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Redefining Pilgrimage

New Perspectives on Historical and
Contemporary Pilgrimages

Edited by

ANTÓN M. PAZOS

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ASHGATE

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To Professor José Andrés Gallego on his 70th birthday.

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Introduction

Antón M. Pazos

When we speak of today's panorama of pilgrimages, as we do in this book, it leads almost inevitably to a discussion of what is and what is not a pilgrimage, and to an awareness that today's world of pilgrimages is changing as much as the pilgrims themselves. Traditional pilgrimages have undergone a systematic process of change, as if they were in fact industrial products, to adapt to new times. Indeed, we can see that public planners treat them as an economic activity in the service sector. And, as with any product, they can be improved or adapted to the necessities of new users, always in search of a better return. In the first instance, the aim is usually greater economic profitability, which is also an aim of religious promoters at pilgrimage destinations. At other times, a more spiritual profitability is sought, and, in some cases, a pilgrimage may be adapted to find a connection with a new religious sensibility. For one reason or another, many of the old pilgrimage routes, like those recently established or re-established, have been under constant renovation and change for some decades.

There are very significant universal examples. Perhaps the most spectacular would be the Way of St James (el Camino de Santiago), especially meaningful here because this series is named after it. The Way has gone from being walked by few but active pilgrims (both culturally and religiously) in the first decades of the twentieth century, to today's hundreds of thousands of walkers – who are, in many cases, simply walkers. They do not see, they do not hear, they do not feel. They only walk from one shelter to another for the whole journey, trying to take each step as quickly as possible and resting for the entire journey in a shelter without ever seeing the incredibly significant works of art around them. The old adage about the traveller on the European circuit applies perfectly to them: if today is Tuesday, this is Belgium. For these pilgrims, the relationship to the land, artistic sensibility, and information that can intellectually enrich their pilgrimage are irrelevant. But everyone has to eat and so, albeit very modestly, the goal of revitalizing the small villages has been fulfilled. In any case, that would require

Conclusions

Having analysed the data, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The network of Lithuanian pilgrimage places consists of the 20 most important pilgrimage places related to the cult of the Virgin Mary, saints and cults of holy persons. Lithuanian Calvaries are also included in this network. Besides the Hill of Crosses, one holy spring and the Divine Mercy Shrine at Vilnius, which contains the first image of the Merciful Jesus, are also included in this network.
2. Two main reasons for the first crosses on the Hill of Crosses could be identified. The first was signs of folk faith, votive signs of gratitude to God. Or alternately, it could be a wish to commemorate rebels of the uprising and to resist tsarist authority, which prohibited and prevented crosses from being built. The first group of explanations contain a miraculous element (miraculous healing of a local man, the apparition of the Blessed Virgin), while others are related to tragic historical events (commemoration of people who died in the 1831 and 1863 uprisings against tsarist Russia).
3. The most important devotional practices of the Hill of Crosses are erecting and leaving crosses, the celebration of indulgence feasts, processions, commemoration of the dead, walking on one's knees, praying, singing hymns (sometimes accompanied by musical instruments), and walking the 14 Stations of the Way of the Cross.
4. According to the inscriptions on the crosses, the two main groups of them are identified as follows – gratitude or supplication crosses and memorial crosses. The four essential notions of the symbolic identity of the Hill of Crosses are: 1) the Hill of Crosses as a symbol of national and religious freedom and resistance to the occupiers; 2) the Hill of Crosses as a symbol of personal or national rebirth; 3) the Hill of Crosses as a place of religious devotion; 4) the Hill of Crosses as a cultural space.
5. The Hill of Crosses is a sacred location for the veneration of the Cross and religious unity and devotion, as well as a burial place for heroes. Inscriptions in foreign languages and the increased number of foreign visitors demonstrate its international importance.

Chapter 7

The Saint and His Cat: Localization of Religious Charisma in Contemporary Russian Orthodox Pilgrimages¹

Jeanne Kormina

I came to the island of Zalita in Pskov oblast' with a group of pilgrims from St Petersburg for the first time in 2004. After six hours overnight in an old rented bus and almost an hour on a shabby boat which was obviously and dangerously overloaded we found ourselves in a small village which had three streets of tiny houses, one semi-empty food store, a deserted community centre with statues of Lenin and local communist hero Zait, after whom the island was renamed in the Soviet period, a church and a cemetery. The leader of the group, a kind of individual entrepreneur who was active in a recently developed pilgrimage market, regularly organized trips to this place. The main destination of these pilgrimages was the grave and a house of recently deceased *starets* (the elder) Nikolay Gurianov.

