Praying with the Senses

Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice

Edited by Sonja Luehrmann

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments · vii

Introduction: The Senses of Prayer in Eastern Orthodox Christianity / Sonja Luehrmann · 1

Part I. Senses

1 Becoming Orthodox: The Mystery and Mastery of a Christian Tradition / Vlad Naumescu · 29
   A Missionary Primer / Ioann Veniaminov · 55
2 Listening and the Sacramental Life: Degrees of Mediation in Greek Orthodox Christianity / Jeffers Engelhardt · 58
   Creating an Image for Prayer / Sonja Luehrmann · 81
3 Imagining Holy Personhood: Anthropological Thresholds of the Icon / Angie Heo · 83
   Syriac as a Lingua Sacra: Speaking the Language of Christ in India / Vlad Naumescu · 103
4 Authorizing: The Paradoxes of Praying by the Book / Sonja Luehrmann · 120

Part II. Worlds

5 Inhabiting Orthodox Russia: Religious Nomadism and the Puzzle of Belonging / Jeanne Kormina · 143
   Baraka: Mixing Muslims, Christians, and Jews / Angie Heo · 163
6 Sharing Space: On the Publicity of Prayer, between an Ethiopian Village and the Rest of the World / Tom Boylston · 165
Prayers for Cars, Weddings, and Well-Being: Orthodox Prayers
En Route in Syria / Andreas Bandak · 183

7 Struggling Bodies at the Crossroads of Economy and Tradition:
The Case of Contemporary Russian Convents / Daria Dubovka · 192

Competing Prayers for Ukraine / Sonja Luehrmann · 213

8 Orthodox Revivals: Prayer, Charisma, and Liturgical Religion / Simion Pop · 216

Epilogue: Not-Orthodoxy / Orthodoxy’s Others
William A. Christian Jr. · 242

Glossary · 253
Index · 259
ANYONE WHO HAS EVER LIVED in a contemporary Russian rural monastery would have initially been amazed by the conditions of life in monastic cells. The cause of amazement would not have come from the ascetic interiors; contrary to expectation, there are no empty rooms with thin mats. Instead, the rooms are strewn with old furniture, used clothing, and blankets riddled with holes. The windows are dirty and the cracked ceilings covered with cobwebs. The cheap paper icons stuck to the walls are intended to remind visitors of the spiritual aims of monastic inhabitants, but instead the icons merely add to the unpleasant atmosphere. These cells resemble a warehouse where any and all goods donated to monasteries find their final abode.

The discomfort from these dusty rooms increases when a pilgrim learns that there is no running water in the cloisters. Sometimes in the corridor there is a washbasin, which often ices over in winter. Once a week the permanent inhabitants wash themselves in a bathhouse, but for temporary visitors this does not fully alleviate the problem. Access to hot water only once a week contradicts the habits of both permanent inhabitants and pilgrims: the overwhelming majority of modern inhabitants of Russian rural monasteries were urban dwellers in their past, with an ingrained habit of a daily bath. If a daily bath is a customary practice, why does it cause so many difficulties in a modern monastery? Often the nuns answer that life in a monastery requires asceticism.

In many cultures, austerity is understood as an inevitable property of religious virtuosoi (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 313–21). Certainly, practices of asceticism
may differ and depend on an image of the natural and desired body in variable historic and cultural contexts. Over the millenniums of Orthodox tradition, the understanding of the sinful and the saintly body has changed on numerous occasions.¹ Looking at the canonical examples of saints, one may see an abundance of convenient methods of handling one’s own body. Saint warriors, martyrs, passion bearers, holy fools, holy hierarchs, canonized monks (prepodobnye)—all these types of sainthood offer different body role models on the way to heaven. What is specific to monastic holiness is a declarative rejection of the body.

According to the mystery of tonsuring, a person who takes monastic vows becomes like a newborn. The new monk’s or nun’s role models should now be angels, who are fleshless creatures (Lestvitsa 1998). But being corporeal while pretending to be incorporeal is a great tension within the idea of Christian monasticism.² Monks and nuns who realized it in practice did it in a different way. I briefly mention only the case of medieval Russian monasticism, because at that time many monasteries were founded in northwest Russia; now they have been renewed, and their new inhabitants especially venerate the founders of their cloisters whose examples they use as a point of orientation for their own piety.³ Medieval monks, many of whom are now canonized with the title prepodobnyi (Old Church Slavonic, literally “most similar”), imitated Christ by bringing direct harm to their bodies. The hagiographies tell about heavy chains worn by saints and amazing feats of fasting performed in the extremely harsh conditions of the Russian north.⁴ There are even more eccentric examples of austerity: Nikita the Stylite and Savva Vishersky are glorified as ascetics who lived for extended periods of time atop pillars (Zhitiia sviatikh [1907] 2005a; [1907] 2005b). The legend about Nikita the Stylite includes a fragment about his early feats: he went to a swampland and allowed his body to be eaten by mosquitoes (Moroz 2009).

