest in my work and considered that it was I who would present their point of view to society, that my text is only a description, and does not have any value for spiritual development. However, such interested informants were in the minority.

5

The people who asked to read my work (at present I have a master's dissertation written on the basis of the results of fieldwork) either did not react to it at all or found it interesting and even to some extent a confirmation of their own views. For example, one informant, who is an activist, who popularises yoga, 'vedic culture', and the idea that certain architectural remains in the North Caucasus were built by the Aryans, and therefore by the ancestors of the Russians, read my work and agreed with my conclusions. He particularly stressed the rightness of my words about how the New Age movement aims to go beyond the boundaries of the religious and position itself as a social and political project. My entirely constructivist words noting the mobility of the boundaries of the religious and non-religious spheres, using the New Age as an example, turned out to be important for a person who is in active contact with his regional administration, preaches a healthy way of life and organises ecological trips. This situation is a good illustration of how relevant the problem of legitimacy is to many religious groups. The New Age movement, which thanks to its esoteric ideas is often recognised as a manifestation of marginal religious activity, has an acute need of certain legitimising mechanisms which would help to demarginalise it. Academic texts are seen by certain New Age activists as one such mechanism.

4

An attitude to the researcher as to a potential ally, or at least someone who might write something that is not negative about the group being studied, may be a reason for a trusting attitude and certain proselytising activities (the suggestion that I should take up yoga, read particular literature, etc.). However, it is difficult to speak of 'conversion' with regard to the New Age movement. Although following the ideas of 'New Age religion' may be accompanied with stories of how someone realised how he / she belonged to the tradition or 'faith of the ancestors', there are no stable mechanisms of 'coming in' here. However, this is an open question for me. In one way or another the New Age movement does assume certain attributes (a person's

external appearance, the esoteric sociolect, etc.) that allow someone to be recognised as ‘one of their own’. Besides, any social network or community based on New Age ideas may have its own ‘entrance requirements’. The questions dealing with the formation of communities within New Age religion and the recognition of ‘them’ and ‘us’ are yet to be studied.

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## DETELINA TOCHEVA

**Politics of Inclusion: Comparative Notes  
on the Centrality of 'Religion'***On kinds of interaction during fieldwork*

Anthropologists of religion necessarily interact with members of the groups they study during ethnographic fieldwork. I propose to term as 'politics of inclusion' the large spectrum of views and actions that members of religious groups deploy in order to integrate the observer. 'Politics of inclusion' can be defined as a broad category that encompasses religious conversion.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the agency of our informants is in some cases best defined as attempts to convert the observer to their religion, understood broadly as a system of ideas and practices that connect the humans to supra-human beings. In other cases, attempts at integration mobilise religion, but the objective of these politics is not religious conversion. During fieldwork in two different settings, I was faced alternately with each of these two kinds of politics of inclusion. I would like to compare them in order to try to understand the difference between them. I think that this difference lies in the degree to which 'religion' is a pivotal category for the self-definition of the two different groups among whom I worked.

In fact, anthropologists can follow multiple paths in analysing politics of inclusion. One of these paths can lead to introspective queries, another one to reflexive explorations of the scholarly field to which the anthropologists belong. A third one consists of considering these politics as part of the ethnographic data. I follow this third path. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among two groups of people practising religion in the postsocialist setting. The first group are Russian Orthodox Christians (Patriarchate of Moscow) in northwestern Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> A rich body of anthropological literature that I do not discuss in this brief notes demonstrates that religious conversion is a context-dependent and not necessarily self-evident concept, an approach to which I also subscribe.

Many of my interlocutors were actively involved in parishes. The second group are Bulgarian Sunni Muslims in southern Bulgaria, who mostly practise domestic and locality-based Islam, and who, however, do not put a strong stress on their practice as specifically religious.

A qualification is needed here in order to specify the way in which I use the term 'comparison'. I do not aim to compare these two forms of Christianity and Islam in general terms. My ambition is more modest. I compare the two religious groups through the prism of my personal experience of interaction with them, with a specific focus on the respective politics of inclusion that I encountered. In spite of the fact that in both cases I was interested in religion and especially religious ritual in the second case, 'religion' was a central category in the politics of inclusion of my interlocutors in Russia and, conversely, it was not for my informants in Bulgaria. Yet, in this second case, I find it misleading to consider that 'religion' is a scholarly category forcefully imposed from the outside. Rather, for my interlocutors, 'religion' is not a central self-definitional lens. The difference in the centrality and vibrancy of 'religion' for these two groups is revelatory of specific ongoing transformations of religion, society and politics, as well as of the challenges with which the people are faced.

Before I get to the heart of my topic, I would like to bring some basic information about my personal national and religious background, since the two played a role for the politics of inclusion I encountered. I was born in Bulgaria to a Bulgarian-speaking non-practising Christian Orthodox family. I was baptised in my early childhood in the second half of the 1970s, that is, under late socialism, in the locally famous Rila monastery on the initiative of my grandmothers. I have no memories from this event. But I remember very well having been often told that this is a prestigious place and that very few of my schoolmates even had the chance to be baptised. In other words, my grandmothers made me understand that they had added this marker of prestige to my personal identity. There was no religious practice in my family. However, one of my grandmothers kept telling a few times per year that she went to light a candle in the church. She also loved mentioning that, as a schoolgirl, her favourite subject was catechism. My interest in religion grew out of my intellectual curiosity as a teenager and later as a student of anthropology; it is not the result of a personal religious commitment.

### *Doing research among active Russian Orthodox parishioners*

I conducted one-year ethnographic fieldwork in Russian Orthodox parishes in a town located in the region of St Petersburg in 2006–7 and made shorter trips in the subsequent years. I have kept strong and friendly relationships with some of my informants to this day. For the contemporary actively practising Russian Orthodox,

'religion' is a central category of their engagement, a major definitional lens through which they see themselves individually and collectively, a lens through which they see their ritual and disciplinary practices. It is also often expressed as 'faith' (*vera*). The emphasis that my informants put on thinking of themselves as being religious played a central role in our relationships. It influenced their politics of inclusion in two major ways. A small part of them expected me to convert immediately; the penalty was the end of our conversations. The bigger part expected in a much more relaxed way that I start showing signs of conversion, but remained open and friendly although I did not show such signs.

The fact that I was baptised in an Orthodox church came out to be important for all of my informants. In their eyes, it made me potentially 'integrable' into their faith. Indeed, most of them expected that I would embrace their faith, and some still do expect me to do so to this day. In reality, having being a baptised Orthodox was a good start in their eyes. In a few cases, this marker of my personal identity proved largely insufficient even for continuing interviews or simple chat. For instance, a small part of my interlocutors began to question the legitimacy of my presence on the basis that I was not Orthodox in the way in which they expected me to be. What they expected me to do was to practise in their way: light candles, utter prayers, make the sign of the cross, kiss icons, take communion, ask the priest for his blessing and kiss his hand, bath in the holy springs and lakes during pilgrimage trips. Some informants laid down as an absolute prerequisite to the continuation of my ethnographic study among them that I bring clear evidence of the fact that I was embracing their religious commitment. I could not satisfy to their pressing expectations. The uncompromising attitudes that I encountered belong by now to a well-rooted trend among the Russian Orthodox faithful. The contemporary ROC has this intrinsic trend in common with proselytising movements.

However, the number of such people was limited. Their attitude did by no means preclude the possibility for me to continue doing fieldwork. I continued to have a friendly, empathic relationship with many other committed Orthodox. The majority of this part of my informants found it sufficient that I cover my head and wear a skirt while in a church. Even this was not laid down as an absolute requirement. It is rather part of a code that all women ethnographers usually find good to observe. Behaving otherwise may be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. The most important for the immense majority of my informants was shared empathy and the time we spent together speaking of our lives and views.

Yet my close informants always expected that I would start showing signs of adherence to their faith, especially through bodily practice.

This was suggested indirectly and gently, with no pressure. For instance, once I had tied my headscarf in a particularly tight way and had put a skirt which nearly touched the ground. A middle-aged woman who had a fascination for ascetic practices, and who was very kind and open with me, commented on my outlook with a large smile by saying that I looked 'exactly like one of us' (*'Ona pryamo kak nasha'*). Her apparently insignificant and friendly words encapsulated the double perception that the expectation that I become 'one of them' was real, but that bodily attitudes, although largely valued, were not sufficient to make me 'one of them', but simply look 'exactly like' them.

One of the most common expressions of this expectation to convert appeared during pilgrimage trips. For instance, during a pilgrimage to the beautiful setting of Izborsk, where there is a lake and springs, and during another one to a church in Kamno, nearby Pskov, where there is spring with a chapel built on it, all the pilgrims immersed themselves. I did not do that; doing it would have meant giving misleading signs to my closer acquaintances, an equivalent to cheating on them. At other occasions, some informants gave me bread dipped in wine at the end of the Sunday service which I ate with them. Others offered me gifts such as icons and religious books with the double meaning of souvenirs and vehicles to conversion. Others invited me to come close to the relics of saints. My informants mobilised these soft, friendly politics of inclusion by encouraging my bodily participation and commensality, and always kept an eye on potential signs of conversion.