As I soon realized, some of pilgrims from the group used to visit Father Nikolay when he was alive. One could easily distinguish them among the visitors because of the bunches of white lilies in their hands. They explained that these were his favourite flowers. They spoke about him in a special, very sweet manner and the first thing which two of them asked the local priest in the church was about the *starets*' cat. Their question 'How is his cat Lipa doing now?' was not properly answered, as the priest started passionately explaining to the pilgrims the stupidity of venerating the cat and, by extension, the person who was not canonized by the Church.

Two things amazed me in this conversation: the question about a cat and the answer of a priest who pretended that he did not understand the question. In fact, the stories about that cat were quite widespread among those who venerated

¹ This research was supported by the National Research University Higher School of Economics' Academic Fund Program in 2012/2013, research grant #11-01-0126.

Father Nikolay as *starets*, including the tale of how he miraculously resurrected Lipa, but I could not imagine that his pet was so important that it could become the subject of a rather dramatic discussion.

Religious pilgrimages to the Orthodox sacred places have become increasingly popular in Russia since the mid-1990s. For many people, especially for non-churchgoers, these organized religious trips have become one of the most acceptable ways of practising their religion. These believers want to be religious outside the walls of the church, escaping the need to follow the commands of a parish priest in his role as confessor and the social control exercised by a church congregation.

The sacred sites visited by pilgrims in contemporary Russia can be roughly divided into two categories: traditional and new. Traditional pilgrimage destinations are large monasteries, which used to be pilgrimage centres before the 1920s, until religion was virtually prohibited in the Soviet Union. In the post-Soviet period many of these places have become pilgrimage destinations once more. However, a significant number of the sacred places visited by contemporary pilgrims in Russia have appeared quite recently – within the last two decades. Some of them are village shrines which, thanks to the joint efforts of a local priest, village ‘keepers of a shrine’ and a leader of a pilgrimage agency from the city, became a part of a pilgrimage route. A typical village holy site, or rather a holy landscape of this sort, is usually made up of a set of physical objects, for example, a stone with a footprint of a saint on it, a stream or a cave, and by a set of belief narratives explaining why this particular place is a sacred one.²

Alongside traditional village sacred places and officially recognized holy places like monasteries, one more type of holy site started to appear on the map of the pilgrims’ routes in the 1990s: person-centred holy sites. Eade and Sallnow have discovered a similar trend in Catholic Christianity, namely a ‘shift from place-centred to person-centred sacredness’.³ The material ‘container’ of sanctity at these places is not a landscape as in the village sacred sites nor an ensemble of monastery buildings where holy icons are kept, but a person, a sort of living saint called ‘*starets*’, meaning ‘the elder’.

² For more detail about these sacred places see: J. Kormina, ‘Pilgrims, Priest and Local Religion in Contemporary Russia: Contested Religious Discourses’, *Folklore*, 28 (2004), pp. 25–40.

³ J. Eade and M.J. Sallnow, ‘Introduction’, in J. Eade and M.J. Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 7.

The tradition of *starchestvo* and the practice of veneration of ‘living saints’ are not absolutely new aspects of the Russian Orthodox tradition.⁴ There is much evidence about hermits – people, not necessarily monks or nuns, who were venerated as living saints by the local population – in late Imperial and even Soviet Russia.⁵ *Starchestvo*, as it is understood by many now, is in fact an umbrella term covering quite heterogeneous religious phenomena. ‘*Starets*’, theoretically, is a monk and spiritual father of a large monastery.⁶ However, in the ethnographical reality *starets* and especially *staritsa* (female elder) is usually a layperson who has neither taken a monastic vow nor been ordained as a priest. They share not only the regular spiritual guidance of a group of believers who are their spiritual children but also their perception and function as prophets and forecasters who can give sage spiritual advice in difficult personal circumstances. As an anonymous compiler of the recently published collection of biographies of female elders wrote:

Since the old days an elder always played the role of mediator between a novice and God. For that, together with other necessary virtues, the elder has to be possessed of the gift of spiritual reasoning, that is, the talent to recognize God’s will through prayer. This makes his answers spiritual and “prophetic”. As a

