

The ethics of Orthodoxy as the aesthetics of the local church.

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the ritual aesthetics of mundane aspects within the global Eastern Orthodox Christian liturgical practice. By comparing a variety of ‘local practices’ within the liturgical traditions of various Orthodox Christian communities, the paper explores how commonly held ethical commitments are expressed in radically different – and at times exactly opposite – practices of quotidian religion. In this evaluation of ‘little traditions’ within the ‘great tradition’ of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the paper focuses on the beauty, judgement, and affect of local practices and their relation within the larger canonically inscribed theology of ‘correct practice’ (orthopraxy). Drawing upon anthropological and sociological theory of art, aesthetics, and invention, the paper argues that aesthetics is localised ethics in practice.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity; ethics; aesthetics; the local

Introduction

Eastern Orthodox Christianity as a global phenomenon is a ‘family’ of churches. It is composed of fourteen<sup>1</sup> autocephalous (self-headed) Churches – such as the Russian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and so forth – as well as, and here the numbers are internally disputed, roughly twenty national churches with varying degrees of autonomy, dependency, and often contested legitimacy, branching off from one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the Churches also recognize a fifteenth, that of the Orthodox Church in America. Its *tomos* of autocephaly (the declaration granting it its independence) given it by the Russian Church, however, are contested by, for example, the Greek Church.

primary fourteen (the Orthodox Church in Japan, for instance, as a dependent of Russia). The international dispersion of the churches opens up a curious series of phenomena as the commonly held religion is refracted and put into practice in the various local contexts. Officially, the Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches all agree on the same faith. The scriptures, Ecumenical Councils, the canons of early saints, and the teachings of beloved saints are commonly held and traded, as it were, across national boundaries. The interpretation of those canons, however, and how local practices celebrate the commonly held theological principals are often in marked contrast. As these various national Orthodoxies migrated out into what is sometimes called—using language set down during the Eastern Roman Empire—the ‘barbaric lands’ of Western Europe, the Americas and Oceania. Here, in the lands outside of Roman civilisation, various ‘local’ practices, originating from across Eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean regions, meet in parishes across town from each other.

This article draws upon research conducted between 2006 and 2016 in the USA (especially the Los Angeles and Kansas City areas), the UK (especially greater London), and the Greek Orthodox monastery of Vatopedi on Mt Athos, Greece. In each of these settings a variety of national Orthodoxies are represented. The USA and the UK fall into the category of ‘barbaric lands’, and as such communities of Eastern Orthodox Christians in these regions belong to any number of national churches, and most parishes will have members from several national and ethnic backgrounds. The monastery of Vatopedi, while not in a ‘barbaric land’, is, nonetheless, similarly a site that brings together individuals from far afield. As such, it serves as a microcosm of the larger themes discussed in this paper. So, for example, while the monastery has been a continual site of Greek Orthodox practice since the tenth century, the pilgrimic practices of Global Orthodoxy bring men from across the Near East, Europe, and

Russia. In this milieu some continuity is markedly present. The variety is, however, also immediately noticeable. Many Russian pilgrims, for example, will bend and kiss the stone features of the door way — a few will bow, or do a full prostration before the threshold. Greeks, on the other hand, tend simply to cross themselves as they cross the threshold. Some may touch the doorframe as well; but the gesture is usually to stabilise themselves as they step down onto the uneven marble floor in the darkened room. Similarly, Romanian pilgrims distinguish themselves quickly in the midst of the Liturgy. As the service approaches its climax – when the priest consecrates the Eucharist – many Romanians take a kneeling position. Side by side a Romanian man kneels and a Greek man dips his head slightly. Both are practicing a devotional act. Both are fulfilling a pilgrimage and participating in the Liturgy. The means of expression, however, are markedly different.

It is important to highlight here the kind of ethics used in this context. In Eastern Orthodox theological tradition, the emphasis on ethics is always linked to the relation to God and the ability to love (see, for two recent discussions of this, Papanikolaou 2013 and Louth 2013). This version of virtue ethics allows us to understand the ethical act to be that which enriches the person's communion with God and increases the ability to love those around them. As such, participation in liturgical worship and other devotional acts (such as pilgrimage, the veneration of icons, etc.) are ethical actions. James Faubion (2011), in his anthropological work on ethics that draws heavily upon ancient Greek philosophy, offers a useful model to think through this relation. Faubion outlines two sorts of ethical action. The first, which he calls 'themitical', is done in accordance with the laws of gods and men. This themitical action meets the requirements of one's role in society and before the divine. Atop, or beyond, this is what Faubion calls 'inventive' ethical action. This does not contravene the themitical, but exceeds it, goes above and

beyond it, or makes it personal. It is here, in the inventive autopoiesis, that Faubion locates the identity of the ethical subject.