### *A strand of Bulgarian Sunni Islam: The weak vibrancy of 'religion'*

In Russia, the active Orthodox parishioners among whom I worked clearly claim that they engage religion. They think of themselves as religious persons in a self-assertive manner. In contrast to them, my Muslim interlocutors in Bulgaria, although they steadily perform religious rituals and think of themselves as an ethnoreligious minority, do not define their collective religious practice as being above all religious, but rather communal. The people among whom I worked knew well that I belong to the Bulgarian Orthodox Christian majority. One belongs to the Bulgarian Muslim group by birth, not by conversion, a fact that makes conversion meaningless. Indeed, my informants never expressed in any way an expectation that I share in their religious identity. Besides the fact that I am not of Muslim origin, what really explains the relative absence of the idea of 'religion' in our interactions is the fact that for them 'religion' has not the vibrancy it has for my Russian informants. The politics of inclusion that I experienced within this community clearly mobilised religion, but never aimed at my conversion.

I began fieldwork in the southern part of the Rhodope mountains, a rural area in southern Bulgaria, in 2009 and keep returning there every year. In Bulgaria, the Rhodope is known for the beauty of the landscapes, folkloric music and also for its 'mixed' population. A large number of localities are populated by Orthodox Christians, the majority religious group in the country, and by Sunni Muslims, a minority most of whom belong to the Hanafi tradition. The ancestors of the latter mostly converted from Christianity to Islam during the Ottoman period (fourteenth–nineteenth centuries). I lived in a 'mixed village', as the local people say, where the local Bulgarian-speaking Muslims<sup>1</sup> clearly outnumber the Christians. As in the neighbouring localities, Islam is rather a domestic and village-level practice. The ritual specialists (singular *hodja*, plural *hodji*) who officiate at ritual events have no formal training and no affiliation with an Islamic authority. Mosque religiosity is related to old age and attendance is usually very low. There, exactly like elsewhere in the Rhodope, the economy has been crumbling since the beginning of the 1990s, resulting in stunningly high rates of outmigration. But there is no relationship of causality between people's experience from this sharp economic downturn and engagement with newly imported forms of pious Salafism, in contrast to what an anthropologist has recently claimed about a neighbouring town [Ghodsee 2009].

I participated in home rituals and village-level *kurban* celebrations [Tocheva 2015]. These rituals are common and extremely widespread; they realise the symbolic integration of the people within domestic and local communities. The term *kurban* is of Muslim Turkish origin and means 'sacrifice'. In this region, it designates both a Muslim and an Orthodox ritual comprising a blood sacrifice and a sacrificial meal shared among the participants. The word *kurban* spread in the Balkans during the Ottoman period, but it is not known when and under what circumstances it came to be applied to communal feasts with slaughtered animals at Orthodox churches. Different sorts of *kurban* provided an enduring frame for the continuation of religious practices under socialism, although they were not necessarily understood as religious by the participants. *Kurban* is practiced at Muslim religious celebrations, Orthodox saints' days, village days, and at life-cycle rituals, and to commemorate personal events. 'To slaughter *kurban*' (*koli se kurban*) means that an animal is slaughtered, cooked, and shared as a free meal with kin, friends, acquaintances and other people. In the Rhodope it is commonly a sheep. The blood sacrifice constitutes the symbolic religious matrix of this ritual for Muslims and Christians.

<sup>1</sup> Bulgarian is the mother tongue of these Muslims who, therefore, differ from Turkish-speaking Muslims in Bulgaria, although both groups are Bulgarian citizens.

In the village where I lived, the large Bulgarian Muslim majority and the Bulgarian Christian minority organise some forms of *kurban* separately, others together. The village *kurban* there is a postsocialist invention inspired by an earlier spring *kurban* related to sheep breeding. It was initiated in 1992 by several villagers, most of them Muslim. The Muslim religious elements are easier to identify, but both Christians and Muslims see the spring *kurban* as a request for protection and prosperity that bridges the two religions. Most villagers spoke of the event in remotely religious terms, or drew no religious association at all: 'This is good for the sheep, for the people, for the village.' Some put a stronger emphasis on religion, without claiming an exclusive Christian or Muslim origin. Muslims may speak of protection from 'Allah' and the 'Lord'; Christians would refer to the 'Lord' and 'God'. A common practice of Muslims and Christians is to refer to 'the one who is above' or to 'the one up there'. No one asserts *kurban* to be either Muslim or Christian. However, an elderly man reads Muslim prayers just before each sheep is slaughtered; he is the one who usually utters the prayers when the Muslim houses slaughter sheep for the feast of *Kurban Bairam*. Moreover, on the Friday morning before *kurban*, usually elderly men gather in the mosque for a prayer, without publicising the event. There is no gathering in the church before or after *kurban*. This different involvement of the two religions shows that a Muslim connotation is more noticeable. But no official Muslim authority takes part and the ritual is not the subject of claims over correct religious practice. At the key moment of the ritual meal neither religion is given prominence. On the contrary, in the preliminary phase Islam is noticeable but not publicised. This serves to soften the religious connotation, which is important in a region where the presocialist and socialist governments repressed Islam. Harsh policies obliged people to change Muslim names to Christian and punished Islamic practices more visibly than equivalent Christian practices.

In spring 2010, I spent the day of the village *kurban* serving plates of the ritual meal for the guests, talking with them and with the other people who came to help. In the evening, I came back to the house of my hosts completely exhausted. I have to specify here that I lived with a Muslim family. My hostess, who had seen me working and talking during more than eight hours, asked: 'Did you eat from the common?' By 'the common' she meant the *keshkek*, the ritual meal cooked from mutton and wheat only at *kurban* celebrations. I confessed that I had eaten only from the yoghurt, but not from the *keshkek*. Her face suddenly changed; I saw an expression of shock and confusion. She jumped from her chair and ran to the fridge. She took out a bowl of *keshkek*. She had managed to take home some of 'the common'. She quickly warmed it up. I had to eat a good portion of the meal in front of her and the other family members. This is

when I fully understood how commensality matters for this ritual. This meal resulting from a sacrificial slaughter must be consumed collectively on the spot. I had completely neglected the importance of this rule of commensality. When my mistaken behaviour became, I was given no possibility to refuse or even negotiate. I had to eat as everybody else. Consuming this food did not make of me a local Muslim or a local Christian. No one ever expected me to become one of them, or even to look 'exactly like' them. Religious sacrifice is instrumental to the ritual. Religion guarantees the validity of the ritual. But ritual commensality generates and reasserts a communal bond.

### *Final remarks*

An important reason for the different emphasis on 'religion' in the two cases lies in their contrasting contemporary conditions. Russian Orthodoxy led by the Patriarchate of Moscow has been promoted as the most legitimate religion in Russia by the political authority in the Putin-Medvedev era. Thus, a hegemonic drive has developed among the actively practising people, that takes the form, among other expressions, of an expectation that it is normal for everyone to be Orthodox, especially for those of Slavic origin and who have already been baptised. For the local Islam in the central southern Rhodope, heavily affected by presocialist and socialist repressions, 'religion' has become a secondary category of self-definition. Today, much like in socialist times, this Islam is much less visible on the public arena than forms of Islam that claim to be more pious, or than those claiming a strong affiliation with an official Islamic authority. Yet, this Islam, nearly unassuming its religious character, lies at the heart of a rich set of rituals that continue to be actively practised in spite of the deepening economic outmigration in this region. The integrative impetus of local communities and the continuing transmission of ethnoreligious identity through domestic religious practice owe much to such rituals weakly infused with a sense of practising 'religion'. This weak 'religiousness' also conditioned the specific politics of inclusion which I met there.

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## ÜLO VALK

**‘Religion’: On the Concept and Its Uses**

Words and concepts are the most important tools in our scholarly practices. They are instruments for understanding, and for creating and sharing knowledge. In the humanities we often get entangled in the world of words because we apply the same linguistic means — verbal expressions — to discuss and interpret the discursive phenomena that form the objects of our research. Analytical language has to penetrate the textual world, inevitably bringing the etic and emic levels into close contact. Even if we work with philological material — texts that have been composed by others, perhaps decades or centuries ago — we become like fieldworkers in a strange territory, in the ‘world of others’ words’, as Richard Bauman has characterised the intertextual realm of expressivity [Bauman 2004]. This is a dialogue in two languages, as we speak our scholarly mother tongue and our partners their own vernacular; and its outcomes can be different, sometimes revealing while in other cases confusing.

It is essentially important to be aware of the concepts that we are using in scholarship. I consider the critical reflexivity towards theoretical constructs and abstract notions the most important contribution that post-structuralist thought has brought to the humanities. However, we have to accept that natural language is our basic and inevitable cognitive tool. And fortunately, it is a subtle, sensitive and flexible medium, an open and unfinished resource for creativity and communication that links generations of researchers with different agendas and fields of vision that have often been delimited by the socially dominant ideas of their lifetimes. Hence, language provides scholarship with historical depth and a glossary of concepts, many of which have roots in Western civilisation.

