Assembling the Orthodox Soul:
Practices of Religious Self-Formation among Converts to Eastern Orthodoxy

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Daniel Alan Winchester

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It's probably the classic sociological trick of the trade to take a phenomenon that appears purely individual and then demonstrate all of the collective, social work that went into constructing it. While my name appears on the title page of this dissertation, a multitude of others helped see this project through to completion. It takes a village, it seems, to finish a dissertation. So, to the members of my village…

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Dedication

--For Christie and Ella, the two great loves of my life.

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Introduction

The Project

  This dissertation is the result of a multi-sited ethnographic study of conversions to

Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region of Minnesota. In

conducting this study, I spent over a year with former Evangelicals, Catholics,

Episcopalians, Pentecostals, New Age devotees, and even atheists and agnostics from

varied walks of life who all came to call the Eastern Orthodox Church their spiritual

home. I met Blake[1], for example, a former atheist who told me that in converting to the

Orthodox Church he came to realize that he had really, deep down, been an Orthodox

Christian all along. I ate Lenten dinners with Abby and Jacob, a young couple who came

to understand the sinful natures of their souls through the ascetic discipline of fasting. I

learned about the establishment of a seemingly unlikely relationship between two women

named Elizabeth – one a Minnesotan school teacher, the other an Orthodox saint who

was murdered by Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1918.

  In addition to learning more about the religious lives of people like Blake, Abby,

Jacob, and Elizabeth (the teacher and the saint), I also got a feel for the everyday contexts

and relationships in which these converts' religious lives unfolded: in their churches,

their homes, with their families, fellow church members, and friends. I stood, sang, and

crossed myself with them through the two-and-half hour liturgies every Sunday. I chatted

with them at coffee hours and parish potlucks about topics ranging from the writings of

early Church Fathers and the purported benefits of asceticism to Vikings football games

and Lenten soup recipes. I fasted with them during Christmas and Pascha (Easter),

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[1] The names of all individuals in this study as well as the names of their church communities have been changed to protect confidentiality.

feeling my stomach rumble and letting my cravings get the better of me, later learning what that might tell me about the moral condition of my soul. I knelt with them at their icon corners, hearing their stories about the saints who were depicted in – and made present through – the flat wooden panels that sat on their desks and hung on their walls.

I also learned a great deal about the tenets and practices of Eastern Orthodoxy, a religious tradition that has been rarely studied in the United States – its theology of salvation, its approach to the spiritual through the material, its understanding that the lessons of 6th-century desert ascetics are as relevant to humanity today as at any point in the past.

Readers will be introduced to many of the individuals, ideas, and settings just described. But, perhaps more significantly, they will also come to a better understanding of the practices which form religious selves. I conducted this study of Orthodox conversions as way to better approach and account for the phenomenon of religious self-formation, here defined as the process by which social actors, with the aid and encouragement of others, incorporate aspects of a religious tradition into their own subjective experiences and self-interpretations. In talking, interacting, and practicing with Orthodox Christian converts, I sought answers to how they came to inhabit and experience the Eastern Orthodox faith as a personal reality, making its particular construal of the religious world a formative part of how they experienced themselves as persons. While the empirical details are necessarily confined to the ethnographic case at hand, central to this dissertation is a wider claim that coming to grips with the question of how religious cultural systems enter into the lived experiences of individuals requires a better understanding of the constitutive effects of religious practices on those who

perform them. Moreover, through detailed analyses of three significant religious practices and their phenomenological effects on the converts who participated in them, I demonstrate how these constitutive relationships between particular religious practices and subjectivities unfolded over time and in context, extending cross-disciplinary literatures on religious narrative, embodiment, and materiality.

I chose to investigate conversion as an analytic site because it is an exemplary case of religious identity change, one through which I could more readily investigate the dynamics of religious self-formation as they unfolded over time and in social context. Popular notions of religious conversion often discuss the phenomenon as a sudden, dramatic, and complete transformation of the self, a supernatural event largely outside of the actor's control (Nock 1933; Jules-Rosette 1975; Snow & Machalek 1984). Yet several sociological and anthropological studies of conversion demonstrate that such accounts of dramatic self-transformations are often retrospective reconfigurations of what is actually a much more protracted process of taking on and "trying out" new beliefs and identity categories (Chen 2008; Keane 2007; Neitz 1987; Stromberg 1993; Smilde 2007). In conducting this study, I too found that becoming an Orthodox Christian was a processual phenomenon, one that started well before and continued long after the individuals in my study had officially joined the Church. As one convert put it, "I didn't really know what I was getting into when I joined the Church. But, over time, my understanding of what it is to be an Orthodox Christian has really deepened." In many ways, this dissertation is an attempt to sociologically account for this "deepening" process, for the ways that cultural identity categories such as "Eastern Orthodox" become progressively and more substantially attached to the subjective experiences of

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individuals. In taking conversion as a site in which to investigate the formation of religious selves, I was selecting a robust case in which this process was amenable for empirical analysis and better theoretical formulation.[2]

The choice of conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy, specifically, was motivated to serve as a productive comparison to much current literature on religious conversion and subjectivity. Most of our current scholarly knowledge about religious self-change is based on studies of Evangelicals and Pentecostals, religious cultures in which the conversion event – to be "born again," as it is called within these traditions – is central to what it means to be one of the faithful (Chen 2008; Harding 1987; D. McLennan 1996; Smilde 2007; Stromberg 1993). These studies have been invaluable in understanding the cultural and social coordinates of religious identity change and I draw on them heavily throughout this dissertation (and especially in Chapter 3). However, I also argue that these tradition-specific experiences of conversion have been over-generalized to the phenomenon writ large. Through documenting how converts to the Eastern Orthodox Church narrate and experience their conversions, I do not simply wish to criticize this tendency, but also to think about how the subjective meanings and experiences of religious self-change vary depending on the religious tradition in question. Conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy, then, serves not only as a helpful critique of some prevailing assumptions about the subject of religious change and subjectivity. It also opens up space

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[2] As Luker (2008) notes, this kind of theoretical case selection is both similar to and different from the "sampling from a population" approach of more canonical social science. They are similar in that both attempt to produce generalities about social life through particular cases. However, where the canonical social scientist wants to know more about the distribution of a population among already known categories, the non-canonical social scientist wants to know more about the relevant categories at work (e.g. religious self-formation). Thus, the task in this scenario is to find a case that is reasonably representative of the phenomena (as opposed to the population) we are investigating. In the case of religious self-formation, conversion fits the bill, but obviously does not exhaust the possible sites in which to study this process and its attendant practices (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of limitations and future research possibilities).

for more fruitful comparative inquiries into the social and cultural study of religious

conversion, practice, and self-formation.

The Research Questions and Relevant Literatures

The focal research question of this dissertation is **"How do converting**

individuals come to incorporate aspects of the Eastern Orthodox faith into their own

self-experiences?"

In posing this question, I take as axiomatic the sociological insight, one developed

by social theorists as diverse as George Herbert Mead (1934), Mikhail Bakhtin (1981),

and Charles Taylor (1989), that the self is not solely the property of an individual but is

rather a relational, interpretive structure constituted through sociocultural means. The

self, in other words, is something that comes to us from the outside-in, as we learn to

appropriate external cultural perspectives on our own subjectivities – i.e. our thoughts,

feelings, desires, and modes of perception (Ortner 2005). In developing a particular

configuration of self (i.e., an identity), we take on interpretive frames that are available in

the wider social order, particular identity categories which provide meaningful but also

norm-laden information about the kinds of persons we are (e.g., mother, woman, African-

American, professor, lapsed Baptist) and the types of thoughts, emotions, perceptions,

and aspirations appropriate to inhabiting that form of personhood (Burke and Stets 2009;

Burkitt 1991). Religions remain one of several important social institutions that offer

such interpretive frameworks meant to configure this process of self-understanding

(Ammerman 2003; Bellah 2002; Davidman 1991; Roof 1999; C. Smith 1998). The

question that this dissertation poses is how these religious models of personhood come to

be assimilated into the subjectivities of concrete individuals – how, specifically, converts came to experience "Orthodox Christian" not merely as one religious identity-offering among others in the pluralistic American religious landscape but as *their* identity, part of the fundamental truth of who they were as persons.

While I came into my study assuming that there would be a relatively formal and standardized catechism process for new converts, I quickly learned that there was no institutionally prescribed way to develop one's Orthodox identity aside from immersing oneself in the practices of the Orthodox Church. Converts learned to become Orthodox not through a formal socialization program but more through an informal and somewhat piecemeal process of taking on and trying out its rhetorical genres, material artifacts, and ascetic disciplines. Orthodox *becomings*, in short, were accomplished through Orthodox *doings*. As one of my interlocutors, Paul, said to me early on in my research, "You can learn about Orthodoxy through books, through lectures, or what have you. But you can only become Orthodox by doing it, by letting it get under your skin."

Focusing on practices as the primary vehicles through which Orthodoxy "got under the skin" of the converts with whom I interacted places my analyses of religious self-formation on necessarily interdisciplinary terrain, as the turn to practice in the study of religion spans the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies (itself an interdisciplinary field). While there is no one unified "practice theory", practice approaches to religion across disciplines do share certain features in common. At the broadest theoretical level, practice approaches take inspiration from praxis-oriented traditions in cultural theory (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Certeau 1984; Ortner 1984, 2006; Schatzki et al 2001; Williams 1977) and pragmatist social theory (Dewey 1922; Camic

1986; James 1912; Joas 1993; Mead 1934, 1977), traditions which conceptualize culture as the "constitutive human process" (Williams 1977: 20) through which human beings (re)make themselves by producing and altering their modes of existence. This view analyzes culture not primarily as a static structure or an integrated system of symbols, but as the collective and historically specific activities through which humans meaningfully reproduce and transform both their subjectivities and social environments.

In the study of religion, this processual and praxis-oriented approach has been adapted by scholars of "lived religion" (Ammerman 2007; Bender 2003; Griffith 1997; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2003) who argue that a focus on practice means understanding religion primarily as culture-in-action – i.e., religion as it unfolds in human activity in the concrete circumstances of everyday life. As such, a focus on religion-as-practice is less concerned with what "R"eligion *is* in any absolute and authoritative sense and more concerned with what religions – as socially situated and culturally-informed sets of practices – do.[3] With specific regard to the issue of religious self-formation, such a focus is concerned with the ways social actors incorporate religious practices into their everyday lives and, in turn, what these incorporations do to modify and form their emergent selves (cf., Furey 2012).

The lived religion/practice-oriented perspective also makes an analytic distinction between religion as a normative discourse or symbol-system and religion as a lived experience (see McGuire 2008). This is not for the purpose of arguing that these are ontologically separate component-parts of religion. Rather, it is to highlight the fact that we cannot simply assume correspondence between the institutionally prescribed beliefs,

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[3]As Orsi (1997) puts it, a focus on practice means being "concerned with what people *do* with religious practice, what they make with it of themselves and their worlds" (7; emphasis in the original).

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rituals, and normative codes of a religious tradition and the subjectivities of those who identify with that tradition (see Wuthnow 1987 for the classic critique of this tendency; see also Bender 2003; Griffith 1997; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008). Instead, a practice-based approach assumes that this relationship must itself be investigated, and that the researcher must empirically account for the concrete ways in which practices dynamically link the situated experiences of social actors to the broader classifications of meaning embedded in the religious tradition. Religious actors do not simply or straightforwardly imbibe or absorb preexisting religious meanings and normative codes but actively work to appropriate them in subtle ways and for varied purposes. This may be for the purposes of gradually conforming one's self as closely as possible to the perceived normative prescriptions of the religious tradition in question (e.g., Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005), of recasting, altering, and even subverting the meanings prescribed by the tradition(s) (e.g., M. Wilcox 2009), or both (e.g., Griffith).[4]

While these practice-theoretic insights provide the broad conceptual coordinates by which I approach Orthodox self-formation, my more specific agenda in this dissertation is to examine the concrete ways that *particular practices* worked to modify converts' subjectivities and encourage new modes of religious self-interpretation. I do this to make my focus on the subjectivity-practice dynamic more analytically precise and to demonstrate how the specific phenomenology of this dynamic differs depending on the practice in question – whether, for example, it is a discursive practice such as telling a

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[4] While some practice approaches assume that agency is to be associated only with the subversion or alteration of existing social structures (Ortner 1996; cf., Griffith 1997), works by scholars such as Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) convincingly demonstrate that conformity to religious norms and prescriptions also requires a great deal of agency and creativity on the part of religious actors. Thus, while "practice" has been invoked by many scholars to demonstrate how peoples' practices diverge from the normative prescriptions of institutions, it can also be used to better account for how religious actors exercise what Hays (1994) terms "structurally reproductive agency".

conversion narrative, a bodily practice such as fasting, or an artifact-mediated practice such as icon veneration. In other words, how practices work at the level of lived experience – the means by which they link subjective experiences with religious interpretive frameworks – are distinct and themselves worthy of careful consideration and comparison.

As such, my broader research question concerning how Orthodox religious practices shape converts' subjectivities is broken down into three sub-questions to be addressed in the empirical chapters to follow. These sub-questions pertain to three different practices significant to Orthodox self-formation – conversion narratives, fasting, and icon veneration – that also have relevance to wider discussions about religious practice and subjectivity in the study of religion. To be clear from the outset, I do not argue that these three practices subsume everything important about Orthodox faith and identity or that they account for the entirety of Orthodox self-formation. However, they were three of the practices that emerged as most significant for my research subjects' changes in subjectivity and self-understanding in the process of becoming Orthodox.

Each of the following research sub-questions is embedded in interdisciplinary literatures concerning the relationship between specific religious practices and modes of subjectivity, and each provides a distinct yet complementary angle on the practical formation of religious selves. While I have woven my reviews of these different literatures into the empirical chapters themselves, I give brief overviews of them here to provide the appropriate intellectual context for my questions and contributions:

1) How do conversion narratives shape Orthodox converts' religious selves?

Addressed in Chapter 3, this question flows from and contributes to interdisciplinary debates concerning the place of conversion narratives in processes of religious self-formation. While early work in the sociology and anthropology of conversion often took social actors' stories of conversion as straightforward data on the social and psychological preconditions for the conversion event itself (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980), more recent work has analyzed such narratives as practices which reconstruct the temporal coordinates of the self – in particular, the relationship between one's current religious present and one's differently religious (or irreligious) past (Bailey 2008; Hindmarsh 2005; van Nieuwkerk 2006; D. McLennan 1996; Stromberg 1993). Drawing from theoretical perspectives on narrative that take this cultural form to be constitutive and not merely representative of the self (Bruner 1986; Carr 1991; Gusdorf 1956; Riceour 1984, 1992), these literatures analyze the conversion event as a discursive achievement in which the subjective experiences of the past are creatively reorganized in light of the interpretive frameworks of the new religious tradition (Brenneman 2012; Engelke 2004; Meyer 1998; Smilde 2007). While I take this approach to narrative as my point of departure in analyzing Orthodox converts' own stories of their conversions, I take issue with a widespread tendency in this literature to assume that conversion narratives always configure a temporal break or rupture between past and present religious selves. My analysis demonstrates that conversion narratives may also be used to construct an experience of continuity between past and present selves, one in which the conversion event is configured not as the creation of a "new self"

but as the discovery of a "true self". My findings suggest that scholars of conversion narratives should parochialize some widespread assumptions about the temporality of conversion, but, more positively, they also open up interesting comparative avenues for future research on narrative self-formation across religious and non-religious contexts.

2) How does fasting shape the development of converts' religious subjectivities?

Taken up in Chapter 4, this question emerges from interdisciplinary conversations regarding the place of embodiment and bodily practices in the formation of religious subjects. Against long-standing Western modes of thought that privileged mind over body and abstract norms over concrete sensations and sensibilities, significant recent scholarship in the social and cultural study of religion has focused attention on how the lived body's materiality has been regarded as essential to the constitution of moral, "godly" personhood within a variety of religious traditions (Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Winchester 2008). Some of this research, moreover, has documented how embodied religious practices also involve intimate associations between salient moral categories and particular bodily states and sensations, including pain (Asad 1993; Shilling and Mellor 2010); listening and sound (Bender 2008; Engelke 2007; Hirshckind 2006); touch (Csordas 1994); movement or kinesthesia (Luhrmann 2004); and, as is the case with fasting, the stomach, appetite, and hunger (Bynum 1987; Laidlaw 1995; Shaw 1998). However, we know little about the phenomenological processes by which such intimate bodily sensations come to take on religiously-prescribed moral meanings in the lived experiences of social actors themselves. Through a close analysis of the phenomenological effects of fasting on converts' bodies and selves, my findings

contribute to these broader conversations by demonstrating how fasting activates

embodied "image schemas" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1989; Johnson 2007) that facilitate

interpretive connections between bodily states and more abstract moral classifications

regarding the religious self. I also argue for the utility of a focus on image schemas for

comparative research on embodiment and subjectivity.

3) What role do icons play in the making of Orthodox selves?

Addressed in Chapter 5, this question emerges from interdisciplinary

conversations highlighting the constitutive effects of material artifacts on religious

subjectivity. Recognizing a bias toward abstract beliefs over concrete things in their

studies, many scholars of religion have explored how religious practitioners' stances

toward and uses of material artifacts such as images, texts, statuary, paintings,

architecture, photography, film, money, and more serve not only as symbolic expressions

of already established religious beliefs and identities (Halle 1993; Harvey 2004;

McDannell 1995) but, even more powerfully, as active agents in the constitution of

particular religious experiences and forms of personhood (Engelke 2007; Keane 2008;

Kilde 2005; Konieczy 2009; Orsi 2005; Promey 2005). Much of this work, however,

proceeds from the perspective of religious subjects already socialized into the material

organization of a religious world. While my analysis will demonstrate that icons

eventually became very important factors in the cultivation of Orthodox converts'

emergent religious subjectivities, it starts with the observation that things did not begin

this way. While many converts ultimately came to experience icons as sacred mediums

through which to engage in intimate relationships with the saints, this was only

accomplished through the practices by which icons circulated in their communal and individual lives. As such, this analysis serves as a demonstration of some of the concrete processes by which human selves and non-human objects come together to constitute new modes of agency, thought, and feeling.

While the three substantive chapters of the dissertation foreground the phenomenological effects of these particular practices and make interventions within each respective literature, ultimately, each of my analyses also serves to reveal a common dynamic in which engaging in religious practices over time produced experiential effects that encouraged and made more persuasive Orthodox models of religious self-interpretation. I term this dynamic one of *mutual appropriation*, a process in which, by appropriating religious practices for "individual" purposes, individuals also become appropriated by or implicated in the meaning system of which the practice is an integral part. In and through taking up cultural practices, converts both put new cultural meanings to use at the same time they are being constituted by – "made subject" to – these meanings (cf. Smilde 2007; Orsi 2005; Winchester 2008). Once converts began to perform practices in the contexts of their everyday lives, they came to find their new Orthodox identities more persuasive, more integral to who they were as persons and even as part of who they had really, truly been all their lives. Through the practices associated with their new religious traditions, general classes of meaning associated with Orthodox Christianity became dynamically linked to converts' situated experiences of self.

Moreover, all of my analyses demonstrate that the constitutive relationships between practice and subjectivity are also always embedded within the context of social

relationships. While individuals perform practices, practices themselves are the shared products of larger traditions (MacIntyre 1984), institutional fields (Edgell 2012), and, particularly significant for this study, "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991). The boundaries of a community of practice are not defined so much by a geographic region (such as a neighborhood) but by members' shared commitment to a particular practice or collection of practices and by the fact that members engage in the process of performing and learning about such practices together. Professors and graduate students trying to grasp and extend sociological theory and research constitute a community of practice, for example, as do a tribe of hunter-gatherers attempting to survive in a harsh wilderness. So, too, are a group of Evangelicals attempting to know "God's Word" or a group of Theravada Buddhists learning to move toward the next level of Enlightenment. Each one of these groups is defined by a particular commitment to a set of practices and is constituted by the relations among embodied actors in learning and mastering these practices. As new practitioners of Orthodoxy, the converts in my study engaged in explicit and implicit apprenticeships guided by more experienced Orthodox community members, moving through a loosely structured trajectory or "experiential career" (Tavory and Winchester 2012) as they learned how to engage with and perform practices central to their new tradition and thus cultivate the subjectivity necessary for developing a new Orthodox self.

Who Else Will Be Interested?: The Broader Significance of the Project

In addition to scholars conversant with the literatures addressed above, the dissertation taken as a whole will be of interest to sociologists of religion and cultural

sociologists in a number of ways. Most broadly, my focus on practices of self-formation will be of significance to sociologists of religion interested in better accounting for the micro-foundations of religious power and identity. Sociologists of religion have generated an impressive amount of research detailing how religious identities and affiliations influence individual attitudes and behaviors in social arenas as diverse as politics (e.g., Greeley 1993; Hayes 1995; Manza & Brooks 1997), moral and social issues (e.g., Adamczyk & Pitt 2009; Adamczyk & Hayes 2012; Ebaugh & Haney 1978; Edgell et al. 2006; Emerson 1996; Hoffman & Johnson 2002; Wuthnow 1991), approaches to the family (e.g., Edgell 2005; McQuillan 2004; Thornton et al. 1992; Wilcox 1998), and individual economic behavior (Keister 2003, 2007a, 2007b), to mention just a sampling of this vast research. Yet even as such evidence of religion's influence on modern social actors' attitudes and actions continues to grow, the specific means by which religious systems become incorporated into individuals' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions remain underspecified and undertheorized. In examining religious practices as the primary vehicles through which religious selves are produced, this dissertation complements these literatures by identifying and analyzing some of the concrete cultural mechanisms (and attendant psychological processes) by which individuals become initially drawn into and subjectively transformed by a religious system of meaning.

Many sociologists of religion have also displayed a renewed interest in the experiential side of religious life (Bender 2010; McRoberts 2004; Nelson 2004; Neitz & Spickard 1990; Tavory & Winchester 2012; Yamane 2000), but this interest is coupled with an awareness that some of our previously dominant theoretical paradigms do not have the resources to fully account for this dimension (Edgell 2012; McGuire 2008;

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Spickard 1998; Taves 2009). This dissertation will add to emergent discussions of how to best approach the tricky phenomenon of religious experience by demonstrating the merits of a processual and practice-oriented perspective.

As a study of religious self-formation that utilizes religious conversion as a privileged case, this study also contributes to the sociological literature on conversion (e.g., Chen 2008; Harding 1987; Neitz 1987; Stromberg 1993; Smilde 2007). First, my focus on Orthodox conversion adds to scholarly discussions about conversion narratives by demonstrating that some forms of religious language may constitute the pre-conversion past in ways that are not well-documented in the current literature. Secondly, and more broadly, this research also moves beyond the almost exclusive focus on discursive practices of the self in sociological studies of conversion to also highlight the importance of bodily and artifact-mediated practices in the process of becoming a new religious subject.

Finally, my overall findings on Orthodox religious self-formation also stand to contribute to wider debates in cultural sociology about how culture influences human experience and cognition (see, for example, Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997; Ignatow 2007; Smilde 2007; Vaisey 2008, 2009; Wuthnow 2007). By demonstrating how concrete social actors' both appropriate and become appropriated by new religious meanings through practice and over time, this dissertation puts forth a dialectical approach to the culture-subjectivity relationship that mediates between some of the problematic assumptions of extant sociological theories of culture. More specifically, the dynamic of mutual appropriation at the heart of Orthodox self-formation arbitrates between the charges of instrumentalism often leveled at repertoire or "toolkit" theorists of culture

(Cerulo 2000; Rambo 1999; Swidler 1986, 2001) and the accusations of taking actors to be passive "cultural dupes" often aimed at more structuralism-inspired, neo-Durkheimian cultural sociologists (Alexander 2003; Alexander & Smith 1993; Reed 2004; P. Smith 2008).

Overview of the Dissertation Chapters and Findings

The remainder of the dissertation is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 2 provides readers with information on how I came to study this topic as well as a brief overview of what makes Eastern Orthodoxy distinct as a religious formation. I also provide information on the Orthodox landscape in the United States, the Twin Cities, and the particular communities where I conducted the bulk of my participant observation and interviews. Finally, I detail my methodological choices and strategies for carrying out the project, outlining my take on what my interviews, observations, and participation in converts' religious lives provided in terms of data for answering my questions about Orthodox self-formation.

The bulk of the dissertation consists of the substantive analyses in chapters 3, 4, and 5. Each chapter is a sustained analysis of the relationship between converts' subjectivities and a significant practice or category of practices in which they were engaged, situated within the temporal and social contexts in which their religious self-formations occurred.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of Orthodox conversion narratives. Drawing on work that critiques the idea that conversion stories are merely straightforward accounts and instead asserts that such stories are practices which in large part constitute the religious self, I

argue that the performance and incorporation of an Orthodox conversion narrative is primarily a way to implicate the self into a new mode of temporality, one that connects aspects of converts' autobiographies with Orthodox Christianity's theological and temporal horizons. I find that while the vast majority of contemporary work on conversion emphasizes the narrative inculcation of a subjective experience of a temporal rupture or break in the lifecourse, Eastern Orthodox conversion narratives emphasize what I term a "conversion to continuity," a discursive practice in which the convert progressively "uncovers" and then "reclaims" a lingering Orthodoxy that was part of his or her life all along. I detail both the theological and pragmatic contexts that influence how these narratives are crafted. I also argue that the emphasis on temporal continuity over rupture demonstrated in these narratives not only troubles but also expands scholarly notions of the temporality of self-formation and what it means to "convert."

Chapter 4 shifts analytic focus from the discursive to the embodied register of religious practice and self-formation. In this chapter, I take readers into a sustained phenomenological analysis of converts' experiences with the Orthodox practice of fasting. Through fasting, I argue, Orthodoxy's particular theology of embodiment becomes linked to the lived experiences of converting subjects, implicating religious actors' own bodily appetites, desires, and emotions within more abstract discourses of moral personhood. More specifically, I employ a modified version of Johnson and Lakoff's concept of "image schemas" as a mechanism that can best account for the ways that embodied religious practices such as fasting establish such connections.

In the last substantive chapter, chapter 5, I examine the mediating effects of material objects on the subjectivity-practice relationship. More specifically, I analyze the

processes through which Orthodox icons became significant components of converts'

projects of religious self-formation. Expanding on David Morgan's (2012) argument that

icons act as interfaces through which the self can become capable of a broader range of

activity and feeling, my analysis demonstrates that the phenomenology of the iconic

interface is not inherent in the artifact by itself but is instead produced through the ways

icons circulate within the practices of new (as well as already established) Orthodox

Christians. Through ethnographically reconstructing the processes by which converting

actors moved from experiencing icons as strange, even off-putting, art objects to

mediums for interacting with divine persons, I demonstrate how these material artifacts

develop their subject-forming capacities.

Chapter 6 consists of my conclusion, in which I recap what has been learned from

this dissertation and expand on the contributions to the sociologies of religion and culture

alluded to above in light of the study's findings. I also outline this study's limitations as

well as avenues for future research.

Chapter 2
Research Overview, Design, and Methodology

Introduction to the Field

My introduction to the phenomenon of Orthodox conversion in the Twin Cities

began with an incidental but fortunate meeting. One day while working at a coffee shop

near campus, I ran into Robert, a young Minnesota-native I had met almost a year prior

while doing some summer fieldwork at a local evangelical church. Robert helped lead the

church's worship services as well as its educational programs for teenagers. While

making small-talk, I asked Rob how things were going with his work at the church. To

my surprise, he told me that he was no longer leading the teen program nor even

attending his former church. Instead, he was attending an Eastern Orthodox Church in St.