In the Orthodox Christian setting, things that are thematical to liturgical worship are the ‘orthopraxy’ of specific rites. This orthopraxy is inscribed in church law and service books. In some cases orthopraxy has developed through centuries of debate and been made dogmatic through the Ecumenical Councils—such as in the case of the veneration of icons. However, while the use of iconography was laid down as a dogmatic aspect of Orthodox Christianity, the details of how to venerate an icon were never specified. In this sense to venerate icons is thematical, how one venerates icons (with a kiss or a touch of fingers, with a large or small genuflection, etc.) becomes the arena of inventive ethical action.

The ethics of Orthodox Christian living is a process (Louth 2013) of coming into the loving communion of God. The question that presents itself, then, is one concerning how this process plays out in real terms. This focus on the particular forms of behaviour around devotional performances opens the discussion to aesthetics.

This paper starts with a brief discussion of aesthetics, specifically in the context of the ‘everyday’ and ritual. While Orthodox Christianity is known for the production of ‘great’ works of art (such as by the artist and iconographer Andrei Rublev), this paper does not focus on these. Instead it looks at the more simple, quotidian aesthetics of Orthodoxy’s ritual tradition. Some readers may take exception to the ‘everyday’ quality of these. And, it is true that some of the practices discussed below only happen once a year. However, as these ritual engagements and the aesthetic qualities of them are routinized and habitual, they carry the same general quality of the everyday aesthetics with, as we will see

below, its emphasis on quotidian ‘beauty’ rather than an emphasis on remarkable works of aesthetic production. Following the discussion of aesthetics, the paper moves through a series of examples in order to draw out the contrasting practices of local Orthodoxy. This works toward a comparison of these local practices and their differing aesthetics, but draws out, in spite of the differences, the common ethical commitments undergirding each practice.

*Ritual aesthetics of the everyday*

Orthodox Christianity is a highly arts-oriented religious tradition. As such, I find it useful to draw into conversation anthropologists, sociologists, and art historians. As an anthropologist, I also think it important to dialogue with my informants’ own understanding of analytical terms, such as aesthetics, particularly when these informants (as is very much true of Turbo, discussed below) have well developed critical understandings of these topics in their own right. As such, this section draws these diverse lines of critical enquiry into initial dialogue. I am not the first to highlight the connection between daily ritual and performance, the beauty of these performances, and the wider ethical implications. In the following discussion I am interested in bringing out some of these particular strands in order to offer some nuance to how we might best understand the complexity of ritualised everyday aesthetics. There is some difficulty in bringing together these anthropological, sociological, and art historical perspectives due to the subtle differences in how these authors are using similar terminologies. As such, I rely quite heavily on quotations in order that the reader may hear the ideas in their own terms. What I hope to achieve, however, in the difference of their registers is a common theme regarding the link between lived experience and the affective response to artful objects and situations and the greater ethical and divine contexts. Following this review

of pertinent literature on aesthetics, the paper then turns to a series of case studies, after which the conversation is revisited once again.

In building toward a perspective that recognises ritual aesthetics of the everyday in its relation to the ethics of practice, I wish to use as a point of departure Jeremy Coote's (2006[1992]) work on the 'marvels of the everyday'. In an effort to move the anthropology of art and aesthetics away from the valorisation of remarkable art objects, he argues that, 'All human activity has an aesthetic aspect' and that 'the anthropology of aesthetics should follow ... ordinary language usage, disconnect itself from art, and get closer to perception' (2006: 282). Coote argues for a simplification of aesthetic theory, both in terms of the language being used – so as to match what source communities discuss, and in terms of the content of discussion – so as to match the interests of the source communities. 'In considering fully the aesthetics of [ritual] dances' among the Dinka, he goes on to say, 'we should have to take into account more than just the purely visual; the major element is presumably the kinetic experience of the dancers themselves, through there are oral, and aural, elements too' (2006: 292). As such, aesthetics is not an abstracted concept, but rather it is best seen as a bodily, gestural aspect of routine ritual action. In Coote's understanding, aesthetics is related to other modes and media of practice – for example songs and visual motifs that are understood to mimic characteristics of God – but is centrally linked to what people do and how this is done. In Coote's work, we see an emphasis on the aesthetics within the 'marvels of the every day' being the pleasing visual and sonic qualities of performances and artefacts that – one could say – otherwise principally about the function and wellbeing of society.

In this way, Coote provides a direct link between wider socio-cultural practice and Dinka aesthetic understandings. In this regard, there is significant similarity between what