⁴ Pilgrimage to the living saints was already quite widespread in Christian Late Antiquity. See G. Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵ Biographies of the unglorified Russian Orthodox devotees of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some of whom were venerated as living saints, were published in the 12-volume collection in the Russian Monastery of St Panteleimon in Athos, see Nikodim, *Zizneopisaniya orechestvennykh podvizhnikov blagochestiya XVIII i XIX vekov* [Biographies of the Russian Zealots of Faith of the 18th and 19th Centuries] (Moscow: The Russian Monastery of St Panteleimon in Athos, 1906–12). Amongst many publications of biographies of the zealots of faith (also unglorified) who lived in the twentieth century, are two of the largest collections according to gender. The ‘male’ collection includes 115 biographies of prospective saints, see S. Deviatova (ed.), *Velikie startsy dvadtsatogo stoletiya* [Great Elders of the 20th Century] (Moscow: Artos-Media, 2007 [2006]). The ‘female’ collection has 70 biographies: S. Deviatova (ed.), *Pravoslavnye podvizhnitsy dvadtsatogo stoletiya* [Orthodox Zealots of Faith of the 20th Century] (Moscow: Artos-Media, 2007).

⁶ For a detailed history of Russian *starchestvo* see the recently published book: I. Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

mediator in transmitting God's will the elder is considered a successor to Christ Himself and a prophet equal to Moses.⁷

Many people believe that it is absolutely obligatory to follow advice given by the elder, even if it seems barely acceptable, because he or she foresees the consequence of every action or decision of those who come to him or her.⁸

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the meanings ascribed to the concept of *starchestvo* by various groups of pilgrims to one particular person venerated as *starets*, Father Nikolay Gurianov (1909–2002). It focuses on the narrative strategies used by different groups of believers in representing the holiness of the place which they visit as a pilgrimage destination. In their stories about pilgrimages to a particular *starets* or his or her grave, people discuss (either consciously or implicitly) many 'big issues' such as qualities of sanctity, the boundary between the religious and the secular, ethnic and national identities, and many others. In this chapter, I will briefly outline the main types of stories about the sanctity of the *starets* Nikolay Gurianov and describe groups of believers generating and promoting a particular version of these stories. These include a Christian legend from a secular newspaper, stories of pilgrims about 'small miracles' which they experienced as a result of their visits to the elder, pseudo-historical narratives by representatives of Orthodox fundamentalists, and stories of locals who do not believe that their parish priest is a living saint.

The chapter is based on field research conducted on an island during the course of my trips with groups of pilgrims from St Petersburg in 2004, 2006 and 2010, and participant observations made in July and August 2008 in collaboration with my colleague, Yulia Andreeva. Printed materials and Internet resources are also an important part of the data.

A Christian Legend in a Secular Newspaper

On 24 October 2002, Nikolay Gurianov, a celibate village priest from Pskov oblast, died. Information about his death appeared in both secular and Orthodox media of different political orientations, both national and provincial. Many

⁷ *Sviatye matushki i podvizhnitsy zemli Russkoy v XX veke prosiyavshie. Zbitya, chudes, vospominaniya* [Venerable Female Ascetics of the Russian Land of the 20th Century: Biographies, Miracles and Memories] (Nikolaev: Litopis, 2010).

⁸ These effects only apply to earthly life. I never heard from my informants or read about an elder helping in the afterlife. The earthly-life orientation of those who venerate *startsy* provides quite a good characterization of an average contemporary Orthodox believer.

important public figures, representatives of religious and secular elites from the city of Pskov and the capital Moscow, as well as from other places came to his funeral on the tiny island of Zalita (Talabsk) in Pskov oblast,⁹ where Father Nikolay had served as a priest in the village church of St Nikolas since 1958. The list of VIP visitors included the archbishop and the governor of Pskov, the influential archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, superior of the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow, and 'Orthodox banker', billionaire and politician Sergey Pugachev. Local people say that the wife of President Putin was to attend the burial ceremony but for some reason she did not come.