'Religion' as a concept has often been criticised because of this historical origin and its close association with Judeo-Christian thought. It has been argued that applying it to cultural phenomena beyond Christianity, Judaism and Islam is unjustified as a manifestation of intellectual colonialism. It is true that in its early phases the discipline of comparative religion has been affected by the template of (Protestant) Christianity as the standard and normative form of religion. Gregory D. Alles has called this approach to defining religion 'prototypical' but he has also itemised other possible definitions, such as substantive (in terms of content, such as belief in gods), functional (in terms of what it does, such as giving meaning to life) or 'polythetic' (in terms of a list of features, none of which is necessarily found in all religions) [Alles 2005; Alles et al. 2015: 7]. Remarkably, all of these definitions accept the fact that religion is not a uniform phenomenon but appears in multiple forms. Applying the same concept to a variety of cultural expressions gives disciplinary unity to scholarship and the possibility of developing consistent methodologies. Without accepting common theoretical ground, 'religion' as the object of research, which has been constructed by generations of scholars, would fall apart.

Critical reflexivity towards concepts sometimes takes radical turns, reflecting tensions, disagreements and schisms inside disciplines. 'Religion' is not the only key-word that has been contested because of its disputable theoretical grounding. Likewise, the category of supernatural has been examined critically because of its controversial cultural baggage and association with Western colonial domination (cf.: [Lohmann 2003]). And certainly, 'god' as an emic concept falls apart in the process of deconstruction (cf.: [Pyysiäinen 2003]). Other categories seem even more problematic because of the negative connotation that they carry — such as 'superstition' or even 'belief', which connotes 'error and falsehood, although it is seldom explicitly asserted' [Good 1994: 17]. Hence, it seems that distinction between belief and (truthful) knowledge has contributed to the sense of superiority of Western colonisers over 'primitive' peoples who follow their superstitious beliefs — in contrast to us, the civilised people, who know. In addition, research on the ontologies of indigenous peoples has brought critical knowledge about other Western concepts, such as personhood. It turns out that it is unjustified to define it on the basis of human individuality; instead personhood is determined by relationships [Harvey 2014]. Moreover, the Western ontological dichotomy between nature and culture is a modern invention and appears useless if we study non-Western cultures [Latour 1993]. We tend to believe that sociality and subjectivity are human qualities only, although many indigenous peoples are convinced that we share these traits with 'non-human persons', such as animals, birds or spirits [Descola 2013].

I consider critical reflexivity towards our scholarly vocabulary necessary as a preliminary step in scholarship. It won't help, however, if deconstruction as a method would result in producing a generally negative aura around some basic categories only because they appear to be 'pre-scientific' or do not match the agenda of a certain school (such as the cognitive science of religion). We do not need to limit our vocabulary but increase and develop it in order to broaden the scope of scholarship. For example, interesting theoretical and methodological discussions are going on in folkloristics, a discipline on the fringes of mainstream religious studies. On the one hand the concept of 'vernacular religion' has been foregrounded to draw attention to religion as lived experience and its individual expressions [Primiano 2014]. On the other hand the category of 'folk religion' has been defended as it sheds light on other aspects of non-institutional religion, such as its politically charged forms in counter-culture [Kapaló 2013]. Both methodological perspectives have recently supported folklorists at the University of Tartu in producing dissertations in areas that have often been overlooked (cf.: [Sepp 2014; Kivari 2016; Lyngdoh 2016]). Such folkloristic work often carries distinctive disciplinary features, such as analytical sensitivity towards forms of verbal expressivity — the world of genres in its multiple outlooks and modalities; interest in the discrepancies between institutionally grounded and vernacular knowledge; and awareness of the creative potential of each and every individual. The implementation of a variety of scholarly perspectives, including folkloristic, ethnological and anthropological approaches, has revealed the live reality beyond the category of religion in its richness. The category itself may seem theoretically vague but it marks a shared territory of different disciplinary interests and delineates networks of scholars whose approaches complement each other. Obviously, there is a social reality beyond the concept — a reality that has, to a certain extent, been shaped by the concept itself and its connotations.

There is a recent social factor that has been affecting the category of 'religion', eroding its meanings and decreasing its value, contributing towards the criticism that comes from inside the academy. This has to do with the vernacular connotations of 'religion', which are today often associated with hierarchically constructed authoritarian institutions that prescribe world views and dictate behavioural norms and ritual practices to their followers (see: [Uibu 2016]). In the contemporary milieu of New Spirituality this kind of institutional religion seems out of date as the more experimental and fluid forms of religiosity have come to the fore. Research in New Spirituality has become an essential trend in scholarship today and its separation from the study of 'traditional' religion does not seem reasonable because of the common elements they share. Moreover, New Spirituality often needs the church as the powerful 'other' to develop

its doctrines and practices as alternative forms to the clerical mainstream. In addition, New Spirituality manifests traits of vernacular and folk religion and often relies on the authority of indigenous world views or belief systems that hardly fit the Western concept of religion — such as Hinduism or shamanism.

'Pre-scientific' or 'theoretically unjustified' categories are typically those that are widely used in the vernacular, and their meanings can hardly be controlled by scholars only. And there is one more reason why they can be considered 'problematic', specifically they often draw attention to the limits of scientific reasoning and to the fragility of rational world view. Certain concepts, such as 'supernatural', 'possession' (either demonic or divine), 'ghost', 'haunting', etc., all refer to existentially important matters and to metaphysical arguments that erode the materialist world view. They also draw attention to certain extraordinary experiential realities that hardly fit into the framework of rational thinking. If we ignore or denounce them as errors of human thought, as has often been done in materialist scholarship, the 'scientific' study of religion might feel more secure as its boundaries remain unchallenged. However, the categories and phenomena would not go away but would be totally monopolised by esoteric approaches and vernacular theorising and this would not help scholarship. Academic language and scholarly thinking does not need purification or isolation from the vernacular but close contact with other discourses and modes of thought. We gain nothing if we use deconstruction as a method to limit or censor our vocabulary but we can lose something from sight and overlook some serious empirical and theoretical challenges. Of course, we cannot deny the right of researchers to make their own methodological choices, including renaming and reconfiguring the object of investigation. However, there are always alternative ways to proceed.

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## LAUR VALLIKIVI

### **Taking Religion Seriously: Fieldwork among Animists and Evangelical Christians in Arctic Russia**

First, I would like to thank the editors for their invitation to participate in the discussion. In this limited space, I am going to comment on a few implications of doing ethnographic fieldwork on religion with a focus on animism, Christianity and movement from one to another. I suggest

that doing research in the field that is going through a rapid transformation such as religious conversion offers an opportunity to question some theoretical assumptions about the possibilities of understanding 'the other'.

Lately anthropologists have begun to call for 'taking seriously' people and their lives, concepts and theories, including their religions, world views, ontologies, worlds or whatever noun-concept one chooses to use [Pina-Cabral 2017]. However, as Matei Candea has noted, 'the moral valence of "taking seriously" has often been clearer than its precise meaning' [Candea 2011: 146]. Obviously, in some sense, all anthropologists think that they take field and its forms of life seriously but not everyone thinks that all their colleagues do. This is because there are different understandings what is to take seriously and how this stance can or should be translated into ethnographic description and theory. The theme of taking seriously starts from the problem that Marilyn Strathern has neatly formulated as following: 'how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal is terms which belong to one's own' [Strathern 1987: 256].

Several vibrant and influential strands of anthropological research have been built on the criticism that studied people and their worlds are not taken seriously. The claim is that people in the field have been deeply misunderstood and misrepresented. More than thirty years ago Paul Rabinow wrote that, instead of taking people seriously, cultural relativists bracket the truth and 'the seriousness of the speech acts of the Other' [Rabinow 2011 [1983]: 14–15] and as a result 'all differences are preserved and denied at the same time. All are treated equally' [Ibid.: 21], and 'translated into Western discourse' [Ibid.: 15]. It is an old truth (among many others) that when going to the field, we bring along our own terms which are not only personal-cultural but also disciplinary with their theoretical, thematic, and areal implications [Pina-Cabral 2017: 184–5]. What can we do about it?

In the following, I will look at what kind of lenses two particular bodies of scholarship have to offer — the anthropology of ontology (or the ontological anthropology) and the anthropology of Christianity (ideally should not be confused with the Christian anthropology, i.e. the theological study of the human).