Coote is suggesting and what sociologist Eduardo de la Fuente argues concerning aesthetics. Drawing on Georg Simmel's work on the aesthetics of sociability, de la Fuente introduces the idea of an 'aesthetic threshold', whereby a form becomes more than purely functional; summarizing Simmel, he says: 'Sociability is aesthetically pleasing because, within it, reality appears in a condensed and sublimated form' (2007: 95). This aesthetically pleasing quality of social behaviour is built upon the fact that quotidian social aesthetics is 'about applying the reasoning of aesthetic inquiry to the broader world, including social life itself' (2007: 93) in a way which encapsulates something larger within the particular form. (Not unlike, I would argue, the divine qualities of piebald cows, as discussed by Coote [2006:286].) Furthermore, de la Fuente highlights a constant theme in Simmel's work on aesthetics saying '“aesthetic feeling” and “aesthetic value” don't develop until “immediate utility has been cleared away in the course of historical development [and] the materialistic motives on which our aesthetic sensibilities are based have been effaced in time”' (Simmel in de la Fuente 2007: 96-97). 'This model of aesthetics,' de la Fuente continues, 'is based on a theory of form that holds that aesthetic sensation requires the transformation of context into something that transcends utility' (2007: 97). In this way, 'as social forms come more purely social, their capacity for aesthetic integration increases' such that 'subjective pleasure, mediated by aesthetic form, transcends the subjectivism of private taste' (2007: 103). So, while one might (and I would) argue that aesthetic quality is useful socially, it is the development of a performance or artifact past simple utility<sup>2</sup> that opens the space for aesthetic integration. The threshold becomes a marking point for what is required for the continuance of life versus what societal flourishes have been incorporated. As something pushes further past the threshold, the social integration of the performance has the knock-on effect of

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<sup>2</sup> I am specifically avoiding the word 'simple pragmatism' as I see pragmatism itself to have its own aesthetic.

expanding the (individuated) subjectivity of aesthetic pleasure into a communal form of aesthetic taste.

This aspect of expansion, what Simmel and de la Fuente call ‘transcendence’ (op cit) is important. Within the context of religious art and ritual aesthetics the purpose of much of the beauty and splendor of the aesthetic qualities is aimed specifically toward transcendent phenomena of communion with the divine or saintly beings. Simmel, however, argued for a distinction between aesthetics in art and aesthetics in religion specifically in terms of how the relationship between the individual and the transcendent other is modeled. On this point I must disagree with Simmel. ‘For religion,’ argues Simmel, ‘the unification of transindividuality and individuality is a constriction because religion is grounded in the former. In contrast, for art, whose roots lie in the latter, this self-same unification means an expansion’ (Simmel 2005: 161). In other words, for Simmel, art allows the individual to expand out while religion – in his case modeled on a demythologized Lutheranism – brings God down into the individual. There is an assumption here in Simmel’s claim that presupposes the size of the ‘transindividuality’ (i.e. God) to be small and definite instead of infinite, for an infinite transindividuality would, of necessity, also be experienced by the individual as an expansion. Simmel’s stance on the trans-individuality of religion is, no doubt, related to his situation of religion within the subject, rather than being grounded in God (Vandenberghe 2010). In an Orthodox Christian setting, with its active dismissal of ecstatic feeling in favour of a life lived in ‘the constant experience of the divine reality’ (Lossky 1976: 209), the distinguishing mark Simmel provides between aesthetics in art and religion does not hold true. Both art and religion, as experienced through their aesthetic value, are an expansion that brings the individual subjectivity into accord with the society and divinity.



In terms of how this union between the individual and society happens, de la Fuente highlights Simmel's preference for situations 'where individual private desire comes to correspond (not submit) to the group situation', juxtaposing it with Michel Maffesoli's preference to emphasize situations 'where the pleasure of fusing with the collectivity overwhelms and transcends individual subjectivity' (de la Fuente 2007: 103-104). The implications here in regards to the causality are potentially quite interesting – particularly in terms of religious participation and freedom of conscience. Placing this within the Kantian tradition, de la Fuente suggests that Simmel's model ('Aesthetics as subjective adjustment to an agreeable object or situation') matches Kant's notion of the 'beautiful' while Maffesoli's ('aesthetics as submission to an overwhelming spiritual or collective force') fits with Kant's notion of the 'sublime' (2007: 104).

This parallelism is potentially problematic for the project at hand, in that it could be argued that the kind of everydayness of the marvels offered by Coote fall firmly into the 'beauty' paradigm (even as he suggests [2006:295]). However, in thinking about the sublime, a very helpful distinction can be made between 'sublime style' and 'the sublime'. In her work on the 'living presence response' to powerful pieces of art, Caroline van Eck points out that 'the sublime' is best seen as 'an experience', such that 'in this experience the representation dissolves into the presence of what is represented' (2010: 654). The represented collapses into the representation and allows for a trans-individual experience: 'recipient' (here using Gell's [1998] language, as does van Eck) with 'prototype'. The implications of this definition of 'the sublime' will be obvious to a reader familiar with Orthodox icons, where recorded tradition is full of accounts wherein the saint appears to and speaks with people via their icon.

Van Eck, in linking the sublime with the ‘living presence response’, offers the sublime as a highly relational experience. In this relational experience there is a quality of the art production to push past the form, and add with it feeling (2010: 655). It is this feeling that allows the evocation of trans-individual experience. If the sublime is an experience, that can be tripped by even a simple form, then the aesthetics of the sublime need to be ‘sublime style’, but only something pushed over the aesthetic threshold—that is, something constitutive of greater sociability, not just social form. In Orthodoxy this may simply then be any thing affecting an inter-subjective sense of trans-individual union. For example, any icon painted is done so according to specific guidelines and theological oversight (see Carroll 2015:195ff for a discussion of this) and are recognizable as Orthodox icons. This iconographic style can be understood as a sublime style. While the language here is distinctly different to what Turbo expresses, the thrust is similar: aesthetics is part of the everyday experience, it is part of and surpasses the utility of simple performances and artefacts, but is useful in drawing the individual out joining them with society and divinity.