This concern with the body and its potential to be transformed into something else can be approached in different ways. Neither fasting nor suppression of the flesh by chains is typical of modern cloisters.⁵ Nuns today find the sources of inspiration for changing one’s body in patristic literature, which is mainly devoted to the virtue of obedience and the hesychastic tradition. Besides the fact that sources offer quite different conceptions of the body itself and the methods to improve it, today’s nuns have a perspective far removed from that of the medieval period, during which these techniques were developed. This chapter focuses on the following questions: to what extent has today’s conception of the body changed, and what kind of human body is suitable for a contemporary...
monastery? I try to untangle the knot composed of hygiene practices and poor living conditions in contemporary convents, as well as the wider economic situation and the current understanding of religious asceticism. This focus on the human body throws light on the problems of the function and understanding of prayer in modern monasteries.

THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF RURAL MONASTIC REVIVAL

At the end of the nineteenth century, Russian convents experienced an unprecedented influx of sisters and pilgrims. This was due to a variety of factors, including the abolition of serfdom and the subsequent opportunity for peasants to leave rural communities and take part in pilgrimages or join the monkhood; the increase of piety among the nobility; and the general process of modernization in the country, such as railroad construction, which facilitated access to distant cloisters (Kenworthy 2010; Robson 2007). Monasteries that had housed about two dozen sisters and been quite poor at the beginning of the nineteenth century increased tenfold, becoming major economic centers by the end of the century. Some of them happened to be well adjusted to the new conditions of advancing capitalism (Wagner 2003). A description of a particular monastery at century’s end depicted cloisters with several hundred inhabitants, sizable tracts of arable land, a large garden, a brick factory, and multiple farm buildings.6

All this wealth was expropriated by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s and 1930s. During the next seventy years, these monastic buildings would be used as childcare centers, museums, storage areas for collective farms, houses of culture, state archives, and so on (Kelly 2013). Naturally, monastic constructions were rebuilt to the needs of the current owners; churches were deprived of crosses, cupolas, icon screens, and all interior decorations. The same destiny was shared by Orthodox monasteries in other countries that became Socialist after 1917. The regions that were annexed on the eve of World War II (the Baltic countries, West Ukraine, and West Belarus) were able to keep some functioning cloisters.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state began to return former churches and monasteries to the Russian Orthodox Church. But these returned buildings were no longer suitable for either church services or housing nuns. The churches and monastic cells were in need of major repairs, as well as the restoration of interior decorations. All this required a large financial investment. Sometimes the state, appreciating ancient churches as architectural
monuments, supported their renewal. At other times the church authorities facilitated the restoration of a monastic complex, but only a few rich eparchies could afford this. Most rural monasteries were restored with the help of a small number of enthusiasts (Tocheva 2011b). In some places, local leaders facilitated the restorations. Elsewhere, urban intellectuals took the lead in restoring rural shrines; these intellectuals had, as far back as the 1960s, considered religious monuments to be embodiments of national ideas (Brudny 1998). This method of restoration via hard manual labor was considered morally blameless, whereas financial sponsorship is often thought of as morally dubious (Köllner 2011). But if the churches, especially those situated in cities, were reconstructed through manual labor, restoring the numerous and remote rural monastic complexes was beyond enthusiasts’ power. Volunteers—who as a rule were urban dwellers—restored city churches after work or in their spare time. But the time needed to reach a village made this type of restoration nearly impossible for rural areas.

As a result, a deficit in money and manpower prolonged the time needed to repair monasteries. A small number of nuns (rarely more than ten to twenty) could not maintain housing designed for hundreds. Neither could they cultivate vegetable gardens at pre-revolutionary levels. The cloisters were as a result forced to accept voluntary temporary workers. These workers had unclear status because they were not officially included in the sisterhood, although they were expected to follow a way of life very similar to that of the sisters; in addition, to be a temporary worker was a necessary precursor to becoming a nun. However, since the number of temporary workers was difficult to predict, monasteries had to store more clothing, tools, and food than needed for the sisters alone. These stocks consisted of donations made by local villagers as well as pilgrims.

The economic situation explains the poor condition of the cells, as well as the neglect of hygiene. Indeed, plumbing was not usually installed in pre-revolutionary monasteries. As for contemporary renovations, such redevelopment would be very expensive. Even more prosperous monasteries, which have new hostels for temporary workers and pilgrims, often restrict access to hot water. They may provide good meals, but they still have only a single bathroom with one hot water heater, capable of providing about twenty minutes of warm water for dozens of people. While hot water is certainly an expensive resource and as such is controlled, why are monasteries so very stringent with it in particular? How do monasteries’ restrictions on hygiene practice help us understand what kind of body is suitable for a convent?
THE AUTOMATIC BODY