### *New animism*

The anthropology of 'the ontological turn' which has its ethnographic stronghold with animists in Amazonia has thrown down a gauntlet to the mainstream representationalist anthropology. The scholars working in this line claim that the animists and their accounts of what is out there have been fundamentally misrepresented. The 'new

animism' (as it is sometimes called) is founded on the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who has proposed ideas that have potentially far reaching consequences for ethnography. He refuses 'the epistemological advantage of the anthropologist's discourse over that of the native' and instead wants native thought to be 'taken seriously' [Viveiros de Castro 2013: 489]. He asks, 'What happens when the anthropologist's objective ceases to be that of explaining, interpreting, contextualising, or rationalising native thought, but instead begins to deploy it, drawing out its consequences, and verifying the effects that it can produce on our own thinking?' [Ibid.]. He argues that for too long anthropologists have taken animists' accounts as merely metaphorical, instead the animists and their alterity should be taken on their own terms.

While Viveiros de Castro argues that there is a huge gap between the Euro-American ontology and the non-Euro-American ontology, Philippe Descola has developed his own scheme in which there are not two but four ontologies — animism, naturalism, totemism and analogism [Descola 2013]. The methodological question is how and with which means scholars can make sense of radically different worlds and carry out translation work between these. Viveiros de Castro's solution is that translation can be only partial and transformative. He calls his method 'controlled equivocation' which claims not to lose from sight the ontological differences. This involves 'the translation of the "native's" practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus' [Viveiros de Castro 2004: 4–5]. Whether this model of translation — and the entire ontology project — can be put in practice has been a matter of considerable debate (see e.g.: [Heywood 2012]).

### *New Christianity*

Although making less radical methodological claims, the anthropology of Christianity has aimed at taking seriously Christianity as a subject of ethnographic study and as a particular logic and lived experience ([Robbins 2003; Cannell 2006]; see also: [Jenkins 2012]). For a long time, anthropologists have avoided depicting Christian converts' lives as meaningfully Christian. Part of the reason is related to the anthropologists' little sympathy for Christians. Importantly, this has had implications for choices of the field. Fenella Cannell has written: 'It is surprising how many colleagues assume that a research interest in a topic in Christianity implies that one must be a closet evangelist, or at least "in danger" of being converted — an assumption that would not be made about anthropologists working with most groups of people around the world' [Cannell 2006: 4]. Indeed we do not hear accusations of someone being 'a closet animist' (should we say that about ontologists?). Cannell refers to the world view of

Western anthropologists as modernist and secularist and therefore, as she argues, they have systematically avoided Christianity as a topic. As a result, Christianity — and the people in the field who consider themselves to be Christians — are thought of either 'tediously familiar', or 'threatening', or — especially in cases of fundamentalism — 'repugnant' ([Cannell 2006: 3]; see also: [Harding 1991]) and — in missionary contexts — as 'false' (e.g. 'rice Christians').

Some might think of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Edith and Victor Turner, and others who have been explicit in their writings about being deeply personally touched by the 'religious' encountered in the field to the extent that this has been transformative for their own personhood and sense of reality [Engelke 2002; Larsen 2014]. Take for instance the classical work of Evans-Pritchard who struggled with the question of the Azande witches that he claimed did not exist and yet he reported of a witch in the form of a bright light passing in the middle of the night [Evans-Pritchard 1976: 11]. He became a Catholic as a result of his field experience in Africa. As he writes: 'I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home' [Ibid.: 245]. Despite his personal religiosity he was a proponent for a relativist position, which is not unproblematic, as we noted above.

There are several other reasons for the disciplinary neglect of Christianity. One of these is that anthropologists share an inclination to see everywhere continuities which has hindered understanding of conversion as rupture from a pre-Christian past, as Joel Robbins has compellingly argued [Robbins 2007]. Rupture as lived cultural discontinuity is particularly prominent in Protestant conversion contexts as rhetoric, ideal and practice. There used to be an implicit consensus among anthropologists that usually Christian converts have not rejected the old ways fully. Robbins writes that Christianity has been systematically represented 'as inconsistently and lightly held or as merely a thin veneer overlying deeply meaningful traditional beliefs' [Ibid.: 6]. Instead, Robbins insists that most accounts of Christians as cryptoreligionists do not hold true [Robbins 2011]. His message is that it is time to take seriously the claims that people live their lives as Christians following a particular set of teachings and the assumptions about the(ir) world which follow from these. In other words, we are asked to take seriously people taking up Christian logic as meaningful and transformative for their lives and not suppose that they continue with the old ways.

### *The pedagogy of the alterity*

In my view, the anthropology of ontology and the anthropology of Christianity have been among the most exciting recent developments in anthropology — of religion and beyond — offering new theoretical

challenges and heuristic tools for ethnographers. Although their theoretical starting points have been rather different, their aims in many ways are largely overlapping as they both try to take seriously the other by using indigenous categories. Both projects have set as their aim at getting closer to the actual experience of the people they study. However, as we saw, the question what counts as indigenous differs and also what is meant by experience is not entirely clear. My critical note here is that a major challenge remains to theorise lives in their complexity and not only as instances of particular embodiments of one or another ontology (or theology, ideology etc). In other words, what should we make of the people we meet in the field who live at the borders between different ontologies (or religions, worlds etc), especially when shifting back and forth between these?

At the centre of taking seriously the other is the de-ethnocentrification of the terms we use [Pina-Cabral 2017: 189]. Anthropologists working on Christianity have been rather efficient here. For instance, Talal Asad has demonstrated that the anthropological notion 'religion' is not universal because it has a western Christian origin and as among other things it treats belief at its centre as individual and 'interior' [Asad 1993]. In the chapter on the genealogy of the concept of ritual, he writes about the influence of the Christian exegetic model on anthropology: 'Anthropologists have, I would suggest, incorporated a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task — that is, the preoccupation with establishing as authoritatively as possible the meanings of representations where the explanations offered by indigenous discourses are considered ethnographically inadequate or incomplete' [Ibid.: 60]. In short, one of the important lessons has been that anthropologists should not render the other radically similar to their own being and thinking. Both those working on animism and on Christianity in these days seem to agree that anthropology has been in many respects nonconsciously Western (naturalist) or Christian (see: [Cannell 2005]).

However, while ontologists say that our theories should be more animist (or any other non-Euro-American ontology that is under study), scholars working on Christianity would argue that a deeper and self-consciously critical engagement with (elitist or popular) theologies would benefit the discipline. What unites those two is the political. Joel Robbins has invited anthropologists to engage with theology and consider a possibility to think from theology and 'to recommit ourselves to finding real otherness in the world' and 'using that otherness as a basis for hope' [Robbins 2006: 287, 292] (see also: [Robbins 2013] and the journal issue to which the afterword belongs to, and [Scott 2013]). This kind of symmetrical anthropology is not different from the endeavour of ontologists to start conceptualising from the 'native' thought and to put difference to effective use for the

benefit of everyone [Holbraad et al. 2014]. Both camps claim to take the other's ontologies (logics) seriously as a possibility to make a life worth living (for criticism see: [Vigh, Sausdal 2014]).

In this project of taking seriously the question is what kind of positionality is possible for an ethnographer? As James Laidlaw has noted, fieldwork and understanding the other is a pedagogic process and thus an ethical self-formation: 'The study of other forms of ethical life becomes a form of self-fashioning insofar as initial puzzlement or incomprehension or prejudice is overcome by improved understanding achieved through modification of the self. And a general point for anthropological method that arises from this is that the object of ethnographic description cannot be imagined as a radical alterity: another world wholly separate from one's own' [Laidlaw 2014: 217]. While wholeheartedly agreeing with the statement, several questions emerge here: How far can or should we go with modification of the self as an ethnographer? If the field is plural and conflictual (e.g. Christians versus non-Christians) whose experience should we privilege? Should we sympathise differently among animists and Evangelical Christians? Most anthropologists seem to avoid too deep personal commitments but just involve in open-minded engagement. The problem starts with the word 'just', as there is no theory-free vantage point.

### *Messy everyday life*

I would suggest that in the field we meet religious life that is fragmented, incoherent and contradictory, which makes it methodologically difficult to take seriously in these exact terms as discussed above. This becomes particularly evident when one looks at cases when communities, families and even persons are 'split' by evangelical conversions which is reflected in my own research among Nenets reindeer herders recently converted from animism to evangelical Christianity (or who have refused to do that, see for more details in: [Vallikivi 2009; 2011]). I argue that while taking Christianity or animism seriously, we should not forget taking seriously people — Christians and animists — with their complex, uncertain and messy lives.

My question is how we can understand such situations when people live with multiple ontologies (metaphysics, religions etc). Can the same person inhabit different worlds — in our case animist and Christian — at the same time? My field material shows that it is not even necessarily a matter of shifting between ontologies after all but rather the shifts occur in the patterns of relationalities in which ontologies overlap. I should stress that unlike Viveiros de Castro and his followers I tend to think of an ontology as a *strong* theory about the world.