Before moving into the primary case studies, there is one final connection to highlight. In the aesthetic threshold, de la Fuente presents us a (albeit fuzzy) dichotomy between what is needful for the endurance of life and the excess that allows for the development of collective social identity. In this way, the aesthetic threshold offers a structural model roughly parallel to Faubion’s ethical dichotomy between the themitical and inventive, as outlined above. The point here is not to claim the two are equivalent in any fashion, but rather that in both a boundary exists ‘above’ which is the excess through which the particular subjectivity of the individual (Faubion) and collective (Simmel) form. In this differentiation between the required (themitical and utile) and what is beyond (inventive

ethics and aesthetic performance) there is a helpful, if abstract, structural duality that I will return to below.

### *Orthodox ritual aesthetics*

When I first met Turbo he was an artist, iconographer, and tattoo artist in Los Angeles. I was able to spend some time with him in Autumn 2015, by which time he had moved to take up a role doing social and self-sufficiency services in Kansas City. While most of his time is now spent with his role in social work, he is still active in both tattooing and iconography. Turbo is unique in the breadth of media across which he works, but he approaches the breath of the media as allowing for degrees of encountering Truth. So, while Orthodox iconography is, in Turbo's understanding, a unique expression and holds a unique capacity to allow a faithful Orthodox Christian to commune with God and the saints, other media – even things like comic book illustrations – can serve as a key to the door to Truth. This phrasing is important for Turbo, aesthetics – while experienced as a highly subjective thing – can enable something greater to be opened up, allowing access to objective Truth. It is not that the aesthetic qualities and symbolic aspects are themselves doors, but rather they are keys to that door. By catching the viewer, they allow for something to be opened within the person, and – if followed up upon – can lead the person from highly subjective entanglement toward knowledge of objective Truth: which, ultimately, in Turbo's understanding, is God. This form of progressive aesthetics allows for all things to, potentially, be part of an individual's progress (as highlighted also by Louth 2013) of coming to learn more fully, and partake in, the love of God.

The subsequent pages discuss various ritual and religious aspects within Orthodox Christianity. Each of these arises out of liturgical practices, but it is helpful to keep in

mind Turbo's idea of aesthetics as a key to open the door to Truth. It is an additional step in the relay between recipient and prototype. Van Eck's notions of the sublime suggest that the form and feeling together will bring about the experience of sublime effect. Because Turbo is interested in a specific kind of sublime effect – namely communion with God – he articulates this additional stage. As we will see, it is these practices of quotidian aesthetics that allows the devotee to experience God in these various instances. The idea of aesthetics as a means to ritual efficacy is not new; Bruce Kapferer opens his chapter subtitled 'A discourse on the Aesthetics of Ritual' with the announcement that 'The efficacy of much ritual is founded on its aesthetics' (2005 :129). He glosses 'aesthetic' as 'the formations of the senses', identifying it as 'the quintessential dimensions of reality construction' (2005:135). Drawing here on Gilles Deleuz, Kapferer places the efficacy of ritual on the ability of aesthetic aspects of ritual to engage sense perception in 'virtual' spaces, thereby forming what is 'real'. In this way, the aesthetics of ritual work to produce the world in which, Kapferer argues, religious participants find themselves. As he states, 'The aesthetic in virtuality manifests the thoroughly constitutive, rather than expressive, dimension of the aesthetics as quintessentially the potency of humanly produced symbolically sensuous processes' (2005:130). Ultimately, Kapferer's anthropological perspective on the role of aesthetics and Turbo's Orthodox devotional and art-practice based perspective differ not on what aesthetic qualities in art (and ritual) are able to do, but only in how the aesthetic dimension relate to things like God—what for Kapferer is 'real' but 'virtual' is for Turbo 'real' and 'actual'.

Turning now to a series of short case studies, hold in mind the notions of feeling, within the form, pushing the ritual practice over the aesthetic threshold, and – potentially – operating as a key to open the door to trans-individual reality.

### *Calendars and time travel*

The most apparent differentiation in local practice in global Orthodoxy is over the question of the calendar. Following the growing acceptance of the Gregorian calendar as a common global calendar, there arose a disparity between the civic calendar (Gregorian) in many Orthodox countries and the religious calendar (for which they still used the Julian). In an effort to simplify things, a group of Orthodox Churches, led by the Greek Patriarch Meletius IV of Constantinople, agreed in 1923 to move to what is alternatively called the Revised Julian or, in Orthodox circles, the ‘new calendar’. Some local churches, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, remain using the Julian calendar. This means that while all dates corresponding to Pascha (the Feast of the Resurrection) are celebrated in unity, any ‘fixed feast’, that is a feast like Christmas with a set (fixed) calendric date, is celebrated according to the Julian or Gregorian system, depending on if the church is ‘old’ or ‘new’ calendar, respectively. At present, the Julian calendar is 13 days behind the Gregorian — hence Russians celebrating the Feast of the Nativity of Christ (Christmas) ‘on’, or rather when your pocket calendar marks, 7 January.