Paul and seriously considering converting to Orthodox Christianity.

As we continued talking, Rob confided that he was already visiting a local

Orthodox parish with a friend at the time of our first meeting last summer, largely

because he was becoming dissatisfied with what he felt was an increasingly shallow

worship style at his Evangelical church. He told me that he initially had no interest in

leaving Evangelicalism. In fact, he said his initial thought was to "experience a more

reverent and liturgical style of worship, and hopefully bring some of that back to my

home church." Yet, after visiting the Orthodox parish for several months, getting to know

its lay members and clergy, and involving himself in some of its major practices such as

fasting and liturgical worship, Rob explained how his religious subjectivity was being

altered as he became more deeply immersed in the Eastern Orthodox faith. "I've been

changed by the [Orthodox] Church," he told me, "and there's really no going back to

Evangelicalism for me at this point." As I asked Rob to tell me more about his new church, he told me, again to my surprise, that half of his parish was made up of converts from previously non-Orthodox faiths and, in some circumstances, no religious affiliation at all.

As a graduate student interested in the phenomena of religious subjectivity and self-formation *and* one in search of a dissertation project, I was immediately intrigued by my conversation with Robert and by the fact that – as some further inquiries bore out – Eastern Orthodox churches in the United States as a whole were, over the last two decades, becoming home to increasing numbers of converts. While I had conducted an ethnographic study of religious conversions to Islam in the Midwestern United States for my master's thesis, I was convinced that there was much more to learn about how individuals come to subjectively appropriate and experience religious reality through the process and practice of conversion. In particular, I was interested in more thoroughly understanding the cultural practices and social processes that patterned individuals' subjectivities in religiously prescribed ways. I wanted, in other words, to attempt to open the blackbox of "religious worldview" by examining how and through what means personal realities became endowed with new sacred significance and meaning.

So What is Eastern Orthodoxy?: A Brief Overview

Historically, Eastern Orthodoxy arose as a distinct body of Christianity during what is usually referred to as the "Great Schism" between the Eastern and Western empires of Christendom in the 11th century. The schism itself was the result of numerous, long-standing historical, cultural, theological, and political differences between East and

West, including but not limited to: the Roman church's insertion of the filioque clause into the Nicene Creed; jurisdictional disputes over who had authority in the Balkans; accusations of liturgical innovations on both sides; and, perhaps most significantly, the extent of the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople vs. that of the Patriarch of Rome (the Pope) over the other churches and regions of Christendom. These controversies came to a head in 1054 when Patriarch Ceralius of Constantinople and the representative of Pope Leo IX of Rome mutually excommunicated one another, officially leading to the separation of what would become the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, respectively, with each one claiming to be the "One Holy and Apostolic Church" and accusing the other of diverging from the tenets and traditions of the faith.

While, today, the tensions between Eastern and Western Christianities (which now include the Protestant offspring of the 16th-century Reformation) have certainly eased in comparison to a millennia ago, the Eastern Orthodox Church still vociferously maintains its status as the "One Holy and Apostolic Church" of Christianity and views itself as the only body in Christendom to transmit, unchanged, the teachings and practices set forth by Christ and his first Apostles (see "Image A" on pg. 39 for a visual example of how the Church sees itself in relation to doctrine and the alleged "innovations" or "heresies" of other Christian bodies). It is this understanding of itself as the true bearer of the unchanged storehouse of knowledge known as "Holy Tradition" that underlies the Eastern Orthodox Church's assertion that it is in fact "Orthodox" – that is, characterized by true or right belief.

Eastern Orthodoxy employs a number of cultural forms to express and convey its understanding of Holy Tradition. The Bible, the writings of early Church Fathers such as

Saints Athanasius, Basil, and John Chrysostom, and the Philokalia (the collected writings

of the Church's most renowned ascetics from the 4th-15th centuries) are central textual

elements of Holy Tradition while Orthodoxy's rich iconography and liturgical forms

make material and sensible the Church's connection to the past-in-the-present. The

Divine Liturgy – the ritual celebration of the Eucharist performed each Sunday morning –

is perhaps the most vivid coming together of these multiple forms, marked as it is by

recitations of scripture as well as the words of the saints; choral chanting and priestly

vestments; incense, prayers and petitions for divine intercession; and the presence of

multiple icons of the saints and Christ himself adorning the walls, ceiling, and altar of the

sanctuary itself. All these forms then culminate in the distribution and partaking of the

"heavenly gifts" of the Eucharist, believed to be the literal body and blood of Christ and

the point at which Orthodox believe Heaven and Earth, materiality and spirit, God and

Humanity come together to intermingle on the same plane of existence.

Along with its claims to universality and its particular cultural forms, Eastern

Orthodoxy is also characterized by a strong ascetic and mystical tradition based on the

writings of the early Church Fathers of the Christian East such as Saint John Chrysostom

(4-5th century) and Saint John of Damascus (7th-8th century) as well as later renowned

spiritual masters such as Gregory Palamas (14th century), to name just a few prominent

figures. Such writings have solidified the Orthodox understanding of divine union with

God, or "theosis," as the ultimate telos of the Christian religious life (see Chapter 3 for a

more in-depth discussion of theosis as well as how it informs Orthodox conversion

narratives). This mystical union with God, in turn, requires the regular utilization of

ascetic practices such as ritual prayer and fasting to transform one's self after the moral

likeness of Christ (see Chapter 4 for a more in-depth analysis of fasting practice).

Adherents, moreover, are encouraged not only to venerate but also emulate saints who are believed to have reached this kind of union with God. Indeed, like in Catholicism, saints are major aspects of Orthodox piety and community, and icons of the saints are central to liturgical practice as well as private religious devotion and ethical self-formation (see Chapter 5).

Finally, Eastern Orthodoxy is characterized by a distinctive organizational structure and model of religious authority. The global Orthodox Church is organized into 15 administratively independent (or "autocephalous") bodies based on nationality/ethnicity – for example, Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, Romanian, Serbian, etc. While the Orthodox Church has a hierarchical structure composed of deacons, priests, and bishops that is similar to Roman Catholicism in many ways, there is no central authority figure such as the Pope who exercises control over all of these Orthodox jurisdictions. While the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, currently Archbishop Bartholomew I, is given the honor of "first among equals" within the global structure of the Church, this title of respect confers no additional administrative power to the person who holds it. The duty of the head bishop or patriarch of each church is to ensure that the traditions and practices of the Church are being preserved in his territory. All bishops are equal in authority and are not allowed to interfere in the governance of other jurisdiction. The authoritative interpretation of what counts as Orthodox tradition itself has been established through the rulings of ecumenical councils in which all patriarchs are given one vote. While the Church has had several such councils over the course of its history,

the decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils dating from the 4th through the 8th centuries are considered the most binding and important for the faith.[5]

Contemporary Conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy: National Trends and Local Settings

While the Eastern Orthodox faith was first brought to North America in the late 18th century by Russian missionaries to Alaska, the Church's presence in the United States today is largely the legacy of the sizeable numbers of Central and Eastern European as well as Middle-Eastern (i.e. Syrian) immigrants that arrived in the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Fitzgerald 1998). Today, the various jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church in the United States comprise approximately one million of the Church's 260 million adherents worldwide (Krindatch 2006).

For the majority of their time in the United States, Orthodox parishes tended to remain ethnically homogenous enclaves characterized by the ethno-national identifications of these historical immigrants and their contemporary descendants (Stokoe and Kishkovsky 1995). Over the past two decades, however, many Eastern Orthodox churches have quietly become home to an increasing number of converts from different religious, spiritual, and even "unchurched" backgrounds. This phenomenon has even garnered attention in the national press, including articles in *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. While there are as of yet no exact figures on rates of conversion across the several U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions, a recent national study (Faith Communities Today 2010) found that converts make up 50%, 48%, and 26% of parishioners in the Antiochian Orthodox, Orthodox Church in America, and Greek Orthodox churches, respectively.

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[5] The above information is largely adapted from that available in the following, more comprehensive overviews: Ware (1997); McGuckin (2008).

These are the three largest Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States, accounting for 70% of all Orthodox parishes and 80% of adherents in the nation.

In conducting preliminary research on Orthodoxy Christianity in the Minneapolis/St. Paul region of Minnesota in early 2009, I found that the Twin Cities represented a diverse microcosm of Eastern Orthodoxy in the United States. Searching out Eastern Orthodox churches in the Twin Cities and surrounding suburbs through Internet resources, phonebooks, and word of mouth, I ultimately compiled a list of sixteen Orthodox churches representing eight of the eleven autocephalous ethnic jurisdictions active in the United States.[6] During preliminary fieldwork, I visited each of these churches to observe services and introduce myself to the members of the parish and interviewed (either in person or over the phone, depending on their preference) a clergy member to get a bit of background on the community and learn if and to what extent their parish had convert members. Through conducting this early research, I learned that the vast majority of converts to Orthodoxy in the Twin Cities were concentrated in the local Antiochian and OCA parishes, which is representative of the larger concentration of converts in these jurisdictions nationwide.[7]

From this larger group, then, I selected three Orthodox churches in which to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork and intensively recruit individual converts for interviews (see the "Methods" section below for more details). I selected these churches not only because they were three of the most well-known in the Twin Cities Orthodoxy

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[6] Currently, Eastern Orthodoxy in the U.S. is organized under the authority of 10 foreign autocephalous Patriarchs (Greek, Antiochian, Ukrainian, Carpatho-Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Russian, and two Serbian) and the self-governing Orthodox Church of America (OCA), an offshoot of the Russian wing that is not formally recognized as fully independent by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople but is still considered as being in full communion with the Church.

[7] I had initially selected a Greek Orthodox parish for one of my fieldsites, but later found that the majority of the converts I had met there initially had actually switched over to one of the OCA parishes (St. Tikhon's).

community for receiving and socializing converts, but also each church represented interesting variation with regard to a) ethnic culture, b) ratio of converts to "cradle" Orthodox, c) geographic location, and d) size. Thus, these three churches not only represented robust "data outcroppings" (Luker 2008) where the dynamics of religious Orthodox self-formation would be amenable to empirical analysis, but also represented enough variation to observe to what extent my findings held across different types of communities.

The first church, St. Basil's, was a small Orthodox Church in America (OCA) established in 1970s by young members of a larger Russian Orthodox Church who wanted to start a parish where the liturgy was conducted in English (as apposed to Church Slavonic). Almost four decades later, it was at the time of my fieldwork a full-fledged parish serving a community of around one-hundred members that was close to 90% convert (including the priest, Fr. Peter, and his wife, Ruth). The second church, St. Tikhon's, was a mid-sized OCA parish. Founded in the early 20th century by a small association of Serbian and Russian Orthodox Christians, St. Tikhon's was at the time of my fieldwork known as one of more vibrant and growing communities within the Orthodox landscape of the Twin Cities. At the time of my research, St. Tikhon's was home to around 200 members, approximately 50% convert, with the other 50% comprised of those raised in the Orthodox tradition. The majority of these "cradle" Orthodox, as they are regularly called within the communities, were Russian- and Serbian-Americans – several the descendants of the Church's original founders. St. Tikhon's was also parish home to a small but significant number of very recent Eastern European immigrants to the area. The third church, St. Nicholas, was a mid-sized

Antiochian Orthodox Church founded almost a century ago by Syrian immigrants, and approximately 60% of current members are 2nd and 3rd generation descendants of these original founders. Thirty percent of the congregation is made up of converts and approximately 10% of much more recent Middle-Eastern immigrants from Syria, Jordan, and Palestine.

Research Design and Methodology

While religious conversion is an exemplary theoretical case for examining the process of religious self-formation, there were methodological issues I had to address with regard to how to actually study this process empirically. The major difficulty I faced was that religious conversion is, in fact, *a process*, one that occurs at different times and over varying lengths of time depending on the individual involved. The fact that some individuals in my sites were at the beginning stages of their conversion careers, while others converted several years ago, and still others decades ago meant that it was impossible for me to personally observe the whole of every individual's conversion process in real time. Given this limitation, I developed a research design and set of methodological strategies that would, as much as possible, allow me to reconstruct the process and attendant practices of religious self-formation and thus approach them as objects of empirical inquiry. Practically speaking, this involved a two-pronged strategy involving 1) locating the common shifts in religious subjectivity experienced by converts themselves as they came into the Orthodox faith and 2) investigating the concrete practices of self-formation by and through which these shifts in self-experience were accomplished. In developing this approach, I took inspiration from practitioners of

institutional ethnography (DeVault 1999; D. Smith 1990, 2005), a mode of social scientific inquiry which advocates beginning with the lived experiences of social actors themselves and then "moving outward," so to speak, to investigate the social and cultural conditions that have shaped and given form to these lived experiences.

To accomplish the first task of locating common shifts in experience among converts, I engaged in in-depth interviews with individual converts themselves. These interviews were conducted in three main stages throughout the project. In the beginning phase of my research, I recruited five individuals at different stages of the conversion process from each of the three communities I selected (N=15). Because I knew I would have limited time in the field (approximately 4-5 months in each community), I used these initial interviews for directing my ethnographic fieldwork (see below for more information on participant-observation), pointing me to begin investigating some of the practical mechanisms implicated in common shifts in subjectivity experienced among converts across fieldsites.

Through this first set of interviews, I was able to ascertain the three common modes of Orthodox converts' self-understanding that are at the heart of this study. First, in these interviews, it became clear that individuals who had been members of the church for a longer period of time had a much more discursively elaborated conversion narrative than those who were in the early stages of joining the Church or who had just recently joined. As will be examined more thoroughly in the next chapter, established converts authored narratives in which the conversion moment was characterized by what I came to call a "conversion to continuity," an event of self-realization in which one discovers that one had (unknowingly) been in some sense an Orthodox Christian and searching for the

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Eastern Orthodox Church all along. Secondly, the established converts had also developed a strong ascetic consciousness, understanding themselves as religious-cum-ethical "works in progress," as one of my interviewees put it, who had to closely monitor and reform many of their desires and inclinations. While early-stage inquirers tended to be ambivalent or even somewhat turned off by the ascetic rigors of the Orthodox Church (fasting, in particular), established converts eagerly embraced them. Thirdly, it was also clear that icons had become deeply implicated in the everyday lives of established converts, as their homes were often filled with them. Furthermore, converts tended to talked about these icons not as religious décor but as ways to develop intimate relationships with the saints.

Once embedded in each community, I continued to recruit interviewees from each respective fieldsite to get a broader sample of convert experiences and to test and broaden my initial assumptions about common changes in subjectivity among them. Finally, near the end of my fieldwork in the St. Basil, St. Tikhon, and St. Nicholas parishes, I also interviewed a small sample of converts (N=10) from outside of these three communities in order to make sure my assumptions about how the process of Orthodox subject formation was accomplished was not radically endogenous to the three communities in which I spent the majority of my time. These interviews largely confirmed that the processes and attendant practices of Orthodox self-formation that I had been studying were also present in other communities as well. However, one major difference between the experiences of converts outside of these three communities was that they were more likely to have made more connections to Orthodox Christians outside of their own parishes for guidance and support in learning about their new faith. Thus, it became clear

that the St. Basil, St. Tikhon, and St. Nicholas parishes were much more assertive and supportive in attempting to integrate new members into their new communities and identities. This explains to some extent why many converts, even if they started their inquiries at another parish in the Twin Cities, often ended up in one of these three communities. As one of my interviewees told me, "It's helpful to be around people who understand what it was like at some point to be new to this. They kind of help you along."

I recruited interview subjects through three primary methods – 1) by placing announcements for interviews in church bulletins (with the aid and permission of each parish), 2) by recruiting face-to-face during church gatherings and services, and 3) a "snowball method" by which new potential recruits were identified through clergy and other interviewees. My aim was to recruit and interview converts who differed on a variety of salient social and cultural dimensions, including gender, age, economic class, and previous religious background (see Arnold 1970; Glaser and Strauss 1967). I also continued to make a special point to seek out and interview individuals who were at various points or stages of the conversion career, a strategy that was extremely helpful in reconstructing commonalities in the temporal progression of Orthodox self-formation within these communities. This logic of interviewing and observing actors who converted at different time periods and over different timescales paralleled the logic of temporality used by demographers when they construct "synthetic cohorts" (see, for example, Preston et al. 2001; Tavory and Winchester 2012). Ultimately, I conducted interviews with a total of 83 converts throughout the course of this study – twenty-three from St. Basil, twenty-six from St. Tikhon, twenty-four from St. Nicholas, and ten from various parishes outside of the selected three communities. The majority of converts in these communities were

white, middle-class people who had converted to Orthodoxy from a different branch of Christianity[8], and my sample reflects this demographic. However, I also made a point to seek out and conduct interviews with people who varied on these three dimensions, conducting interviews with nonwhite, working-class, and people who had converted from religious groups other than Christianity as well.

In conducting the interviews, I was most interested in asking questions that addressed changes in what Allison Pugh (2013; see also Luker 2008; Wuthnow 2011) terms the schematic level of culture, referring to the deeply ingrained cultural frameworks through which social actors experience themselves and the world around them. As such, I steered away from posing "*why?*" questions that asked my informants to give reasons for their conversions to Orthodoxy, as answers to these kinds of questions most often led informants to give idealized, retrospective justifications for their behavior that possibly had tenuous connections to their initial motivations (Vaisey 2009). Instead, I posed questions that asked after process and elicited narratives of self-change (Bamberg 2010; Frank 1993; Pugh 2013).

In practice, this involved two different lines of questioning. First, I asked my respondents to tell me how they came to embrace the Eastern Orthodox faith. Without fail, this question elicited autobiographical narratives detailing converts' own religious life histories. These narratives were very informational and often quite elaborate, and it became clear early on in my research that these types of narratives were themselves important practices of religious self-formation. As important as these narratives were for my understanding of how Orthodox subjectivities came to take shape, these stories were also somewhat limited in that conversion narratives are generally focused on only one

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[8] These demographics are consistent with the (admittedly incomplete) national data (Krindatch 2006).

aspect of religious subjectivation – i.e. the linguistic modification of the non- or differently-religious past in light of the religious present. As such, I employed a second line of "before and after" questioning that encouraged converts to get outside of the conversion script. In practice, this entailed asking converts to talk about their experiences of different elements of the Orthodox faith before vs. after converting – elements such as fasting, prayer, icons, the Bible, liturgical worship, etc. I also asked my interviewees to describe, in as much detail as possible, the moments or processes through which their experiences and understandings of these elements underwent some kind of change. Such responses served to "ethnographize" (Ortner 2003) the interview material by providing thick descriptions of social context and the experiential effects of engaging with religious practices over time. As such, this interview material went a long way in accomplishing my task of understanding how and in what ways particular religious practices formed Orthodox subjectivities.

In addition to my interviews, I also engaged in ethnographic modes of participant-observation in order to more fully understand the ways in which various practices of religious self-formation shaped converts' subjectivities as well as the social contexts and relationships in which these practices and subjectivities were embedded. To more fully document the local social contexts in and through which converts' selves were formed, I conducted participant observation in the three selected churches for approximately 4-5 months at each location. I conducted fieldwork at St. Basil's (OCA) from August through December 2010, St. Tikhon's (OCA) from January through April 2011, and finally St. Nick's (Antiochian) church from May through August 2011. While I certainly moved among the churches for special events, ceremonies, or occasions (such as the chrismation

of new converts), my reasoning for focusing my research on one community at a time was that most Orthodox churches follow a very similar liturgical calendar, and in most cases services and events (e.g. Divine Liturgy) occur at exactly the same time of day.

Furthermore, attending the majority of the services at one church for a concentrated period of time as opposed to going to that church every 2 or 3 weeks (which would be the case if I was observing at all three churches over the same period of time) allowed me to establish a presence in the community, building rapport and familiarity with church parishioners and clergy. Finally, it also allowed me to get a more in-depth feel for the culture of each church, inserting myself into the life of the parish as priests often encouraged newcomers to do ("Come and See" was a frequent saying of Orthodox priests to aspiring converts). Much of my participant-observation took place during church programs and services, particularly during Sunday services where the Divine Liturgy, the cornerstone of Orthodox worship, took place. Furthermore, coffee and lunch were most often served after the liturgy, allowing me to observe and interact with church members in a more informal atmosphere.

I also attended a series of adult education or "collective catechism" classes organized by the Minnesota Eastern Orthodox Christian Clergy Association (MEOCCA). These classes consisted of two-hour lectures and discussions that offered basic overviews of the defining aspects of the Orthodox faith. These weekly classes ran from September 14 – December 7 and were held every Tuesday night, 7-9pm, at a local Greek Orthodox church. They were free and open to the public. However, I found that these classes were not taken to be especially important aspects of converts' self-formation processes because of their high level of theological abstraction and generality. While converts found them

interesting and informative, all of them repeated the point, mentioned in Chapter 1, that their experiences and understandings of their own Orthodox identities were primarily shaped in and through immersing themselves in the activities and practices of the faith. As such, these classes did not become central to my analyses.

In addition to attending to these more communal contexts, I also initiated fieldwork in converts' homes, offices, and even automobiles in my attempts to better document how they engaged with and were subsequently shaped by their icons. Generally, this fieldwork occurred after I had conducted an in-depth interview, when I would then politely ask my respondent if they would show me their icons/icon corners. In most cases, these "icon tours," as my respondents and I came to call them, took place in converts' homes, as these were often the places where we conducted our interviews. However, there were also times where I met converts at their workplaces and found that icons often played a prominent role in their working lives. And, in a few circumstances, converts even took me out to their cars to show me the travel icons they had on their dashboards or hanging from their rearview mirrors. During these tours, my respondents would tell me why particular icons and the persons depicted in them were important to them, from where and/or whom they had received the icons, and why the icon or icons were placed in a particular area. Responses to these questions were often highly emotionally charged, giving me a glimpse into the power of icons to shape not only the practical but also the affective contours of converts' self-experiences.

Finally, I also participated in two of the major Orthodox fasting seasons in order to deepen my understanding of the experiential effects of this practice in converts' lives. The first fast I engaged in was the 40-day Nativity Fast in Winter 2010 and the second

was the Lenten or "Great" Fast which begins the 7 weeks before Pascha (Easter). This more participatory method allowed me to analytically compare my normal experiences of everyday life to the shifts in subjectivity experienced while engaging in this practice, thus deepening – and often challenging – my initial assumptions about the significance of fasting for Orthodox self-formation. It also enriched my interviews, leading me to pose better informed questions and establishing some common (but certainly not identical) experiential ground on which to have a conversation about this important religious practice.

Ultimately, my participant observation allowed me to productively blur the line between the object of inquiry – i.e. the lived experience of cultural practice – and the mode of inquiry, but, again, without assuming that I shared an experience identical to that of the religious individuals under study. As Robert Orsi (2005) argues, building off the insights of anthropologist Michael Jackson (1989), experience need not be conceptualized as a shared identity, but, more productively, as an experimental field in which one explores strategies of connection with those one is attempting to more fully understand. While I in no way claim to have grasped the full complexity of any one person's experience, I hope the empirical analyses that follow demonstrate how I attempted to create these moments of connection and what they provided in terms of insight on the phenomenon of religious self-formation.

My approach to writing, coding, and analyzing fieldnotes followed a three-part strategy. While short, hand-written notes were jotted down in the field whenever possible, I made sure to type and/or audio-record a more detailed and complete transcript as soon as possible after being in the field (within 24 hours). In these initial notes, I tried

to be as descriptive as possible and refrain from imposing an analytic or theoretical

schema over the interactions that occurred in the site. After writing these notes, I then re-

read them from the perspective of analytic abduction (Timmermans & Tavory 2012),

looking for evidence that fit with *and* disconfirmed prevailing theoretical assumptions

about the phenomena in question. I then wrote analytic memos that commented on the

data generated from this reflective process, as well as new leads and questions to which I

should be attentive as my research progressed. As I began to accumulate fieldnotes over

the course of the project, I also began coding for emergent patterns and themes found

across observational periods. These coded themes were organized into separate sub-files

and analytic memos were written that pertained to how these themes spoke to and/or

caused me to refine my analyses of religious practice and Orthodox self-formation.

Image A: An Orthodox View of Christian History
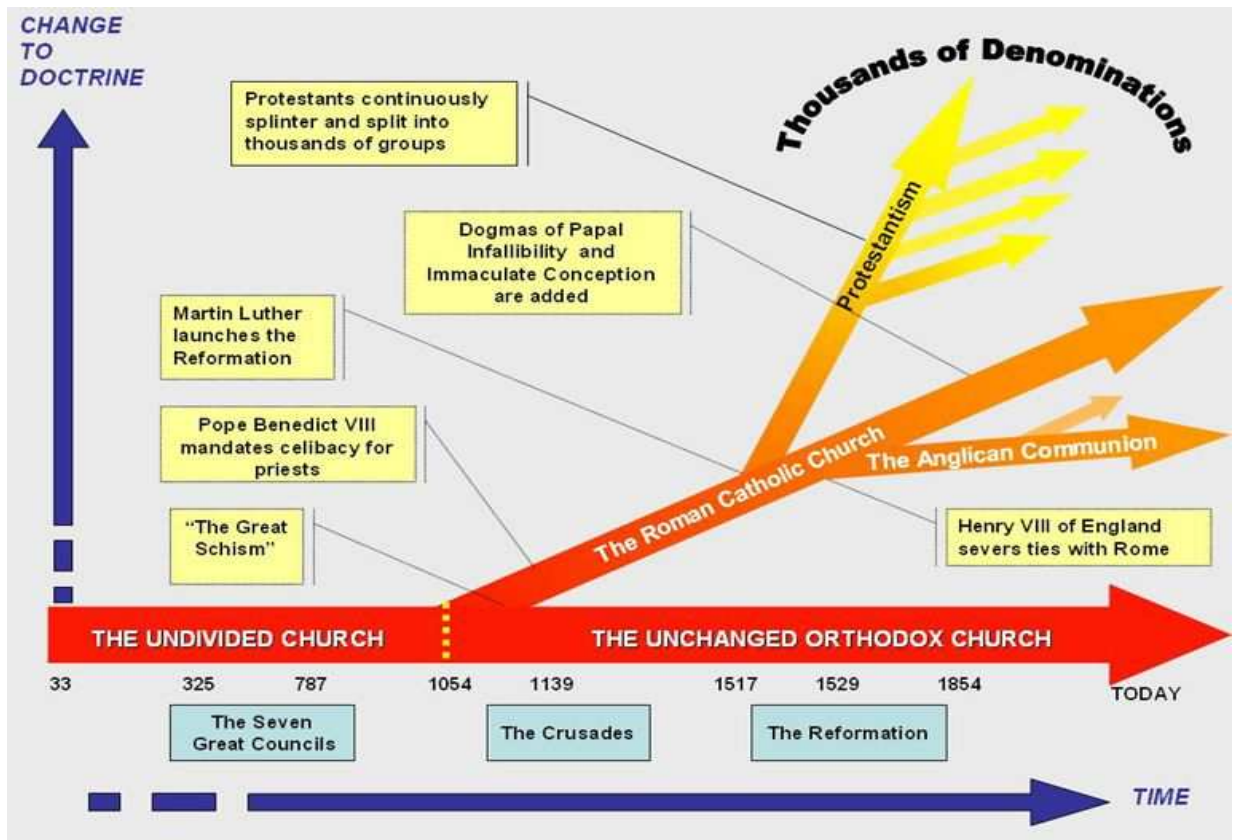
Chapter 3
Converting to Continuity:
Temporality and Self in Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives

"Let me tell you my story."