I will begin with a particularly striking case, which resulted in the dissociation of a convent. This was a small convent of twelve inhabitants in the Vologda region. The head of this cloister, Mother Evfaliia, was about sixty years old. She had been a medical assistant in a village until she decided to enter the monastery in her thirties. It was the Soviet period, so active convents were found only in the Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. Evfaliia came to a Ukrainian convent near the town of Cherkassy, and over the next fifteen years she climbed the hierarchical ladder from novice to monastery administrator (blagochinnaia). In those years, the cloister supported itself mainly through farming, and in the 1990s it expanded its farmland and endeavored to have the state return its pre-revolutionary church buildings. In 1995, the bishop of Vologda had Mother Evfaliia return to her native region in order to help restore the Goritskii convent. Many of the Goritskii buildings were either destroyed or abandoned or had been turned into a museum or taken over by local residents. Mother Evfaliia, reproducing Soviet-era patterns of survival, focused the initial restoration efforts on the large farms, which required considerable investment of labor. The nuns and volunteer workers toiled twelve hours a day with no days off. Due to the nuns’ exhaustion, church services were held only on Sundays and holy days, and private prayer was not observed. Although the monastery gained a good farm, garden, and cattle yard, this success came at the cost of the dissatisfaction of many sisters. They began to struggle in 2012. I learned about this confrontation by a text message from a novice: “We want a monastic life in the monastery!” What did this mean? They wished to reduce the time of labor obedience (poslushanie) and create a special time for prayer.

There are two meanings of the word “obedience.” First, obedience is a way of life, in which a nun constantly subordinates her will to the will of another person and through this person to the will of God. Second, obedience is necessary in everyday duties, and in this sense it becomes synonymous with work. The complexity of the analytical category of obedience lies in the fact that it may refer to both the field of theological reflection about inner spiritual work (obedience as a virtue needed for the salvation of the soul) and to the field of economy. In the latter case, obedience is particular to the performance of certain duties. This meaning has been used for a long time within Russian monasteries. A pre-revolutionary list of the Goritskii convent nuns contains information about first names, year of birth, date of admission to the monastery,
tonsure date, the estate (soslovie) to which each nun belonged, and their obediences, which included seamstress, arch-chanter, and baker (Glyzina 2009).

The work necessary for the restoration of returned buildings was also termed obedience. Apparently, the word “obedience” was chosen in order to stress the continuity of traditional monastic life. However, obedience in the current historic and economic context has a different connotation.

How does obedience work in monasteries today? My informants conceptualize obedience as a spiritual gift from God. But like any reciprocal relationship, this tie implies a degree of mutuality. For establishing this connection, God is not necessarily the original donor. The person can initiate this relationship. But what can a human being present to God? The person’s gift as part of this exchange can be his or her voluntarily alienated free will. It requires an extreme self-sacrifice for a person to surrender his or her will to another.

What does true obedience mean? In fact, that a person “in obedience” relinquishes his will. And why is this most precious to the Lord, when a person relinquishes his will? The thing is that everything comes to us from God, all our virtues are from our God, all from God, that’s what the Lord gives us; all talents even, hands, legs, eyes are all from God; the language that we speak, think, everything comes from God. And it is only the will that is just ours. We, humans, are endowed with this free will. We finally give it all to the Lord, sacrifice everything. It’s the supreme sacrifice.

According to this excerpt from an interview with a nun who serves as administrator of the Goritskii convent, free will is initially the property of God, who gives it to the person. The believer should in turn return it to the Giver, because one can expect salvation only when living according to God’s will. If the will remains a person’s property, it will lead to ruin. One cannot be guided by one’s own will, because it can be “treacherous”: people usually estimate their own deeds in a favorable light. “Everyone is very deceitful and sometimes it seems that the motive of your actions is very noble, but if one looks deeper into oneself, more often the motives come from selfishness,” this nun explained.

In spiritual literature by the church fathers, searching is necessary but must be done with caution because “we read the books, but our mind is infected, our mind is sinful; it does not understand anything and cannot see anything.” According to this logic, the more that individuals do not own themselves, the more they are owned by God, and thus the more certainly they are saved. By handing over the will through obedience to another, one restores a desired safety and balance.
For monastic work, this means that obedience serves as a moral sanction for daily work. A typical workday in the monastery is twelve hours. The duties for the majority of inhabitants involve cooking, cleaning, simple renovations, working in the vegetable garden, and so on. Such work, while often monotonous, is not considered humiliating because many contemporary monastery inhabitants performed similar work at home or in their summer cottage. At this point the contemporary understanding of obedience begins to depart from the previous interpretation of this virtue as it was described in the older Orthodox texts.

The most famous classical text glorifying the virtue of obedience is *Practical Teaching on the Christian Life (Dushepoleznye poucheniia)* by Abba Dorotheus, an Egyptian hermit from the sixth century. This book begins by telling about a young man of noble birth who demonstrated amazing humility in the monastery, unquestioningly following all instructions and performing any distasteful work (Avva Dorofei 2005). Many similar stories put a nobleman or prince in the center of the plot, likely because, in feudal society, to be subordinated to a lower social position was regarded as a special kind of virtue. A similar discrepancy concerning the modern understanding of obedience can be observed in the popular histories of the Paterikon, in which a character is given orders to plant cabbage with the roots pointing upward or to water a stick to turn it into a living tree. In these stories, obedience is associated with irrational labor. However, modern monasteries cannot afford the luxury of wasting labor power in this way.