Taken on its own, this is not overly complicated. There are theological disagreements behind the decision, and at the time several ‘old calendarist’ movements broke away from the national churches in protest over the change. One group that maintains the Old Calendar, yet also maintained its canonical status within the family of Orthodox Churches, is the monasteries of Mt Athos. While under the Patriarch of Constantinople, the monks of Mt Athos refused to adopt the New Calendar. This has produced the regular practice of what some pilgrims called ‘time travel’. The monastic community, which has existed as an autonomous democratic theocracy under the protection of the Emperor, the Sultan, and now the Greek State, is highly regarded amongst global Orthodoxy as the ‘spiritual heart’ of Orthodox Christianity. Pilgrimage is made regularly

to the mountain by those able to go, and many men from Mediterranean and Eastern European contexts go yearly. In late summer 2011, toward the middle of August, I travelled to Mt Athos. My travel arrangements, and complications on the way, meant that I stayed in the port city of Irisos on 15 August, which is a national holiday in Greece. The holiday is to celebrate the death of the Theotokos (the One Who Bore God), Mary the Virgin. This is the same feast that I was traveling to Vatopedi to observe. The monastery takes in over a hundred pilgrims each day, and as large feasts approach the number increases. Many of the pilgrims at this time of the year come specifically for, as it is called, the Feast of the Dormition. Speaking with one Cypriot family – a grandfather, two sons in their late forties, and three grandsons in their twenties – it became apparent that they come to Athos together every year. The Feast is preceded by a fifteen day fast (avoiding animal products), and I asked if they came to Mt Athos for the whole time. No, they answered. They celebrated the Dormition with their family and had a huge party; ‘nightclubs’, mentioned one of the young men; ‘wives’, mentioned the brothers. After the feast, they all come to Athos, to celebrate the Dormition again, just the men— ‘with prayer’, said the grandfather; ‘silence’, added the older cousin. Silence (ἡσυχία, isichia) here should be read both as that of a calming break before going back to work and as ‘holy silence’, connotative of the hesychastic (ἡσυχασμός) prayer of silence central to the Orthodox monastic practiced on Mt Athos. In this way the secular and sacred sides of the feast come in sequence. As it is a national holiday in Cyprus, too, and most businesses close for the later part of August (its too hot to work, I am told), the festival opens up a period of holiday both in what the word means now, and its etymological roots as ‘holy day’ of spiritual retreat. When asked about the contrast between nightclubs and monastic chant, they saw the irony, but did not see a conflict. Both were ways of celebrating the Dormition, and the differing in time allowed them to celebrate it in both places, in both ways.

Travel in and out of Athos opens up folds in the calendar, such that feast days may be repeated or deleted. The duplication of feasts opens up the possibility to celebrate a great feast twice, in both the local (familial, jocular, domestic) manner and in the Athonite (monastic, austere, grand) manner. The temporal disjuncture allows pilgrims to participate in two local practices of the same calendric occasion, thereby benefiting from both ways of practicing the feast.

The next section pursues this theme of variability, but focuses on three cases of conflicting local practice that arise in the context of Eastern Orthodoxy in the West. In these settings local practices from abroad emerge side by side, directing pious Christians to different – and sometimes conflicting – practices.

#### *Orthodox material culture*

Before moving forward with the subsequent case studies, it will be useful to provide some background into Orthodox Christian practices concerning materials used in liturgical rituals. These practices of Orthodoxy, or what can be termed ‘orthopraxis’, rest on a general understanding that objects become blessed through their ritual use. At times ritual objects are actively sprinkled with holy water, but even flowers placed in front of an icon move out of the standard forms of consumptive circulation and become ‘blessed’. As such the disposal or continued use of these plant clippings takes on a devotional element.

As mentioned above, having a devotional element consequently implies an ethical element, as Orthodox virtue ethics values the actions that bring the individual into communion with God as being ethical. Central to Orthodox Christian use of material

representations of the holy in their worshipful tradition is an argument put forward by John of Damascus around the turn of the eighth century. Written at the time of the iconoclastic controversy (that is, the period before the use of icons became a dogmatic part of orthopraxy), the Damascene's theology of icons argues that if God can be known through material, the faithful must use material to know God. In other words, as it is the Christian's responsibility to come to know God more fully, it becomes a matter of orthopraxy to use whatever means possible for knowing God more fully. The material register of the icon was, in 787 and again in 843, declared a necessary and true part of Orthodox religious practice. Icons used in worship are understood to be holy images and, being done in a 'sublime style', these continue to demand respect, even after the material is no longer usable for facilitating 'the sublime' through veneration. If an icon breaks, for instance, or if rot gets to it in a damp environment, such that it cannot be repaired, the wood panel is taken and destroyed respectfully – sometimes burned, or buried in clean earth.