In my conversations with the dozens of converts to Eastern Orthodoxy I interviewed in and around the Twin Cities, answers to my initial questions about how they came to be Orthodox Christians almost inevitably started with some variant of the quote above, and so it feels fitting that the first empirical chapter of this dissertation begin with an analysis of their stories of becoming Orthodox. These narratives are of course brimming with the idiosyncracies of their individual lives, but they also bear the markings of certain cultural patterns and regularities that come from inhabiting a religious tradition of a particular kind. As I mentioned in the last chapter, a regularity that emerged early on in my research was one in which, over the course of time, converts came to tell more elaborate but also more thematically similar narratives about the significance of their conversions to Orthodoxy. While early stage inquirers and converts often described their interest in Orthodoxy in sometimes ambiguous and underdeveloped ways, those who had been Orthodox for approximately a year or more told much more intricate stories in which discovering the Orthodox Church was also a moment of self-discovery, a realization of a previously hidden truth about themselves.

What should the analyst make of the development of such stories? And what can they tell us about the process of religious self-formation? Many contemporary scholars of conversion have argued that it is problematic to treat the content of subjects' conversion stories as straightforward data on the social-contextual factors and/or psychological

predispositions predicting their initial changes in religious affiliation. While early and foundational work in the sociology of religious conversion often did treat conversion narratives in this way (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980), others came to critique this approach by showing how converts' narratives were retrospective reconstructions of the past that were patterned by (and helped reproduce) the larger religious groups' theological presuppositions and norms about what constituted an experience of conversion in the first place (see Beckford 1978 for the classic critique; see also B. Taylor 1976; Griffin 1990; Stromberg 1993). Conversion narratives, these critics argued, were not transparent accounts but identity-forming *practices* that should be treated as objects of analysis in their own right and scrutinized for the work they did in constituting particular kinds of religious subjects.

Drawing on broader insights from autobiographical and narrative identity theory (Bruner 1986; Carr 1991; Gusdorf 1956; Riceour 1984, 1992), later research highlighted the central role of temporality in the self-constituting power of conversion narratives. Like other autobiographical narratives, conversion narratives are practices through which social actors reflexively address the dynamics of being subject to time and, in particular, being subject to the past. "Autobiography," as Gusdorf (1956) writes in his landmark essay on the subject, "obliges me to situate what I am in the perspective of what I have been" (38). Religious conversion narratives are a particular genre of such autobiographical work, situating and, in part, constituting the religious self through a meaningful ordering of the irreligious or differently religious past vis-à-vis the religious present (Bailey 2008; Hindmarsh 2005; van Nieuwkerk 2006; D. McLennan 1996; Stromberg 1993). Conversion narratives are thus one of the primary practices religious

institutions and actors employ to retrospectively address the relations between personal pasts and presents, culturally "working" this temporal gap into a meaningful biographical pattern.

In analyzing the following narratives, I take up this method of inquiry to understand the ways Orthodox selves are crafted in and through narrative practice. Instead of mining these stories for data on the sociological or psychological predictors of conversion, I examine how social actors' themselves took up a specific discourse of conversion to make sense of the relationship between their past and present selves from within the wider religious traditions' frames of reference (Snow and Machalek 1984).

The vast majority of scholarly work on Christian conversion narratives has demonstrated how these practices encourage and help construct a temporal break with one's past, a moment of biographical rupture and spiritual rebirth in which the old "sinful" self of the past is put to death and a new "godly" self is born. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these analyses are almost exclusively among scholars of Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Charismatic Christian culture, religious groups in which this kind of temporal break – being "born again" – is central to what it means to be "converted" and thus one of faithful (Chen 2008; Harding 1987; D. McLennan 1996; Stromberg 1993; Smilde 2007). While the specifics of personal life events inevitably vary, central to the narrative constitution of the born-again event is a shared emphasis on a moment of temporal rupture, a moment in which the subject's past is retrospectively emplotted as the property of a distinct self at variance with the religious self of the now. In telling stories of being born again, speakers come to narrate their past selves as living lives "for themselves" and not in accordance with the will of God. While these lives may seemingly

be going well at first, troubles invariably occur in the form of personal crises, feelings of emptiness, being lost, etc. It is the narrative construction of a moment of "chosen subjection" (Schofer 2005) within the story that constitutes the rupture of being born again – in reaching out to a future with God, the self of the moment before is biographically and temporally divided into an "old," sinful self of the past. In its place, a "new," spiritual self of the present emerges that is qualitatively different from and morally superior to what had come before (Chen 2008; Harding 1987; Stromberg 1993; Smilde 2007). At this biographical and spiritual breaking point between past and present, conversion is experienced as "a powerful clash resulting from the shift from one realm of thought and action to another, a moment of specific *shock*" (Jules-Rosette 1975: 135).

Many contemporary scholars of global Christianity have commented on how this temporality of rupture seems to be an enduring element of Christian culture no matter where it is found. Researchers of Christianity in various parts of Africa (Engelke 2004; Meyer 1998), Latin America (Brenneman 2012; Smilde 2007), and Southeast Asia and Oceania (Keane 2007; Robbins 2004) have all examined how Christianity exhorts its adherents to "make a complete break with the past" (Meyer 1998) and thus experience their religious subjectivities as emerging from experiences of punctuated biographical rupture. These researchers have explicitly linked this narrative focus on rupture to cultural constructions of temporality within Protestant Christianity writ large, arguing that its abiding focus on temporal discontinuities (e.g. salvation as transformative event, eschatology, reformation and revival, etc.) also shapes the narration and subsequent experience of biographical rupture among its new adherents. In a well-received and oft-

cited article, anthropologist Joel Robbins (2007) has even suggested that this focus on temporal discontinuity is central to Christianity as a cultural formation writ large.

It is indeed hard to ignore that such temporal discontinuities and ruptures are central to many Christian religious cultures and, subsequently, many narratives of conversion. But, in this chapter, I wish to temper generalizations that the focus on discontinuity is characteristic of *all* Christianities and all experiences of conversion. Instead, the following findings demonstrate that, and contra to what most studies have argued about the importance of conversion narratives constituting a temporal rupture or break within social actors' biographies, the majority of my respondents' conversions to Orthodoxy were narrated as a revelation of the religious self's basic *continuity* over time, despite – and perhaps especially because of – what seem like major changes in religious identification over the course of a life. Their narratives constituted conversion to the Orthodox Church as, in part, a discovery of a "latent Orthodoxy" that was heretofore hidden within their pasts, suggesting that they had, in some sense, really been Orthodox all along. And while this latent Orthodox subjectivity may have been spiritually "stunted" by the "incomplete" nature of one's former religious affiliations, it was nevertheless a subjectivity narrated as largely continuous with the self of the present.

Before turning to my analysis of these narratives and the complex theologies and pragmatics of time that inform them, though, one final remark to make clear what I am and what I am not attempting to do in this chapter. I am resolutely *not* attempting to make adjudications about whether my informants' selves and religious affiliations are "really" as continuous as they claim or if they are simply covering over what are, in reality, quite distinct modes of religious subjectivity, culture, and identification. While I will have

more to say about what I think are some of the shortcomings of framing research

questions about continuity and discontinuity in these either/or terms in the conclusion, for

now I will simply state that what I am attempting to do here is understand how, why, and

to what effects continuity is discursively performed within the narratives of these

particular people.

An Orthodox Presence in the Non-Orthodox Past: Constructing Self-Continuity in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives

The sun shone with an uncharacteristically intense heat for early June in

Minnesota as I crossed the East Bank of campus to meet David at his office for our

interview. I had met David almost three months prior during a Lenten potluck at St.

Tikhon's Orthodox Church, but his busy work schedule as a university administrator had

prevented us from meeting until today. In truth, my own schedule was rather hectic at the

time. I was trying to juggle multiple projects in addition to my ongoing dissertation

research, and I secretly wished that the interview could have happened a few weeks

before. But, as the temperature climbed well over 100 degrees (it turned out to be the

hottest day in Minneapolis in 23 years), all I could think about was sitting down in what I

hoped was a well-insulated and air-conditioned office. After one of the longest and

coldest winters in recent memory, summer in Minnesota seemed to be arriving with an

equal vengeance.

David's office was, thankfully, very well air-conditioned, and so I gladly let all of

my other responsibilities slip from my attention for the afternoon. Better yet, it turned out

that David, who had seemed shy when I first met him, turned out to be quite the good

conversationalist. Now in his early sixties, David had just spent the last hour or so telling

me in great detail about his path to Orthodoxy. He told me about how he first became a

committed Christian as a young adult during one of the renowned evangelist Billy

Graham's "Crusade" revivals, but later in life came to question these initial Evangelical

views. Concerned with what he termed the "theologically narrow" perspective of

Evangelicalism, he decided to join his wife's Lutheran faith, and ultimately went to

seminary and became a minister of a theologically conservative Lutheran Church in St.

Paul, Minnesota. Ten years later still, and becoming increasingly disillusioned by what he

saw as "the loss of a liturgical perspective" in his church and within Lutheranism in

general, David started to learn about Eastern Orthodoxy from a close friend from

seminary who had left Lutheranism for the Orthodox Church two years prior. From there,

he developed what he termed an "insatiable" interest in Orthodox theology and practice

that eventually led him to leave the Lutheran ministry and become an Orthodox lay

person a few years later.

As I listened to David's story, I was certainly interested in the personal,

idiosyncratic details of his story, but the pattern-seeking sociologist in me was most

captivated by the fact that he, like so many others I had interviewed, emplotted these life

changes into a narrative whole that stressed a basic continuity of self-experience over and

against any massive temporal ruptures – ruptures that one might think basic to an

experience of "conversion". In talking about his initial shift from Evangelicalism to

Lutheranism, for example, David told me:

> As an Evangelical, I was involved in the Baptist Church for awhile and my
> wife followed me there. And that's what brought us up here [to
> Minnesota] actually, because I went to Bethel College….and I wasn't
> there very long before I realized that *I really wasn't a Baptist after all*. I
> was kind of being a gadfly in the theology classes, you know, and raising
> counter arguments and questions. And as I did that I began to realize the

way I was questioning things was more in line with a kind of a Lutheran perspective or a more liturgical, higher church perspective.

And, later, as a Lutheran minister discovering Orthodoxy, a similar construction of continuity:

> The longer I learned about Orthodoxy and the more I learned about Orthodox liturgy and read theologians like Alexander Schmemann, for example…I began to realize that when I had been thinking of myself all this time as being more Lutheran, I was really even more Orthodox. So, I had already had that kind of way of thinking and sensibility without even knowing about Orthodoxy, without even knowing that the Church I had in my mind was already out there, in reality. So it was like I kept having these moments of, "Wow, this is who I am! This is exactly what I've been searching for and just didn't know it yet!" That may sound strange, but I think you might hear something similar when you talk with other people.

David was right. I had heard and – throughout the remainder of my study – continued to hear from the majority of my interlocutors that their conversions to Orthodoxy were not primarily marked by a punctuated event of self-transformation but, rather, moments of self-recognition in which they uncovered in their pasts an Orthodox subjectivity that had, at least in some sense, been there all along – just awaiting discovery, waiting to be "let out," so to speak. In this narrative schema of conversion, pasts were not divided from the present in an intense moment of crisis, forging the emergence of a new, born-again self; rather, one's ongoing "discovery" of Orthodoxy endowed past experiences with a new sense of self-continuity with the present – the revelation of a sort of Orthodox unconscious that had been guiding the quest for an heretofore unknown Orthodox Church all along. As another of my interviewees, Terri, put it:

> Converting to Orthodoxy, it's not really about changing yourself. Sure, there are things that you need to let go of…—your hang-ups, I guess you would say….But when I converted to Orthodoxy, I wasn't turning myself

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into something I wasn't before. I was becoming who I really am, who I always truly was, in fact.

Interestingly enough, this narrative construction of a latent Orthodox self that was, in reality, there all along, was even performed among several former Evangelical and Charismatic Christians who had gone through what they had at least initially experienced as a canonical "born-again" conversion. A young woman named Kelsey, for example, told me:

> **Kelsey:** I had what you might call the classic, Protestant born-again experience as a teenager, back in 2000. I was going through a rough time in high school and I started attending this pretty charismatic Evangelical church….And they were saying, you know, "Just ask Jesus into your heart" and "you can be saved and born again," and, at the time, that all really appealed to me. So I did, I said the standard sinner's prayer, asking Jesus to come into my life, and so on. And I felt this great emotional release. It was a really emotional experience. And, at the time, I thought, you know, that that was the pinnacle of what it was to become an "authentic Christian" [uses fingers for air quotes].
>
> **Me:** But you don't think that now?
>
> **Kelsey:** No, I don't. I mean, I would never deny the importance of that experience, but I began to see it much differently after converting to Orthodoxy. I don't see it as the defining moment of my Christian experience now, but more like an important part of a much bigger process that eventually led me to what I was really searching for, Orthodoxy….But, you know, I didn't realize that – I don't think I could realize that, in fact, until I converted to Orthodoxy. So it [the Evangelical experience] was more of a stepping stone, I would say now, not the end-all-be-all moment like I viewed it as before.

I will say more about other aspects of the "much bigger process" that Kelsey is referring to in the next section of the paper, but here I want to highlight how, like David, converting to Orthodoxy is narrated not as a moment of biographical rupture, but as a revelation of hidden, biographical and spiritual continuity. Orthodoxy, Kelsey came to realize, is what she was "really searching for" all along. Moreover, in narrating her self in

this way, Kelsey's initial story of born-again conversion became transformed,

downgraded to a subplot of the extended and more continuous narrative of her becoming

Orthodox. In doing so, the contents and qualities of the initial experience itself also

changed, to the point, in fact, where they were no longer seen as the qualities and

contents of a definitive "conversion point" at all. Instead, they became so many stepping

stones along a circuitous but nonetheless continuous path to Orthodoxy. As with David,

earlier experiences of religious change – even what was once seen as the pinnacle event

of the born-again experience – become re-narrated as one moment in what was really the

person's continuous search for the Orthodox faith. Not, in other words, a temporal fault

line separating two distinct selves and forms of life, but one of several waypoints toward

the discovery of a latent Orthodox self that – while perhaps obscured at that moment –

would eventually come to reveal itself in time.

More often than not, converts' stories of a continuous but largely unrecognized

Orthodox subjectivity within their pasts were also coupled with what they retrospectively

viewed as attractions to latent Orthodox or Orthodox-like elements hidden within their

former faiths (or, in at least one case, their former lack of any religious faith at all). Those

who were previously members of liturgically-oriented "high church" faiths like

Catholicism and Episcopalianism often focused, perhaps unsurprisingly, on how much

they had always been attracted to ritual. John, a former Catholic, for example, stated:

> I was born two years before Vatican II, so I never really knew anything
> other than the *novus ordo* [the vernacular Mass instituted after the Vatican
> II Council]. But I always loved it. I've never been a real theological
> person…it's always been in the liturgy and the ritual, that's where it's at
> for me….I've had lots of good Protestant friends, like Evangelicals, and
> I'd go to their churches sometimes for special events or maybe just
> because they asked me. And it's not that I hated being there or anything,
> certainly not…but I always felt like, "There's something big missing here.

There's no way I could ever leave Catholicism for this." You know, I had to have the liturgy and the other ritual aspects in my life. It couldn't just be praise music and powerpoint slides….But when I started visiting [a local Orthodox] church, I began thinking those exact same things about Catholicism. Compared to Orthodoxy, the Catholic Church was like Protestantism! The liturgy, the fasting, the feast days, *everything* was just so central [to Orthodox Christianity] that Catholicism just felt like a stripped down version of Orthodoxy….So, in the end, it wasn't that I felt like Catholicism was wrong or fundamentally misguided. Sure, there are things I would quibble with now, but the big thing was it was just not the fullness of the faith. And it turned out that I needed that fullness.

Greg, a former Episcopalian, told me something quite similar. While earlier in our interview, he told me, "part of me, deep-down, was truly Orthodox all along," he did not see this as necessarily being at odds with his involvement in his former faith. In fact, he narrated his upbringing in the Episcopal Church as a gradual and necessary step toward realizing his true Orthodox self:

You know, earlier I said that there was part of me that was Orthodox all along. But I don't necessarily see that as being at odds with my past in the Episcopal Church. What Orthodoxy did is fulfilled my Anglican upbringing, because I couldn't have truly become Orthodox if I didn't go through this other door first, and that door being the Church of England. And it's sort of – I suppose in a way it reminds me of graduation. Just like you might feel that you've always had the inclination or potential to go to college, but you still couldn't have gone to college without graduating high school. And so, in the same way, I wouldn't have become Orthodox if I hadn't been Episcopalian first, I don't think, because the Episcopal Church rooted me in liturgy…but just not as deep and not as complete as the Orthodox Church….Orthodoxy, you know, it means true faith, true worship. But maybe a better way of putting it, it's the complete faith. Anglicanism is not wrong. It's incomplete.

While generally not as focused on liturgy and ritual, converts who came from less liturgically-oriented and more "low church" Christian backgrounds also stressed latent – if "incomplete" – Orthodox-like elements in their previous faiths, elements to which they now realized they were always already attracted. Mary, a former Pentecostal, for

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example, stressed a basic continuity between her past and present experiences of the "real presence of God":

> **Mary:** When I finally realized that, yes, I'm an Orthodox Christian and I'm going to convert to Orthodoxy, a friend of mine from my former [Pentecostal] church, she was really upset with me. She confronted me one day and she says, "Mary, how can you do this!? How can you abandon your faith?" She said that: "abandon my faith." And I looked her straight in the eye and I told her that I wasn't abandoning anything. That I was only drawing closer to the real presence of God.
>
> **Me:** And what did she say to that?
>
> **Mary:** Not much! [laughs]. But I truly believe that. Now, sure, there are big differences between Pentecostalism and Orthodoxy, and I've had to change my thinking on a lot of things. But what's always stayed the same with me is that longing for being in the real presence of God. That's what drew me to Pentecostalism….like the Orthodox, Pentecostals believe in the true presence, you know, that Christ and the Holy Spirit—that they are really and truly there among us when we worship….And I feel like Pentecostalism got me close to God, but, with Orthodoxy, I've just gotten so much closer, right there, really.…When I go to the chalice [to receive the Eucharist], I'm as close as any person can be this side of Heaven.

Along with narrating what they viewed as basic continuities within themselves as well as basic affinities between certain elements of their past and present faiths, stories like those of Mary, Greg, and John also revealed that Orthodox narratives of self-continuity are not necessarily narratives of stasis. It is just that within these narratives, changes are subsumed into what one might call a religious human development perspective, one in which the Orthodox self that has to some extent always already been there becomes more and more "nourished" as it draws closer to the "fullness" of the Orthodox faith. As such, and again in stark contrast to conversion narratives which emphasize temporal rupture, the non-Orthodox selves and affiliations of the past are not

discursively divided from the present, but are instead enfolded into a narrative schema of the latent Orthodox self's ongoing realization and growth.

While, as noted in chapter 2, the majority of the Orthodox converts I interviewed, like the vast majority of Orthodox converts in the United States as a whole, came to Orthodoxy from other Christian faiths, I found that stories of the latent Orthodox self's realization and development were also centrally woven into the conversion narratives of those who had come to Orthodoxy from non-Christian backgrounds. Danielle, for instance, while raised in a nominally Lutheran home as a child, had spent the majority of her adult years involved in various forms of New Age spirituality. Nevertheless, she too told me that while there were certainly "major differences" between her past New Age practices and affiliations and her current Orthodoxy, there was, all the same, a more important, overriding continuity. As she explained:

> …I told you about all this New Age stuff I was into before discovering the Orthodox Church and, sure, there were parts of that that were misguided and there are major differences between the two….But here's the thing: the thing that attracted me to the spiritual things I was involved in before is the exact same thing that ultimately got me into Orthodoxy. And that's the mystical aspect, which is very central to Orthodoxy….The Orthodox Church is of course Christian, but it's also Eastern, and so it isn't bogged down in all these sorts of rationalist tendencies that you see in the Western [Catholic and Protestant] Church—you know, not comfortable with mystery and paradox and trying to rationalize everything….And, so, when I converted, I didn't have to do this complete 180 [degree-turn], even though you might think that. Converting to Orthodoxy was really about bringing that mystical part of me into the light of the Church, to where it really belonged.

And, in perhaps the most intriguing account of self-continuity I heard, Blake, who had self-identified as a "doubtful agnostic" without any religious affiliation before converting to Orthodoxy, relayed:

Blake: I used to do this thing, since I was a kid, where I would cross myself before doing something. But I'd do it ironically, you know, to get a laugh out of my friends or other people….And, the funny thing is, I always did it right-to-left, like the Orthodox, not left-to-right [as in Catholicism and some Protestant denominations]. I always figured that didn't mean anything because, at the time, I didn't really know that there was a difference between how the Eastern and Western Churches made the sign. But, anyway, this is kind of crazy, but when I was doing my first confession right before my chrismation—you know, you have to kind of do this inventory where you try as best as you can to remember and confess all of your sins. Kind of onerous, especially for a guy like me who happened to have sinned a lot—but, and I didn't think it was the biggest deal in the world, but I decided to confess to having done that, because I felt like it was kind of making a mockery of the sign of the cross, not being reverent, you know. And Father Jim, he asked me, "Well, how did you make the sign?" And I was like, "Huh?" And he said, "How did you make it?" And I showed him, you know, right to left, just like I do now. And he says, "Well, see, you were Orthodox all along. Welcome home."

Me: So what did you make of that?

Blake: I don't know. At the time I didn't really take it seriously. I thought he was joking. And maybe he was. But the longer I'm in the Church, though, the more I think he might've been right.

Contexts of Continuity: On the Theologies and Pragmatics of "Doing Time" in Orthodox Christianity

The narratives in the preceding section are but a diverse sampling of multiple stories I heard from Orthodox converts which emplotted the self within a narrative that stressed the religious self's basic continuity through what could just as easily (and, in many cases, perhaps more easily) be considered quite profound changes in religious practice and identification. Instead of narrating their conversions as events in which the past non-Orthodox self was revealed as fundamentally distinct from or at odds with a new Orthodox self, my interlocutors told a story in which coming to Orthodoxy revealed past selves and religious affiliations as containing a latent "Orthodox-ness" all along. Thus, and in stark contrast to the temporality of rupture often viewed as the *sine qua non* of the

conversion experience (and its attendant narrative genre), conversion to Orthodoxy was

constructed as the discovery and progressive cultivation of a continuous Orthodox

subjectivity threading from the past and into the present – in essence, *a conversion to*

continuity.

Here I should point out that not all of my interviewees told their stories of

becoming Orthodox in this way. Some still emplotted their religious pasts and presents

along the lines of the narrative of rupture so characteristic of Evangelicalism. A man

named Corey--who, perhaps non-coincidentally, had just recently come to Orthodoxy

from an Evangelical Christian background--stressed the need to make a complete break

from the self of his past (if, however, still using a somewhat developmental or processual

way of speaking about it):

> In converting to Orthodoxy, it was like I was learning to be a Christian for
> the very first time. Sure, I was coming from Evangelicalism, what most
> people would consider a "Christian" [uses air-quotes] faith. But, really,
> there's so much error in it, so much that is completely at odds with the
> early Church and the Church's teachings. So, for me, coming to
> Orthodoxy has meant learning to completely leave that behind, you know,
> throw away the old me and what I used to think and believe.

Such narratives of rupture certainly existed among Orthodox converts, although

they were relatively rare. This suggests that the norms around what constitutes a "proper"

Orthodox conversion narrative are more flexible than in some forms of Protestant

Christianity. It also suggests that the form does not quite constitute a unified genre that

we could term *the* Orthodox conversion narrative. Nevertheless, these continuity

narratives were prevalent enough among both the local communities I studied and within

the wider, public arenas of Orthodox discourse[9] that it begs the question of *why*, exactly, so many experiences of conversion were narrated along these lines. In addressing this question, I first turn to how Orthodox theological conceptions of personhood and time – and, in particular, the temporality of salvation – legitimated and informed these narrative constructions. I then focus on how this construal of the continuous Orthodox self was used to address some of the pragmatic and existential conditions of actors' everyday lives, thereby reinforcing its experiential validity and persuasiveness through the dynamics of mutual appropriation I mentioned in Chapter 1.

The Temporality of the Soul: Orthodox Theologies of Salvation and Personhood

As was touched on in the opening of this chapter, research on the temporality of Christian conversion has focused largely on the "complete break with the past" narratives characteristic of Evangelical Christianities, broadly conceived, and argues that the temporal rupture stressed in these narratives are shaped by Christian theological notions

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[9]While this analysis stays close to the local data I know best, my research also confirms that these continuity narratives are not isolated to the geographic area of the Twin Cities. Several conversion accounts of contemporary and relatively well-known (at least in Orthodox circles) Orthodox Christians are readily available in books and on the Internet, and the majority of these accounts also relay an autobiographical narrative that stresses self-continuity over discontinuity. One of the most popular accounts in the communities I studied was that of Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, an Orthodox bishop in England and a noted author and theologian who converted in the late 1950s, several decades earlier than most contemporary conversions to Orthodoxy in the West. In a section of his conversion narrative that bears a striking resemblance to those I heard among converts in my own study, he writes:

> The more I learnt about Orthodoxy, the more I realized: this is what I have always believed in my inmost self, but never before did I hear it so well expressed. I did not find Orthodoxy archaic, foreign or exotic. To me it was nothing other than simple Christianity.

Accounts such as these were widely-read among the people in the communities I studied, and in some cases were explicitly referenced as being "like" their own experiences of converting to Orthodoxy. I thus have no doubt that these publicly available narratives have a formative influence on the ways the people here formulated their own stories. However, even these public narratives were not fashioned out of whole cloth and still beg the question of *why* the stress on self-continuity. As such, I rely on my ethnographic data to draw out some of the theological and pragmatic contexts that I argue inspire and make convincing these narrative forms.

of time. The "born again" biographical event narrated by so many Christians around the globe (Harding 1987; Stromberg 1993; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004), for example, is fundamentally informed by an Evangelical theology of salvation, which is itself informed by a particular theology of the person.

To begin with this Evangelical model as a point of comparison, the temporal experience of a complete break with the past is theologically informed by the soteriological doctrine of "total depravity."[10] A doctrine first elaborated by Calvin but then also adopted in modified form by Wesley (Marsden 1991; Noll 2003),[11] total depravity implies a theological anthropology in which every part of the human being is, by nature, afflicted by sin. While humanity was originally created in the perfect image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), this intimate relationship with God has been severed by sin, an inheritance of Adam and Eve's "original sin" against God in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. This inherently sinful self can only be redeemed or "saved" through acceptance of Christ as one's Savior, whose death is what atones for the sinful nature of humankind. Through accepting Christ – which, in Evangelical circles, is often accomplished through the practice of the "sinner's prayer" in which one asks Jesus "into one's heart" (Chen 2008; Ellingson 2007; Erzen 2006) – one effectively enters into the new life of salvation and thus breaks with a past self irredeemably and extensively corrupted by sin. These moments of rupture between present "saved selves" and past

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[10] To be clear, I am not arguing that Evangelicals necessarily draw on this doctrine explicitly. Its informing effects are just as often implicit.