Take a following ethnographic example from my fieldwork. Tikyne, a young Nenets woman living with her reindeer herding parents and siblings in the tundra recently converted to Pentecostal Christianity. As she said she had Jesus in her heart and this promised to give her the eternal life. Typically to Christian convert contexts, her Christian inner self was to emerge through the notion of heart that marked the new kind of interiority [Robbins et al. 2014]. Jesus came to her life after meeting a Ukrainian missionary who baptised her. The pastor had taught her to speak and feel in a new way. However, Tikyne also told that she was ‘a bit of a shaman’. She claimed she was able to feel inside when a wolf was on its way to the herd and that she could persuade the wolf not to attack her family’s reindeer. The reason why she was able to engage with the wolves was that, as she explained, she was kin to the wolves. Right after when she was born a wolf had killed a reindeer. This happened at the time when umbilical cord stump falls off and a sacrifice was to be carried out. Then her parents gave up the idea of ritually slaughtering a reindeer, as the sacrifice had already been taken. As a result, a strong bond between the child and the sacrificer wolf — and the wolves as the species — emerged.

Is Tikyne an animist or a Christian (Descola’s naturalist)? Should we see here a contradiction? Based on my impression when living with the family, there was no doubt that she considered herself a Christian. We should not forget how important identifying as a Christian (or rather ‘a believer’) is in Christianity. Most youth in the neighbouring camps identified as one (and not less importantly it meant identifying as *non-pagan*). I learned that Tikyne was well aware that her family’s engagement with spirits was disapproved by the missionary as he made her parents to burn their spirit figures (‘devils’) and stop sacrificial rituals to the master spirits who among other things protected their reindeer herd [Vallikivi 2011]. Nevertheless, living in the tundra and being illiterate, there was little (self-)control on her personhood practices by the missionary. If he had known of Tikyne’s intimate relationship with the wolves, a theological diagnose would have been that she was possessed by the devil.

If we think through the ontological anthropology and apply Descolas’ four-fold scheme mentioned above [Descola 2013], we could claim that three different ontologies meet here — animism, naturalism and analogism. According to [Ibid.: 368], Nenets represent a people who have shifted from animism to analogism because of the domestication of reindeer. Humans have taken the role of offering animals protection thus dominating them. However, if we take Nenets seriously there is a tight cooperation between humans and spirits who both take care of a herd that belongs to them. Tikyne’s relation with the wolf fits again with the more egalitarian animism in which the border between humanity and non-humanity is porous. From a Christian (naturalist) perspective again, there should be a radical discontinuity

between humans and non-humans. Obviously, these ideal types which are thought-provoking on their own are often limited in their power to make sense of real life complexities (see also: [Vitebsky 2017]). Furthermore, Christianity itself cannot be characterised only as a naturalist ontology. As [Vilaça 2015: 13] notes, the Christian theology of the devil allows remarkable stretch beyond naturalism. So, what this far too brief ethnographic vignette reveals (and this is not the only case I know) is that Tikyne's and many other Nenets converts' world is difficult to depict ontologically as One as ontologists' schemes would have it.

Of course, there are several other possibilities for making sense of what was going on here. One could argue that Tikyne had not completed her conversion and lived in a syncretic world (view) in which old and new were combined. Or, following [Robbins 2011], we could talk about value hierarchies by arguing that Tikyne valued more Christianity while her animist engagements did not constitute the core of her being and were of a secondary importance. The question is in what sense her distributed personhood and agency can be thought in terms of values. We need not think of Tikyne as a cryptoreligionist and can assume that in the long run Christian exclusivist logic might make a stronger impact on her (something that has happened with some neighbouring Baptist Nenets). Nevertheless, there is still the ethnographic question which of her claims we should take more seriously. Lived lives are structured by various liminalities and incoherencies which can only partly be explained by particular (onto)logics.

### *Conclusion*

As an anthropologist's viewpoint is always from some place and there is never total conceptual vacuum, can anthropology achieve the complete de-ethnocentrification of its terms and yet remain a comparative project? Pina-Cabral argues that ethnographic engagement is a never-ending 'questioning of our limitations concerning what we know about human sociality and how it engages world. It is by its very nature a messy task that will never be exhausted, since the metaphysical dynamism of the human condition means that we will ever waver between different and new views of the world and the person; we will never settle to a final truth' [Pina-Cabral 2017: 184]. Indeed, this dynamism and messiness is something to be taken seriously if we want to listen to and learn from our interlocutors and their world they live in.

And finally, I hope that in our endeavour to take religion seriously we would not lose our ability to detect and use humour. Jokes and laughter constitute an important part of what makes life (and field) liveable (which is something that Rane Willerslev has demonstrated ethnographically [Willerslev 2013] (see also: [Hamayon 2016])).

Acknowledging human playfulness is a necessary move for bringing back real people into the kind of ethnography that takes the other seriously.

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## VIRGINIE VATÉ

Each of the questions posed by the editorial board of the journal *Antropologicheskij forum / Forum for Anthropology and Culture* deserves an extensive discussion.<sup>1</sup> Given constraints of time and space, however, I have decided to focus my attention on questions 2, 3, and 4. In my understanding, each of these questions concerns the challenges that the anthropologist of religion can meet on the field. I will respond to these

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questions by reflecting on my own fieldwork experience in Chukotka, from 1994 to 2006, and more recently in Alaska in 2011, 2015, and 2016.

In the course of my work as an anthropologist, I have been concerned, and continue to be concerned, with the ways in which people engage with various religious practices. After a M.A. thesis on Chukchi birth and death rituals, I looked, in my doctoral dissertation, at how the gendered division of labour operates in everyday life and in ritual activities. My focus was on reindeer herding and sea-mammal hunting ritual cycles among the Chukchi. Thereafter, the changes that I observed in the field and the news that I received through letters sent by my friends from Chukotka led me to shift my attention to Evangelical Christianity, which began to spread among people throughout the region in the 1990s. Following up research on this new topic in Chukotka, I extended my ethnographic inquiries to sites in Alaska, which served as bases for Christian missions to Chukotka. In short, I reconceived my research interests to encompass religious interactions in the Bering Strait region, with a particular focus on how indigenous people of both sides of the Straits interact through religious practices. With this in mind, I did field research in Nome and on St Lawrence Island, whose inhabitants have close ties with kin and other members of their ethnic community in Chukotka. More recently, with a French colleague, Marie-Amélie Salabelle, I started a comparative project studying the relation that indigenous peoples have with Orthodoxy in Alaska and in Chukotka.<sup>1</sup> Over the past two years, together with my colleague, I have done fieldwork for this project in the Kodiak region, where we are investigating the pilgrimage devoted to St Herman, the first Orthodox saint of the Americas.

Given the topics just mentioned, my research falls within the field of the anthropology of Christianity but also includes the anthropology of rituals and shamanism. My encounter with different religious practices raised different kinds of question regarding my position as an anthropologist working in local communities. This is what I am going to explain now.

Because of the emphasis they put on conversion, participants in Evangelical Protestant movements challenge the position of the anthropologist who wants to study them using the method of participant observation. This has been mentioned by a number of authors who do research on Evangelical churches. Simon Coleman [Coleman 2006: 4] explains that 'ethnographers have defined Pentecostalism as a troubling field of study within the almost equally troubling sub-field of anthropology of Christianity.' According to

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him, anthropologists dealing with Pentecostalism, find that one of their main 'problems' in doing ethnographic work is establishing the appropriate 'distance' from the subject of their fieldwork [Coleman 2006: 4].

Because I was first confronted with such questions when I turned my attention to the study of conversion to Evangelical Christianity, I decided to analyse and compare my different fieldwork experiences. Specifically, I wanted to compare my situation and my degree of involvement in the field in the two kinds of religious practices that I looked at, namely, reindeer herding rituals and Pentecostalism or Charismatic Protestantism. This comparison is all the more relevant insofar as I am often speaking about the same people who were involved in these two different forms of religious practices during different periods of their lives (and of my research). In Chukotka, those whom I know as members of Evangelical churches are, in several cases, the same ones whom I saw performing reindeer herding rituals before they had become Christians. While I was studying Evangelical Protestantism, this enabled me to benefit from relations of trust that I had established in the past. But the fact that I had shared people's lives before they became Christians does not mean that my position within the Christian community of the village was not questioned.

Regarding the status of the anthropologist, there are, I suggest, at least two points that distinguish reindeer herding rituals from Pentecostal practices:

- a) one is the presence or absence of a requirement to believe in the representations implied by these religious practices;
- b) and the other is the presence or absence of a requirement to be a member of the community that performs those practices.

Indeed, one can take part in reindeer herding rituals in two ways, according to one's situation. First, one takes part in rituals when one belongs to the reindeer herding family that organises the ritual. For family members, it is important to take part since rituals are performed in order to perpetuate and promote the wellbeing of the herd. Rituals are also performed in order to reassert social and symbolic links at several levels: at the level of the familial unit, at the level of the encampment, and at the level of the community. They also confirm links between humans and various spirits and entities, living and dead, including humans, wild game animals, and reindeer.