It is not surprising that an article about Father Nikolay has appeared in the Russian version of Wikipedia; he was a famous figure since the mid-1990s, when people of different social backgrounds started visiting him en masse. The Wikipedia article includes a story about the miraculous help provided by Father Nikolay, a story that was published in one of Russia's national newspapers, *Izvestija* (*The News*), in 2001 and reproduced many times in secular media:

He acquired a reputation as a miracle-worker after he had been found by Igor Stoliarov, the survivor of the nuclear-powered submarine *Komsomolets*.¹⁰ Some years after the disaster, the seaman from Siberia, who heaven knows how happened to survive, came to the island of Zalita and immediately recognized father Nikolay. He was a *starets* who had appeared to him when he had been fainting in the icy waters of the Atlantic. The grey-bearded old man had identified himself as archpriest Nikolas and said to him, "You swim, I am praying for you and you will escape". Then he vanished. Suddenly, a log had appeared from somewhere; shortly after that a rescue boat arrived.¹¹

This text is an easily identifiable Christian legend about Saint Nikolas the Miracle-Maker, who 'specializes' in helping seamen. Obviously, the story about miraculously helping the sailor from the last Soviet submarine makes Nikolay Gurianov a holy person on a significant national scale. It also puts the saint back in the Soviet period, thus building a bridge between Soviet and post-Soviet

⁹ The island is inhabited by fishermen, pensioners and, since the 1990s, Orthodox migrants from cities. The latter moved from Moscow (mostly) and St Petersburg, alone or with their families and spend every summer or the whole year on the island. These people are known as 'Orthodox dachniki'.

¹⁰ The nuclear-powered submarine *Komsomolets*, which means 'Komsomol member', sank in the Norwegian Sea in April 1989. This tragedy symbolizes the end of the Soviet epoch.

¹¹ *Gurianov, Nikolay Alexeevitch*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolay_Guryanov (accessed 17 June 2011). Incidentally, there was nobody on the submarine with this name.

Russia. In other words, the narrative gives the reader an idea that this holy person used to live before the de-secularization of Russia had started. Hence, the central message of this narrative can be formulated as follows; he and other *startsy* served as vessels preserving religious tradition, meaning that the authenticity of religious tradition in Russia had not been interrupted during the Soviet period.

However, I have never heard this story from pilgrims or local people living on the island. Instead, some pilgrims and newcomers who came to the island from the cities and have settled there in the last 10 to 15 years recite a different narrative about a seaman from a submarine. This story tells of a man who had become infertile as a result of serving on the atomic submarine. He visited the *startsy*, who prayed for him and subsequently his wife gave birth to a son, while other men from the same submarine remained childless. This type of narrative about miraculous help in solving health problems as a result of pilgrimage to a shrine or a holy person is a very typical one. It reproduces a widespread scheme of reciprocal exchange with the sacred, one that is well known in many religious traditions. It should be added in this context that, traditionally, infertility used to be one of the most typical health problems to be solved with the help of the divine. However, this problem used to be seen as linked only to female health. The narrators of these stories reveal not only their modern attitudes towards the source of fertility problems but also their quite modern social phobias and fantasies about atomic energy.

However, this tale is almost unusual because the stories about healing as a result of pilgrimage to a shrine are quite rare in the contemporary Orthodox narrative repertoire. They have probably disappeared together with the idea of a personal vow, which was very common in pre-revolutionary Russia, and even later, in small pilgrimages to local village shrines practised secretly in the Soviet countryside, at least in north-western Russia.¹² Instead of asking God or a saint for miraculous recovery from some illness, contemporary believers usually ask for divine intervention in their social relationships, such as problems with family members, colleagues or representatives of the state and in situations of uncertainty, such as trials, exams, etc. Visitors with health problems come to *startsy* in search of help to make serious decisions about whether or not they

¹² The tradition of making *obet* or *zavet* in Russia is discussed in T.B. Shchepanskaya, 'Krizisnaya set' (traditsii dukhovnogo osvoiniya prostranstva) ['A Crisis Network (Traditions of Creating Religious Landscape)'], in *Russaki Sever. K probleme lokal'nykh grupp* [Russian North: The Study of Local Groups] (St Petersburg: Musei Antropologii i Etnografii, 1995), pp. 110–76 and A.A. Panchenko, *Issledovanie v oblasti narodnogo pravoslavija: derevenskie sviatyni Severo-zapada Rossii* [Study of Russian Orthodoxy: Village Sacred Sites of North-western Russia] (St Petersburg: Aleteya, 1998), p. 82.

should trust their doctors. They would ask *startsy* whether they should follow the doctor's prescriptions for a particular medicine or have an operation rather than ask for immediate miraculous recovery. Correspondingly, in the narrative repertoire of pilgrims, 'real miracles' about healing are replaced by the 'small miracles' which focus on consolation and harmonization of the self.