[11] Today, Evangelicals are still somewhat split over more Calvinist/Reformed vs. more Arminian/Wesleyan perspectives concerning the nature and consequences of total depravity for salvation. While those from a Calvinist orientation hold to the doctrine of "limited atonement," meaning that God's saving grace is limited to a select number of individuals, those following Wesley's more Arminian theology hold to a doctrine of "prevenient grace" in which God's grace works in all people to allow them to be capable of responding to or, on the other hand, rejecting God's call. Both groups, however, hold that human beings cannot affect their own salvation through any means without the previous grace of God. This is due to the totally depraved condition of human nature.

"sinful selves" are narrated by Evangelicals themselves as psychologically transformative and central to who they are as persons (Chen 2008; Harding 1987; Manglos 2010; Stromberg 1993).

In contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy has historically held a different conception of human nature, the effects of sin, and how it is that human beings are to acquire salvation. In Orthodoxy's theological anthropology, there is an important distinction between what it means to be made "in the image" versus "after the "likeness" of God. The image of God in humanity, it is argued, is generally associated with the human faculties of reason, intellect, and free will. This is and remains an innate aspect of human nature, and was not lost due to the Fall. To be fashioned after the likeness, by contrast, denotes the ability to acquire the spiritual and moral qualities associated with God. It was this ability to acquire the likeness, most Orthodox theologians hold, that was lost due to the "ancestral sin"[12] of Adam and Eve. The consequence of this sin for humanity, then, is not the inheritance of an extensively sinful human nature, but rather the loss of the path by which one can attain God's likeness. Without this path, the image – the self's innate potentiality to become like God – cannot be actualized, and human beings inevitably fall into sin as a result. The path to likeness, it is argued, is what was restored by the death and resurrection of Christ and what has been safeguarded by the Church through its doctrines, sacraments, and spiritual practices.[13]

For the Orthodox, salvation is undertaking the process of fashioning one's innate image after the likeness of God through the life of the Church, a process termed "theosis"

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[12] Orthodox theologians generally use the term "ancestral sin" rather than "original sin."

[13] This is obviously a brief gloss on a theology that has been expounded upon in great detail by Orthodox scholars. For a more in-depth treatment, see Lossky 1974.

– i.e. to become like God.[14] The temporality of this process is fundamentally not one of rupture but of processual growth. Since the past self, no matter how wayward, still by its very human nature contains the image of God, salvation does not require one to throw off all the elements of one's past for a completely different self of the present. Rather, as my respondents' narratives make clear, such a theology seems much more conducive to a story in which one's "true self" – i.e. the latent image of God – is discovered as being there all along and, as such, fundamentally continuous with the Orthodox self of the present. Indeed, many of my respondents explicitly drew on these Orthodox theological understandings when I asked them more about their narratives of self-continuity. For example, when I asked Terri to tell me more about her experience of conversion to Orthodoxy as "becoming who I really am, who I always truly was, in fact," she elaborated:

> So, in Orthodoxy, we believe that all human beings are made in the image of God, and that is like your true self, the very core of who you are as a human being…In Western Christianity, the belief is that human nature is totally corrupted by sin, but in the Eastern view, the image of God is always there, no matter what. So, that's what I mean about becoming who you really are. That, with Orthodoxy, you finally recognize that has been there your entire life. It's like you've found your way back to yourself, your real self, you know? You can now look back on your life before and see that it was there, but you just spent so much time ignoring it or suppressing it or covering it up or whatever. But now, through the Church, you see it and now you have the tools to try to make that image shine. And that's theosis, constantly working on that godly part of your self until your image reflects the love and likeness of God.

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[14] As explained by Saint Athanasius: "God became man so that man might become God." Many Orthodox Christians I met were fond of using this simple phrase to explain theosis, but were also quick to note that Athanasius and other Orthodox make a further distinction between the essence and energies of God. Human beings cannot literally become a God by uniting with God's essence, but they can become "like God" by uniting themselves with God's energies.

It is thus the Orthodox doctrine of the image, this unassailable spiritual essence of the self, which provides the temporal anchor point around which Orthodox narratives of self-continuity are told. While old ways of being may have to be left behind, the true essence of the self is always there, waiting to be uncovered through one's discovery of the true Church. And it is the Orthodox doctrine of theosis, the ongoing cultivation of this heretofore latent subjectivity, which provides the narrative resources for the themes of growth, maturity, and development also so central to these stories. As another convert, Brian, put it:

> While I think part of me has always been Orthodox, the Church is constantly nurturing and strengthening that part and encouraging me to ignore other, insignificant parts of who I am--or who I think I am, rather, because who we think we are isn't always the truth. And that's the ongoing work of theosis. So I'm always becoming Orthodox, too.

Practicing the Continuous Self: Addressing Everyday Temporal Dilemmas

While Orthodox theologies of personhood and salvation provided the institutionally legitimate "public narratives" (Ammerman 2003) converts implicitly or explicitly drew upon to construct their autobiographical accounts of self-continuity, the experiential persuasiveness of a particular construal of the self was not solely the result of applying theological categories. As stressed in Chapter 1, practices of religious self-formation work through a dialectical relationship between such abstract discourses and situated, everyday experience. In other words, while practices of the self draw from the normative content of pre-existing cultural models, they also reconfigure these models to meet the practical and existential concerns of everyday life. It is through the continual "trying out" and "trying on" of these models within everyday life that religious modes of

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being in the world achieve their reality effects and religious subjectivities take form (see especially Smilde 2007; see also Neitz 1987).

With regard to the practice of narrating conversion, we can again draw on previous research as an informative point of departure. Several contemporary studies of Evangelical conversion note how the narrative construction of a born-again self often becomes compelling to people through its ongoing application to social relationships, allowing people to effectively distance their "new" born-again selves from some of the social entanglements of the past (Chen 2008; Meyer 1998; Smilde 2007). Meyer (1998), for example, details how the "complete break with the past" advocated by Evangelical theology also serves as a practical temporalizing strategy for many Ghanian Pentecostals, allowing them to distance themselves from what they consider the "backward" traditions of many of their community and family members and more easily approach an ideal of being a "modern individual." In a study of Evangelical conversions among impoverished men in Venezuela, Smilde (2007) similarly demonstrates how actively construing one's self as a born-again Christian is the only way former gang members can safely disentangle themselves from their former affiliations and networks. In this way, the narrative of the born-again self becomes more and more persuasive through reconfiguring one's past social ties as belonging to a different kind of person altogether.

Narrative construals of a continuous self work in a similar way, but, instead of creating distance between one's past non-Orthodox and present Orthodox relationships, they are utilized to maintain relational proximity. Several converts I interviewed told me, for example, that converting to Orthodoxy had emotionally hurt close friends and family members, as their conversions were often viewed as an abandonment of – or even a

personal insult against – those who had been a formative part of their past religious lives. In addressing these emotional wounds, Orthodox converts consistently drew upon their constructions of a continuous self to persuade their friends and family members that they were still, deep down, the same person. Chris, for example, talked to me about how he addressed a strained relationship with his wife, Jennifer, who remained in an Evangelical Church:

> When I decided to convert to Orthodoxy, it really put some stress on my marriage. My wife, she was really confused by the whole thing and kind of hurt. She felt like I wasn't just rejecting Evangelicalism, but that I was also in some way rejecting her too….And I had to keep telling her, "I'm the same guy I've always been, the same guy who's always loved you and who's always loved God. And neither of those things is changing because of this. In fact, it's that love of God that's led me to Orthodoxy. I'm fulfilling something within myself, not rejecting anything, especially not you"….And it took awhile for her to come around to that…but she's finally realized that I was telling the truth and so our marriage is really back to normal again, and maybe even better because we've had to really try to understand each other through all of this.

Some utilized their narrative construals of themselves as continuous over time not only to convince significant others that they were still essentially the same person, but even to suggest that it was the remarkable job these others had done in forming their initial faith that had ultimately led them to seek out Orthodoxy. Melissa, for example, grew up in a very committed and active Lutheran household, and her parents had initially taken her decision to convert to the Orthodox Church rather hard:

> My parents, they were kind of upset….They felt like I was rejecting something that they had passed down to me and had worked really hard to instill. But I've told them, "No, no, no. It's what you've taught me that's led me to the [Orthodox] Church." They were really confused by that at first [laughs]. But I told them that they were the ones who taught me to love God. And even though I'm really theologically-minded and got interested in Orthodoxy at first because of my theological questions, that's all driven by that love that they taught me….So, I wouldn't say they are

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happy about it now, but at least I think they realize that I'm not rejecting them, that I'm still basically the same person they raised. I've just come to realize that this same person needs to belong to the Orthodox Church.

Even the local churches themselves worked to maintain and reinforce such ties. During Melissa's chrismation, just a few weeks before our interview, Father Andrew, the priest at St. Tikhon's, took a moment of his remarks to thank Melissa's parents for raising her with a strong love of God, telling those in attendance that "it is that same love of God that they instilled in her that she brings into our Church today. We thank them."

In addition to employing their narratives of self-continuity to maintain past relationships in the present, Orthodox converts also relied on their understandings of themselves as basically continuous over time to address doubts about their ability to stick with the temporal rigors of the Orthodox religious life. "Orthodoxy," as Melinda, a cradle member of St. Nick's Antiochian who had a reputation for "telling it straight", put it:

isn't a one-and-done kind of religion. The first thing people notice is the beauty. But the second thing they notice is the repetition. We do things over and over and over. And then we do them over and over and over again. And that's not just about liturgy, that's what the Orthodox life is: it's you try, you fall down, you get back up, and you do it again and again. And sometimes I'm not sure if the converts are really ready for all that.

Indeed, while feelings toward new members were generally positive in the communities I studied, there were also the occasional expressions of skepticism about converts' intestinal fortitude. Conversion is a double-edged sword. On one side, to convert to a faith marks a strong degree of commitment, for one has personally chosen the religious principles at hand, not "passively" accepted them as part of one's familial, ethnic, or national inheritance. On the other side, however, to convert *to* a faith also always implies converting *from* something else. As such, the act of leaving one's former

faith or faiths can also be interpreted as one's inability to stick with something or keep

commitments – to be "flaky," in other words. I even found that this particular kind of

temporal dis-ease had a name and diagnosis within Orthodox communities: "convertitis."

Indeed, one of the most common admonitions I heard directed at Orthodox inquirers from

priests and laity alike was to make sure that they were the type of convert who was

interested in coming *to* Orthodoxy, not simply running away *from* some aspect of their

former faith that they disliked. These types of converts, it was said, would quickly leave

Orthodoxy as soon as they saw something within their new churches that they did not

like, but usually only after a protracted battle in which they made everyone else in the

parish miserable.

Individuals who had converted from and to multiple faiths before coming to the

Orthodox Church were especially vulnerable to doubts about their abilities to remain

committed to their new religion. Yet several of them used their narrative construals of a

continuous self to combat charges of convertitis and also to change their own feelings

concerning the truth of this diagnosis. Jake, for example, told me:

> I've definitely been suspected of convertitis, and, in the past, I've often
> wondered about that myself. I mean, if you look at my past, I was raised
> Catholic, then was into the New Age stuff in the 70s, then became an
> Evangelical, then the Episcopal Church, and now to Orthodox. And, so,
> yeah, I get why people might be suspicious. And, before becoming
> Orthodox, I would have agreed with them. I just thought that there was
> something wrong with me. You know, "all these other people are sitting in
> the pews looking happy, why can't I be?" But when I found the
> [Orthodox] Church, it all kind of came into place. "Oh, this is why I've
> been so restless! I've been looking for this Church all along and just didn't
> know it was there waiting for me"…So, you know, when I tell people
> about my past and I see that look of suspicion on their faces, I just let them
> know that all of that was just my ongoing search for the Orthodox Church.
> I wasn't flaking out or burning bridges or anything, I was just trying to
> find my way home.

Thus, in using the story of a latent Orthodox subjectivity simply trying to find its way back home, Jake and other converts were able to provide a kind of narrative defense strategy against both their own and others' interpretations of their lives as a series of temporal breaks, enfolding what might very much look like "complete breaks with the past" into something that looks like a much more coherent and continuous process of spiritual development.

Finally, I would also point out that the narrative of self-continuity so prevalent among these converts also allowed them to claim adherence to two distinct, and usually understood as mutually opposed, forms of authenticity: 1) following the call of one's "true, innermost" self and 2) conforming one's self as close as possible after the model of an original (cf., Petersen 1997). Readers may have already noticed that these converts' narratives of a latent, continuous Orthodox subjectivity bear a striking resemblance to what Charles Taylor (1992) has named the modern "ethics of authenticity" – the idea that to live authentically is to discover who one really, truly is and to live life by the dictates of this innermost self. And, indeed, not only contemporary converts but also contemporary Orthodox theologians such as Kallistos Ware and Alexander Schmemann have referred to the image of God as synonymous with one's "true" and "authentic" self (see, for example, Ware 1995: 55-56), leading us to acknowledge that religious and secular conceptions of the self may not always sharply diverge (cf. Mahmood 2005) but may also dovetail and even adopt and adapt from one another. In narrating and thus experiencing their conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy as in part the discovery of their truest selves, Orthodox converts were not only explicitly drawing support from Orthodox theological conceptions of personhood and salvation. They were also garnering support

from more implicit, but no less powerful, references to one of our most influential contemporary conceptions of what it is to be an authentic self. At the same time, in claiming to fashion these innermost selves after the model of "the original" Christian Church, they were also laying claim to the other discourse of authenticity, one which argues that to be authentic is to discover and to conform to that which is pure and original in form. In cultivating the "true" self through conformity to the "true" Church, converts' narratives construe the self as doubly authentic. As a convert named Corey put it:

> When I look back, throughout my life, I was always searching for something real, you know, something with a solid foundation, with roots. And then I found Orthodoxy, the original Christian Church, and it was like, "Yeah, this is for me. This is the real deal. This is what I've been searching for all along.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to show how Orthodox conversion narratives are used as a means to address the relationship between new members' non-Orthodox pasts and Orthodox presents. While much research on conversion narratives has analyzed how such practices construct temporal ruptures in individuals' biographies, thereby constituting distinct past and present selves, this analysis demonstrates that conversion discourse can also be a practice through which to constitute a "true self" that is continuous across past and present temporalities. Moreover, this analysis has shown that this practice of the continuous self is informed by both theological classifications of time and ongoing, existential temporal concerns. Orthodox conversion narratives mediate between these two poles of concern, bringing Orthodox cultural classifications to bear on the lived experience of time and vice-versa, working to form a new religious biography and, subsequently, a new form of religious self-interpretation.

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There have of course been many critiques of the focus on "conversion" in the social scientific literature, arguing that "in most situations of 'religious' transformation, professions of new belief belie the fact that older modes of thought and action were never fully laid aside" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 247; see also Appiah 1992; Hefner 1993). In much the same way, I could draw on my ethnographic data to argue that in situations where actors stress religious self-continuity, they are in many ways ignoring or covering over elements of their religious lives that are "really" quite discontinuous. Such critiques certainly have their uses, particularly in highlighting those elements of history and biography powerful institutions (religious and otherwise) would rather keep concealed.

Yet there is also benefit to analyzing discourses of conversion outside of this hermeneutics of suspicion, largely because religious actors themselves rarely experience continuity and discontinuity in such either/or frames. Rather, under the enabling and constraining influences of their religious traditions, they craft narratives that attempt to address one pole through the other. Indeed, discontinuity and continuity are necessarily interrelated. As Meyer (1998) points out, the continual assertion of breaking with the past in Evangelicalism paradoxically requires the past to continually be called upon, to be reinstated as a part of one's biography. Without it, there is simply nothing to "break with." In similar fashion, Orthodox converts' stories of self-continuity require a backdrop of discontinuity against which the self can be framed as "Orthodox all along." Without such a backdrop of discontinuous temporality, there is simply nothing against which the self's continuity can be asserted. Continuity and discontinuity, then, are less an either/or

dichotomy than a gestalt-like structure of figure and ground, wherein bringing one pole to the fore is often used as a tacit means to address the problems of the other.

Much of the best research on religious conversion has demonstrated how the discourse of conversion is convincing because it allows those who become subject to it to address troublesome non- or differently-religious pasts through a narrative practice of self-rupture. In this chapter, I have hoped to show that in some situations, it may also be used to recuperate such pasts through a narrative practice of self-continuity. Given this fact, the question becomes not "are these pasts really, in truth, more discontinuous or continuous with the present?" Rather it becomes "why are some individuals and institutions liable to address their pasts through a logic of discontinuity and self-transformation and others more liable to address them through a logic of continuity and self-discovery? And to what effects for the subjectivities of those involved?"

While I have highlighted some of theological and practical reasons for why this may be the case in different cultures of Christianity, this is a question of self-formation that can be productively explored across religious and non-religious contexts. For example, these Orthodox narratives in many ways bear striking resemblances to "coming-out" narratives among gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals (Hammack & Cohler 2009; Mason-Schrock 1996). While the process of inhabiting gay, lesbian, or transgender identities necessarily involves processes of both self-change and self-continuity, like the narratives here, coming-out stories almost always narrate a moment (or moments) of discovering who one has truly been all along. There are also very intriguing similarities to narratives in organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain 1991; Pollner & Stein 1996), where the long, slow process of recovery requires one to recognize that one has

always been and always will be an alcoholic. In making such comparisons across religious and secular contexts and practices (or, in the case of AA, a quasi-religious context) we can begin to examine if there is an even more general cultural logic or set of logics at work in determining why some institutions exhort their members to emphasize biographical continuity, while others emphasize rupture. While the findings from this chapter can only be suggestive at this point, the following factors seem pertinent to explore in future comparative work:

1) The larger institution's normative models of the self and its development (e.g., "image vs. likeness;" "theosis").

2) Practitioners' concerns about their own authenticity and legitimacy within the community of practice (e.g., "doubly-authentic selves;" "convertitis").

3) Practitioners' and institutions' concerns about whether past social attachments and relationships are congruent or incongruent with the new identity.

In taking up such comparative work, scholars of conversion can begin to address how several of our contemporary social institutions – religious and otherwise – enable and constrain the temporality of modern subjectivities and self-interpretations.

Chapter 4
Of Bodies and Souls: Fasting and the Moral Topography of the Orthodox Self

"Momma, look at all this food!," a little girl in a purple dress, probably no older than six, yells out, whirling a string of sausage links above her head. Amused and slightly embarrassed, the girl's father walks over to take the sausages from her hand and place them back in the one of many baskets of food and drink covering the tables and floors of the community building.

"And all the vodka!" an older man cries out, triumphantly raising a bottle of Stolichnaya above his head, to the laughter and applause of those in attendance.

Spirits are literally and figuratively high at St. Tikhon's Orthodox Church this early morning, much as I expect they are throughout the Orthodox communities here in the Twin Cities. It is Easter Morning – Pascha, as the Eastern Churches call it. In celebration of the Resurrection and the end of the Great Lenten Fast, church members have brought Paschal baskets filled with many of the foods and drink from which they have abstained for the last forty days. Their baskets overflow with sausages, loaves of bread, rich dairy spreads and olive oils, chocolates, bottles of beer, wine, vodka, and fine cheeses as well as the occasional box of more pedestrian (but no less popular) Cheez-Its. The Orthodox at St. Tikhon's exchange Paschal greetings of "Christ is Risen" and "Indeed, He is Risen" as they begin to unload their baskets to share with others, slicing meats and cheeses and pouring wine and vodka into plastic cups. Having abstained from meat, dairy, oil, and alcohol for the past several weeks, the parishioners at St. Tikhon's are excited for their Paschal Feast, which, according to the Orthodox Tradition, begins at around 2am Sunday morning, just after the Paschal liturgy that started at 11pm Saturday night. And, as many a parishioner has told me, the celebration won't end until sometime around sunrise. "We Orthodox," as one of the deacons at St. Tikhon's told me a few weeks earlier, "like a good party to go along with our piety."

I don't plan to stay until sunrise myself, as the three hour Paschal service preceding this celebration has me wanting my bed even more than a piece of cheese and a shot of vodka. But, before I make my "early" exit, I stop by a table to chat with Jennifer, Alexei, Jason, Mary, Christina, and Paul, six parishioners who I've gotten to know fairly well during my time here at the church. As I approach, Paul sticks out his hand and greets me with a hearty "Christ is Risen!" Shaking his hand, I reply with a bit less enthusiastic "Indeed He is Risen". Mary invites me to sit down and eat with them, but I tell her that I'm exhausted and will be leaving the festivities early tonight. Most in this group know that I've been fasting (if not always successfully) this Lenten season as part of my research, and Alexei nods and says, "Yes, the fast can really take it out of you." The others nod in sympathetic agreement, and I don't quite have the heart to say that it might be many hours of attending Holy Week services as much as the fast that is leaving me sluggish. By the standards of Orthodox liturgical piety, particularly during Holy Week, I'm still a lightweight.

"You must be pretty excited to finally be able to eat all of this stuff again," I say, pointing to the two big baskets of food sitting on the table. They smile and nod, voicing agreement as they start to parse out the food. But then Christina interjects.

"I'm looking forward to eating a cheeseburger very soon, don't get me wrong," she says, a smile on her face. "But I'm also always kind of sad when it comes to an end. You learn so much about yourself when you fast."

"It's so true," adds Paul. "It's very powerful. It just kind of draws your attention to things about yourself that you hadn't noticed before. Important things. I'm actually looking forward to the next one."

Soon, a discussion ensues about how much they will all miss the fasting season, and Alexei uses the opportunity to fill some cups with wine. "To the Fast!" he says, lofting the plastic cup of cabernet into the air. "May its lessons stay with us throughout the year."

"To the Fast!" the rest of the table responds, and I decide to take my leave as the faithful begin to happily enjoy their Paschal Feast. On the way home, I look forward to getting a few hours of sleep before waking up later that morning for yet another liturgy...but not before I hit up a late-night burger joint and grab a cheeseburger myself.

A Pedagogy in the Passions: Fasting, Passions, and the Moral Topography of the Orthodox Self[15]

While no one at St. Tikhon's – myself especially included – decided to forego the feasting that night in favor of continuing their fast, the sentiment that fasting was a deeply pedagogical practice that one might actually miss and yearn for was quite common among both "cradle" Orthodox and established converts across the Orthodox communities I studied. Yet, for new converts especially, fasting was often regarded as something of an epiphany in their projects of religious self-formation. What was initially considered an unnecessary physical burden by many came to be experienced by these same individuals as an enlightening spiritual endeavor. Fasting, as I often heard, was not simply about being hungry, nor even solely about following an obligation first set down

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[15] I borrow the term "moral topography of the self" from Taylor (1988).

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by Church Tradition over a millennium ago – although, of course, it involved both of these things. More importantly, fasting was a distinctively ethical practice through which one could learn about, reflect on, and possibly even transform one's self. Fasting, as Paul told me in a conversation just two weeks before the Paschal feast described above, was "about coming to terms with the things within myself that keep me away from God" and, as Christina put it, "a way to confront myself…to see where I'm at spiritually."

Fasting, of course, is a practice integral to many religious traditions and has a long history within Christianity itself (Bynum 1987; Shaw 1998). Within much of the contemporary United States, however, fasting tends to be more peripheral to Christian religious practice. The majority of Protestant denominations do not mandate fasting and, within Catholicism, the Church's strict fasting rules have been relaxed since the Vatican II council. Within the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, fasting remains central to communal identity and spiritual life, and the Church sets comparatively strict guidelines for its members. In terms of dietary restrictions, fasting in the Orthodox tradition generally involves abstaining from meat, dairy, oil, and wine (usually interpreted as extending to all alcoholic drinks). As well as the restriction on types of food and drink, the Church states that one should also reduce the overall amount of food one takes, usually eating only small meals (or sometimes just one small meal) during the day.

There are four main fasting periods or "seasons" during the year: 1) the Lenten Fast (also known as the Great Fast), which begins seven weeks before Pascha; 2) the Nativity Fast, in which one fasts the 40 days before Christmas; 3) the Dormition Fast, a two week fast from August 1-14; and 4) the Apostles' Fast, the length of which varies depending on when Pascha falls on a given year. In addition to these major fasting

periods, several holy days throughout the year, such as the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, are also days of fasting. Furthermore, if receiving Communion on Sunday, Orthodox parishioners are required to refrain from food after midnight of the morning of taking the Eucharist.

The majority of people in my study had little to no experience with fasting before converting, and those who did usually did so under much less strenuous guidelines. As such, the strict rules as well as the sheer amount and often extended length of fasting days and periods struck newcomers as particularly daunting, even draconian at times. As one couple explained to me, "the fasting was a big obstacle to our committing at first. It just seemed at the time to be over-the-top and rigid. We thought, 'Why does God care at all what you eat?'"

Clergy in the communities I studied spent a great deal of time trying to address new members' negative associations with fasting by stressing that fasting was not a way to punish the body, but rather to utilize the body as a way to illumine and cultivate the spiritual and moral condition of the soul. More specifically, fasting was understood as essential to the work of what was called "knowing the passions". The passions, according to Orthodox belief, are disordered desires, distortions of humans' natural bodily needs and inclinations that have resulted from the separation of humanity from God after the Fall. More specifically, while every human being is thought to have a natural desire for the infinite, as this is what encourages humankind to follow and become like God, the separation from God after the Fall has meant that this desire for the infinite becomes disoriented and turned toward worldly instead of heavenly things (Staniloae 2002). The desire to love, for example, becomes the passion of lust, while the desire for rest becomes

the passion of sloth, or the desire to eat becomes the passion of gluttony. Only through

becoming intimately aware of how these passions operate on the self can one reorient

them toward God through ascetic practice, ultimately transforming desire from worldly

passion to godly virtue. This process of becoming intimately aware of one's passions and

how they work is what is meant by "knowing" them (Chryssavgis 2008).

While fasting is not the only ascetic discipline meant to recognize and reform the

passions[16], it is widely considered to be the cornerstone of ascetic practice in Orthodox

thought. This is because it is gluttony that is believed to be the first and most rudimentary

in the hierarchy of the passions, leading to all others such as lust, greed, anger, sloth,

envy, and pride (Limberis 2011). Priests were fond of quoting the early Church Fathers in

this regard, who stated that passions were interconnected like links in a chain, one being

the offshoot of another. By fasting from the passions of the stomach, it was argued, one

could gain insight into the logic and effects of the others. As Fr. Peter at St. Basil's told

his parishioners:

> Fasting is a very effective means of dealing with those aspects of
> ourselves that take us away from God. Because when you're fasting from
> the food, see that is a very concrete form of confronting the passions. It's
> very tangible….If you fast from food, if you're attentive to it, you'll learn
> certain principles. You'll learn how desire works on you and how you are
> engaging that desire. And then you can take those same principles and you
> can start applying them to the more subtle areas of your life – for example,
> passions like anger, lust, envy, pride. If you're attentive, you'll see that
> fasting is not just about food, but has multiple moral and spiritual
> dimensions.