When one does not belong to the familial unit, one may, however, still participate in reindeer herding rituals with the status of a guest (in Chukchi, *rēmkył'yn*). Indeed, although the family members who reside together in a particular *iaranga* ('tent' in Russian, from Chukchi *iaran* 'y) are the active participants in the ritual, the presence

of guests is also required. Guests are considered to be necessary for the successful unfolding of the ritual. Rituals are announced in advance by means of radio so that friends and relatives living in the distant village or in neighbouring encampments can join those who are performing them. Usually, the different brigades, corresponding to a number of different encampments, try to stagger the dates for the performance of the main ritual, held at the end of August or the beginning of September, so that their member will be able to visit one another. Guests enjoy taking part in festivals hosted by others, since such events provide an opportunity for enjoying special dishes, prepared only in such occasions, and also for receiving gifts from the hosts (e.g., reindeer or dog skins, whole reindeer, quarters of meat, sledges, etc.). These rituals are, of course, occasions when people can gather together and meet. But this is not the only reason for the presence of guests: They are also expected to share the considerable workload, for example, by offering a helping hand in butchering the reindeer slaughtered during the ritual (see also: [Vaté 2005; 2013]).

Therefore, although I was an outsider, I could get close enough to observe the rituals by taking on the status of a guest. Before my stay in the tundra, people in the city would tell me that I would not be able to observe the rituals — that people were not going to tell me or show me things because this is all secret. But, actually, I did not have much trouble, since I could be a guest, just like many other participants in the festivals. Guests give value to the ritual, in a number of ways. The fact that my contribution to the work of butchering — particularly, in the beginning — was not of great value, was in part compensated by the fact that I was known to have made a long trip from France to attend the ritual. My participation in reindeer herding ritual never implied a greater involvement than being merely a guest; but this status enabled me to attend all the rituals without any difficulty. Although there was a *iaranga* where I could feel at home with my host family, and where I was given a lot of responsibility in everyday life, I never received blood paintings as family members do and I was never involved as an insider in the ritual system. But I would argue that this was actually something positive.

I have to explain that each *iaranga* plays a central role in the definition of the family. It functions as a kin unit: a newborn child is said to ‘belong’ to the particular *iaranga* in which he / she is born. Biological brothers and sisters may well belong to different *iarangi* (plural form), if, for example, the oldest child of the family was born when his / her mother was still living with her parents. In the case of marriage, the wife or husband is integrated in his / her new *iaranga*. Each *iaranga* has its own hearth, and, in Chukchi terms, members of the same family are sometimes called ‘those of one hearth’ (*ynnanjynl’at*) [Bogoraz 1975 [1904–9]: 537–8; Ragtytval 1986: 172]. ‘Those of one hearth’ refers to the central role of the hearth. The hearth is

an indicator of familial identity. Charcoal from the hearth may be used to draw symbols of tent-based identity on the skin or clothes of family members to reassert their connection. Charcoal is also used to integrate non-human components into the familial unit. For instance, when one receives a new dog from a neighbour, the animal is marked with some charcoal from the fire; or, again, after the mistress of a house has sewn a new inner tent, she draws signs on it with charcoal from that fire. Each family has its own signs, such as animal figures, geometrical designs or a combination of both. The hearth of the *iaranga* is central not only to people's identity and kinship affiliations; it also creates a link between the *iaranga*, the family that lives in it, and the reindeer herd. This mediating role of the hearth is one of the reasons why it has to be protected, particularly from contact with other hearths. Pots or utensils that are liable to come into contact with the fire or with the food prepared on the fire must not come into contact with food or items coming from another hearth (see also: [Vaté 2011]). All this is to say that, by not belonging to any particular hearth or any particular *iaranga*, I was free to interact with different households and to help with tasks linked with the hearth (cooking, boiling water for tea, and so on), without representing a danger to the family I lived with. This is why I am saying, in retrospect, that the status of guest was probably the best for me.

In a very different way, the presence of individuals in the Pentecostal church is justified with reference to shared belief, considered here in an 'emic' sense. At the Pentecostal service, the notion of a 'guest' does not make any sense. People go to church because they believe in God and Jesus Christ. Being present at reindeer herding rituals does not oblige the anthropologist to believe in the diverse spiritual entities that are mobilised and fed (entities that are not explicitly named or mentioned); but as soon as the anthropologist comes in touch with an Evangelical community, he / she is asked whether he / she is a Christian or not. And if the anthropologist defines himself / herself as a Christian, he / she has to testify about his / her real 'degree of Christian-ness', his / her real involvement in and practice of Christianity.

This is why participants in Protestant Evangelical movements question the position of the anthropologist. Ruy Llera Blanes, who did research with Roma Pentecostal churches in Spain and Portugal, explains that, for Pentecostals, 'preaching the Gospel to everyone possible is not a matter of choice, but in biblical exegesis a moral obligation of the believer and demonstration of commitment to the church <...>. It also reflects the Pentecostal interpretation of ontology, or the nature of being and believing, and ontogeny, or the process of becoming a person "living in Christ"' [Blanes 2006: 228]. In this context the anthropologist becomes a potential target for

conversion and is subjected to pressure from the community of believers.

What stance can the anthropologist take in such a context? For Blanes, this question, more than an ethical issue, is 'the very core of ethnographic research: the interplay between scientific enterprise and personal experience' [Blanes 2006: 232]. Blanes shows 'how beliefs (or the lack of them) are negotiated through a communicational process that is built on tensions, distances and proximities' [Ibid.: 224]. The anthropologist has to find his / her way in this interplay and should be flexible.

Like other anthropologists facing such a situation, I was also subjected to pressure to convert; and it was also through 'negotiation' that I could find and define my place in the church. When I started to do research with Evangelical and Charismatic communities, I was wondering how I was going to do it. I had questions about the way in which I should get involved in the rite myself. Should I sing? I decided to do it exactly the way I did it among the reindeer herders, that is, to take part as much as I could in following most of the actions and attitudes of the practitioners. This meant, during the church services of the Evangelical Christians, standing when they stood, sitting when they sat, and singing when they sang. I drew the line when it came to 'speaking in tongues' or engaging in other forms of exalted behaviour.

In the Chukotkan village where I did my research, the Pentecostal community also proved to be flexible, to a degree, in facilitating my integration. As in other Pentecostal communities (see for instance: [Blanes 2006: 229]), my presence in their church and my interest in them were interpreted as God's will. Though not solving completely the issue of 'belief', this attitude on the part of members of the Pentecostal community provided me with a sort of legitimacy. The question remains whether the anthropologist can remain non-committal for an indefinite period of time or whether or not tensions necessarily arise, due to community expectations that outsiders will eventually convert.

In my most recent fieldwork, in an Orthodox setting in Alaska, I felt the situation was sort of in-between. If church life in Kodiak is based on important community ties, it also integrates visitors regularly. Usually, these are Orthodox visitors, coming because of the historical significance of the Church and the relics of Saint Herman; but tourists come as well, visiting Alaska on a cruise boat and coming to look at the historical building. My colleague and I were kindly encouraged to become Orthodox, but, with one exception, the pressure was not intense. During services, we were invited to take part in moments that are open to non-Orthodox, such as the benediction, the veneration of the saint, and blessed oil unction. But there

are also limits to the participation of outsiders: a non-Orthodox cannot take part in communion, and the same is true for a person who has not confessed.

Reflecting on the position that the anthropologist can occupy in a religious group is also a way to reflect on some of the specific aspects that define the religious practice under study. Regarding question 2, I would argue that it is not just the identity or standpoint of the scholar that is of vital importance but the relationship between the scholar or researcher and a community of religious believers or practitioners. In any particular case, this relationship is determined by the interaction of two variables: first, the background of the researcher and, second, community members' views regarding the applicability of their beliefs and practices beyond the borders of their community. Very briefly, let us consider how each of these variables applies to the situations that I have described above.

The 'personal standpoint of the individual scholars' is important in the anthropology of religion because the researcher's analyses engage with people's views of life and the world, and because readers of ethnographic accounts of religious practices might suspect that the results are biased if the anthropologist is an adherent of the religion in question or is fundamentally opposed to it. This question of bias may be more obvious in anthropology of religion, but it should also arise in other fields, such as political or economic anthropology, where the ideological convictions of the anthropologist may as well influence his/her analysis. To come back to my personal 'standpoint', and to integrate question 3 regarding 'defamiliarisation' into the discussion, I feel that the study of religion was for me the most 'defamiliarised' field that I could have chosen, since in my family of origin this issue did not play an important role. I grew up in a Catholic but very secularised country (France), and had grandparents who were believers (but my grandmother practiced popular Catholicism, and my grandfather expressed clear anticlericalism). But I was brought up largely outside the Church, raised by parents who were influenced by ideas of the generation of 1968. In this respect, I feel I had as much to discover about Evangelical and Orthodox churches as about Siberian shamanism.