#### *ritual botanicals*

While the disposal of sacerdotal artefacts, such as icons or altar furnishings, is usually left to the clergy, these formal objects of ritual paraphernalia are by no means the limit of Orthodox ritual material culture. Among other things, Orthodox Christian liturgical practice makes frequent use of plants in its ritual custom. Practices, such as the use of palm fronds on Palm Sunday—commemorating the entrance of Jesus of Nazareth into Jerusalem—are, for example, a recognisable part of the yearly cycle leading to Pascha. But while the use of palm is shared across Mediterranean Christianity, Orthodox and Catholic alike, the national churches further north did not traditionally have access to palm. This simple geographic and ecological difference has produced a local tradition within, for example, Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine to use pussy willow branches. This



spring-time foliage is cut in long twigs and held in procession much like palm fronds are in the southern regions. On one level this is the same ritual practice, simply swapping material symbols due to local availability. When looked at further, however, there arises the simple fact that palm fronds wither and grow brittle, while pussy willow branches—if stuck in the damp spring earth—will take root and grow. This simple ecological fact produces distinct possibilities within which pious Orthodox faithful are able to relate to the holy.

— *basil*

While there is no formal injunction concerning the sacred quality of plant foliage such as the palm branches, they nonetheless take on a blessed aspect through use in worship and are treated with respect as part of the material ecology that facilitates communion with God. How this respect is shown, however, varies widely. For many feasts, herbs are used during the service. Basil, for example, may be laid around icons as decoration, or tied in a bundle attached to a blessing cross. While the use of basil is common across Orthodox churches, what is done with the plant after its ritual use differs significantly.

Take, for example, the basil used for the Feast of Theophany (6 January) 2013 in a small Antiochian Orthodox parish in the greater London area. This feast, which commemorates the baptism of Christ in the Jordan River, proclaims to bless all the water in the world. Parishes that have access to a river, lake, or ocean will often bless the natural body of water. Urban parishes without such access usually bless a large basin of water, in many cases using the same basin used in infant baptism. After the blessing of the water, as is common in Orthodox parishes, the priest – whom I will call Fr Theophan – took up a hand-held crucifix bound with springs of fresh basil. Dipping it in the basin of blessed water, he swung his arm in a large arch (as though tossing a ball

over-handed), sprinkling the congregation with the blessed water. Repeating this several times, over each part of the congregation, while the cantors sung the troparion (hymn) of the feast, the festal liturgy drew to a close. After the service the water is drunk by those present, sent home with the faithful in bottles, and some is usually kept in reserve by the parish. When all is done, the herbs are left over.

Why the presence of the herbs in the first place is itself worth considering. Basil, from the word for ‘kingly’, is an herb associated with the resurrection of Christ, as it is reputed to have sprung up around the tomb. Its flavour and sent are associated with triumph and splendour. Practically speaking, in the context of the service of the blessing of the waters, the leaves help hold water so that as the priest blesses the people – sprinkling them with the blessing cross and bundle of herbs – there is plenty of sprinkles spraying out over the congregation. The temporary chaos of flinging water, scented with the pungent odour of regal triumph, in the context of a great festival setting, fills the congregation with a certain glee; often priests will playfully splash children or lay leaders in the congregation. After splashing the congregation, Fr Theophan tossed the (now somewhat battered) herbs into the font; ‘to add a nice flavour’, he explained. This water, ritually blessed during the service, is then holy water. It can be used to bless the home, protect against evil, and help cure ailments. After the font is drained (having filled bottles) the herbs remain. Being blessed, however, they cannot simply be thrown out.

In cleaning up after the service, one of the young men helping asked the priest, ‘Father, what do we do with the basil?’ ‘Eat it, of course!’ came the reply, and the priest grabbed a few leaves and stuffed them in his mouth and chewed. The server suggested taking it to have with lunch; ‘Oh no,’ the priest responded, ‘these are blessed; they can’t be eaten

with normal food. Eat it now, before eating regular food. If there is too much, share it with the people; it is to be eaten before regular food, though.’

This was at a parish under the episcopal oversight of the Antiochian Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, based in Damascus, Syria. The London parish was composed of a broad mix of individuals, many of whom were converts, under the pastoral guidance of a priest of Russian descent. Later, I asked a member of neighbouring Greek Orthodox parish what they did with the basil left over from such a blessing. Growing up in Athens, he told me, his mother placed the leaves in their drawers. The blessing of the leaves transferred to the cloth, and offered the children protection when wearing the clothes. ‘What would you think of someone eating the basil in the temple,’ I asked, and he laughed. This, he told me, was the sort of thing zealous Russians would do on pilgrimage; there was nothing wrong with it, but it was a little bit much.