While placing fasting within this larger interpretive context of fighting and

recognizing the passions provided a justification for new converts' initiation into the

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[16] Establishing a daily prayer rule, saying of the Jesus Prayer, the practice of charity, regular confession, scripture reading, and regularly partaking of the Eucharist and other sacraments, for example, are also established ascetical disciplines in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

practice, it does not tell us much about how converts themselves came to grasp its "multiple moral and spiritual dimensions". The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to fill in this gap, to show how new or soon-to-be Orthodox Christians incorporated this understanding of the moral significance of fast into the contours of lived embodiment, transforming habits, sensations, and emotions associated with the fasting body into privileged mediums for the moral evaluation and development of the self.

The Virtues and/of the Body

 To argue that there is an intimate connection established between embodied sensations such as hunger and a religiously-prescribed form of moral selfhood may seem somewhat strange given that scholarly thinking about both morality and religion has long been shaped by Cartesian and Kantian assumptions which privilege mind over body and abstract norms over concrete sensations and sensibilities (MacIntyre 1984; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 1990; Mellor and Schilling 1997). Yet significant recent scholarship has focused attention on how religious traditions themselves have rarely subscribed to such a view. For many religious groups – including, as we will see, Eastern Orthodoxy – the lived body's materiality has been regarded as essential to the constitution of moral, "godly" personhood while, often at the same time, viewed as particularly susceptible to moral corruption (see Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Winchester 2008). These same religious traditions, moreover, often associate these salient moral categories with particular bodily states, sensations and sensory organs, including pain (Asad 1993; Shilling and Mellor 2010); listening and sound (Bender 2008; Engelke 2007; Hirshckind 2009); touch (Csordas 1994); movement or kinesthesia (Luhrmann 2004); and, as is the case here, the stomach, appetite, and hunger (Bynum 1987; Laidlaw 1995; Shaw 1998).

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Talal Asad's scholarship on the uses of pain in medieval Christian monasticism is particularly influential in these contemporary discussions. According to Asad (1993), the monastic who took on painful practices such as self-flagellation was not so much learning to despise his body, but to learn to understand more fully the truth of his fallen condition. Arguing against popular understandings of ascetic practices as involving a desire to kill the body, Asad convincingly demonstrates that the body was not seen as an obstacle to self-understanding, but more as "a medium by which the truth about the self's essential potentiality for transgression could be brought into the light…" (1993: 110). Within the economy of truth that characterized early Christian monastic practice, pain and extreme discomfort were privileged techniques by which these truth-bearing functions of the body could be cultivated.

Following Asad, Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) have developed rich ethnographies of contemporary Islamic practices in Egypt that also make a strong case for the intimate connection between corporeal states, embodied practices, and moral agency. In her work on the women's mosque movement, Mahmood analyzes the complex connections the women in her study make between their bodily practices and the ethical formation of their souls. According to Mahmood, veiling, for example, is not simply a way to display one's already modest nature but a way to actively cultivate modesty, to ingrain modest feelings into the habits and desires of the recalcitrant self via the body: "For the mosque participants, it is the various movements of the body that comprise the material substance of the ethical domain" (Mahmood 2005: 31; cf., Winchester 2008). In his work on sermon cassette-listening among men in Egypt, Hirschkind makes a similar point. The men who listen to these sermons, Hirschkind

shows, do so not to demonstrate pre-existing piety, nor even to simply ruminate on the content of a religious discourse. More fundamentally, the act of listening itself is understood to be a disciplinary practice aimed at honing what Hirschkind terms "an ethically responsive sensorium: the requisite sensibilities that many of those engaging in cassette-sermon listening see as enabling them to live as devout Muslims in a world increasingly ordered by secular rationalities" (10). Listening, in other words, is an embodied technique through which to hone the self into an instrument of religious-cum-moral perceptiveness and action.

Asad, Mahmood, and Hirschkind all provide richly detailed descriptions of how the practical disciplining of the body in religious contexts is not simply an internalization of prohibitions. Rather, each study highlights the productive role such practices play in constituting the body as a complex terrain for the moral interrogation and cultivation of the self, as well as the ways that these relationships are influenced by the wider theological contexts of religious traditions. In investigating how the relationship between various practices, bodies, and subjectivities are articulated within and shaped by religious discourses, these investigations go a long way in critiquing notions of moral selfhood that have relegated the body to a subordinate position.

Yet what remains missing from such work is a more phenomenological account of how these connections between physiological states of the body and the moral conditions of the soul become established at the level of the lived experiences of those who participate in them. While it is certainly true that the connections between the body and notions of the moral self are mediated by complex practices and theological traditions and thus not universal in their meanings and applications, it is also the case that the

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relationship between bodily senses/sensations and moral subjectivity is not simply a top-down imposition of moral categories on otherwise amorphous bodily experience. Instead, in this chapter, I look to how the practice of fasting activates and elaborates upon existing structures of embodied experience that lend themselves to interpretation via more abstract Orthodox moral discourses pertaining to the passions and virtue.

To better understand how this works, I draw from Lakoff and Johnson's work on embodied cognition and, in particular, "image schemas" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1989; Johnson 2007). According to the two authors, image schemas are prelinguistic cognitive structures based on recurring bodily sensations, movements, and perceptions that provide the experiential correlates for more abstract, conceptual understandings of self and world. For Lakoff and Johnson, basic aspects of our bodily being-in-the-world come to be defined by recurring patterns and structures such as up-down, front-back, near-far, in-out, etc. These body-based schemas, in turn, provide the foundations or sensory scaffolding for the metaphorical elaboration of experience into conceptual thought or discourse. The image schema of PATH, for example, derives from our recurrent bodily experiences of moving through space (sensation and movement) and perceiving objects moving around us (perception). This PATH schema can then be semiotically mapped onto more conceptually abstract but semantically fine-grained metaphors such as "life is a journey." To use another example, the image schema of CONTAINER derives from our experiences of encountering bounded regions in space in which a boundary distinguishes between an interior and an exterior. Our bodies themselves serve as perhaps the most primal basis of this experiential pattern, as many of our most basic bodily functions involve ingestion and excretion, intake and outtake of substances such as food and air.

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The CONTAINER schema then becomes an experiential prism through which to meaningfully ground a host of abstractions that involve placement within or outside of boundaries, physical and/or symbolic.

Moreover, image schemas can be combined in order to create more complex structures of meaning. Take, for example, the seemingly simple statement, "He's gone out of his mind." In this sentence, image schemas of CONTAINER (being "outside" the boundary of normal psychological functioning) and PATH (a temporal transition from inside to outside) come together to make conceptual sense of the experience of insanity. In such instances, Lakoff and Johnson argue, we are elaborating on preconceptual, body-based meaning in order to understand a more conceptually abstract domain, understanding the more abstract in terms of the more experientially concrete.

Below, I draw on Lakoff and Johnson's focus on image schemas to designate some of the specific experiential structures activated by fasting, schemas through which Orthodox conceptions of sin and virtue become phenomenologically and interpretively linked to the sensations, movements, and perceptions of the fasting body. However, while taking inspiration from Lakoff and Johnson's approach, I also diverge from it in some important ways. Despite their noteworthy attempts to put forth a non-dualistic and deeply embodied understanding of how even abstract concepts emerge from and are continuous with embodied experience, Lakoff and Johnson also exhibit what Kimmel (2005) terms a "feed-forward bias" in their accounts of how image schemas work. In other words, Lakoff and Johnson argue that abstract conceptualizations become meaningfully structured through their metaphorical association with preconceptual experiential structures, but do not have an account of how more abstract categorizations may in turn

"feed-back" to modify embodied experience. This is a problematic bias for understanding the effects of fasting because fasting not only encouraged converts to understand the moral self in terms of experiential structures associated with bodily hunger and appetite. Once these experiential-interpretive connections were established, converts also began to experience their own bodies from within the structures of a new moral frame. Thus, while highlighting the importance of image schemas in encouraging converts to make interpretive connections between bodily experiences and new moral discourses of the self, I employ a more dialectical and co-constitutive understanding of this relationship, one in which the interpretive frame initially suggested by an image schema recursively highlights bodily experiences corresponding to the frame, thereby strengthening the reality effect of a particular interpretation of experience (cf. Leder 1990: 152-54).

In addition, Lakoff and Johnson assume that image schemas are universally available to be drawn upon at any given moment. My analysis, however, highlights how particular religious practices activate and elaborate upon image schemas in ways that compel social actors' attention. This highlights the fact that religious discourses not only contain metaphorical references to more deeply ingrained image schemas (e.g., Balaban 1999; Slingerland 2003) but that religious practices themselves act as means by which image schemas are stimulated and set in motion. Through disrupting and problematizing the body's taken-for-granted habitual, emotional, and physiological relationships with food, fasting produces experiences which activate the image-schematic structures that lend themselves to Orthodox moral discourses pertaining to the moral self and its "passions." These image-schematic connections, in turn, constitute an experiential-

interpretive feedback loop between converts' bodily experiences and Orthodox discourses of moral subjectivity, each one mutually reinforcing the other.

Finally, this chapter focuses more attention on the intersubjective, relational contexts in which the process of interpretively elaborating image-schemas take place than is the case with Johnson and Lakoff and other image-schematic theorists (but see Kimmel 2005 for a counter-example). While Johnson and Lakoff tend to conceptualize the imaginative projection of image-schemas (e.g., sensations of hunger) into new conceptual terrain (e.g., morality) as an individual act, the analysis here demonstrates that social others within the "community of practice" play a significant role in encouraging converts to move in particular interpretive directions.

A Note on the Data

While there are many fasting periods in the Eastern Orthodox liturgical year, most of what follows is focused on the 47-day Lenten and Holy Week Fast before Pascha – the most significant fasting period in Eastern Orthodox Christianity – and the 40-day Nativity Fast before Christmas. I do this to add some analytical focus and clarity to the chapter but also because these were by far the times at which my subjects most deeply involved themselves in the practice and the times when I myself was able to participate. My data are drawn from interviews, conversations, observations, as well as my own participation in the practice of fasting during these two fasting periods (see Chapter 2 for more details on methodology).

Compulsion and the Hypocrisy of the Stomach

It's approximately 9:30am on a Saturday morning in late November, and I wake up excited to make breakfast. A small thing to be excited about, I suppose, but between fieldwork on Sundays and school responsibilities during the weekdays, Saturday is usually the only day where I can spend the needed time to prepare something that isn't just a bowl of cold cereal or, even more likely, a granola bar that I stuff in my pocket to eat on my way to work. Looking through the refrigerator, I decide on an omelet. I lay out some cheddar and mozzarella cheeses, a little bacon, cut up some onions and green peppers as I let the frying pan heat on the stove. Once the skillet is at the right temperature (and after I've made my way through my first cup of coffee), I crack open three eggs and listen to them hiss and sizzle as they gently hit the surface of the pan.

And then…I remember. I'm supposed to be fasting. And not just today, but until Christmas. Resigned to my fate, I decide on a bowl of oatmeal instead and contemplate why, exactly, I thought doing this kind of "observant participation" (Wacquant 2011) was such a great idea in the first place.

The next morning, however, I find that my disappointing breakfast experience was not at all idiosyncratic when I decide to strike up a conversation about how the first week of fasting was going with a few church members at St. Basil's at the Sunday coffee hour following liturgy. After thinking for a moment, a parishioner named Brian says, "I always get a bad case of the put-it-backs."

"What the heck are the put-it-backs?" another person at our table, Joy, asks.

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"You know, like I went to the fridge yesterday for some lunch, grabbed some turkey and swiss for a sandwich – whoops, fasting. Put-it-back. Wanted to grab some Cheetohs for a snack – whoops, fasting. Put-it-back. Happens for at least the first week."

While most did not have an actual name for the experience of catching themselves in the act of reaching for non-fasting foods while perusing the fridge or pantry, the restrictions on what for most people were major parts of their everyday diets was regularly mentioned as an important way in which fasting disrupted the normal workings of bodily habit. In cases such as these, fasting created a conflict between the "rules" of which one should be explicitly aware and the habitual inclinations of the body that tended toward automaticity and "forgetfulness." The body's habitual tendency to act first and ask questions later created a multitude of situations in which one's eating habits outpaced reflective awareness, only to be consciously "caught" a moment later, often to the chagrin of even the most pious subjects intent on following the rules. As a convert named Mark explained it, "You find yourself reaching for that beer at the end of the day or unwrapping that candy bar in the afternoon and going, 'Woah, wait a minute, what I am doing here?'"

In the language of Lakoff and Johnson's image-schema theory, this experience of not being fully in control of one's eating habits is associated with an even more basic-level image-schematic structure of COMPULSION. COMPULSION is itself part of a larger family of image schemas termed "force dynamics" (Tamly 1988) that include schemas such as ATTRACTION, DIVERSION, BLOCKAGE, ENABLEMENT, and REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT. Some of the earliest and most primal categories of bodily experience humans undergo, Johnson and Lakoff argue, are those associated with these

experience of FORCE in which a) a source acts upon a target or patient with b) various degrees of intensity and with c) different causal consequences for the source and target involved. Force dynamics are bound up with basic senses of bodily agency and constraint. An ENABLEMENT schema, for example, emerges from recurrent experiences of agentic abilities to physically affect other entities or persons – e.g. the experience of being able to throw a ball across a room or to get the attention of someone by addressing them in certain ways (like when we cry as infants or, later in life, learn to address people by pronouns or their names).

While the ENABLEMENT schema is constituted through our various "I can" experiences, the COMPULSION schema, by contrast, is related to those many situations in which we feel acted upon or carried away by some other agent or entity – experiences, in other words, of "I must." Such "I must" experiences are related to being acted upon by external forces or actors (like when we are pushed to the ground by a strong gust of wind or an aggressive assailant) but also by more "inner" bodily forces such as strong emotions, habits, or impulses. Leder (1990), for example, provides a compelling and detailed phenomenological analysis of the many ways in which the structure of embodiment not only provides the necessary conditions for all of our agentic "I can" capacities for acting upon self and world, but also involves basic experiences of compulsion or "I must". Basic human needs to breathe, sleep, drink, and, yes, eat at regular intervals regularly exert demands that exist below and largely outside of the control of personal subjectivity, compelling us to meet needs in which we do not have much say. As Leder himself phrases it:

> I must eat, breathe, excrete, drink, sleep, at certain times and in certain
> ways to mollify inner demands. My personal subjectivity can choose how

to fulfill such biological needs, eating one food rather than another. But it does not assert a final autonomy…When the personal subject seeks to overcome the vegetative "I must," it is the subject who is ultimately overcome (48).

Converts were encouraged to interpretively dwell in their own bodily experiences of "I must" and to think about what their bodies' habitual and impulse-driven relationships to food disclosed in terms of how their passions operate. For many, the lesson drawn was that the passions are less explicit belief states and more deeply-ingrained habits that guide action outside of the purview of explicit awareness. Indeed, in Orthodox theology, passions are said to become rooted in the self in the form of lasting habits or vices, disposing one towards sin and thus becoming the major obstacles to cultivating the Christ-like virtues that are part and parcel of theosis.[17] The habitual nature of the passions is significant because passions are thought to be so deeply ingrained in the usually subconscious patterns of bodily behavior, perception, and emotion that orient one in everyday life that one is generally not aware of their influence. As such, they are often stubborn to conscious reflection and modification – a serious roadblock for the reorientation of human desire that Orthodoxy views as necessary for salvation. "Passions," as Dmitri, a deacon at St. Tikhon's told me and a group of relatively new Orthodox inquirers one day at Sunday coffee hour:

> are sneaky. They're sneaky because they are so ingrained in us, in our automatic, unthinking behaviors, that they just seem natural. Elder Ephraim called them 'thorny roots' just to give some impression of how embedded in our natures they become and how difficult they can be to dig up.

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[17] As discussed in Chapter 3, salvation, or theosis, in the Orthodox Church is understood as the long, continual process of fashioning one's self into the likeness of God, "likeness" referring to the moral and spiritual qualities associated with Christ. The acquisition of these virtuous qualities, in turn, requires asceticism.

And, speaking to the faithful during the second week of Lent, Father Mark told his

parish:

> When we find ourselves struggling to keep the Fast, to break our
> automatic responses with regard food, there is an important lesson to be
> learned about sin and the passions that give rise to sin. Passion are our bad
> habits…those things that control us from within.

With such interpretive encouragement from clergy, many converts came to

connect their experience of COMPULSION with these broader understandings about the

habitual nature of sin and the passions. After finding herself on multiple occasions eating

non-fasting foods during her Lenten Fast, for example, first-time faster Beth told me:

> So many times now, I've found myself mindlessly breaking it [the fast].
> Just unthinkingly eating stuff that I've already told myself I'm not
> supposed to eat!....And then I begin to wonder, how often does that
> happen with sin? How often do I just act on a sinful desire without even
> thinking about it?

Such interpretive connections became an impetus to being more attentive to the

compulsive force and power of habit in converts' moral lives. To cite but a few examples,

a woman named Maggie began carefully monitoring how often she would swear

throughout the day, while a man named Jared started to take note of how often he raised

his voice in anger at work and at home. Another convert, Andrew, started to document

how much of his time and money he gave (or failed to give) to his Church's outreach

mission to the poor. In each of these cases, a phenomenological experience of bodily

COMPULSION helped initiate a more abstract and reflexive form of moral self-scrutiny.

What began with reflecting on the compulsive habits of the gut was analogically

extended to the close monitoring of other habitual aspects of one's life. What began as

corporeal interoception ended in moral introspection.

Another common way in which the automaticity of one's regular eating habits was phenomenologically disclosed in an experience of COMPULSION was in the tendency to "overeat", especially during the first week or so of the fasting period. A common guideline given by Orthodox leadership for *how much* to eat during a fast was to stop eating while one was either still somewhat hungry or at least before one was fully satiated[18]. Again, while most everyone who participated understood they should follow this explicit rule, doing so on a regular basis proved difficult. During an interview I was conducting with a couple, Abby and Jacob, during Great Lent, for example, I was treated to a meal of spaghetti and home-made tomato sauce, of which all three of us ate abundantly. Looking down at the empty pot after the end of the meal, Abby explained that she had initially planned for there to be enough leftovers for their dinner tomorrow. "Major fasting fail," exclaimed Jacob, who went on to suggest that maybe they should just start taking the spoon out of the pot after getting their first portions. Like the converts above, Jacob and Abby transposed their experience of COMPULSION into an Orthodox moral register, interpreting it as a lesson not simply about the difficulty of abruptly altering one's habitual eating patterns, but also – and more significantly – about the nature of their passionate souls. As they explained it to me during an extended conversation after our meal:

> **Abby:** We're finding out that this is part of the learning process involved in fasting. The Holy Fathers write about the "hypocrisy of the stomach". Even when you've had plenty, you want more.
>
> **Jacob:** And it applies to so many other passions, like lust or greed. It's this habit or addiction of always wanting more and more and more…The Church Fathers, they say, it all begins in the stomach, and then it spreads

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[18] This is a guideline based on the words of St. Gregory the Sinaite who stated that there were three degrees of eating: temperance, sufficiency, and satiety. Temperance, he noted, was when someone wants to eat more food but abstains.

from there. And so we've kind of tried to take that lesson to heart, you know, try to cut back, cut down, focus on what's important.

Me: In what ways, specifically, do you think?

Abby: Well, we're still trying to work it out with the food, obviously [laughs as she points to the empty spaghetti pot in the sink]. But we've just decided, you know, to cut back on entertainment – frivolous magazines and television, you know….And on consumption, in general, because that's a big way I think we're programmed, at least here in the United States, to give into our passions, to be ruled by our passions, I would say.

Jacob: Yeah, like it's some great virtue to shop your way into debt….But it's the same thing, the same thing as eating more than you really need, eating even when your belly is so full that it's bursting. Buying crap even when you don't have room in your house for all the other stuff you bought last year. That's how the passions work.

Me: And so you think fasting has helped you understand that in a new way?

Jacob: Uh-huh. Definitely.

Abby: It's just such a tangible experience….[W]hen you have to try to control one of your most basic impulses – to eat – you kind of recognize these things about your condition at a very concrete level.

Passions, in the Orthodox understanding, are akin to an instatiable hunger

(Staniloae 2002). Even as they constantly cry out for satisfaction, they can never be

pacified but constantly override one's capacities for self-awareness and self-control. As

Abby and Jacob's "spaghetti incident" makes clear, through fasting this understanding is

not simply interpreted in the abstract, but experientially anchored in the gut. Through the

schema of COMPULSION, the experience of the body as a problematic ethical terrain

first begins to take shape.

Objects of Desire and the Porous Body

Fasting not only revealed the automaticity of convert's bodily activities, but also the relative strength of the objects of desire to which their habits and appetites were oriented. As the fast continued, strong cravings for certain non-fasting foods began to develop. Once one finally had a handle on the body's automatic inclinations toward desired food objects, their continued physical absence became accompanied by an increasingly strong desire to have them back.

Beth, for example, told me about longing for her morning latte from Starbucks, and how the thought of it "seemed to stick in my mind throughout the day," while Greg joked about his "dreams of roast beef sandwiches." I found that for many individuals, this desire was not simply one for a food or drink item as an isolated object, but also for the place of the food or beverage in their everyday routines. Jeff and I, for example, commiserated over the loss of our respective beer or dram of bourbon at the end of the day, something we both did as a way to ritually "wind down" before bed. Without it, both of us found ourselves struggling to relax and fall asleep at night. Elizabeth, too, found herself less productive in the morning without her lattes. "Part of it is the need for the caffeine," she told me, "but the other part is simply that my whole day doesn't feel right without it."

Along with the cravings for desired food items, fasting also started to induce basic but experientially profound physiological changes. As a convert named Philip told me:

> I've come to appreciate the fact that fasting enacts a physiological change within us, that it changes you on just a simple biological level. It really attunes our bodies to, "Okay, something different is happening right now."

Indeed, the removal of fat- and protein-rich foods from the diet coupled with the significant reduction of the *amount* of food a person takes in during fasting necessarily resulted in changes in how one felt at the most basic bodily level. While we are often unaware of how much of our daily activity is structured by the rhythms of our bodies' basic digestive and metabolic needs, fasting (and particularly prolonged fasting) alters these patterns to such an extent that the visceral body, which usually recedes to the far background of conscious experience, becomes an object of focal awareness.[19] Feelings originating from the body's visceral depths project themselves outward, surfacing at unforeseen times and in unexpected places: the rumbling of one's stomach during a business meeting, for example, or the weariness in one's limbs during an afternoon walk or workout, or hunger-induced headaches that make studying for a midterm exam extremely difficult.

In bringing to awareness the dependent nature of the embodied self on all those objects of comfort and desire that propped up converts' (and my own) daily practices, routines, and moods – whether getting up for work, making it through the day, or relaxing to go to sleep – fasting served to activate and combine two new image-schemas: those of CONTAINMENT and SUPPORT. As mentioned above, the CONTAINER or CONTAINMENT schema is derived from aspects of our experience in which substances are placed within and removed from bounded spatial areas,, of which our experiences of our own bodies as containers in which things such as food and air move in and out are primary. The SUPPORT schema, like COMPULSION, is force-dynamic in nature, as it indicates the nature and causal directionality of a force – e.g. the books are supported by

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19 As Leder (1990: 83) puts it, "When normal physiology reaches certain functional limits it seizes our attention. We remember the body at times of hunger, thirst, strong excretory needs, and the like."

the shelf; the baby's head is supported by the father's hand; the writer's backside is supported by the uncomfortable office chair, etc.

While many of us are often used to experiencing the body as a hermetically sealed or "buffered" entity (Taylor 2007), this experience itself is supported by the stabilization of a much more fundamental body-world relation upon which the singularity of self-consciousness depends (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Thus, if the schema of COMPULSION outlined in the previous section derived from an experience in which the embodied self of the convert reflexively turned "inward" toward the nature of his or her habits and impulses, the combined schemas of SUPPORT and CONTAINMENT derived from an experience which disclosed the external milieu to which those habits and impulses were attached and from which they derived their conative force (Csordas 1993). Through these processes of body-world destablization, converts began to experience the interface between body and world less as a buffer between inside and outside and more like a highly porous membrane in which internal states were dependent on external things. As Greg told me during an interview:

> Fasting makes you recognize that you are not as independent as you might
> think you are. You have to face up to the fact that you depend on a lot of
> little stuff to get you through your day.

These combined SUPPORT and CONTAINMENT schemas became interpretively transposed into a moral register in two ways. First, the recognition that the smooth functioning of many of one's everyday routines and emotions were dependent on things as seemingly trivial as a latte or, as in my case, a late-night beer or tumbler of bourbon[20] came to be understood as an exercise in humility. Orthodox clergy warned that

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[20] Luckily I take my coffee without dairy, otherwise I'm not sure I would have made it through this experiment in participative piety. While I told myself at the outset that I would try to cut back on coffee

the relationship between the passion of pride and asceticism was fraught with moral

paradox and hidden spiritual danger. While ascetic practices were meant to humble the

soul via the flesh, there was also the ever-present danger that one could become proud of

how rigorously (and righteously) one was performing one's ascetic efforts. Luckily,

fasting seemed to have its own built-in humbling mechanisms, at least for first-time

fasters. As a woman named Melissa told me:

> I'm kind of embarrassed about this now, but when I joined the Church and
> started fasting, I was like, "oh yeah, fasting, I'm going to rock at this!
> [laughs] I'm going to be the best faster ever!" And, of course, that was the
> totally wrong attitude….I kind of realized, whoops, you're not as great as
> you think you are, Melissa. I was really struggling with it – I was hungry,
> you know, my stomach was rumbling and I just really, really wanted the
> foods that I wasn't having….And I was *struggling* with that. And I still do.
> So I soon recognized that I'm not as in control as I think. But now I
> recognize that that's kind of the point. It's not to prove to yourself how
> great you are. Quite the opposite really. It's really there to knock your
> little ego down a peg.

In addition to revealing and putting a check on excess egoism and pride, the

combined activation of SUPPORT and CONTAINMENT schemas also served as

enticements to critically question and renegotiate one's relationships to and reliance on

objects of "worldly" desire. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, passions are thought to

be the result of a misapplication of desire, a consequence, in other words, of human

beings' attempts to fulfill their desires with finite, worldly things as opposed to the true

infinite energies of God. Only through rightly orienting and ordering one's desires toward

God can the passions be healed. As I heard several Orthodox in the Twin Cities put it,

fasting was a way to question what it is one truly hungers for and, ultimately, to make

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during the Fasts (I drink too much of it anyway), I ended up drinking more than usual to compensate for the
lack of other food and drink items I enjoyed. I'm sure an Orthodox ascetic would have much to say about
what that reveals about my overall spiritual condition.

less space for worldly things and more space for God in one's life. Jeremy, for example, told me:

> And so that's been the big lesson for me in the past year with fasting, trying to simplify in a way, or just kind of resist…always being occupied with *things*. Which is hard, which is really hard….[T]o be honest that's been kind of my focus, has been to try and simplify, so that there's less of me that's dependent on frivolous things and more ground for spirituality, you know, more space for God….Before, I just thought I didn't have time for any spiritual activity. Like, you know having time to say prayers, having that kind of thing. I didn't have time for that, and I would be frustrated about that. But it's like I didn't actually back up and say, "Well, I should probably just, sort of, stop spending my time on this, you know, this frivolous stuff."