How about the second variable, the way in which the members of a religious community understand the applicability of their beliefs and practices beyond the borders of their community — i.e., whether and to what degree they feel that others should subscribe to these beliefs and practices and follow them? These understandings vary widely for my three case studies. The Chukchi rituals are linked to a certain type of relation to nature and are meant to support activities of subsistence. Today, when those festivals are adapted to the urban context (see: [Vaté 2005]), the performance serves more to express

indigenous identity than to perpetuate and promote the wellbeing of the herd. In any case, there is no dogma, just certain rules that must be respected in terms of practices, to which the anthropologist should conform in order not to disturb the ritual process.

The Christian congregations, in contrast, both subscribe to a dogma that, in their view, has universal validity not only for members of the congregation but also for those outsiders whom they would like to see become members of it. Still, there is a difference between the ways in which the believers whom I encountered tried to make outsiders accept their dogma in the Pentecostal and Orthodox churches. How can this difference be characterised and explained?

In this discussion, I do not pretend to resolve these questions in one page. Here, very briefly, I will try to address two interrelated dimensions, based on my reflections on fieldwork: (1) the relationship of the individual to divinity, and (2) the quality of social relations among church members.

(1) The relationship of the individual to divinity. The key distinction here is between immediacy and mediation. In the Pentecostal church, the relationship of each member to divinity tends toward immediacy: everyone can make direct contact with divinity, as is evident in such practices as speaking in tongues. Of course, Orthodox Christians may also have an immediate relationship with divinity through worship and prayer. Nevertheless, in the Orthodox Church, this relationship is often mediated by the priestly hierarchy to a much greater degree than it is in the Pentecostal churches, e.g., through the dependence of ordinary members on the priesthood for confession, benediction, communion, and so on.

(2) Social relations among church members. Here, the key distinction is between egalitarianism and hierarchy. Clearly, hierarchy is not absent in the Pentecostal churches, especially in the relation of the members to the pastor and to representatives of regional or global Pentecostal organisations. Nevertheless, the immediacy to divinity, as discussed above, promotes a feeling of egalitarianism among Church members. For example, in testifying, each member can become like a pastor, if only temporarily. In contrast, in the case of 'the Orthodox Church in America', the hierarchical organisation of the Orthodox Church is quite pronounced. It has its pinnacle in the metropolitan and descends gradually from him to the archbishops, the bishops, the priests and deacons, and the ordinary church members.

Referring to differences along these dimensions allows us to see significant contrasts between Pentecostal and Orthodox churches, which, in turn, affect the relationship of the anthropologist to their members. The sense of immediacy among Pentecostals is related both to a feeling of equality among themselves and a feeling of distance from

'the world' and its representatives. Consequently, there is, among Pentecostals, more of the sense that one is either 'with us' or not. What matters is one's personal relation to Christ. For researchers, this means that, at some point, there is a crisis when the congregation demands to know which it is — are you for us or against us?

With the Orthodox, in contrast, the spiritual mediation of the ordinary member's relation to the central truths of the religion — which is the domain of the priesthood — finds its parallel in the mediation of social relations within the hierarchical organisation of the church.

Whereas Evangelical Protestants would insist on 'taking Jesus in one's heart' (see: [Kormina 2013]), being an Orthodox implies the assimilation of more codified knowledge and practices. In a sense, then, the relationship of the anthropologist approaching the Orthodox church parallels that of the ordinary member, insofar as both stand outside of the inner circle of religious specialists, if in different ways and to different degrees. In some ways, this facilitates the — admittedly limited — acceptance of the anthropologist in the Orthodox community.

No doubt, more would need to be said to build a comparison between Chukchi rituals and Evangelical Protestant and Orthodox Christianity, and also their internal diversity. But with my answers to some of the questions posed by the organisers of this forum, I hope to have provided some impetus for that further discussion.

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## CATHERINE WANNER

### What Is This Thing We Call Religion?

One week after the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan, I entered an Orthodox church for the first time. It was January 1980 and the brightness of the snow covered Moscow streets dimmed after the sun set, driving the mercury down even further and chilling me to the bone. Back in those days, foreigners were 'guided' in their travels around the city. I didn't know it at the time, but the American professor who accompanied this group of students to the USSR was also a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church. So our tour guide — I don't remember her name, but I can still see her stout body wrapped in a green wool coat topped with a pristine white fur hat — took us one day on an excursion to a church. Wasn't religious practice supposed to be forbidden in the USSR? I thought so, but I wasn't much interested in religion so I didn't give what seemed like a paradox much thought.

Although most of the other students, blasé about church and religion, chose to stay outside on the street, out of curiosity, I decided to enter the church. I was stunned at what I saw: a thick air, visible to the eye, laden with smoke from candles, steamy breath, and the sweat of those who had been there too long under layers of winter clothing. Glittering, golden icons of saints with elongated noses seemed to reach out to visitors in dizzying intimacy as they leaned in to kiss them in an act of pious prostration. The incense created a peculiar but pleasant smell that was totally unfamiliar to me. And then there were the voices. Beautiful, melodic voices,

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wafting down, seemingly from on high. I twirled and spun in circles in search of the source of such beautiful sound. I did not know then that choirs are deliberately placed above parishioners, out of sight, so as to be heard but not seen.

Beyond the sounds, smells, glimmer and glistening, there were the elderly women. Some carried babies. Others wore dresses and knelt on a hard, cold, stone floor, as they recited prayers with fervent devotion. It was such an intense assault on the senses that it was almost a relief, a feeling of fleeing, when I felt the cold rush of air hit my face on the street again. I never forgot that moment, and thereafter entered many Orthodox churches as an amateur anthropologist in observance of the natives during this period of undergraduate study of Russian literature in the USSR. It was decades later before I began to think critically and analytically about religion at all, and about Orthodoxy in particular.

When I finally began conducting ethnographic research on religion in Ukraine in the late 1990s, I first focused on Protestant communities, mostly Baptists and Pentecostals, as well as a variety of other 'New Religious Movements' of western origin that had established bases in Ukraine, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Adventists. They were all as unfamiliar and as exotic to me as were the Orthodox. Protestants, be they in the West or Ukraine, follow similar patters of communal organisation that include formal membership, regular church attendance, hierarchical leadership, and an emphasis on textually-grounded belief and conviction. This meant that there was abundant scholarly literature for me to draw on.

However, when I began more systematically interviewing Orthodox believers in 2010, I quickly realised that the scholarly categories and concepts I had used earlier did not apply or were outright misleading. Even the word 'religion' itself was problematic. Questions concerning 'religion' usually elicited blank stares. Respondents insisted that they were not religiously observant. They rarely attended church and certainly didn't 'belong' to a particular church community. Few participated in rituals, and many knew very little about religious symbolism, doctrine or liturgy.

Questions concerning 'faith', however, often brought forth references to one's own *dukhovnik* (spiritual adviser) and the meaningfulness of this relationship. Whereas 'religion' elicited critiques of the profiteering, power-driven nature of the church as an institution, 'faith' prompted people to make references to the illustrious role Orthodoxy has played in enriching and defining Eastern Slavic civilisation and to its numerous accomplishments in the domains of art, architecture, and scholarship. Many told about how they visit monasteries, participate in pilgrimages, pray regularly, often go to church to light a candle, and attend exhibits, concerts and performances with

religious themes. In short, I quickly understood that to learn about Orthodox religious practices and beliefs, it is best not to mention religion and church is not always the place to go. Although people denied being religious, I understood that they very actively practiced their faith and that it in fact informs their relationships, world views and everyday practices, often to a significant degree. Ethnography as a research method offers the advantage, which is vitally important in this case, to capture the difference between what people say they believe or don't believe, and what they actually do. I have found the paradox to be particularly vivid among the Orthodox.

Much like attempts to define culture, anthropologists have found the delineation of religion from other forms of human behaviour to be quite vexing. Both culture and religion are not bounded entities that are readily and universally identifiable. Rather they are constantly evolving and, like water, they flow where they can. Still, social scientists have perpetually sought a definition of religion to serve as a boundary-marking analytical category so as to clearly identify the essence of what they study and to create an intellectual justification for doing so. Especially for anthropologists, who usually gravitate toward unfamiliar societies whose members demonstrate fervent belief, defining religion and translating religious practices and sentiments into an idiom for others who do not share them presents many difficulties. This is primarily because, as Winston King has written, 'The very attempt to define *religion*, to find some distinctive or possibly unique essence or set of qualities that distinguish the religious from the remainder of human life, is primarily a Western concern <...> what the West calls religious is such an integral part of the total ongoing way of life that it is never experienced or thought of as something separable or narrowly distinguishable from the rest' [King 1987: 282]. In many societies, King goes on to argue, everything can potentially be considered divine and existence itself appears to be sacred.