'I Became an Absolutely Different Person': Pilgrims' Narratives

Since at least the early 1980s Nikolay Gurianov has attracted the attention of members of the young Orthodox intelligentsia and neophytes from metropolitan bohemian circles.¹³ It must be mentioned here that the Pskov region was one of those which were unintentionally promoted by the Soviet state as a representation of Russianness and of Russian spirituality. One of the reasons for this is that Pskov is an ancient city founded before the tenth century, preserving much of its medieval fortifications and churches, which date mainly from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Since the 1960s the Soviet state organized excursions in the Pskov region for foreign delegations, which were allowed to visit very few places in Russia. These trips included visits to the local Orthodox churches and to the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery, the only one in Russia which was never closed, to demonstrate 'religious freedom' in the USSR. At the same time, specialists in Russian architecture and icon-painting from Moscow and St Petersburg started going to Pskov as part of expeditions from art museums and academies of sciences, hunting for ancient Russian pieces of art and manuscripts or as restorers of old churches.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, almost half of the material for the first documentary about the Russian Orthodox Church called 'Khram' (Temple), produced in 1988 to mark the millennium celebration of the Christianization of Russia, was filmed in Pskov oblast. In particular, this film contained a short scene with village priest Father Nikolay sipping tea at a table in his small house. The documentary was shown several times on TV, and was also screened at various film festivals. In addition, an article with a portrait of Father Nikolay was published in the popular illustrated magazine *Sovetski ekran* (Soviet Screen). It is entirely possible that this film and article played a role in

¹³ In Pskov oblast, Orthodox believers from Moscow and other cities also visited the monk-priest Ioann Krestiankin (Pskovo-Pecherski monastery) and Father Vassili Shvets, who served in the village of Kamenny Konets.

¹⁴ For information on the influence that this kind of expedition had on the reshaping of local and religious identities, see the recently published book: D. Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

the popularization of the figure of Father Nikolay. Interestingly, he was not yet called a *starets* in the article, just a *sel'ski pravednik* (righteous village man).¹⁵

Mass pilgrimage to the island began in the mid-1990s, when Father Nikolay was already an elderly man in his late eighties. People, who came either in groups organized by parish priests or lay religious activists or separately, had to queue for hours to have a very brief talk with Father Nikolay. At the end of the 1990s, access to Father Nikolay was restricted in his everyday routine by his *keleinitsey* (the term derives from the word 'kellia' – monastic cell).¹⁶ The personal narratives of visitors to Father Nikolay about his sanctity usually have two central points. First, stories about visits to the *starets* contain evidence of his gift of foresight; he can see who his visitors are, in terms of profession and personal qualities, without asking them and he can foretell their future. Second, the visitors believed that as a holy person he could give wise advice in difficult personal circumstances or at a crucial moment when an important choice had to be made. For Orthodox seminary graduates it is often about marriage and thus whether to become a secular priest or to take monastic vows, for example. As it is believed to be appropriate for a real *starets*, Father Nikolay usually spoke in riddles. For example, he told a nun that she would receive a marriage proposal and should not reject it; later she was invited to become a Mother Superior of a nunnery, 'and realized then what kind of marriage proposal he was talking about'.¹⁷ Sometimes he did not give any answer to a visitor, and this was also perceived as a riddle. The interpretation of his answers is a specific topic in the personal narratives of the pilgrims who visited him.

As mentioned above, the personal narratives about communicating with the *starets* very rarely contain evidence of miraculous healings or miracles of a different sort. However, the holiness of a living saint can be pronounced in another way. In the documentary *Why Are We Orthodox?*, shot on the island in 1997 by 'Orthodox director' Alexandr Alexandrov, one of the pilgrims queuing at the door of Nikolay's small house is demon-possessed. It is well known that a demon

¹⁵ Y. Tiurin, 'Put' dlinoju v tysiacheletie' ['The Way that Lasted for a Thousand Years'], *Sovetskii ekran*, 11 (1988), pp. 6–8.