Most probably, the social imagination underlying contemporary ideas of obedience has another origin besides patristic literature. Reading these old legends, contemporary believers understand them through a more familiar cultural grid that includes a knowledge of totalitarian states, with little respect for feudal virtues. The emphasis on the rejection of the person’s own will and complete submission to the will of another is more reminiscent of dystopian novels—with strong state power and people like cogs in the system, striving for a brighter future on this earth or in heaven—than of medieval stories about noble humility or irrational labor.

The dystopian storylines elaborate on another popular older idea: belief in the end of days. In the eschatological narratives collected in famous contemporary Orthodox monasteries, one can see a clear parallel to the motives of the well-known dystopian novels of the twentieth century: *We* by Yevgeny Zamiatin, 1984 by George Orwell, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (AkhmeTOVA 2010, 176–214). However, for those who were training themselves in the vir-
tue of obedience, the old and popular image of the malevolent and omnipotent power, leading to apocalypse or to a depersonalized society, brought up a quite practical question: how to determine the right spiritual leader to receive the gift of their will. Dystopian narratives told stories of people consciously or unconsciously rejecting their own will in favor of the state or an unspecified collective. Strictly speaking, the very difference between utopia and dystopia resides exactly in this point: by whom, and how, these people’s wills would be used. For nuns, this choice distinguishes true obedience from false. The task was to find a spiritually gifted leader who could direct his pupils to God. The concern with finding a spiritual leader was not shared by old hermits, who feared false pride as the most dreadful sin. But modern nuns were more afraid of following the wrong leader. The history of the twentieth century, readings of utopian/dystopian movies and books, and contemporary conspiriological folklore taught people that their will and consciousness could be subdued. It is a person’s own responsibility to choose the right spiritual authority.

By contrast, if individuals give their own will to a saint, they would not need to think about their salvation anymore. Their duty would be only to properly follow the instructions of the saint. For many members of contemporary monastic communities, such dedicated obedience allows one to surrender attachment to ordinary feelings and desires and become instead a completely docile laborer performing rational obligations. As one nun described the ideal obedience, it should be a chain of simple and direct tasks, one following another, so that one need not think at all but only obey instructions. Thus, the contemporary ideal of obedience is of a person who carries out all tasks correctly and without reasoning, much as a robot would. On the one hand, it is clear that such an ideal has recent origins and connects with utopian narratives. On the other, this ideal expresses one of the ancient postulates of monasticism, which is incorporeity. Thus through this mechanistic body, many moods (tiredness, sexual desire, weakness, affliction) can be downplayed or ignored. Whether ancient or recent, robotization helps transform the problematic human body into something more convenient and efficacious, in an economic sense, to monasteries.

Returning to the history of the Goritskii convent’s schism, it is clear that in this case prayer existed only as common ritual, that is, as part of the church liturgy. Mother Evfaliia, more managing director than spiritual leader, did not understand the demands to provide time for personal prayer. She regarded any doubt about the wisdom of labor obedience as evidence of laziness. She told me that sisters are allowed to pray as much as they want during their labor
obedience, that such was not prohibited. Mother Evfaliia claimed that most labor in the garden, cattle yard, and kitchen required certain skills but that over time these were becoming routinized operations; therefore, during those tasks the sisters’ minds remained unoccupied and they were able to pray. In this case, to pray meant to repeat memorized prayers without any additional sensory support, such as kneeling, crossing oneself, or bowing. The priest who acted as confessor to the convent said that sisters are required to perform work but that prayer was a personal matter. If someone painted a fence or cooked a borscht, he said, then the result was obvious, but how to measure prayer? According to the priest, prayer in the monastery was the private affair of each nun.

THE TRANSFORMED BODY

Many sisters, however, did not see prayer as merely an appendix to labor. Some understood prayer as their main transformative practice. They often considered the words of the apostle Paul, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17, ESV), as the basis of a spiritual life. Their reflection was devoted to analyzing the phrase “without ceasing.” How was such possible under the conditions of everyday life? In the imagination of many, monasteries were unique places where people would be free from economic worries so that they could devote themselves to prayer. Often this group of nuns included people with a higher education who had lived in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and begun a religious search in the 1980s and 1990s. Many began their search with Eastern religious traditions and acquired some experience in practicing yoga and meditation. Orthodoxy attracted them with the performance of the Jesus Prayer.