In response to the analytical and descriptive challenges presented by the anthropological study of religion in such societies, for quite some time E. B. Tylor's succinct assertion that religion constituted 'a belief in supernatural beings' [Tylor 1903: 424] was embraced by anthropologists as the most valid definition of religion. It clearly established belief, however it was understood, as a core attribute, and placed belief into its own domain, separate and distinct from others, by connecting it to supernatural forces. The compendium of beliefs associated with these spiritual beings was something Tylor called 'animism'. In the evolutionary framework of the day, he considered the polytheism of animism to be a precursor to monotheistic, institutionalised religion as it existed in Europe at the time. The evidence he offered was his assertion that the 'soul' was the fundamental concept that evolved into religion. Dreams, apparitions

and visions of dead kin were taken as proof of the existence of souls. Recognition of the soul spawned a wide range of deities in the form of gods, demons, and natural spirits thought to be capable of harming or helping humans. Sir James Frazer, who scandalised British society by considering magic and religion in conjunction with one another, suggested that the limited powers and fallibility of these spiritual beings led to the invention of infallible gods [Frazer 1894].

As the ethnographic record expanded over time, our knowledge grew of societies that venerate a variety of spirits and gods for what they *do*. European anthropologists realised that a belief-oriented, usually text-centred, approach to religion as its defining factor was a projection of a Protestant impulse [Asad 1993; Pels 2008; Meyer 2012]. Once one moves beyond this faith tradition, even just to another branch of Christianity, such as Orthodoxy in other European countries, even Tylor's minimalist definition can become confining.

An influential critique by Talal Asad [Asad 2003] charged that defining religion in such globalised, universal terms masks the fact that religion is essentially a historical category and a byproduct of Western secular modernity. His writings significantly contributed to anthropologists expanding the cultural and historical framework within which they study religion and the very issues they engage. Asad asserts that religion must be considered in conjunction with its twin, secularisation, which is itself inextricably linked with the internal transformation of European Christianity. He argues that we have not seen a dialectical shift from religion to secularisation or the infusion of religion with secular sensibilities. Rather, religion and the secular mutually constitute one another and always have, which means that anthropologists of religion must be extremely sensitive to context [Wanner (ed.) 2012], Asad's insights are particularly relevant for studying Orthodox societies.

Reflecting on my own ethnographic material, which is based on participant observation of daily life, observance of a wide variety of religious and spiritual practices as well as formal interviews and countless conversations in Ukraine and Russia, I have argued that current forms of religiosity in the region are shaped by what I call 'syncretic secularism' [Wanner 2014: 435]. Anthropologists have used the concept of syncreticism to describe the phenomenon of religious synthesis when a so-called 'world religion', meaning Christianity, Islam or Judaism, meshes with indigenous faith practices, usually under conditions created by colonisation, to yield new hybridised or creole forms of religiosity. The term has been rightly critiqued for trading on the idea of two, bounded faith traditions intermingling to form a third. Having said that, some anthropologists, myself included, favor retaining a focus on the processes of blending practices from different faith traditions grounded

in a variety of world views [Stewart, Shaw (eds.) 1994; Weller 1998; Hoskins 2014].

The collage of religious practices I observe in Ukraine and Russia mostly centres on blending belief, doubt, and non-belief with the desire to belong and the refusal to be coerced by institutions. I have called this syncretic secularism because such religiosity meshes seemingly opposed inclinations and desires in novel reconceptualisations of religiosity. Syncretic secularist practices offer a mode of being and a mode of belonging that influences how faith is lived as opposed to how religion is practiced. The amorphousness and multiplicities of allegiances reflected in syncretic secular practices stem from a wariness of institutions and an entrenched suspicion of individuals in positions of authority. The syncretic secular aspects of faith, which include aesthetic sensibilities, political orientations and identities, have a significant impact on the political power of religion. They expand the ways in which the political and the religious can be melded together for greater effect.

For a variety of doctrinal, practical and historical reasons, Orthodoxy is a faith tradition that fosters forms of religiosity that do not always easily fit established categories and assumptions in the social scientific study of religion. Yet, consideration of what distinguishes Orthodoxy, the forms of blending it allows, and the ramifications of that innovation, allow anthropologists to uncover new and highly promising angles of inquiry. Anthropologists to date have paid little attention as to how inclinations to religiosity not grounded in belief might be experienced. Many in Eastern Europe define themselves in very significant ways in relation to Christianity while only tenuously, if at all, holding beliefs that would be recognised as 'Christian' [Pelkmans (ed.) 2013; Robbins 2014: 166]. Such individuals are referred to as 'identifiers' or the 'nominally Orthodox', whereas they refer to themselves as 'atheists with traditions', 'prikhilnik' (Ukr.), and 'zakhozhanе' (Rus.).

In my own research, I have moved away from belief and consider experience as a window to understand the relevance of religiosity as it is lived in Eastern Christian societies. I embrace a focus on experience as a lens through which to see religion in spite of what Fenella Cannell has called the 'disciplinary nervousness about religious experiences in general' [Cannell 2006: 3]. This nervousness is a direct outgrowth of the secular, rational preoccupation of social scientific inquiry that favors tangible, measurable elements of religion, such as specific patterns of authority, hierarchies and processes of community formation. Still, it is Robert Orsi's definition of religion as, 'the practice of making the invisible visible' through the 'senses' and the bodily experiences this generates for the practitioner [Orsi 2006: 73–4] that reflects the descriptions I have

heard over the years as to why being a *dukhovnyy chelovek* matters. The Swiss artist Paul Klee claimed that, 'Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible,' which, perhaps goes a long way to explaining the close connection between religiosity and aesthetics and how both are capable of generating experiences that ignite the senses.

The question still arises as to which experiences anthropologists should consider worthy of study. I advocate a concept of religion that involves multiple, interconnecting components. I have found the emphasis some anthropologists place on religion as a form of mediating the transcendent particularly helpful in conceptualising religion. Harking back to the Latin roots of the word religion, *ligare*, to bind or connect, Birgit Meyer in particular, argues that religions create an interpretive distance between the individual and the supernatural and then mediate this with links to the 'beyond' [Meyer 2006: 290; Meyer, Moors (eds.) 2006: 7]. Religion, therefore, serves to connect a person to higher powers, be they gods, ancestors, or spirits, and does so by using material objects and places to generate non-material experiences of their presence. Here is where the critical distinction is revealed that my interlocutors have made between religion and faith. They claim that the binding force of religion is obligation. Religion uses rules of behaviour, mandates to fulfill rites, and moral judgment to bind people and generate experiences, which is why I have often heard it said that a religious person 'observes or participates' in rituals, whereas a spiritual person 'experiences' them.

In other words, my research indicates that the essence of religion, faith and spirituality, however understood in a particular context, centres on practices of mediation in which experiences bridge the immanent to transcendent, and connect daily rhythms of worldly life to extraordinary sensations of otherworldly presence. Thanks to these experiences and the sensations they generate, the individual feels the presence of the divine or the 'beyond'. Religion, in the sense of a body of knowledge or a social institution, offers techniques to enhance this process of mediation. An experiential approach to the anthropological study of religion heightens the importance of particular places that are considered sacred and draws our attention to the elaborate efforts that are made to define those spaces as the sites where experiences understood as religious or spiritual might occur.

When experiences are understood as an otherworldly or mystical encounter by virtue of the bodily sensations and emotions they generate, I think we can consider these experiences religious and distinct from those generated by other facets of social life. Such religious experiences are characterised by the visceral knowledge they deliver that is inscribed on the body and acquired and shared in communion with other people. Moreover, the shared nature of this visceral knowledge enables certain political initiatives. The promise

of transformation that such experiences of the beyond hold out to the individual can, under certain circumstances, be replicated on the societal level. The same potential exists for religion to draw its privileged access to supernatural forces to create the possibility for political and social transformation in a society.

One of the most incisive points I have learned in studying religiosity in Ukraine and Russia in combination with ethnographic studies of the anthropology of religion is that, regardless of the time period or place, the 'good life', meaning happiness, health and well-being, cannot always be realised by human efforts alone. This has been a key factor fueling religious practices oriented to otherworldly forces. Religion, in all its guises the world over, provides a form of agency to individuals with which they can respond to given circumstances, some of which are unwanted, by giving these circumstances meaning. Religion also provides a vehicle to exercise power over those circumstances by transforming them into something more desirable.

Whereas religion offers a framework for 'making the invisible visible' by authorising and authenticating certain practices to make the transcendent present to the senses in the circumstances of everyday life and in public space, individuals magnify and expand the possibilities for such transcendent experiences through the use of certain practices and objects, such as relics, icons and even choirs, to render present the 'beyond'. All of this makes religion imminently performative. I have come to appreciate the tremendous elasticity and openness of Orthodoxy to allow a full spectrum of places and objects to become religious mediums capable of generating mystical experiences and bodily sensations that fulfill a desire for contact with 'something greater' than oneself. Not only holy texts, prayers, images, and music can be affective religious media capable of conjuring up the presence of the transcendent, but cemeteries, diets, and art can too. Each has the potential to generate a sense of the extraordinary in the form of an immediate presence of the sacred that generates bodily experiences, much like those sensations I experienced as a result of my first exposure to Orthodoxy on that January day, and this, in essence, is indicative of this thing we anthropologists call religion and study ethnographically.

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