¹⁶ A *keleinit* lives with an elderly monk or high-ranking church official as his servant, pupil and personal secretary. *Startsy* also have their *keleinit* (male) or, as in case of Father Nikolay, *keleinitsey* (female), who act as gatekeepers controlling the sacred embodied in the living saint. It so happened that the *keleinitsey* of Nikolay Gurianov were representatives of the fundamentalist movement in the Russian Orthodox church, who continued their fight for the *starets*' legacy after his death.

¹⁷ N. Hieromonk, *Starets Nikolay Zalitsky [Nikolay of Zalit, the Elder]* (St Petersburg: Satis, 2002), pp. 13–14.

reveals its presence in the body of the possessed when that person approaches holy things and places. In particular, they start blaspheming the Church and faith, and can only be exorcised by a religious specialist.¹⁸ Although there are some places (monasteries) in Russia where people go to participate in the rituals of exorcism, Father Nikolay never practised it.¹⁹ So the story, which probably began as a narrative about a miraculous recovery from demon possession, turned out simply to be evidence of the holiness of Father Nikolay. This evidence is articulated by the possessed women or, rather, by the demon who was speaking from her lips, in the last part of the documentary, 'Revelation of the Demon':

I hate the Orthodox people! I hate them! The nastiest faith is the Orthodox faith! All the other religions will go to hell. You are idiots, why do you listen to him? Kol'ka (variant of the name Nikolay, pejorative in this context). He is a fool! Kol'ka, I hate you! You teach them all the time. Don't do that! Let them [the Orthodox] go to Hell! Don't let them know the truth! Let them see TV, let them play computer games! Let them die! They have to go to hell!²⁰

Paradoxically, by her blasphemies the possessed proved the truth of the Orthodox faith and personal holiness of Father Nikolay. And, as I mentioned already, the exorcism does not happen.

In the pilgrims' stories, miraculous changes occur not in the bodies of the narrators, for instance, a recovery from some illness, but in their personalities. These transformations, which I call 'small miracles', occur as a result of brief communication with the *starets* or merely through observing him. Some people say that they received consolation even without any contact with him, just by spending some time on the island. A pilgrim who suffered from deep personal discomfort and disorder received consolation and a feeling of harmony.

Batiushka [the diminutive form of "father"] could see the future, but it was not the central point in his ministry. The central point was that he consoled everybody ... He just anointed us with holy oil from a test tube using a paperclip, but what a consolation was coming into the soul after that! Although he did not

¹⁸ See for example: Christine D. Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ For a detailed history of discourses and practices of exorcism see, E. Mel'nikova, 'Otchityvanie besnovatykh: praktiki i diskursy' ['Exorcism: Practices and Discourses'], *Antropologicheskoye forum*, 4 (2006), pp. 220–263.

²⁰ A. Alexandrov, *Pochemu my pravoslavnye? [Why Are We Orthodox?]*, documentary (Moscow: Radonezh, 1998).

Speak much, and it seemed that he addressed the same words to different people, having received consolation in their different personal circumstances.²¹

The famous ophthalmologist Vladimir Nepomnyashchikh, who used to visit Gurianov in the 1990s, stressed his feeling of purification as a result of communication with him:

Every time after my meeting with Father Nikolay tens of questions and problems just disappeared. As a result of the prayers of the *batiushka*, mind and heart cleared ... The soul calmed down, got ready for confession; offences vanished. This inner purification happens also when one visits other saints and holy places.²²

Here, another visitor to the *starets* describes the experience of spiritual and probably even physical regeneration:

After conversing with him I left his house with a feeling that I became an absolutely different person. I felt relief. What joy! It seemed to me that life was different, I got firm confidence in the future ... always after meeting with *starets* Nikolay my thoughts and feelings were put in order, sorrow vanished, the aim of life had become clear for the short-term future.²³

Anthropologists who study pilgrimage have already pointed out that at the sacred place a pilgrim expects to have an experience of transformation of his or her personality as if he or she were going through the *rite de passage*, where travel to the sacred place has features of the liminal period.²⁴ Accordingly, communication with the *starets* is represented in the narratives of pilgrims as a rebirth of the person.