— *bay*

Another herb often used in Arab practice is bay leaves. In the sombre Liturgy offered on Great and Holy Saturday (that is, the day preceding Pascha) a special liturgy is sung ‘in anticipation’. The service commemorates Christ’s descent into, and harrowing of, Hell. In the pageantry of the Holy Week services, this service is sung at a time when Christ is dead, but the reality of the anticipated resurrection is felt very strongly. Preparation for the feast are well under way, and the tone of the chants turn from the mournful funeral dirge of Friday’s crucifixion to the quiet certainty of triumphant resurrection due to happen on Sunday. In this anticipation, at the turning of the tone from mournful to triumphant, the priest exists from the altar with a basket of bay leaves. Walking around the congregation while the choir chants, the priest tosses handfuls of leaves at parishioners. As the first release after a long period of Lenten preparation, this mood is,

like at Theophany mentioned previously, playful and happy. Leaves land in people's hair, and children and old ladies, alike, reach to grab the bay from the air.

Joining London's Arab parish in 2012, one of the ladies of the parish came up and pushed a handful of bay leaves into my hand, 'to use in your cooking!' she said. I asked another parishioner for clarification, 'What should I do with the leaves?' 'Use them in cooking, of course! That is what herbs are for!' Remembering Fr Theophan's prohibition, I ask, 'But they are blessed?' 'Yes, and so too will be your cooking!'

### *Botanical blessings*

Each of these cases demonstrates the idea that mundane materials used in the services take on a blessed quality. They also each suggest that the blessing of the mundane material can be passed on, in a sort of manner not unlike 'holy contagion', wherein the *virtus* (life energy) of a saint is passed from relics onto pilgrims as a blessing (Hahn 2010; Carroll 2016). The blessing of the liturgy, transferred into the leaves, can subsequently be transferred into the clothing, food, or body: depending on how the contagious material is used. The different cases, however, present unique attitudes toward how the sacred should be respected. For Fr Theophan, the holy herbs are 'sacred', literally 'set aside', and must be consumed as such. The honour given to the holy herbs must be in keeping with the wider pattern of holy food. Within the liturgy the Eucharist, as well as a blessed bread given to the faithful after the Eucharist – known as the antidoron (lit. instead of the gifts), are food to be eaten after fasting. The breaking of the fast (partaking of the Eucharist) precedes eating of other food. For Fr Theophan, the basil, being used in the service, fills a role similar to these other sacred foods. While an herb, it is now a set aside herb, and must be consumed in a fitting manner.

This sensibility runs contrary to the sensibility expressed by the older women in the Arab parish. Here, in the directive to use the bay leaves in cooking, is the clear indication that their use in Liturgy does not change their class of being. And while the bay is blessed, this sacred quality comes about, they understand, in order to communicate this blessing on to other food.

These practices, and the Greek practice of placing leaves alongside clothes, each capitalise upon the holy quality of the herb. Each practice is done in a way that respects the sacred quality. How that is done, however, is aesthetically different. The command to keep the herb separate from other food and the command to use the herb in cooking are precisely opposite outcomes, which are derived from the same devotional respect for holy things. What can be seen here is that the basic form of their praxis is the same: respect the dignity of the blessed herbs. The sociality of the practices, however, – what de la Fuente would characterise as the aspect that push these practices past the aesthetic threshold – is distinct. Each local practice draws upon the same ethical commitment, but how this is crafted makes for distinct ritual aesthetics.

### *Kissing the chalice*

Another marked difference in performative Orthodoxy comes when Orthodox Christians come to partake of the Eucharist. In Orthodox practice the Eucharist is fed to the faithful using a chalice and spoon. Unlike in Western forms of Christianity, where the bread (usually a wafer) and the wine (or grape juice) are kept separate, Eastern Christians submerge part of a leavened loaf into the wine. Using a spoon, the priest then scoops a chunk of bread, soaked in wine, out of the chalice and into the faithful's mouth. This is a highly sacred moment, and often takes on quite an intimate quality as the priest, as father, spoon feeds the faithful, as children.

Across global Orthodoxy a number of different stances, body postures, and patterns of prayer are employed leading up to the moment of communion. The regularity of communion is also quite variable; some Greek and Romanian communities encourage the faithful to communion only a few times a year, while in many Arab parishes, particularly those with large numbers of adult converts, many parishioners commune weekly. On one hand it is a serious question that various theologians and spiritual leaders have discussed in various contexts: should the Eucharist be taken regularly, or taken sparingly. Both answers come about based on similar axiomatic truths: the Eucharist, being as they understand it to be the body and blood of Christ, is the most cherished mystery. Priests, when ordained, are charged to protect it, and if any wine spills on their vestments or the floor, they must clean it up: usually licking, sucking, and rinsing it clean with their own mouth.