There is a powerful tradition in Orthodoxy called hesychasm. These ideas were developed, between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, by Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory the Sinaite, and Gregory Palamas. According to their doctrine, the godlike state of theosis is achievable in this life through contemplation of the divine energies (divine light). For this they offered a special technique to achieve the desired state for the performance of the Jesus Prayer (Pop, this volume). To find the divine light that people had inside, all external sensory impressions had to be limited. A hesychast must sit in a fixed posture, slide the knees to the chest, turn the gaze inward, follow the breath, and silently utter the Jesus Prayer. Exercising the imagination at this time is not recommended. Ideally, such detachment and minimization of external bodily sensations may be found in cave monasteries. However, despite the fact that some monasteries have good conditions for practicing the Jesus Prayer, they are in no hurry to
revive this kind of monasticism. In contemporary monastic prayer discourse, a certain hierarchy exists, with liturgical prayer during church services at the very bottom and the Jesus Prayer at the top. The head of the monastery often does not approve of the practice of the Jesus Prayer among monks or nuns, considering the monastic community to be unprepared for the highest spiritual practice.

Thus, the abbot of the Archangel Michael’s monastery in the Caucasus does not rush to develop the performance of the Jesus Prayer in such a form, though the monastery’s caves were evidently used for that purpose by pre-revolutionary hermits. His doubt is related to the theological distinction between internal and external action (Russian delanie), which underpins to a great extent the practice of monastic prayer. External action is considered to be the physical performance of the prayer: kneeling, bowing, reading out loud or in silence. Inner action describes the accompanying emotional mood. If a person undertakes to fulfill the highest virtue but is not ready, then at best he or she will only imitate the external action and at worst will fall into the sin of pride. The abbot spoke about what may happen if he encourages performing the Jesus Prayer: “It is clear how to build up this brand: that I have hermits. The cave, hermits, an Athonite-type monastery, the abbot visiting Mount Athos. These can build up a brand, but we do not want it. We do what we are able to do and what we know right now: we read the morning and evening prayers. Well, now that is the foundation for us.”

Some features of the modern understanding of the hesychasts make their teachings particularly attractive to a specific group of monks. This is the doctrine of the light of Mount Tabor. In the hesychasts’ teaching, the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, accompanied by bright light, is used symbolically to demonstrate that invoking the name of Jesus brings internal illumination. In the consciousness of modern monks, this connects with the idea of energies. In the Orthodox tradition, Gregory Palamas developed some ideas about the energies of God (Meyendorff 1974). But contemporary fascination with hesychasm likely has its roots in widespread New Age views in post-Soviet territory rather than in knowledge of the theological debates of the fourteenth century. Energies are a popular quasi-scientific concept, used by some New Age movements. Some of my informants at first told me stories about Indian yogis who did not require the usual sustenance of sleep or food and were able to achieve complete transformation of the body through meditation. Then it turned out that my informants held exactly the same ideas in their understanding of Orthodoxy. For my informants, the Jesus Prayer called the Holy Spirit (that is, the divine energy) to the worshipper, and this energy transfigured humans “cell by cell.”
If we look again at the Goritskii convent, the conflict between prayer worshippers and obedience worshippers becomes more obvious. Given the special techniques that are required for the performance of the Jesus Prayer and the physical labor required for sheer survival, it is very difficult for contemporary admirers of hesychasm to integrate the practice into modern institutionalized monasteries. The Jesus Prayer is a very time-consuming practice that not many monasteries can afford.

Novice Maria, who left the Goritskii convent precisely because she was looking for prayer, told the story of her friend, a hieromonk, who practiced the Jesus Prayer. She explained why he considered the current monastic life not conducive to the transfiguration of a person.

When he came to the monastery, he had already been keeping the Jesus Prayer almost constantly. And he said that everything in the monastery was against the Jesus Prayer. . . . All dwellers labored so much that it was nearly impossible to keep the Jesus Prayer. Now he is released from prayer services and brotherly meals and he prays at night and constructs his day as he wants, except for his obedience, which he bears in the temple. So, when I began to ask him about the little prayer (molitovke), he showed me how three fingers add up to pray, so he put them to himself and I put my fingers to myself, and I immediately felt responsive fire at the point of touch. First, I realized where this point is located. Second, because he was standing right by me, with his great energy reserve, the fire was immediately transmitted to me. What I mean is that a person in prayer emanates something like that. Well, but there are now very few such persons.

The idea that the performance of prayer releases a certain energetic force, rebuilding not only the soul but also the body, can be confirmed by the examples of the incorruptible relics and hagiographic histories about the extraordinary light produced by devotees of Christ (Greene 2010). Improvement in this way is accessible to people independent of institutional support. This is what happened in the case of Maria. She returned to her Moscow apartment, where she continued to train in prayer at her own pace. Several other Goritskii nuns and novices preferred to go to another monastery that had many more nuns and a reputation of being more prayerful. Another friend of mine with a biography similar to Maria’s also chose the monastic way, but instead of a convent she went to a male monastery. There she carries out the obedience of an accountant, but apart from that her schedule is very different from the rest of the brotherhood, leaving her time for private prayer. Finally, there are those who take on jobs as temporary workers in different monasteries, having come to the conclu-
sion that one can become a monastic in order to avoid thinking about one’s economic situation, thus freeing oneself to focus on spiritual affairs and a life of discipline. Yet if a person has no economic problems, modern life in a megalopolis will provide better opportunities for the practice of the Jesus Prayer than will current conditions in monasteries. Indeed, the anonymity and alienation of life in large cities have become proverbial. If, as in Maria’s daily routine, a person is retired, owns an apartment, visits the nearest store, and watches an online broadcast of the church liturgy, her conditions would be the envy of any hagiographic hermit, left in the remote Vologda forest of northern Russia or in the Syrian desert for the practice of prayers.