Meanwhile the local people's narratives about the *starets* are quite different from the two mentioned above. They do not agree with pilgrims and newcomers to the island from the cities that Father Nikolay, who served on the island of Zalita for more than 40 years, was a holy person. In their view, he was a good priest and at the end of his life, an elderly member of the village community

²¹ L. Iliunina, *Starets Nikolay Gurianov. Liubov' ko Gospodu Vedushchaya* [The Elder Nikolay Gurianov: Love that Leads to the Lord] (St Petersburg: Pravoslavny St Petersburg, 2007), p. 27.

²² *Vospominaniya o startse Nikolae Gurianove* [Memoirs of the Elder Nikolay Gurianov], ed. Galina Chinyakova (Moscow: Kovcheg, 2009), p. 102.

²³ *Vospominaniya o startse Nikolae Gurianove*, p. 28.

²⁴ See E. Turner and V. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

taken care of by the village. The newcomers complain of the 'locals' blindness': they could not see the obvious fact that they had been privileged to live side by side with the living saint. The newcomers and pilgrims refer to the spiritual ignorance of the local people as 'simplicity', the quality which they share with Father Nikolay. However, 'simplicity' in this case is not entirely a compliment; it means stupidity too. But of course it also means a kind of 'natural authenticity', or even 'inborn Russianness'.

Orthodox Christianity is understood by many Russians in a rather primordial way, as something naturally inherent in the national landscape and in people's minds and bodies. According to this popular argument, the degree of 'authenticity' of the place is closely connected with its remoteness. In the imagined geography of visitors to the island of Zalita, this place is located in the far periphery not only because it is an island, a piece of land isolated from the mainland, but also because of its closeness to the state border. The border (this border at least – the island is located less than 50 km from the Russian–Estonian border) is seen as the end of the Russian world, the edge of the Russian Orthodox world.

The locals, on the other hand, see the newcomers and visitors as religious fanatics who dedicate their whole life to religion. For the locals, typical 'miraculous stories' about Father Nikolay are dream narratives, just common local folk narrative genre. Father Nikolay appears to the islanders in their dreams as an ordinary person who speaks about their everyday needs and gives practical advice, just as their deceased relatives and neighbours would do. For example, the head of the village administration told us about a dream he had in which Father Nikolay ordered him not to drink water from the lake and stop taking a particular medicine which he used to take to cure his headaches. He followed his instructions and has felt better ever since.

Stylistic of Sanctity: Debates

His life itself is a great miracle. The sanctity of Father Nikolay is so obvious that it does not need any special justification, including invented miracles. His humility did not need any laudation when he was alive; similarly, there is no need for it now, after his death, because it contradicts the level of spiritual perfection he has achieved. Batiushka used to recite: "there are hundreds of Angels, where the

simplicity is ..."²⁵ He was looking for simplicity, he has achieved it; it is impossible to enclose his sanctity in the construction of fantasy and ecstatic visions.²⁶

This text, written by Igor Izbortsev, an Orthodox writer and journalist from Pskov, represents one opinion about Nikolay Gurianov's kind of saintness. That was a reflection of a heated debate which flared up after the death of the *starets* in 2002, between representatives of the right-wing fundamentalist Orthodox group led by his *keleinitsa* Tatiana Groyan and the rest of the believers. The fundamentalists appeared on the island at the end of the 1990s and started their struggle with the official Church for control over the *starets* Nikolay and his legacy. After his death, they bought his house, where they set up a museum, free of charge for all visitors. They did their best to establish control of the memory of Father Nikolay including such private details as his attachment to his cat, while they made attempts to promote their own image of this proposed saint via the Internet, newspapers and other media. These believers belong to a group of Orthodox people who were not satisfied with the canonization of Tsar Nikolai II as a passion-bearer (*strastoterpets*). Instead, they insisted on canonizing him as a Martyr and even as a co-redemer, who suffered for the whole Russian nation, whilst promoting the canonization of such an ambiguous historical figure as Grigori Rasputin. The *keleinitsa* Tatiana Groyan, a linguistics graduate from Moscow State University, actively participates in polemics about the *starets* and has published a hagiographical book about Grigori Novy (Rasputin).²⁷ She claimed that Nikolay Gurianov venerated Rasputin and gave her his blessing for the canonization of this person.