Ultimately, this experience of porous embodiment suggested an interpretive elaboration in which the soul, much like the stomach, was open to being filled with external things – some of which were morally and spiritually nourishing while others were morally and spiritually harmful. Converts made an interpretive connection between filling the body and filling the soul, and many attempted to "cleanse" themselves of worldly attachments and/or "fill up" on godly activities. Abby and Jacob, for example, engaged in a "cell phone fast" in which they committed to not using their smart phones for anything other than basic communication and not as an entertainment device or, as Abby put it, "a way to constantly distract ourselves." Others committed to substituting activities as wide-ranging as shopping, online gaming, web browsing, reading tabloid magazines, and reality television shows with increased prayers, church services, scripture reading, or charity work. Fasting, then, became not only a project involving food but all sorts of endeavors and objects that converts deemed in some way spiritually malnourishing. Or, as Greg succinctly put it:

> I think Orthodox fasting has made me even more conscious of how much of life is preoccupied with…well, pardon my French, with bullshit….How

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much of what we think we need to have is not really a need at all, but just some hole we're filling with crap.

Affective Disruption and Confronting the "Inner Infant"

The physiological changes involved with fasting were also closely related to psychological/emotional ones. Converts commonly mentioned feelings of irritability, "crabbiness," and moodiness as part and parcel of the emotional toll of fasting, especially around the midpoint of a long fasting season. Father Peter, who admitted to me his own sometimes irritable nature during fasting, regularly said – and only half-jokingly – that this was why monasteries generally combined long periods of fasting with silence: "So the monks and nuns don't go around biting each other's heads off."

The experience of affective disruption during a long fasting season was not simply understood as a natural result of hunger, however. Like the experiences of being subject to compulsive eating habits and of porous embodiment detailed above, it became interpretively elaborated in ways that implicated the moral condition of the self. This was done, in part, through the bodily activation and discursive elaboration of the COMPULSION schema previously outlined above. As a force that moves one from within and largely below the surface of subjective control, strong emotion compels one to behave in ways that are not always in line with one's more cognitively held moral stance. Perhaps the most striking example of how this occurred came from Blake, who told me the following story about his first fasting experience:

> **Blake:** My first Lenten Fast was a real eye-opener, mainly [because] I was so miserable at it [laughs]. I'm a big eater, especially meat and dairy – I'm from Wisconsin after all – and…by about the third week of the fast, I was just kind of impossible to be around. I was just a big grump and irritable, and I'd be snapping at friends, co-workers, even my wife and kids….So, eventually, I decide I need to talk with Father Jim about this, and so…I tell

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him that I'm really not doing well with this fasting, that I'm being short-tempered with people, etcetera. So I'm asking him, you know, "What do I do?" And he said two things. First, he said to apologize to your wife and kids for being a grump. Second, he said to go eat a cheeseburger.

Me: What? Really? That's kind of surprising.

Nick: I know, I know. I was like, "Huh?"….But he told me, go eat a cheeseburger and enjoy it. But then, after that, think about what it is about that cheeseburger – you know, why do you need this in order to be tolerable to be around? And, the fact of the matter is, if I have to rely on something as insignificant as a cheeseburger to be gracious to people, to not be a total jerk to my own family, then maybe I have some real work to do.

The ordeal of fasting was, as one long-time Orthodox Christian put it, a "spiritual stress test," a way of seeing how truly free one was of the passions. The logic here was that the life of a Christian necessarily entailed an ascetic pursuit of self-denial, but that, because of the passions, human beings rebel against having anything removed from the orbit of the ego. While one may think that they are not in the thrall of the passions, the negative emotions that arise during fasting are said to be signs of the true nature of one's spiritual condition. Anger and irritability are a manifestation of what Orthodox clergy sometimes called "the inner infant," the spiritually immature part of the self that shouts, cries, or throws a fit when something is taken away. Only by confronting and disciplining this spiritually immature aspect of the self could one hope to progress more fully in *theosis*.

The experience of one's self as containing an emotionally unbalanced "inner infant" unsuited for the rigors of ascetic labor involved a combination of the COMPULSION with the CONTAINER schema. Not only are emotions experienced as forces driving us in certain directions, but they are often also experienced as "welling up" from within. This bodily experience of emotions compelling one from within was then

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interpretively extended to the construction of a morally-and-spiritually stunted agent –

"the inner infant." While I am not suggesting that Orthodox Christians took this "inner

infant" to be a literal person, it was a way to interpretively link unusual emotional

experiences with a new moral discourse of the self. More specifically, it was a way of

accounting for "what got into me" that went beyond the simple explanation that one was

irritable because of hunger to a more wide-ranging interpretation that involved morally-

valenced explanations regarding spiritual (im)maturity and (the lack of) self-control.

Virtue and The Lightness of Being

  The beginning and midpoints of a long Fast tend to be marked by bodily feelings

that sharply contrasted with those that characterized the end of a fasting season. Converts

often described feeling weary, tired, and weighed down in the first few weeks of a long

fast, and I too characterized my feelings in such terms in my fieldnotes. As the long

fasting periods continued, however, and the metabolic patterns of the body began to

adjust to the new diet, many described the feelings of weariness transforming into an

experience of bodily "lightness" of which they also became acutely aware. To quote a

convert named Joy:

> I think the foods we fast from – the meat, cheese, dairy, all this heavy stuff
> – it literally weighs you down. I think your body, it just kind of weighs
> you down, and maybe even your mind, makes it heavier. And I know
> when you're fasting, there's this lightness that happens. You can feel it.
> It's like this awareness, and it's a physical, you know, there's a physical
> difference because you've stopped doing one thing and [now you're]
> doing something else.

And, in a similar vein, John:

> At first with the fasting, you just feel tired and kind of "bleh." But, after a
> time – I mean, you still will feel tired a bit – but this other cool thing

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happens where you adjust to the food and you get this lightness feeling.
You quite literally feel lighter from not eating as much and not eating
these heavy foods.

This experience of moving from a felt sense of bodily heaviness to lightness over

the course of a 40- or 47-day fasting period activated a complex configuration of three

image-schematic structures not mentioned previously – SCALARITY, PATH, and

VERTICALITY. As Johnson (2007) notes, humans are physiologically attuned to scaled

changes in the degree, quality, and intensity of bodily feelings and sensations. Tastes may

become sweeter or more bitter, temperatures cooler or hotter, objects and bodies heavier

or lighter. Moreover, in the case of fasting, this scalar change from heaviness to lightness

noticeably occurs over an extended time period, thus implicating the SCALARITY

schema within a PATH schema as well. Finally, the combination of the SCALAR quality

of moving from heaviness to lightness over a period of time also served to trigger a more

complex schema of VERTICALITY in which one felt as though one had "descended" at

the beginning and midpoints of the fast and then "ascended" toward the end.

This schema configuration was often interpretively elaborated as a sign of the

soul's spiritual progress. While the early and middle points of a Fast were often

characterized by feelings of spiritual failure, correlated with the body's feelings of

heaviness and weariness, the end of a fasting season was often the point at which fasting

practice had become more ingrained not only into one's physiological rhythms, but also

into the fabric of everyday life.

More specifically, the feelings of bodily lightness functioned as a religiously

significant "qualisign." Adapting from the terminology of Peirce, Munn (1986) defines a

qualisign as a sensation or "sensible quality" that signifies positive or negative value, as

when "sweetness" or "bitterness" signify not only taste qualities but also positively and negatively valued character traits, respectively. For Orthodox Christian converts, embodied sensations of lightness became qualisigns of spiritual ascent along the ascetic path of theosis. As such, the sensation of lightness became a way for converts to intimately feel that, despite initial difficulties as well as having to confront the passionate state of one's embodied soul, they were in fact moving heavenward through their acts of ascetic piety (see also Laidlaw 1995). Such sensations were experienced as particularly complex and meaningful when connected to the vector of porous embodiment detailed earlier. As Christina told me shortly before Pascha:

> The [Lenten] Fast is a time to fill yourself with heavenly things, not just heavenly foods[21] but all the liturgies, the prayers, just with all the Church has to offer you. And, at this point, you can physically feel the difference that it has all made. It's as if your burdens have been quite literally removed from you.

In this combined schema, the light sensation of the body became experienced as a felt liberation from some of the passions, a materialization of a now more virtuous soul via the sensations of the body. Of course, lest pride set in, it was made clear that such states, while real, were only small progressions in the ongoing and lifelong battle against the passions. Indeed, once converts came to inhabit this particular moral topography of the self, it seemed that there were always more passions waiting to be uncovered through the next Fast. In participating in the fast, the stomach and its appetites became an almost inexhaustible semiotic resource for palpable signs of converts' spiritual progress as well as imperilment.

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[21] According to Eastern Orthodox theology, the qualities of foods themselves are morally significant. Lighter foods are themselves understood as more godly, while heavier foods (particularly those associated with animal flesh and blood) are understood to be more able to excite the passions.

Conclusion

The basic question that motivated this analysis was how Orthodox converts came to experience bodily sensations associated with hunger and appetite as intimately linked to the moral condition of their selves. While previous research has documented that religious practices are constitutive elements in the cultivation of what Hirschkind (2006) calls an ethically responsive sensorium, what has been missing from such accounts is a nuanced phenomenological understanding of how, exactly, practices create such links between embodied senses/sensations and broader moral discourses of religious personhood at the level of lived experience. While the body is often at the center of analyses in the contemporary sociocultural study of religion, the tendency to sometimes treat it as a blank slate to be inscribed by powerful discourses of meaning gives us little understanding of what it is about human bodies that allows them (as opposed to many other animal bodies) to be so radically shaped by cultural forms. According to the image-schematic approach utilized in this chapter, it is the human ability to metaphorically extend recurring patterns of bodily experience into more and more abstract conceptual territory. The conceptual territory of discourse may, in turn, feed-back on the phenomenological experience, endowing it with richer and more meaningful content.

Here, I looked to the practical activation of "image-schemas" as a means by which converts – with the aid of others – came to forge interpretive links between concrete bodily experiences and Orthodox discourses of moral selfhood, deeply implicating the conceptual in terms of the experiential and vice-versa. While the analysis was necessarily restricted to the role of fasting in constituting the moral contours of Orthodox self-formation, a focus on image-schemas holds potential for scholarly

understandings of the constitutive role of other bodily practices within and across religious traditions. More specifically, it is possible to take up comparative explorations of the a) different practical methods by which religious traditions and communities activate and interpretively extend image-schemas and b) the experiential effects such activations and extensions have on the social actors who perform them. We can think, by way of example, of the many different ways that religious traditions deploy practices that attempt to activate and discursively extend the FORCE and CONTAINER schemas so central to my analysis here. Buddhist as well as Yogic meditation practices, for example, activate the CONTAINER schema through encouraging members to focus on their breathing as well as concentrate on the thoughts and bodily sensations that pop "into" and "out of" conscious awareness. These image-schematic experiences are then interpretively elaborated as ways of modifying the "energy forces" that move in and out of the body, interpretations that can also be coupled with force-schemas of being "blocked," "centered," "balanced," "stored up" or "depleted" (Pagis 2010; Persson 2010).

In a similar fashion, we could look to how many rituals of religious worship involve movements of the body that also encourage activation of the basic schematic structures of FORCE and CONTAINMENT, but often to very different effects (cf., Taves 2009: 65-6). While I do not cover this comparison in detail in this dissertation[22], one of the more interesting shifts in subjectivity I noticed among several former evangelical Christians in my study was a change in the way they experienced Orthodox liturgical forms. Originally finding the repetition and length of the liturgies as "constraining" their

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[22] I do not focus on this in detail here because it is a change in experience that only affected a subset of my subjects (i.e. some former Evangelicals). However, I am currently sketching the early stages of a separate research article that examines the experiential reorganization of the worshipping body via the image-schema of containment.

ability to worship God, they later came to experience these practices as extremely "fulfilling." I posit that this change involved a reconstruction of the worshipping body through an interpretive reversal of certain FORCE and CONTAINMENT schemas. More specifically, whereas worship in their former Evangelical settings had emphasized expressive ritual forms in which spirit-filled individuals poured themselves out in ecstatic praise, the liturgical forms in their new Orthodox communities emphasized the body as a vessel to be filled through movement in ritually defined spaces (such as the movement between narthex and sanctuary in the Orthodox liturgy) and the ingestion or "taking in" of sacred substances such as incense, imagery, and of course the Eucharist.

Ultimately, a focus on image schemas can help scholars of religion in explaining the practical constitution of religious embodiment in ways that better grasp the dynamic relationship between the phenomenological and discursive domains of religious life, noting the importance of both without reducing one to another. Like the findings on narrative in the last chapter, this also has potential implications for theories of embodied subjectivity outside of religious settings. Future research could examine, for example, how image-schemas associated with practices surrounding bodily appetite and hunger help construct secular types of moral subjectivity as well. Fasting, we know, is a practice integral to many religious traditions, but the complex phenomenology of hunger is open to multiple forms of practice and interpretation. Outside of religious domains, practices of dieting and, in more extreme fashion, self-starvation and anorexia (Lester 1997) also utilize hunger as a primary vehicle through which new selves are formed and reformed. While not using the language of image-schemas, Lester (1997) aptly demonstrates how the practice of anorexia is intimately linked with a felt need on the part of the sufferer to

control the bodily boundary between inside and outside. While the selves being formed

are obviously quite different and the results much more destructive than the practices I

detail in this chapter, the connections that are made between corporeal boundaries and the

moral formation of the self do bear some striking parallels to fasting. Lester (1997: 487)

is worth quoting at length here:

> Her ritualized eating and fear of food attest to the anorexic's anxiety about
> not being able to seal herself up completely, and to the central significance
> of these boundary issues for her self-project. Like other transitional
> substances (Douglas, 1966), food (which moves between "me" and "not
> me") harbors enormously powerful symbolic potential, and the movement
> of food across the boundary from the "outside" to the "inside" provokes
> almost unbearable anxiety in anorexic women. Indeed, many express the
> terror that eating one unplanned or uncontrolled bite will "open the
> floodgates" and control of the body's boundaries will be lost. In response,
> the anorexic engages in elaborate rituals surrounding the "dangerous"
> moment when the inside/outside separation is compromised as a means of
> mediating this anxiety and retaining as much control as possible over the
> event, revealing the centrality of the concern for rigidly controlling the
> definition of the inside/outside relationship in the etiology of the illness.

Researching the many ways in which bodily hunger/appetite and associated

image-schemas such as CONTAINMENT are activated through various practices of the

self is just one way to shed light on how particular moral configurations of selfhood

become experientially persuasive in the lives of real persons. Fasting and other religious

forms of asceticism, then, are not the anachronistic activities of a select few believers, but

one of several ways that contemporary social actors come to understand and evaluate the

moral condition of their souls in and through the experiences of their bodies – for better

or for worse.

Chapter 5
"They're a Part of Who I Am":
Icons, Emotions, and the Role of Material Things in Assembling the Orthodox Soul

I arrive at the Cathedral of St. Mary on a mild, late afternoon in March to observe the Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers. Celebrated every year on the first Sunday of Great Lent, The Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy celebrates the defeat of the Byzantine iconoclasts (those who vehemently opposed the making or use of religious imagery) of the 8th and 9th centuries, and the Vespers service commemorates the restoration of icons to the Orthodox churches. Here, some 12 centuries later, hundreds of local Orthodox faithful gather (several with their own icons in tow) at the Cathedral to participate in the service and to watch nearly two dozen Orthodox clergy process through the Church with holy icons in their hands.

As the service commences, I stand to the left of the priestly procession and observe many faces that are now familiar to me – Fr. Peter from St. Basil's on the South side of town, Deacon Dmitri from St. Tikhon's in Saint Paul, Fr. Stephen from the Orthodox mission in the suburbs. But I also see several other now-familiar faces, ones painted on the flat wooden panels or imprinted on the metal reliefs that the clergy hold in their hands – Saint John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary [or the Theotokos ("God-bearer") as the Orthodox call her], Saint Herman of Alaska, the Old Testament Prophet Daniel (we share a name, after all), and, of course, the many faces of Christ – the warm teacher, the suffering crucified, the stern and triumphant Pantocrator.

At the close of the Vespers service, and on my way over to the social hall where a coffee hour and Lenten meal will take place, I run into Beth for the first time since I spoke with her last Spring. Beth was one of the first people with whom I spoke in this project, and she was to be chrismated (the sacrament by which one is officially received into the Orthodox Church) only a few weeks after our very first conversation.

As we exchange greetings, I can't help but notice Beth holding something to her chest – an icon. I'm surprised. While several of the Orthodox faithful had brought their own icons from home to this service and celebration, I didn't expect this same act of devotion from Beth...not because I felt she was somehow "unserious" about her faith, but because at our last meeting a little less than a year ago, Beth had told me she didn't "get icons," or, more specifically, she didn't understand the pious devotion and affection many Orthodox granted to these seemingly peculiar things:

> **Beth:** "I find the iconography of the [Orthodox] Church very beautiful. Very striking. The Byzantine style of painting and the colors, they're just so unique and very (pauses) just very striking, as I said before. I mean, you walk into an Orthodox Church, and it really is one of the first things you see, the icons, at least it was for me....But, to be really honest, I still don't get icons.
>
> **Me:** What do you mean by not "getting" them?

Beth: I mean, I get that they're very beautiful pieces of art, and understand, you know, theologically that they are part of how the Church expresses its understanding of the Incarnation [of God in the human, material form of Christ], but honestly I don't get the…devotion toward them that many Orthodox demonstrate. You know, the veneration of them, the touching, the kissing. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with it, I just don't share that feeling of connection to these things. Maybe if I had grown up around them – or maybe if I had a more aesthetic sensibility or appreciation for art, or something – I would understand.

Me: But you don't really understand it now?

Beth: No, it's still a bit of a mystery to me, a bit weird to be quite frank.

Now, not quite a year later, Beth the Minnesotan school teacher, former Evangelical turned Lutheran turned Orthodox Christian, is embracing an icon of St. Elizabeth, the Russian Orthodox nun and martyr. Before I can even open my mouth to remind her of what she had told me during our first conversation, Beth smiles somewhat sheepishly and says, "I know, I know, I remember what I said before."

"So, yeah, what happened?" I ask her.

"Well, a lot of things," she answers. "But the big thing I've learned is this: They're not just art objects, they're more than that. They're a part of who we are. They're a part of who I am."

"They're a part of who I am."

Beth's response that day was significant not only because of its drastic difference from her own earlier orientation towards icons, but also because it so well exemplified a more general phenomenon pertaining to so many of the people with whom I interacted in my study. Like Beth, many converts had told me that they were initially confused and sometimes even uncomfortable with icons, finding them "odd," "strange," or, in a few cases, even bordering on "idolatry."

Yet, like Beth, converts' initial sensibilities changed over time, often quite dramatically. Eventually, my interlocutors told me, what they once experienced as

anachronistic artworks or even borderline objects of idolatry had become, over time, "something much more, very close to me" as a convert named David put it or "important partners on my journey" as another, Marla, had said.

Given the "material turn" that has been occurring in the social and cultural study of religion over the past two decades (Houtman and Meyer 2012; McDannell 1995; Morgan 2010; Stolow 2012; Vasquez 2011), converts' statements about the importance of material objects such as icons are not entirely surprising. Recognizing a bias toward abstract beliefs over concrete things in their studies, many scholars of religion have explored how religious practitioners' stances toward and uses of material artifacts such as images, texts, statuary, paintings, architecture, photography, film, money, and more serve not only as symbolic expressions of already established religious beliefs and identities (Halle 1993; Harvey 2004; McDannell 1995) but, even more powerfully, as active agents in the constitution of particular religious experiences and forms of personhood (Engelke 2007; Keane 2005; Kilde 2005; Konieczy 2009; Orsi 2005; Promey 2005). Yet converts' initial experiences of icons demonstrate that the intended constitutive effects of material religion are not immediate or guaranteed. In fact, what is supposed to be an object of religious reverence or awe in one religious context may produce apathy, disinterest, or even repulsion when presented to a person whose habitus has been shaped in a very different kind of context, as Beth's statements about her early experiences with icons makes clear. Such experiential disjunctures presented me with an empirical question in need of an answer: How, exactly, does matter come to matter in the lives of religious subjects? More specifically, what are the actual processes by which "mere things" such as

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icons became part and parcel of convert's religious selves, constituent components of their trajectories of religious becoming?

As the significance of icons within my interlocutors' accounts of becoming Orthodox became more apparent, I started to ask them this very question, asking what had changed their initial perspectives on icons and if and how they saw them as significant components of their religious lives. Many mentioned that, like Beth, part of their change in perspective came from learning the Church's theological defense of the icon, an apologetics first elaborated during the iconoclast controversies within the early Church in the 7th and 8th centuries. Against the iconoclasts' charges that icon veneration was a violation of the Second Commandment's prohibition against imagery of God, the defenders of icons (*iconodules*) argued that the Second Commandment's prohibition was modified with the incarnation of God in the person of Christ. Since God had literally become flesh and thus been made visible to human eyes, it had become not only permissible to portray Him, his mother, as well as all the saints who had followed Him, but also theologically necessary. To deny icons and their veneration, argued one of the most famous defender of icons, Saint John of Damascus, was to deny both the truth of the Incarnation and the honor due to the saints who best demonstrated how to follow Christ (St. John of Damascus, 2003).

These theological explications are important, as one can see that significant boundaries around Eastern Orthodox identity are already being drawn. Icons and icon veneration are held up as a distinctive – perhaps *the most* distinctive – artifacts and practices of the Orthodox faith. As opposed to "iconophiliac" Protestants[23], it was often

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[23] To be clear, these are not my characterizations of Protestant and Catholic engagements with material culture, but the characterizations of many in the Orthodox Church.

argued by clergy, Orthodox Christians understood that there was no strict separation between the material and the spiritual, that "the sacred should be touched, tasted, looked at, listened to" as Father Mark at St. Nicholas put it. And opposed to the statuary of Western Catholicism, which was often characterized as "too realistic," the flattened, inverse perspective of the iconic image was argued to more fully draw the viewer into the spiritual realm through the material, as opposed to "dragging the spiritual down to our level," as one Orthodox Christian put it. While these were most certainly un-nuanced and largely unfair characterizations of Protestant and Catholic perspectives on and engagements with materiality, these statements served the purpose of setting the expectation that to be fully Orthodox was to grasp the significance of icons, to cross an important emic/etic threshold of experience and understanding.

Most converts became familiar with these apologetics relatively early in exploring Orthodoxy and came to at least intellectually grasp that icons embodied such understandings of Orthodox theology and identity. Yet they told me that their everyday orientations toward icons did not change until they began seeing icons less as anachronistic representations of people long dead and more as material-cum-spiritual entry points into live relationships with Christ and the saints. This, I found, is what made icons "more than just art" – a comment I heard repeatedly in my conversations and interactions with Orthodox Christians from multiple communities. While art, they told me, could educate and inspire, only icons could provide one with access to a particular kind of relationship with sacred actors. Indeed, within the theology of the Orthodox Church, icons do not represent a reality that is wholly independent of the icons' materiality. Instead, according to the Church, they "make present" holy figures, allowing

those who interact with them tangible access to an otherwise invisible relationship with who is portrayed in the image. Who is depicted in the icon is also, in some sense, at one with it – having a spiritual presence beyond but also within the material object. As one local priest explained:

> [Icons] bring the mystery of Christ and his holy mother and the saints out of the abstract and into the concrete. They are physically present there in their icons. Christ and the saints are in our midst and, through the icon, we can see that….Now, you may say, "it's just a symbol." And I will say, "yes, it is a symbol." But what is a symbol? Symbol comes from a Greek word – "Symbolos" – which means coming together. So symbol, a real symbol, is the meeting point of two realities. And in this case, the heavenly and the earthly. That's what the icon is. In the icon, the earthly and the heavenly meet – they form a relationship, a communion, if you will. So when you engage the icon, you're engaging the saints in Heaven, and they are engaging you.

In common Orthodox parlance, icons are called "windows onto heaven," spaces where the otherwise immaterial holy figure can be materialized – *made* present – and interacted with in some form. In reciprocal fashion, icons extend the presence of holy persons into devotees' everyday lives, allowing saints and Christ to meaningfully interact with human persons. In his own work on icons, David Morgan (2012) has argued that this relationality and reciprocity makes icons akin to an interface, an interactive boundary in which "the body finds an efficacious fit with another object or person, resulting in a larger or extended body, one capable of an expanded range of work or feeling" (91) that "blurs the distinction between two parties and empties the self of the viewer into the new register of being" (101). Like a human body interfacing with a hammer transforms the hand's soft surface into a hard one fit for pounding nails, or a computer interfacing with a printer allows it to transform its electronic text into printed form, the icon allows the devoted viewer to interrelate aspects of his or her own subjectivity – identity, agency,

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emotion – with those of a sacred Other (ibid: 103), creating an intersubjective space that

transacts across earthly and heavenly realms (Orsi 2005). Understood from this

perspective, icons allow for the creation of what Bruno Latour (1993; 1999; 2005) has

called "hybrid actors," social entities which couple together otherwise heterogeneous

actors, agencies, and identities into "complex processes of collaboration and

exchange"(Stolow 2007: 317).

In this chapter, I want to detail the processes by which icons came to develop such

an important mediating capacity within the experiences of the converts in my study.

Central to my analysis is the argument that the phenomenology of the iconic interface is

not inherent in the artifact by itself, but is instead produced in and through the ways icons

circulate within the practices of new as well as already established Orthodox Christians.

Indeed, while most converts became familiar with the theology of the icon relatively

early in exploring Orthodoxy, they also told me that their everyday orientations toward

icons did not change until they "spent some quality time with them," as one told me, or

"really made them a part of my life," as another put it. Here, then, I unpack what these

statements refer to in everyday life, ethnographically reconstructing the cultural

infrastructure through which the iconic interface was established and experienced.[24]

Drawing from my interviews and from observational data collected from

converts' homes, workplaces, and even automobiles (see the Methods section in Chapter

2 for more details), I delimit and describe three practices by which the iconic interface

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[24] My analysis of a religious artifact here is similar to the way actor-network sociologists attempt to analyze scientific and technical objects – i.e. by unpacking the constitutive practices by which objects are made to act, practices which are usually sublimated or "black boxed" within everyday life. Morgan (2012) makes a similar argument with regard to visual artifacts in religious contexts, stating that the cultural apparatus that underlies the relationship between viewers and images is usually concealed in favor of claims that sacred qualities inhere in the objects themselves (102-3).

was established and experienced among the converts in this study: 1) though biographical intertwinement; 2) through interacting with icons as "constant companions" within morally problematic arenas of everyday life; and 3) by turning to icons as "compassionate interlocutors" in life's more emotionally fraught dramas and events. While not all converts experienced each of these processes in the order they are presented here, each was incredibly common across the communities and subjects I studied. More importantly, each category of practice was particularly powerful in phenomenologically transforming the icon from a "mere" object into a spiritual interface through which human and divine personages could engage and interact.

"People Like Us": Icons as Sacred Gifts and Sites of Biographical Intertwinement

One of the obstacles converts told me they encountered in their initial experiences with icons consisted of the fact that, as one put it, "I didn't know who any of these people were."[25] Indeed, the Orthodox Church claims thousands of saints with at least one icon if not several depicting them. The sheer quantity of iconic depictions of saints (as well as the many iconic depictions of Christ, each meant to signify a particular aspect of Christ's person) seemed to encourage anonymous viewing and was thus an impediment to new converts seeing icons as means through which to intimately connect with holy persons.