When the priest turns from the altar and steps out toward the congregation, presenting the Eucharist to the people, those who have prepared themselves to partake of the Eucharist approach the front, forming a queue. The shape of the queue may be different in various parishes, some more single-file, some more like a group huddle, but either way the faithful present themselves one at a time before the chalice and the priest spoons a chunk of bread, soaked in the wine and water mixture, into the mouth of the faithful. Again here is difference. Typically amongst Russian parishes, the faithful do not touch the spoon; open-mouthed, the communicant lets the priest drop the soggy bread into their mouth. Often, because the damp crumb sticks to the metal spoon, this requires a carefully crafted flick of the priest's wrist. Arabs and Greeks, however, tend to close their mouth about the spoon, letting their lips draw the sacred host off the utensil.

It is not rare, amongst young adults, especially the children of priests or individuals otherwise close to the Orthodox ritual tradition of both their own and other ethnic traditions to joke about ‘Christ flingers’ and ‘Spoon suckers’, that is, Russians and Arabs, respectively. Priests will specifically teach their parishioners not to do the other practice. But Orthodox individuals who move between parishes learn to embody the distinct practices, or risk chastisement.

After communing, another difference arises. Russian Orthodox practice expects the veneration of the chalice. In this practice, after having the Eucharist dropped, flicked, or flung into their mouth, the communicant is expected to kiss the base of the chalice. This simple act requires some coordination as the red napkin held in front of the chalice must be moved away (usually being dropped beneath, or pulled forward, flush against the chalice) in order for the communicant to have access to the base of the chalice. To those accustomed, it is perfectly fluid—an entirely naturalised course of action. To those unaccustomed to the practice it causes anxiety. I have heard priests in the Antiochian tradition express outright fear, as the possibility of someone trying to make contact with the chalice opens the possibility of it being jostled. As noted above, if any of the wine is spilled, a very arduous process must be undertaken to clean it from vestments or the floor.

Here, the ritualised affective and aesthetic practice of communion does – for each – the same sublime and productively ‘real’ transformation. The purely function act of communion is one that brings the transindividual (to use Simmel’s language) into the self. In the context of its ritual aesthetics, however, this is an expansion that brings the community together in a carefully choreographed social action of ritual commensality. In Kapferer’s language, the efficacy of the aesthetics of ritual is, in both cases, productive of

the same intensity of embodied subjective experience and confirmation of that virtual/real ritual effect. The aesthetics, in their everydayness, in terms of the ritualised stance, body postures, gestures and emotional engagement (following Coote) is different however. For Kapferer this should be a problem. If the aesthetics are different, then the efficacy, too, should be different. This, however, seems not to be the case. While local traditions may say ‘do’ or ‘not do’ with equal emphasis about the same practice, these ritualised aesthetic practices are born in their difference out of the same ethical commitment to the holy nature of these ritual practices. The dogmatic and canonical (and therefore themetical) aspects of orthopraxis, being similar across the Orthodox contexts, links the various communities as each being part of the same ethical project. Their specific aesthetic inventiveness marks each as being uniquely local.

### *Conclusion*

Working from Kapferer’s ideas of ritual aesthetics, one should anticipate that different aesthetic practices would correlate to different ‘realities’. Taken in the context of Global Orthodoxy, however, the disparity in local aesthetic practices does not impede co-religious fellowship across national, ethnic, and aesthetic borders. A sceptic could simply dismiss Global Orthodoxy as an illusion. Particularly if working in a stream of thought along the lines of Bourdieu (1984) or Gregg and Seigworth’s (2010) respective works on affect, one should expect to see radically different relationships forming between the ritual encounter and the individual subject. However, this is where Turbo’s understanding becomes particularly helpful. In his idea of ‘progressive aesthetics’, which lead the subjective individual toward the objective (*real* and *actual*) truth, the particularity of the sign must stand in relation between the subject’s affective position and the objective position of ‘truth’. This is to say that the specific, quotidian shape of ritual



aesthetics *must* be different in different locales because the shape of the quotidian life (and thus Coote's ordinary perception) itself is different in those locales.

In the local celebration of Christian Orthodoxy, it is those aspects of ritual practice that push beyond the aesthetic threshold, and thereby are able to operate as the 'key' (in Turbo's usage) to open up the door to access the sublime aspects of ritual performance. The key itself, however, is a limiting, ethical factor in the progression of aesthetics into that sublime. Limiting in the aspect of direction, not in the constraint against expansion. As argued above in the context of Lossky's theology of living in the divine reality, such that both art and religious aesthetics can be seen as an expansion, the key of aesthetics, as it is practiced within ritual contexts, directs the individual through specific 'doorways' toward the reality in which the ritual is situated. As the progression of aesthetics draws the subject into greater degrees of transindividual – and more increasingly from Simmel's emphasis on desire toward beauty to Maffesoli's emphasis on submission to the sublime – the ethical implications of the actions become increasingly profound as the individual expresses greater degrees of love and communion with God and their neighbours. The sociability of aesthetic ritual can then be seen to be the localised, practiced, form of larger ethical commitments. Aesthetics are the everyday localised expressions of ethics.

Acknowledgements:

Research for this paper was funded in part by the Paleologos Fellowship, of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America. I am also deeply grateful to Magda Craciun and Georgios Tsourous for their helpful and critical comments on early drafts of this paper.

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