The notion of a monastery as a place of individual prayer is rarely recognized in contemporary Russian convents. The Goritskii priest disagreed with Maria’s opinion, because Maria’s way of transforming herself implied personal autonomy and attention to her own internal states. The priest did not consider contemplation of one’s inner state to be spiritual work; rather, as seen in his comment, he thought it a sentimental and romantic impulse without support by everyday actions: “The Goritskii convent could well become a kind of elite monastery for ladies disappointed in life. And I think it would meet demand, in the sense that there would be a lot of nuns fluttering around as butterflies, not sowing, not reaping, but recollecting themselves in solitary prayer and dreams of Heavenly Jerusalem. Mother Evfaliia provided an earthly monastery, from the plow, a kind of agricultural work team [artel’]; thus labor combines with prayer and this shapes the form of a monastic life.” Different sensory regimes accord with different meanings of prayer. The performance of the Jesus Prayer implies very strong ties between prayer and the body of the worshipper and at the same time requires isolation from other people, while for Mother Evfaliia, prayer is simply a pronunciation, out loud or silently, of memorized texts. Contrary to the robotization of the human body in contemporary monastic labor, people do not easily imagine themselves as docile mechanisms. This framework contradicts the diverse personal and bodily experience of everyday life.

Another framework seems to be more sustained. The work on the body (“cell by cell”) is intended to transform the human person and bring it closer to the divine. This process of transformation is understood in quasi-scientific terminology as “sensitivity to invisible energies.” Given their attention to the body, the group of inhabitants who wanted more prayer could not leave without reflecting on the hygiene situation in monasteries. Unexpectedly, they accepted the idea that little access to bathing would lead to self-renewal and
self-purification of the body. Moreover, they viewed water as a substance with a memory that can transmit negative information to a bather.\textsuperscript{12} The novice Maria, for example, believed that if for two months a person did not wash his or her hair, it would arrive at a natural balance. Her beliefs incorporated both the idea of a golden age before modernization and civilization, when humanity was in a natural state, and the concept of self-transformation through the Jesus Prayer.

**UNCLEANED BODIES AND MODERNIZATION**

The theme of modernization is a very important one for monasteries. Since the world, according to biblical eschatology, never changes for the better, cloisters should be rooted in tradition, meaning a habitual way of life as well as imitations of exemplars from patristic literature. In a world where technological innovations are happening at a rapid pace, however, the traditional lifestyle is called into question. Even such monasteries as those on Mount Athos, with a thousand years of uninterrupted history, are forced to argue about acceptable and unacceptable inventions (Fajfer 2012). Such things as electricity, roads, and mobile phones have become the subject of serious debates. Even if these things were not the cause of disagreements, they become a means of pointing out one’s opponent’s lack of spirituality, as happened in two monasteries of Athos: Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou (Paganopoulos, n.d.).

Russian Orthodox monasteries have had a seventy-year break in their history, during which there have been significant changes in the infrastructure and technology of the state. The tradition of monastic life, on which the current dwellers rely, stopped at the technological and social level of early twentieth-century society, and patristic literature does not offer any advice about using modern devices. In conditions when it is impossible to rely on tradition, monastery inhabitants are trying to decide on their own the degree of modernization within their cloister. This gives rise to inconsistent-combinations: in one case, laptops are prohibited but mobile phones permitted; in another case, central electricity is intentionally not installed, but dwellers have laptops, which are powered by the generator; in a third convent, laptops, mobile phones, and TV are forbidden, but the convent has its own tractors, harvesting machines, and cars. However, in this kaleidoscope it is possible to trace an economic logic of what is permitted and what is prohibited. Monasteries usually tolerate those innovations that help them to survive. Loopholes for innovations are possible even if a monastery is firmly convinced of the inadmissibility of
certain items in its territory. For example, many monasteries prohibit the use and even the presence of a computer, but some work that requires a computer is performed by members of the laity, who are often voluntary helpers at the monastery.

The issue of modernization seems to be most apparent via the example of the use of electronic devices. Nevertheless, this topic refers to wider questions, including the restoration of monastic buildings and the interior decoration of a cell. These questions are not left unconsidered by the nuns. I had a conversation with a cantor of the Goritskii convent who was still practicing obedience at the time but would a couple of years later leave for another monastery in search of prayer. She told me that the large, rebuilt, pompous monasteries did not attract her; she preferred the cloisters with cracks in the walls. I asked, “These cloisters are more correct, aren’t they?” The cantor answered, “They are traditional.” She went on to say that when Trinity-Sergius Lavra near Moscow was being renovated, the leadership decided to do European-style remodeling. A number of inhabitants did not agree with this type of restoration. They called the renovated monastery Euro-Lavra. In spite of this renovation, however, the life of the monks has not changed much: windows of ascetic schemamonks still look out over the dustbins.