This was not generally a problem for "cradle Orthodox" members who had grown up with specific icons as part of their home and liturgical lives, but many did recognize it as an issue for members who were converting as adults. Marjorie, a cradle Orthodox

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[25] This was largely true even for those converts who were formerly Catholic. While the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church share many saints from before the "Great Schism" of 1054, they do not share saints from after that time period. Furthermore, the non-naturalistic style of Orthodox iconography made even saints who were known initially unrecognizable.

woman in her early seventies, expressed this problem well: "I know that it's probably very strange for them at first," she told me one day at coffee hour after the Divine Liturgy, "seeing all of these pictures of these strange-looking people, and all of us Orthodox kissing them and crossing ourselves in front of them. But I take it as my job to make it un-strange for them. I just say, 'I want to introduce you to some of my dear friends.'"

I found that these introductions, as Marjorie put it, most often consisted of a particular kind of narrative technique, one I refer to here as *biographical intertwinement*. In biographical intertwinement, the icon functioned as a material center around which the stories of Christ and the saints would be connected to the present-day lives of Orthodox community members. Such intertwinement would often be accomplished through giving icons to new members as gifts. For many new converts, this is how the intertwinement of their biographies with the life stories of those presented in icons first occurred, within the social spaces of religious communities where icons were not only present on the walls of the Church itself, but also circulated among and between parishioners as sacred gifts.

It was Marjorie, in fact, who gave Beth her icon of St. Elizabeth on the day of her chrismation. While it is was common practice for converts in the communities I studied to take the chrismation name of a saint who shared their given name, Beth actually had taken her name after another St. Elizabeth – the mother of St. John the Baptist and close relative of the Virgin Mary.

"When I received the icon," she told me during our second interview directly after the Triumph of Orthodoxy Vespers service, "I had no idea who this St. Elizabeth was."

When I asked Beth why Marjorie had given her an icon of St. Elizabeth the New

Martyr instead of the other saint, she told me that Marjorie had said that St. Elizabeth the

New Martyr "suited her more." When I asked her to tell me what that meant, she said that

she had told Marjorie and other members of her church community that she had recently

started a teaching job in an impoverished school district known for its many "at-risk"

students, as well as some problems with gang violence. While she had taken the job for

altruistic reasons – in order to "try to reach out to those who don't have much," as she

told me and a few of her friends at church one day – the demands of teaching in her new

environment were taking a psychological toll. Beth had confided to several in the

community, including Marjorie, that she was often feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and

even scared at her new job, and that she wondered if she should quit.

Shortly thereafter, Marjorie gave Beth the icon of St. Elizabeth and told her the

saint's story. According to Orthodox accounts of her, the woman now known as

Elizabeth the New Martyr was formerly a Grand Duchess of Russia who converted to

Orthodoxy in 1891. She later renounced her title and became a nun devoted to the poor

after the assassination of her husband, Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, in 1905. Murdered by

Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1918, St. Elizabeth is venerated for her selfless devotion to

orphans, the poor, and the less fortunate. According to Beth, Marjorie had told her to look

to St. Elizabeth when she needed the strength of compassion, especially in her work at

the school. As Beth emotionally relayed to me during our second conversation:

> Marjorie told me to look to St. Elizabeth when I needed encouragement
> and strength in my new job. And St. Elizabeth, she was incredibly caring
> and compassionate in her life. Selflessly so. And Marjorie told me she saw
> aspects of that compassion in me, in my willingness to go where kids
> really need someone who cares about them….And I just, thought, wow,

you know, that just really touched me. That she would be so thoughtful as to think of what I was going through and say, "Here, I know you're going through a tough time, but I see something of St. Elizabeth in you, and I think she can help and encourage you." It almost made me cry.

Marjorie was not alone in encouraging the establishment of this kind of personal and mimetic relationship through gift-giving; in fact, I found it was a common practice in all of the communities I studied. Paul, a "cradle" Orthodox member at St. Nicholas also told me that he liked to give converts whom he had sponsored icons of sacred figurers whom they would "feel a connection with." As he explained to me:

> I've been fortunate enough to be a sponsor for several of the new members of our church. And, with a lot of the new converts, I try to give them or lead them to icons that they might feel a connection with. You know, like I've given icons of Christ the Teacher and St. John Chrysostom [the patron saint of letters] to people who are educators, or icons of Mary or Joseph to people I know are really doting and fretful parents – God knows, there are plenty of those! [laughs]. Or, you know, maybe something even a bit more personal if the person has confided in me that they struggle with a particular problem in their life, because we all do. Because the amazing thing about the saints is that they were people, just like us. They weren't perfect. In fact, many of them started out their lives as really damaged, sinful people. So they have their human flaws and foibles, just like we do. But, through their icons, they also let us see that, if you turn toward God and the Church, you can overcome your sins.

In and through this exchange of icons, people like Marjorie and Paul not only gave converts one of their first pieces of Orthodox material culture, but also supplied them with the story of the sacred referent depicted therein, one whom they initially did not know or recognize. Moreover, they also intertwined the inspired biography of the saint with converts' own stories, encouraging them to identify with a saint whom they could see as in some ways like them but in other ways more spiritually and ethically advanced, as moral equals as well as exemplars. Such forms of identification made the

icon the tangible site of a dual form of emplotment. At one moment, gazing upon the icon

could bring the story of the saint to bear on one's own life, putting a more human

personality on the holy figure, bringing them "out of the clouds and into real life," as

Mark, one of my interviewees, suggestively put it. But, at the very same time, seeing the

icon was also experienced as bringing one's own ongoing biography into a religious

frame of reference. To see the saints and even Christ as in some ways "people like us"

brought the saints down to earth, so to speak, but it also "lifted" one's own story into a

narrative arc that incorporated the stories of holy prototypes.

The construction of these types of personalized and mimetic relationships with the

saints (through their icons) also became very apparent to me as I began to ask converts to

show me their icons and where they placed them within their homes and workplaces

(more on this in the next section). Even without prompting, I found that these icon tours

would inevitably also become sites of intimate storytelling about their personal affinity

with the depicted figures. One of the most affecting stories I heard was told to me by a

man named Trent and centered on the gift of an icon of St. Mary of Egypt, a 4th and 5th

century prostitute turned desert monastic and, later, patron saint of penitents within the

Church. Trent, who told me before we officially met for an interview, that "you probably

haven't heard a story like mine," openly told me during our conversation that he had been

both a childhood victim and adult perpetrator of sexual abuse.[26] After our interview,

Trent showed me his icon of Mary of Egypt, telling me that he had received the icon

while in prison after being convicted on a sexual assault charge. While searching for God

while locked up, Trent met an Orthodox priest who was heading a prison ministry

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[26] I asked Trent directly after our interview if he wanted this sensitive, personal information included in my
dissertation or any other publications. He stated that he did, noting that his current distance from the
problems of his past demonstrated what a change the Orthodox Church had made in him.

program. Trent later converted to Orthodoxy, but, before that, the Orthodox priest in

charge of the ministry gave him the icon of St. Mary as a gift:

> When I was in prison and first thinking about becoming an Orthodox
> Christian, [the priest] sent me the stories of two saints and their icons.
> One was Saint Moses of Ethiopia, the other was Saint Mary of Egypt. And
> Father told me, you know, that he gives these two icons and their stories to
> a lot of the prisoners he works with because they show that, no matter how
> far you have fallen and what horrible things you may have done, you can
> be changed. And, to this day, they are my two favorite saints. I love to no
> end that they have Saint Mary of Egypt up on the wall at [the local church
> he attends]. Okay, she went beyond being a prostitute, she was what we
> would call today a nymphomaniac….and there were some of those same
> issues in Moses of Ethiopia's background, and they both had the same
> struggle with similar sins, sins similar to my own. So I had her icon in my
> cell and she's still with me today, but now in my apartment, thank God.

Although their lives were separated by hundreds and even thousands of years, as

well as the metaphysical divide of life and death, through biographical intertwinement

converts like Trent were encouraged to see commonalities between themselves and the

saints depicted in their icons. In many ways, constructing these commonalities focused

attention away from the separate object-ness of the material icon, encouraging new

Orthodox adherents to not so much look past its materiality but rather, much like a

window, *through* it and towards the common sins and uncommon virtues of the sacred

subjects depicted therein. In giving an icon that "connects" with converts, members of the

Orthodox community began the work of placing both the convert and the holy figures

within a personalized relationship, one in which the icon acted as both material fulcrum

and spiritual interface through which this work was accomplished. Moreover, in

encouraging converts to begin to cross the emic/etic threshold from seeing icons as

strange aesthetic objects to depictions of people to whom one shared an intimate

biographical connection, members were also implicating converts more deeply in the

collective identity narratives of their Eastern Orthodox communities. Being part of the

story of the saint was also to be a part of the story of the community who venerated those

saints – to become "people like us" at the communal level as well.

"Constant Companions": Interacting with Icons in Problematic Moral Spaces

The previous section demonstrated that converts' experiences of icons began to

change as they started to treat them as narrative focal points through which to construct

personal and mimetic relationships with saintly referents. This process, I argued, is one

that endows the icon with a particular biography and personality, one that interfaces with

both the stories of the convert who views the icon as well as the holy prototype depicted

in the iconic image itself. Icons were not only used as focal points around which to weave

stories of identification, however. Their portability allowed them to also "follow"

practitioners into multiple arenas of everyday life as everyday interactants or "constant

companions," as one of my interviewees called them. While icons (and, by extension,

their sacred referents) were distributed throughout several spaces of everyday life, I

found that what held these activities of emplacement together into a more coherent

category of practice was that converts overwhelmingly decided to have their icons

"follow" them into places that were deemed to be in some way morally and spiritually

problematic.

With regard to their domestic lives, converts were encouraged by both priests and

laity to establish an icon corner in their homes, usually a small shelf or table placed in the

east corner of a room (see Image B for a typical example; although icon "corners" could

also grow to be as large as entire rooms; see Image C). These corners would always have

at least one icon of Jesus and the Theotokos, popular saints, as well as the favorite saints

of the convert and his or her family members (if they were also members of the Church).

Icon corners were places where converts offered their daily prayers and devotions, either

in the morning or at night or both, and the icons were present there for the express

purpose of strengthening piety. For many, the icons around them made present a "cloud

of witnesses" reminding them that they were never truly alone in their Orthodox

devotion. This seemed especially important for those converts who had joined Orthodoxy

alone, without a spouse of significant other. As Alex, whose wife and children had little

interest in Orthodoxy or religion in general, told me:

> It can be kind of isolating sometimes when you're the only person [among
> family and close friends] who is Orthodox. But, then, I look over at my
> icon corner and see that I'm never really alone, that there is this larger
> community around me all the time, praying along with me and
> encouraging me to keep going along the path I've taken.

Icons, then, allowed even seemingly individual prayers to be experienced as being

delivered in a collective mode. Moreover, as my interlocutors were often quick to tell me,

icons disciplined the prayerful mind by engaging the wandering eye. As Kim argued

while showing me one of her favorite icons of Mary, centrally placed on the shelf that

comprised her icon corner:

> One of the things that – and I'm sure you've noticed this too – one of the
> first things that people notice about icons are the eyes. They're usually
> very big, very round, and it can even look distorted and off-putting at
> first….Symbolically, the bigger eyes are meant to represent the spiritual
> vision of the saints, that they see the spiritual realities that many of us
> can't see. But, in addition to that, I think that they are there to draw your
> own eyes to them….Like, with this icon of Mary, I focus my eyes on hers,
> and I feel like she focuses hers on mine, and I feel like that keeps the rest
> of me – my brain and my heart – focused where it should be while I'm
> praying, on God. Because where the eyes go, the rest of you will follow.

While icon corners were an established part of every Orthodox home I visited, I also found that some icons – especially those that were considered particularly special in some way to the individual – were often placed in different areas within the home. Beth, for example, placed her icon of St. Elizabeth on her clothes dresser, so I "could see it each morning when I woke up and started getting ready for work." Remembering Marjorie's advice to look to St. Elizabeth when she needed encouragement, Beth decided to cross herself and say a short prayer in front of the icon each day before she left for work. She did this for several months, but then decided that she should make an icon corner where she could start to say prayers more regularly. She bought a few more icons from a local seller – of Christ, the Theotokos, and "the other St. Elizabeth…you know, I still felt I owed to her," she told me, laughing, and moved St. Elizabeth (the New Martyr) from above the dresser and onto the new icon corner she placed in a spare bedroom. Still not one who felt herself too enamored with icons, Beth was surprised to find that she missed seeing St. Elizabeth at the top of her dresser every morning.

"The whole feel of my morning routine just seemed completely thrown off," she told me. "I mean, it was weird how used to having her there I had become…there was like, a palpable absence in the room." Beth decided to buy another icon of St. Elizabeth to put back on her dresser drawers, and then another to take with her to work:

> I work in a public school, so I'm not sure how kosher it would be to have something religious like an icon out on display, so I just made a nice spot in one of my desk drawers. I put down a nice velvet cloth down below her and around the outside of the drawer so the icon wouldn't get scratched….I just thought it would be nice to have her there with me at work too…so whenever I'm feeling overwhelmed or like [imitating exasperation and anger] "I can't deal with these kids anymore!", I open that drawer and look at her and she's looking at me, like, "Come on, you can do this. No one else is there for them." And so she gives me strength, especially when I'm having trouble.

Beth was not alone in taking her icons to work; many converts took an icon or two to work with them, often utilizing icons as a way to instigate them to imitate more godly or saintly virtues while coping with what they often felt were contexts in which "keeping a Christian mindset is difficult to do on your own," as Charles, a finance executive who worked in downtown Minneapolis, said. While interviewing Charles in his office one morning, I asked him about an icon of Christ Pantocrator he had on his office wall. Charles smiled, stood up and walked me out of his office and closed the door behind us. Then, almost immediately, he opened the door again and led me back in:

> My wife gave me that after we joined the Church together. And I put it here because it is the first thing that I walk past everyday when I come into this room and, even if I don't look at Him, I know that He is always watching me….In my business, as I'm sure you probably know from the news right now, people can be tempted to do some pretty unscrupulous things. And that [he points to the icon, for emphasis] is there to remind me of who I'm really called to be like. Because, at the end of the line, I'm not going to be judged on how much money I make for my clients – or for myself, for that matter – but on if I've lived a Christ-like life.

In addition to home and work spaces, smaller, travel-size icons also allowed Christ and the saints to be taken on long trips or placed in the car during everyday commutes. Showing me a small diptych icon of Christ and the Theotokos (see Image D for an example of this kind of icon), a convert named Hannah, for example, told me that she hung an almost identical version from her car's rearview mirror.

"I keep this icon in my car because I tend to get very impatient and angry when I drive," she told me, "so my daughter and husband gave me this to help."

"So, does it work?" I asked her while examining the detail that went into such a small piece.

"Well, sometimes," she responded, laughing, "but sometimes not at all. But it *does* always remind me to ask for forgiveness right after [laughs]….It's so bad, but I've probably asked Jesus and the Theotokos for forgiveness in that car more often than I have in a confessional!"

In taking their icons into arenas of everyday life that were considered to be in some way morally or spiritually problematic, converts used (and thus helped constitute) icons as visible and tangible interfaces through which to align their own moral intentions and agencies with those they imagined to be constitutive of the saints or Christs' exemplary characters. Embedding icons into the routines of everyday life was a way to restructure perceptions, thoughts, and affective sensibilities into an intersubjective frame of reference shared by a saint or even a deity. Treating icons as "constant companions" encouraged converts to call upon and cultivate the virtues of the saints and Christ. At the same time, it brought the saints' virtues to bear on what would otherwise seem the mundanity of the everyday – time alone in the house, meetings at work, (rage-inducing) drives to pick up the kids from soccer practice, etc.

In placing icons in the home, at work, and even in the car, drawing on the strength and inspiration of divine actors could be experienced as an everyday affair. "The saints," as one Orthodox priest relayed to me, "are with us everywhere." And, I would add, this may be due to the fact that, through their icons, they can be – and regularly were – taken just about anywhere. Moreover, as Morgan (2010: 68-9) points out, modes of religious seeing simultaneously implicate viewers in both new forms of agency and novel mediums of power, exemplifying the dynamic of mutual appropriation mentioned in the first chapter. In taking up icons for their own religious ethical purposes, converts were also

submitting themselves to meaningful forms of icon-mediated bodily discipline. When

Charles, for example, placed his icon of Christ so that he would see it at the first moment

he walked into his office, he was submitting not only his gaze but, ideally, all his daily

actions to the scrutiny of God. Engaging the eyes of the icon, as Kim so aptly put it

above, was also a matter of disciplining the body, mind, and heart.

"There When You Need Them": Icons as Compassionate Interlocutors

Icons were not always part of the background practices of everyday life, however.

For many converts, there were times when they became focal characters in peoples'

ongoing lives as Orthodox Christians. If, in becoming part of the spatial backdrop of

routine existence, icons functioned as "constant companions" in the arenas of the

everyday, there were also moments when they functioned as compassionate interlocutors

within the more dramatic events of peoples' lives. In these moments, the iconic interface

was established through intimate transactions of sympathy and empathy (Morgan 1998),

often at points where the individuals in my study felt at the limits of their own capacities

for agency (Orsi 1996). Icons, as one of my interviewees, Brent, noted, were not only

there *where* converts decide to place them, but also "there when you need them" – in

those moments when life becomes overwhelming or difficult.

During my interview with Brent in his studio apartment in South Minneapolis, he

showed me an icon of St. John Maximovitch (often referred to as St. John the

Wonderworker), a 20th-century ascetic and hierarch known for his successful missionary

work in Shanghai, Japan and San Francisco in the United States. Brent had first

encountered St. John while spending several months at a monastery named for him in San

Francisco, California. Brent told me that he had been suffering from debilitating depression during this time, and had decided to go to the monastery (even though he was not Orthodox or even particularly religious at the time) because a college friend who was Greek Orthodox had suggested it. "He said he thought it would really help me," Brent relayed to me while showing me the icon of St. John (see Image E), "and I thought, well, it can't hurt….I guess you could say I was desperate at this point."

Brent eventually converted to Orthodox Christianity while at the monastery, and also developed what he termed "a very important relationship" with St. John. At the monastery, Brent stayed in a room that was, in typical monastic style, quite sparse, with "only a bed, the Bible, a few books, and some icons," including an icon of St. John the Wonderworker:

> I just remember spending a lot of time looking at the icon [of St. John], and noticing that he didn't ever seem to look the same. His eyes just, I mean, they're just really full and they seemed to look at me with compassion. But there's something very stern in him too that I felt I had to respond to too. And I think I needed both of those things. Someone to look at me with understanding but also not—at the same time, not to just feel sorry for me and let me wallow in my self-pity….And, to this day, it seems that he knows what I need to see whenever things start getting rough.

Brent's experience of a holy figure's countenance changing depending on what one needs, when one needs it, was something that I heard quite often in my interviews with Orthodox practitioners. While, at first glance, iconic representations often make saints or Christ seem oddly emotionless, my interlocutors were quick to point out that this was merely a surface appearance, and that icons contained an emotional depth that could only be seen after a more prolonged – and affect-laden – engagement. Icons seemed to

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function like an emotional Rorschach blot, inviting viewers to perceive the look (or looks) they needed at the moment in which they were in trouble or despair.

An especially common narrative I heard concerned icons of Mary during difficult experiences with children or pregnancies. A woman named Carrie, for example, told me of her experiences with an icon of Mary when she was confined to several months of bed rest due to pregnancy complications with her first child:

> I remember the first time…feeling really drawn to an icon was right after I was pregnant with [my son] and just feeling totally overwhelmed because it was really touch and go and it wasn't clear if I would lose the baby or not. And I remember lying in my bed, just feeling awful and scared, and spending a lot of time looking at the icon of the Theotokos. And for the first time, there was a connection I could make to a saint and through an icon. Which was very different for me. Because it was kind of like…well, I felt like we were looking at each other as mothers. And that was just strange, but it happened….I felt like she really understood what I was going through, and that made such a huge difference to me.

As Morgan (1998; see also 2012) notes, sympathy and empathy are interrelated yet distinct emotional processes, sympathy involving a "feeling with" others while empathy requires a more radical "feeling as" or "into" the distinct emotional situation of an Other. Sympathy tends to gather similar emotions into the same affective orbit, giving weight to one's current subject position, strengthening existent identities and identifications. Empathy, however, involves reaching out into a different emotional atmosphere, reconfiguring one's feelings in response to the very different feelings of another. With regard to iconic images, I found that these two emotional processes often intermingled and relied on one another in symbiotic fashion. At first, a moment of sympathetic recognition, followed closely by a moment of emotional projection as

converts attempted to reconfigure their emotional state to match what they imagined to be that of the saint or Christ.

During our second interview, Beth, for example, told me of turning to St. Elizabeth during a particularly trying family experience, and that it was this experience, more than any other, that had "totally changed the way I thought about icons." Confiding to me that she had recently faced the prospect of confronting someone in her family who had deeply hurt her and other members of her family,[27] Beth stated that she had no idea whether to even take up the opportunity of confronting this person, let alone *how*.

"I know the Christian thing to do was to forgive [the person]," she said, "but I was just still so angry that I couldn't find it in myself."

Beth had asked advice from several close friends and family about what she should do, but told me, despite her closest confidants' good intentions, she still didn't know whether and how to approach the situation. But then she turned to St. Elizabeth:

> To be honest, it was the last thing I thought to do—kind of a last resort type thing, because, I remembered Marjorie telling me, you know, turn to St. Elizabeth when you need help. So I thought, "what the heck." So, one evening, I get back from work and prayed with my icon of St. Elizabeth, asking her what I should do. And, after awhile—I don't know how long, but it seemed like hours—I had my answer. I needed to forgive. I just had to do it. And I finally felt like I could, too.

When I asked Beth how she – and St. Elizabeth – had arrived at the answer, she told me that in looking at her icon, she remembered a part of St. Elizabeth's story that gave "me the strength to forgive." While St. Elizabeth is most known and venerated among Orthodox for her devotion to the poor and her eventual martyrdom at the hands of Bolshevik revolutionaries, Beth also relayed to me a lesser known story about her life, a

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[27] At my interviewee's request, I have omitted the exact nature of this family relationship to protect privacy.

moment before she had decided to become a nun and just shortly after the assassination

of her husband. The still mourning Grand Duchess, so the story goes, routinely visited

her husband's murderer in prison, even taking him a copy of the Bible in hopes that he

would convert to Christianity. She also became the man's sole defender, petitioning the

local authorities to stay his execution (a battle she lost, in the end).

In turning to the icon of St. Elizabeth in her moment of need, Beth initially relied

on the sympathy she imagined St. Elizabeth to have for her – that she, like her, must have

known exactly how emotionally difficult it was to face someone who hurt you so badly,

placing an aspect of St. Elizabeth's story into her own affective orbit.

> While I was praying with the icon," Beth told me, "I just kept thinking of
> that story. I don't know why, and I don't even remember where I had
> heard the story of that part of her life. But that's what kept coming into my
> mind….And I thought, wow, here is someone who really knows what it
> means to face someone who has hurt you.

Yet, shortly thereafter, Beth moved from placing St. Elizabeth into her own affective

orbit of the self to imaginatively reaching out into another emotional atmosphere – the

place where St. Elizabeth was able not only to forgive, but even work on behalf of, the

man who murdered her husband. "Eventually," Beth relayed to me:

> I just began to think of how amazing it was that she actually forgave and
> defended the person who murdered her husband. I mean, Christians talk
> about being "Christ-like" all the time, but very few of us actually do it….It
> was like she was looking at me, saying, you know, "you can do this too."
> And I'm not comparing her situation to my situation like it's the same, but
> it was like an encouragement. A nudge or something, like, "you can do
> this, just follow my example," if that makes sense.

In turning to her icon and in engaging in the emotional dialectics of sympathy and

empathy, Beth the school teacher interfaced with St. Elizabeth the nun and martyr. She

found a way to feel and then act differently, activating the iconic interface's ability to make one "capable of an expanded range of work or feeling" (Morgan 2012: 91).

Conclusion

A common way to characterize material artifacts such as icons is as "objects of devotion". And, indeed, to read this chapter as an ethnographic analysis of the practices through which converts cultivated their devotion to the saintly figures depicted in their icons would be one way to understand how icons were transformed from aesthetically strange, even displeasing, art objects into an interface mediating intimate relationships between Heaven and Earth. With the aid and encouragement of others in their communities, converts came to subjectivate these objects, making them a part of their everyday lives. They connected the stories of the saints to their own biographies, took them into their homes, workspaces, and cars, and turned to them in times of emotional distress.

All this is true. But it is also only one side of the story told above. To characterize icons as objects of devotion is to make them too passive, to characterize them as mere receptacles of religious desire without recognizing how they, in turn, serve to animate and reconfigure religious subjectivities. While it is true that these objects were placed into the service of human actors through their circulation and uses within the contexts of converts' lives, once set in motion, icons themselves worked to subjectivate those who utilized them. In having their biographies connected to the lives of converts, the stories of Elizabeth the New Martyr, St. Mary of Egypt, and St. John the Wonderworker in turn lived on as active presences within the stories of people like Elizabeth, Terry, and Brent.

In being placed within their homes and offices, the saints' eyes served to discipline the bodies and behaviors of those they gazed upon, intoning Kim to keep her focus on her prayers and Charles to not fall prey to unethical business practices. In being turned to in times of emotional turmoil, the saints not only acted as passive listeners but also as agents who reconstituted the emotions of those who turned to them, making them capable of forms of feeling they thought impossible alone.

This is to say that the interface between religious actors and material objects is constituted by multiple agencies, including material agencies. Once the material artifact is made subject to the lives of people, it also makes subject those who use it, framing their personal narratives, their everyday activities, and major life events within broader religious narratives of meaning and communal histories of practice. "Ways of seeing," Morgan asserts, "are visual situations in which viewers assume a position within a set of relations" (2012: 68). In this sense, material objects like icons are not only objects of devotion. They are also agents of religious self-formation, artifacts that, in being positioned by human actors, also serve to position them within newly configured social contexts and subject positions. To turn to an icon in a moment of distress is to position one's self within a larger history of Orthodox people who have also turned to the saints – and sometimes one's preferred saint – for consolation and strength. To position an icon in one's home or office space is also to reconfigure that space as one imbued with Orthodox religious significance and meaning (cf., McDannell 1998; Taves 1986). To make icons a part of one's life is to also allow the icon to become a part of one's self – a part of who one is.

Image B: A small icon corner

Image C: A much more elaborate icon corner

Image D: An example of a travel diptych

Image E: Saint John Maximovich

Image F: Saint Elizabeth the New Martyr

<h1 style="text-align:center">Chapter 6
Conclusion</h1>

Project Review and Summary of Findings

When I was a young child, I, like many other kids in my neighborhood, attended church with my family on Sundays. While I don't remember all of the things that went on there, some of my more vivid memories of Cornerstone Baptist Church are of singing congregational hymns. I remember, in a church that didn't have enough stellar voices to form a choir, the congregation singing songs such as "Amazing Grace," "The Old Rugged Cross," "He Walks With Me," and many others. To this day, far removed from the religious times and spaces of my early childhood, I know and can sing many of these songs by heart. One particular hymn that I remember, and that comes to mind as particularly salient for concluding this dissertation, was called "My God is Real." Set to a country-folk tune belted out on our off-key piano and accompanied by the clapping hands and stomping feet of the congregation, we sang:

There are some things I may not know
there are some places I can't go,
but I am sure of this one thing,
my God is real for I can feel him in my soul.

Some two decades later, as a religious agnostic who studies religion from the secular perspective of the sociologist, I still cannot help but be struck by such declarations about the intimate, personal experience of sacred reality among the religious groups and individuals I study. I have talked with Evangelicals who say they intimately know Jesus as their personal savior, Muslims who not only believe that they are servants of Allah but intimately feel their submission to Him, Catholic and Orthodox Christians who tell me the saints really do hear and sometimes answer their prayers. What is it to

experience such things? How, I have continued to ask myself, do people come to inhabit a religion as a personal reality, incorporating its seemingly other-worldly symbols, ideas, injunctions, and rituals into their most intimate experiences of self?

In this dissertation, I approached this question through a series of ethnographic investigations of contemporary conversions to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Midwestern United States. Through in-depth interviews with converts and participant-observation within the St. Basil, St. Tikhon, and St. Nicholas Orthodox church communities, I examined how individual converts in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region of Minnesota came to inhabit and experience the religious world of Eastern Orthodoxy as a personal reality, making its particular construal of the religious world a formative part of their own self-experiences. Central to the dissertation was the larger claim that understanding how religious cultural systems entered into the lived experience of these individuals required a better understanding of the self-constituting effects of religious practices on subjectivity.

I developed separate analyses of the effects of three practices on converts' emerging Orthodox selves, examining how conversion narratives, fasting, and icon veneration worked to experientially ground aspects of a new religious system of meaning in the subjective experiences and self-interpretations of the individuals I studied. Drawing on interdisciplinary literatures on conversion narratives and temporality in Chapter 3, I looked to how Orthodox converts' stories themselves acted as significant practices of self-formation. Specifically, my findings demonstrated that, in contrast to prevailing assumptions that the incorporation of conversion narratives always constitutes a temporal rupture in religious subjects' autobiographies, Orthodox conversion narratives evinced a

rhetoric of continuity in which the conversion event was constructed as a moment (or series of moments) in which one recognized a latent Orthodox subjectivity that had been there all along. In detailing the theological and practical contexts which informed and encouraged these narratives of religious self-discovery, Chapter 3 ultimately argued for an approach to narratives of religious conversion that moved beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion to instead examine why some individuals and institutions are more likely to address the past through a logic of discontinuity and self-transformation and others more likely to do so through a logic of continuity and self-discovery. I concluded by demonstrating how this approach to self-narratives could also be of potential to studies in many non-religious contexts as well.

Chapter 4 examined the role of fasting in Orthodox self-formation. Bringing together scholarship on the relations between embodiment and moral subjectivity in the cultural study of religion with insights from embodied cognitive science, I argued for the relevance of "image schemas" in understanding how religious actors come to transform bodily sensations into privileged mediums for the moral evaluation of their selves. Demonstrating how fasting activated deeply ingrained structures of bodily experience such as CONTAINER, SUPPORT, SCALARITY, VERTICALITY, PATH, and COMPULSION schemas, I detailed the phenomenological-interpretive links that embedded Orthodoxy's particular theology of moral embodiment within the lived experiences of converting subjects. By way of conclusion, I argued that a focus on how various institutions, practices, and self-projects cultivate particular image-schemas could be a promising way forward in developing comparative analyses of cultural embodiment.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I asked how converts moved from viewing icons as strange and sometimes even displeasing aesthetic objects to intimate and indispensable partners in their projects of religious self-formation – a part of who they were, to adapt a quote from my interlocutor, Beth. Expanding on the argument of David Morgan (2012) that icons act as interfaces through which the self can become capable of a broader range of activity and feeling, I analyzed the practices through which this interface was established in the experiences of Orthodox converts themselves. My findings demonstrated that the phenomenology of the iconic interface was not inherent in the artifact by itself but was instead produced through the ways icons circulated within the practices of Orthodox individuals and communities. Nevertheless, I also concluded that once these material objects became grounded in the personal lives of religious actors, icons began to have their own, sometimes unpredictable effects on converts' subjectivities. As such, I argued that material artifacts such as icons should not be seen as passive receptacles of devotion but as religious agents in their own right.

By approaching Orthodox religious self-formation as an ongoing and combinatory process of linguistic, somatic, and material implication, this dissertation demonstrated how the appropriation of particular narrative, bodily, and material practices into converts' everyday lives worked to progressively transform their subjectivities in religiously prescribed (but not completely determined) ways. Taken together, the analyses in this dissertation illustrated how the religious formation of the social actor through practices involved a dynamic and fundamentally social process of both appropriating and being appropriated by new religious meanings. As converts first encountered practices such as fasting and icon veneration, they started by looking to other, more experienced and

established members of their communities to understand the normative meanings and purposes behind these cultural forms. Yet, as each of my analyses also demonstrated, these meanings remained somewhat abstract and did not become part of their own lived experiences and interpretations of self until they engaged with them and put to them to use within the contexts of their own everyday lives. Once converts began to put practices to use, they came to find their new Orthodox identities more persuasive, more integral to who they were as persons and even, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, as part of who they had really, truly been all their lives. Over time and through practice, the meanings associated with these practices migrated, so to speak, from the impersonal realm of abstract theological discourse, to the interpersonal realm of social interaction, and, finally, to the intrapersonal plane of self-consciousness (Mead 1934; Bakhtin 1981).

Broader Sociological Implications

While each empirical chapter in the dissertation made interventions in and contributions to interdisciplinary literatures on religious practice and self-formation, here I return to the broader sociological implications of my project taken as a whole. As touched on in Chapter 1, the practice-based and processual approach to self-formation employed in this project has important implications for research and theory in both the sociology of religion and cultural sociology more broadly. In the sociology of religion, this dissertation has implications for the areas of religious power and identity, conversion, and experience. In cultural sociology, this dissertation contributes to discussions of the links between culture and subjectivity. I expand on each of these areas below:

Religious Power and Identity

Most broadly, this dissertation provides insight into the micro-foundations of religious power and identity. Such a focus goes to the heart of classical and contemporary discussions of religion's ability to constitute, enable, direct and control human action. As many of the most central scholars of the discipline argued, the power of religion to direct human action in the world was in large part due to its capacity to mould and transform subjectivities. As Weber's ([1930]1998) canonical work on Protestantism and capitalism asserted, it was the subjective anxieties engendered by the Calvinist doctrine of predestination that directed Protestant subjects to develop and sustain a work ethic and "spirit" that legitimated early American capitalism. Or, as Durkheim ([1912]1995) famously noted of the power of religion to transform the subjectivities and capacities of social actors, "The believer who has communed with his god is not simply a man [sic] who sees new truths that the unbeliever knows not; he is a man who *is stronger*" (419; emphasis in the original). And Clifford Geertz (1973), who is arguably more responsible than any other contemporary scholar for renewing sociological interest in the cultural side of religious life, noted that religion instills in worshippers the fundamental "moods and motivations" that subsequently direct human action in the world. For each of these central theorists, it was assumed that the ways religious systems became implicated in subjectivity (and vice-versa) accounted for much of religion's capacity to shape, motivate, and guide human meaning and action in the social world.

Within the contemporary sociology of religion, a vast amount of research has documented ways that religious affiliation and identity influence the attitudes and behaviors of individual adherents in a number of social realms. Scholars have repeatedly shown how religion influences, to list just a small sampling of research, individuals' political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Greeley 1993; Hayes 1995; Manza & Brooks 1997); their orientations to moral issues such as abortion (e.g., Ebaugh & Haney 1978; Emerson 1996; Hoffman & Johnson 2002), sexuality (e.g., Adamczyk & Pitt 2009; Adamczyk & Hayes 2012), and social welfare (e.g., Regnerus et al. 1998; Wuthnow 1991); their approaches to family formation and marriage (e.g., McQuillan 2004; Thornton et al. 1992; Wilcox 1998); and even their economic activities (Keister 2003, 2007a, 2007b; Lehrer 2004). Yet, despite the great amounts of evidence pointing to the fact that religious identity continues to deeply influence the individual subjectivities of modern social actors, the specific processes by which a religious system becomes incorporated into individuals' self-experiences remain rather opaque.

In examining religious practices as the primary vehicles through which religious selves are formed, this dissertation identified some of the concrete sociocultural mechanisms and attendant experiential processes by which individuals become personally implicated in broader religious systems of meaning, thus shedding light on the necessary antecedents of the religiously motivated actions so well documented by sociologists of religion in both the classical and contemporary traditions. The practices highlighted here show how religious identities "get under the skin," as Paul put it in Chapter 1, through ongoing practices that shape subjectivities in accord to religious models of selfhood. As such, a greater attention to practices as agents of identity

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formation can go a long way to help sociologists understand the ways religious systems

come to have significance in the personal lives of social agents (see also Allahyari 2000;

Bender 2003; Smilde 2007 for sociological accounts that make this larger point in

slightly different yet complementary ways).

Religious Conversion

      While much of the early sociological literature regarding religious conversion

focused primarily on the social and psychological predictors of *why* an individual adopts

a new religious tradition[28], more recent work has also asked questions concerning *how*

actors come to inhabit a new religious world. As with this project, this research attempts

to get at "the inside" of conversion, to understand the practices and processes that

accomplish the process and subsequently form new religious selves.

      The vast majority of this scholarship has emphasized the constitutive role of

religious language in the conversion process (e.g., Chen 2008; Harding 1987; Neitz 1987;

Stromberg 1993; Smilde 2007). Perhaps the most instructive early work in this vein

comes from Neitz (1987), whose study of Catholic Charismatics was one of the first to

focus on the role of metaphor in creating a new religious subject. Through the use of

metaphor, Neitz argued, those converting to charismatic forms of Catholicism

interpretively transposed everyday experiences into a new religious register, practically

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[28] In other words, these studies focus on either the affinity between the individual and the group to which they convert based on the supposed psychological predispositions of the convert, or on how the convert becomes affiliated with the groups they join through social networks. Some scholars have combined questions of both affinity and affiliation to produce more nuanced models of conversion. The most popular and widely tested model is that of Lofland and Stark (1965). This model has been revised and updated in both Stark and Bainbridge (1980) and Stark and Finke (2000). These studies/models may tell us something about the conditions under which conversion is more or most likely to occur, but they tell us little about the process of conversion itself – how, in effect, one develops a religious self. For a test of the merits and weaknesses of affinity and affiliation approaches, as well as a call for a different approach to the study of conversion, see Heirich (1977).

embedding their beliefs into their everyday experiences to make new sense of them.[29]

More recent scholarship has focused attention on narrative as another important linguistic practice of religious self-formation, as it allows for the reconstruction of personal autobiography and memory according to the temporal frameworks and truth claims of the larger religious tradition (e.g. Chen 2008; Meyer 1998; Smilde 2007; see Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of this literature).

While firmly acknowledging the importance of linguistic practices in the conversion process, this research demonstrated there is more involved in becoming a new kind of religious self than just the incorporation of new forms of religious rhetoric. Conversion – i.e. the process by which new religious subjects come into being – also involves the reorganization of bodily habits and sensations, as well as the implication of the self in a new material (not just narrative) environment. In producing fine-grained analyses of the *combined* role of narrative, bodily, and artifact-mediated practices in the making of Orthodox Christian selves, this dissertation opens up a more comprehensive understanding of conversion as involving self-change at multiple levels of subjectivity and through multiple processes of subjectivation. Comparative analyses of conversion, then, can be made contrasting not only different rhetorical genres and approaches to the autobiographical self, but also the different forms of somatic education and material socialization expected of and undergone by religious neophytes in different religious contexts.

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[29] See Chapter 4 of this dissertation for an approach to religious metaphorization that roots the process more firmly in embodiment.

Religious Experience

The broadly processual and practice-oriented approach to religious self-formation utilized in this dissertation also has implications for recent research on religious experience. Many contemporary researchers have taken a broadly "ascriptive approach" to the phenomenon, arguing that the task of the researcher of religious experience is not to attempt to identify a *sui generis* form of religious experience that holds across time and cultures (Eliade 1987; Otto 1923; Forman 1998) but instead to investigate the ways in which various religious meanings get ascribed to different kinds of experiences (Katz 1983; Nelson 2004; Proudfoot 1985; Taves 2009; Yamane 2000). Nelson (2004), for example, deftly utilizes this kind of approach to examine the ways experiences of ritual in an African-American church became linked to ascriptions of the Holy Spirit or, in other instances, Satan. Perhaps the most ambitious and comprehensive scholarship in this vein is the recent work of Taves (2009), who argues that scholars of religion should take an analytic "building-block" approach to religious experience. Practically speaking, this means that researchers first disaggregate the term "religious experience" and instead focus on "experiences-deemed-religious." Secondly, they can then trace the processes by which certain experiences 1) become perceived as special in some way by actors themselves and 2) how these experiences become implicated as component parts or "building blocks" of the larger social formations we call religions. Utilizing such an approach, a historian of religion, for example, could look at the emergence of the experience of "speaking in tongues" by tracking how this experience was ascribed special significance by social actors who experienced or witnessed it and how, over time, the

experience became identified as one of the central component pieces of the religious formation known as Pentecostalism.

In many ways, this study demonstrates the fruits of this ascriptive approach. Orthodox converts did, in fact, come to ascribe religious significance to multiple aspects of their lived experiences – associating their autobiographical memories, bodily sensations, and material surroundings with the wider categories of religious meaning provided and authorized by the Orthodox Christian tradition. However, the methods by which this occurred demonstrate the utility of complementing the building-block perspective that Taves outlines with a processual and practice-oriented approach that can account for how experiences-deemed-religious become uniquely compelling to the actors doing the ascribing. In other words, while an analytical, building-block focus on experiences-deemed-religious allows scholars to decompose religious experience into its various component parts (e.g., experience, practices of ascription, broader categories of religious meaning), a processual focus on religious subject formation allows scholars to examine the methods by which these component parts become "compressed" or reassembled into a new and persuasive mode of subjectivity and self-interpretation (cf., Luhrmann 1989).

Culture and Subjectivity

Finally, the practice-driven dynamic of mutual appropriation exemplified in my analyses of religious self-formation also contributes to wider discussions in cultural sociology about how culture structures and influences human subjectivity (see, for example, Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997; Ignatow 2007; Smilde 2007; Vaisey 2008;

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Wuthnow 2007).[30] Until recently, the debate in contemporary cultural sociology over how culture "works" at the level of human cognition and experience has been waged largely between neo-Durkheimian theorists (e.g., Alexander 2003; Alexander & Smith 1993; Reed 2004; P. Smith 2008) who take culture to be a type of semiotic code deeply formative of human subjectivity and repertoire theorists (e.g., Cerulo 2000; Rambo 1999; Swidler 1986, 2001) who argue that culture matters less foundationally but in more strategic terms – as a "toolkit" of practices that allows individuals to consciously build strategies of meaningful action in the world.[31]

Each of these influential positions has been critiqued for particular theoretical weaknesses and blindspots. Repertoire theorists have been taken to task for leaving the actor as a conceptual "black box," one in which critics have argued that the very same rational actor of economics that cultural theory sought to displace is sneaked back in under the cover of multiple repertoires of action (see Ignatow 2007; Vaisey 2008, 2009; C. Smith 2003). Social actors deliberately and consciously use culture to build courses of action that satisfy their wants, preferences, and goals, but culture, it seems, does not modify or affect these wants, preferences, and goals in any substantial way. Culture remains stubbornly "external" and instrumental to actors' thoughts, motivations, and preferences (which, of course, only begs the question of where exactly these thoughts, motivations, and preferences come from). Neo-Durkheimians such as Alexander, in turn, have been criticized for their overly textual and structuralist approaches to culture, as

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[30] I prefer the term subjectivity to cognition to refer to the complex configuration of thoughts, feelings, desieres, perceptions, etc. that animate social actors, as cognition holds overly mentalist connotations. However, cognition is the term most often used in these discussions in contemporary cultural sociology, so I employ the terms interchangeably here to detail the dissertation's implications for this conversation.
[31] See Kaufman (2004) for a good overview of these debates. See also Swidler (1986, 2001) and Alexander (2003) for programmatic statements on repertoire and neo-Durkheimian approaches, respectively.

they provide little in the way of demonstrating an empirical link to account for the ways such cultural structures influence human thought and action. The move from the semiotic analysis of public discourses to the moods and motivations of the actors exposed to those discourses is more a theoretical leap of faith than an empirical case-in-point (McLennan 2005).

Recent attempts have been made to incorporate the insights of both positions while steering clear of their weaknesses. One of the most influential of these attempts is a "dual-process model" of cultural cognition (Vaisey 2009; see also Martin 2010; Lizardo & Strand 2010) which builds on insights in cognitive psychology (c.f. Haidt 2001) as well as the social theories of Bourdieu (1990, 1992) and Giddens (1984) to argue that culture is best conceptualized as operating through two cognitive systems – one system that is "fast, automatic, and largely unconscious" and another that is "slow, deliberate, and conscious" (Vaisey 2009: 1684). The first cognitive system is akin to what Bourdieu-inspired scholars would call the "habitus" or what Giddens would label "practical consciousness," those deeply ingrained and motivating habits of thought, feeling, and perception that are such a part of one's being that they are often unavailable to focal consciousness. The second system is what Giddens would call "discursive consciousness" or what Bourdieu and many other sociologists would refer to as "reflexivity," the cognitive ability to take one's actions, preferences, and even identities as objects of reflection over which one can talk and deliberate.

This model has done sociologists of culture a service by demonstrating that the previously mentioned debates over how culture affects subjectivity may be a dead end. Repertoire theorists and neo-Durkheimians, dual-process theorists suggest, are arguing

over what are in fact two sides of the same culture-cognition coin. While I agree with this basic insight, my findings on Orthodox self-formation offer a different approach to the question of how culture shapes subjectivity, one in which the fundamental dynamic of interest is not between two distinct processes of cognition but that of the *mutual appropriation* of cultural meaning as mediated by concrete practices over time. In this practice-based approach, social actors do indeed appropriate cultural practices for their own purposes, but, in doing so, they are also having those same purposes reconfigured in light of the institutionally-based cultural meanings embedded in the practice (see also Smilde 2007). In appropriating religious practices, individuals also become appropriated by or implicated in the meaning system of which the practice is an integral part.

This does not occur instantaneously but is a mutually reinforcing process that unfolds over time. Take, for example, the complex of practices associated with icon veneration detailed in Chapter 5. Converts most certainly used icons as ways to modify their own behaviors and to develop new modes of moral agency and emotional subjectivity. To do so, however, implied progressively taking on and committing to the Orthodox meanings associated with the icon. New forms of agency and personhood, in other words, implied acquiescence to new structures of meaning. This process was neither totally guided by the instrumental planning of the agent nor a one-way imposition of Orthodox theological discourse. Instead, in trying out new practices for their own purposes, converts also got progressively "caught up" in and attached to the meanings associated with these practices, often in ways they did not expect or deliberately plan for. In praying to an icon of a saint in times of need, for example, many converts were surprised to find themselves emotionally moved, even changed, by the interaction (cf.,

Orsi 1996). In fasting, converts were taken back by how Orthodox teachings about the soul's passions seemed to concretely manifest in their bodily habits and appetites. In appropriating a narrative of temporal continuity, converts were able to narratively reconfigure their own pasts as well as their current social relationships in ways that were both intellectually coherent and emotionally satisfying.

Moreover, and in contrast to the assumptions of dual-process theorists such as Vaisey (2009) and Martin (2010) who theorize a sharp bifurcation between practical and discursive consciousness in cultural action, this dynamic of mutual appropriation is one in which a broad continuum of human experience is involved. In fasting, for example, both the activation of subconscious image schemas and reflexive interpretations of experience were intimately intertwined in the creation of a new form of moral embodiment. As such, my findings suggest that the imagery of "dual-process" is too dichotomous to account for the complex ways that culture and subjectivity intertwine in complex practices of the self.[32]

Limitations of the Study and Avenues for Future Research

In addition to its contributions, this dissertation, like all studies, has its limitations. One obvious limitation is that of breadth. While my ethnographic study of Orthodox self-formation in the Twin Cities provides in-depth and contextualized information about

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[32] While much can be learned from dialogue between sociology and the cognitive and psychological sciences, sociologists would do well to remember that many of the findings in these sciences about how cognition "really works" are usually produced in controlled experiments where individuals are asked to carry out rather simple actions and evaluations (such as deciding when and whether to push someone off a bridge, why they think incest is bad, etc.). Once we "scale up" to complex sociocultural behavior where a multitude of actions are incorporated into spatially and temporally extended cultural practices, we are dealing with much more complex cognitive and psychological processes that are better investigated and theorized through the more "naturalistic," sociological methods such as the participant observation and in-depth interviews employed here.

various practices and processes of religious self-formation among particular individuals in the concrete settings of their everyday lives, it remains to be seen to what extent these dynamics remain consistent in Orthodox communities outside of the Twin Cities. In the two years I have lived near Denver, Colorado since initially conducting this research, I have informally made contact with a number of Orthodox Christian converts in a few of the Orthodox communities in this area. In discussing my findings with them, their input suggests that they too experienced many of the same self-constitutive effects of the practices in this study, but this information remains anecdotal. As such, one obvious avenue for future research would be studies of Orthodox conversion and/or community in other locales. Indeed, this is sorely needed in the contemporary study of religion in the United States. While one of the most exhilarating aspects of initially embarking on this project was studying a religious tradition that had been almost entirely neglected in scholarly studies of U.S. religion, I ultimately came to experience this lack of scholarship as more hindrance than help to my analyses of Orthodox self-formation. While scholars of Evangelicalism can, for example, look to a multitude of surveys and ethnographic studies to ascertain whether and to what extent their own findings converge or diverge from other scholars, this was not the case for my own study. While I think there are bound to be similarities between the practices and subjectivities of the Orthodox converts in this study and Orthodox Christians elsewhere, there are also bound to be sociologically intriguing differences. Future research on Orthodox Christianity is therefore necessary to corroborate, expand, and/or modify the findings I have outlined here.

This study is limited in terms of temporality as well as by geographic location. This study has focused the vast majority of its attention on the initial construction of an

Orthodox self, those important processes through which individual subjectivity and abstract subject position first come together in a new realization of religious identity. Yet, religious selves, while durable, are by no means fixed or permanent. The processes and practices of religious becoming (and unbecoming, as the case may be) continue over the course of a lifetime, but the varying ways that these Orthodox converts continue to go about practicing, reinforcing, modifying, or even discarding their Orthodox selves over the longue durée is not something addressed in this study. How, for example, do peoples' complex relationships with icons unfold after initially finding them compelling? Do these relationships continue to deepen over time? Or do they, like so many initially passionate relationships, become more comfortable yet less intense? My as well as others' future research could look in these directions, analyzing the different kinds of opportunities and challenges faced by those who have initially succeeded in occupying a new identity position (cf., Tavory and Winchester 2012).

My dissertation findings on the power of practices to shape religious selves are also circumscribed by the fact that I have studied their effects in the lives of people whose conversions were ultimately successful. While my findings demonstrate how certain practices generate experiences that encourage or move people toward new interpretations of self, they do not *guarantee* the self-transforming effects I document here.[33] While I was aware of this bias early on in my study and actively sought out people who started practicing Orthodoxy but then chose not to convert, such negative cases proved extremely difficult to find and, in two cases where I did have leads, they invariably became dead ends. Both religious institutions and individuals, it seemed, were

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[33] Indeed, if they did, I might likely be writing this from the position of a newly converted Orthodox Christian.

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much more interested in sharing "success stories" as opposed to "failures" of Orthodox

identity acquisition. Despite the difficulties in locating such cases, future research on how

practices fail to fully take hold of the subjectivities of those who perform them would not

only be a great boon to studies of religious self-change, but to research on social

becoming more generally. [34] [35]

This study is also circumscribed through the analytic boundaries I set for the

project. Occupying an identity is always a work of negotiating boundaries of difference

and similarity, and this study has put most of its attention on the latter side of this analytic

line. In focusing attention on similarities in experience and self-formation trajectories

among the many individuals I studied, I admit I have focused less attention on the

practices and identities (such as those dealing with gender and social class) that created

differences between them. However, any project that examines difference must first have

a grasp on the shared ground upon which differences of position come to be significant.

This project has provided such information, but a more intersectional approach to

religious self-formation is an important next step.

This study has focused its attention on the ways local Orthodox churches provide

the "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991) through which new members'

subjectivities take shape, but it is also the case that newcomers often deeply shape the

communities into which they are socialized. Yet there is a surprising absence of studies in

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[34] This is not solely a limitation of my study, but is a limitation found in several studies of social initiation and becoming [see, for example, Becker (1953) on marijuana users; Benzecry (2009) on opera fans; Sudnow (1978) on jazz pianists; Wacquant (2004) on boxing]. Each of these works tells us a great deal about the phenomenology of successfully occupying a new social position, but there are no examples of unsuccessful initiations.

[35] There is of course a robust sociological literature on "role exit" (e.g. Ebaugh 1988) that could be of use here, but this is a slightly different phenomena. Role exit refers to exiting an identity position that had previously been firmly occupied and thus a part of one's self. The phenomenon I am referring to here is when an identity position fails to take hold in the first place, even despite practical attempts to the contrary.

the sociology of religion on how converts affect the receiving institutions of which they become a part. While I have not written about this here, one of the interesting things I encountered in my research was how the rhetoric of conversion and of being a convert affected people classified as "cradle." In many instances, the discourse of conversion was largely taken up by younger "cradle" members of the Church, many of whom, like converts, came to view themselves as reclaiming an Orthodox religiosity that had previously been hidden from view. For these adherents, the Orthodoxy they were "born with" had largely been one concentrated on ethnic meanings and affiliations, but the Orthodoxy they later "chose" was felt to be one of more spiritual truth and depth. Thus, for some cradle Orthodox, the conversion narrative supported a decoupling of ethnic and religious identifications and asserted the primary importance of religious over ethnic identity. However, I also found that other cradle Orthodox, particularly from the older generation, were much more ambivalent or unsympathetic to this discourse, finding it to be insulting to their self-experience in some cases and even deeply hurtful in others. I am currently working on developing an article based on this data.

Finally, this dissertation opens up space for future comparative inquiries into practices and processes of self-formation within and across religious and non-religious domains. As I have suggested in the conclusions of my empirical chapters, the three types of practices I analyze in this study already provide interesting points of comparison that could be expanded upon in future work on narratives of self-change, body-based image schemas, and the material mediations of subjectivity, respectively. But there are obviously many more self-formative practices to be identified and compared than those closely examined here, practices including but not limited to music (DeNora 1999;

McElmurry 2009), confession (Foucault 1978; Rose 1989), meditation (Pagis 2010), cooking and food preparation (Bender 2003; Perez 2011), all of which are important mechanisms that help constitute religious as well as secular subjectivities in the contemporary world. Comparative studies of such practices or technologies of self-formation could do a great deal to deepen sociological understandings of the dynamic ways social actors get caught up in the "webs of significance" (Geertz 1973) that comprise meaningful social worlds. Ultimately, I hope this dissertation serves as both an example of a fruitful way to empirically and theoretically approach such processes of self-formation and as a call for future sociological work in this direction.

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