The cantor, who graduated from a Moscow university with a specialty in sound production, belonged to the metropolitan intelligentsia, just like the novice Maria. This group is most appreciative of the aesthetics of ancient Russia: the icons of Andrei Rublev, the znamenny chant, the medieval architecture of northern churches, all of which create an image of the solitary monastery, alien to economic and other worldly troubles. The aesthetics of imaginary ancient Russia resonates more with picturesque ruins than with rich monasteries serving as production centers. According to this cultural code, the dilapidation of monastic buildings is regarded as proof of their authenticity. Thus, some degree of damage to objects or buildings is not considered negative but on the contrary serves to demonstrate their merits. At the same time, this group may exhibit even more aversion to ordinary rubbish than is usual in Russian society. So, for the cantor, the unpleasant view from the schemamonk’s windows serves as a sign of irrational modernization, where what should be left alone gets repaired and what needs to be cleaned up gets ignored.

The heads of the monasteries usually hold different beliefs. For them a tidy facade is more important than the preservation of antiquities, because a renovated facade gives the authorities the most obvious proof of success. Therefore churches are the main structures repaired, since they are the primary buildings
observed by diocesan authorities, pilgrims, and tourists. The interior and the internal infrastructure of these buildings are renovated last of all. The question remains, however: if economic constraints are at the heart of monastery hygiene practices, why does this kind of relation to the body meet with support from the rest of the monastery inhabitants?

People with different aesthetic views and understandings of the practice of salvation may in fact have a similar relation to the body if they agree with one idea: the cloister should be inhabited by monastics seeking to establish a connection with God, not with other people. Lives of northern Russian monastic saints are full of stories about how the future saints left their communities and settled in the dense forests in order to devote their whole life to God. The image of a similarly solitary monastery is ideal for almost all the nuns. This ideal was demonstrated in an interview with the Goritskii administrator who supported the practice of obedience in everyday life:

I imagine Saint Zosima Verkhovskii, who lived in the wilderness in Siberia, where the frost is deeper; he lived in an earth house with no wood. Do you know how they prepared their food? During a week in the fall, they baked bread consisting of half flour, half grass, and then they froze it and froze vegetables and cooked some soup and froze it too so that they didn’t need to cook in winter. Every winter they lived in their cells; I don’t know how warm they were, but they prayed. Since they didn’t want to spend time on cooking, they cut off a piece of the frozen bread and soup and continued their prayer.

It is noteworthy that her image of the ideal monastery does not mention obedience. In fact, this image emphasizes the relationship of a person with God as it is expressed by prayer. The denial of relationships with laypeople, as is required of Orthodox nuns, leads to the rejection of public life and public presentation of the self. Before the monastery inhabitants arrived, they were familiar with a very modern form of public life, closely related to the development of a new cultural body, which became less tolerant of a variety of smells and more demanding in terms of hygiene (Elias [1939] 2000; Foucault 1973; about the Russian situation, see Pirogovskaya 2014). Smells, or rather their absence, serve as a marker of both the level of culture and the safety of the environment; hence deodorants and various means of hiding the body’s natural smells are very popular in contemporary society.

Despite the monastic idea of transforming the human body into something incorporeal, it is in the monasteries that the sweaty, dirty human body receives the right to exist. This kind of austerity, in which hygiene practices are severely
curtailed, contrasts with the increased desire to clean that is the contemporary norm. At the same time, monastery inhabitants’ neglect of cleanliness calls for neglect of the usual standards of public behavior. The desire to create a non-social society, where every nun would, in the first place, take care of her relationship with God rather than her relationship with other people, correlates well with the reverse concern for one’s body, where an unclean and unkempt body is more highly valued.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Russian monasteries are very young, in contrast to the centuries-old monastic communities of Mount Athos and other parts of the Orthodox world. Most contemporary monasteries were under restoration during the 1990s. Today it is rare for a monastic community to be older than twenty years. The people who came to monasteries in those early years were faced with a situation in which nobody knew exactly what to do. The principal aim of those who went to the cloisters was the salvation of their souls, but the Orthodox textual tradition, as well as the millennial history of Russian monasteries, offers very different strategies for reaching heaven or building a proper monastery. So during this period, the chief questions were these: which practices lead a person to God, and which practices are most preferable for a spiritual community such as a monastery?

Asceticism is implied as an essential practice for such religious communities, limiting as it does the practitioner’s ties with the mundane world (Moore 1987). But in the Orthodox interpretation, this should not be a spontaneous austerity that doesn’t follow a traditional model. For Orthodox monasteries, it is important to seek acknowledgment in patristic literature of the activity of their inhabitants. Today’s nuns represent themselves as possibly weaker in feats than the ancient saints but as their heirs in terms of grace. Thus both the adherents of obedience and the practitioners of the Jesus Prayer derive their authority from the patristic tradition. However, the traditions they choose, and the interpretation of those traditions, depend on the modern conditions of a revival of monastic life.

I used the example of the relationship to the body to describe the contemporary application of the patristic tradition. Modern nuns and novices are faced with the ancient monastic challenge of the minimization or transformation of the body into something fleshless. The contemporary solution for how to handle one’s body in a monastery lies in the appeal to very modern
conceptualizations of the body, power, and free will. One path follows plots of utopian/dystopian narratives; another borrows models of individual and self-transformation, ideas that are most popular in New Age groups. Prayer occupies a central place in these debates. It is alternately considered a mental activity, transformative practice, or collective ritual. Consequently, the body may not be given any attention at all (at least on a discursive level), or it may be considered both instrument and indicator of deification.

Actually, economic problems determine many ascetic activities in modern monasteries. These problems of the cloisters can be viewed within the broader context of small, closed, agricultural religious communities under threat within a capitalist economy and secular state. Monastic life in contemporary cloisters is very diverse, as it depends on the availability of buildings in need of restoration, sponsorship aid, the position of local authorities, the number of voluntary temporary workers, and what image of the monastery the abbot, bishop, and inhabitants wish to achieve.

However, even among such diverse monasteries, there is a need to deal with common key issues: they must become part of the modern world while at the same time emphasizing their difference from it. The latter is in part accomplished via austerity in hygiene practices. Hygienic practices are so deeply ingrained in modern society that they are hardly noticed. The impossibility for contemporary monasteries to live up to citizens’ hygienic standards leads to new ascetic potentialities.

**Daria Dubovka** is a postgraduate student at Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg.

**NOTES**

1. For Catholic tradition, see, for example, a brilliant description of attitudes regarding crippled bodies (Orsi 2006, 19–47) or about female physicality in Roman theological works (Bynum 2007).

2. Nowadays there is a movement in the Catholic tradition, called new monastic communities, that rejects this angelic image as theological doctrine. This movement considers the human body bestowed by God as something that makes humans sacred (Palmisano 2015).

3. Materials for this article came from my fieldwork in some convents in this region. This region is associated by many believers with Holy Russia: a mythical golden age of prosperity, Orthodoxy, and morality.

4. Clearly these hagiographical narratives have complicated links with reality, but for the aims of this article it’s enough to point out that the medieval body demanded the apparent presence of God or demons or the king’s power (Foucault 1975).
5. Of course, meats and some other products are prohibited, and all fast days are kept, but cooks always aspire to provide variety and abundance for the permanent dwellers. The idea of the value of fasting is quite common, but it isn’t realized in practice. This fact is especially interesting because many monasteries experience a shortage of funds. In that case, cooks sacrifice the quality but not the quantity of food.

6. Such descriptions may be found in monasterial booklets that were published in the late nineteenth century and recently reprinted. See, for example Mikhailo-Afonskaia Zakubanskaia pustyn’ (1897) 1999.

7. On the popular image of Orthodox churches as centers for redistributing objects, see Detelina Tocheva (2011a).

8. Before the revolution, this convent was inhabited by seven hundred sisters.

9. In the Cistercian Order, physical labor was considered an exercise for achieving humility. Such work was assessed as undignified for members of the upper class from which the order drew most of its membership (Asad 1993, 147–53).

10. Many booklets circulating in Orthodox monasteries and churches are also devoted to this question.

11. Apparently, such people can be found across post-Soviet spaces (Naumescu 2012).

12. Some of these ideas may have been acquired through television. In 2006, the “Russia” TV channel showed a quasi-scientific film, Water, in which viewers were told that water has the ability to perceive and transmit information, thoughts, and emotions. See http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/10258.

13. Trinity-Sergius Lavra is one of the most important and famous Russian Orthodox monasteries. In the lavra are an ecclesiastical seminary and a cantor’s school, where my interlocutor studied before taking her monastic vows. In the post-Soviet era, the lavra, like many monasteries, was being repaired. The lavra was restored using the most prestigious repair method, known as “Eurorepair” (Evroremont), which means the repair has been done according to European standards. This type of repair is also used in homes and offices. In most contexts, this renovation serves as a sign of the owner’s status. Quality was attributed to the high cost of the repair as well as to the prestige of the European materials. In the Orthodox world, however, the nickname “Euro-Lavra” has distinct negative connotations, for Europe is generally considered to be a violation of conservative Orthodox traditional values.

14. The znamenny chant is the main type of liturgical singing in ancient Russia. It disappeared from churches in the nineteenth century. At the end of the twentieth century, the znamenny chant began to be revived by professionals in conservatories.

15. She generalizes the way of life of ascetics in Siberia.


REFERENCES


Palmisano, Stefania. 2015. *Exploring New Monastic Communities: The (Re)invention of Tradition*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.