Starets is not an official position within the Church; it is a reputation. The elders are not included in the official Church hierarchy and represent, in the eyes of many anticlerical believers, a kind of alternative religious authority. In contrast to the official Church hierarchs who are blamed for corruption and too close collaboration with the state, elders such as Nikolay Gurianov are believed to live ascetic lives in monasteries or poor remote parishes beyond political intrigues and economic interests. There are those who managed to

²⁵ This saying is ascribed to a famous monk of the nineteenth century, *starets* Amvrosy who lived in the Optina monastery. The full version of the saying is 'there are hundreds of Angels, where the simplicity is while there is no angel where sophistication is'.

²⁶ I. Izbortsev, 'Ya pomolius' za vas'. O zalitskom startse o. Nikolae Gurianove' ['I Will Pray for You': About the Elder from the Island of Zalita Father Nikolay Gurianov'], *Proza.ru* [Prose.ru] (3 June 2003), at <http://proza.ru/2003/03/07-70-1> (accessed 18 June 2011).

²⁷ T. Groyan, *Muchenik za Khrista I za tsarya Grigori Novy* [Martyr Suffered for Christ and for Tsar Grigori the New] (Moscow: Entsiklopedia Russkoi Tsivilizatsii, 2001).

preserve an ancient Russian Orthodox tradition uncorrupted. Paradoxically, the exceptional authority of *startsy* was officially acknowledged and artfully used during the campaign of the Patriarchate of ROC (Russian Orthodox Church) against the 'INN (individual tax numbers) jihad' organized by groups of Orthodox fundamentalists and nationalists.²⁸ In 2001, Tikhon Shevkunov interviewed four famous *startsy*, including Nikolay Gurianov, about their stance on the introduction of individual tax numbers. All of them – as represented in the Church mass-media – confirmed that there was no Satanic number (666) encoded in individual tax numbers and gave their blessing to believers to accept individual tax numbers.²⁹ Their position, transmitted via various media, played an important role in changing public opinion about INN among Orthodox people and, according to some analysts, helped to avoid a split in the ROC.

However, Tatiana Groyan and other Orthodox fundamentalists are not satisfied with the status given by reputation; they prefer to transform the symbolic capital obtained by the *starets* as a result of his personal charisma into a position in the Church hierarchy. Groyan claims that Father Nikolay was a hidden *episcopus* who was secretly consecrated during the Second World War.³⁰ There are two possible explanations for why he did not reveal his high position to anybody except his closest friends, including Groyan. The first reason, as believers themselves would explain it, is his deep personal modesty, a quality that amazed almost everybody who visited him – or at least who published their memories about these visits. The other explanation is connected with the specific worldview of this group of believers, who are obsessed with conspiracy theories in their explanations of Russian history as well as current affairs. At the same time, these people reproduce the conspiracy model of the world but with themselves in the role of those with the power to create the conspiracy. In particular, they are sure that everything which is real (authentic, not fake) must be hidden and only a limited number of people should have access to this knowledge. Limitation of access to knowledge or other resources, for example

²⁸ See: A. Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie. Russkie pravoslavnye natsionalisty i fundamentalisty, 1995–2001* [Political Orthodoxy, Russian Orthodox Nationalists and Fundamentalists, 1995–2001] (Moscow: Tsentr 'Sova', 2003), pp. 73–94.

²⁹ Interviews with three of these elders, including Nikolay Gurianov, are published in a book by a popular speaker of the ROC: A. Kuraev, *Segodnya li dayut 'pechat' Antikhrista? Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov' ob INN* [Is it Today when the 'Stamp of Antichrist' will be Given? Russian Orthodox Church on the Individual Tax Number] (Moscow: Troitskoe slovo, 2001).

³⁰ T. Groyan, 'Nebesny angel. Plamenny molitvennik zemli russkoy za ves' mir' ['Heavenly Angel: The Flaming Russian Man of Prayer for the Whole of the World'] (Place of publication not indicated: Russky vestnik, 2002).

to the particular source of sanctity, provides it, and the privileged few and gatekeepers, with a desired halo of elitism.

This is why the celibate village priest Nikolay Gurianov was declared to be a hidden monk and *schema-episcope*. In 2000 or 2001, Tatiana Groyan, together with other *keleinita*, claimed to be a nun. Tatiana became Nikolaya, obviously in honour of the elder. It is not clear where they took the veil, but they definitely did so without the permission of the ruling archbishop Evsevii.³¹ This way of taking the veil is perhaps a simulation of the phenomenon of secret nuns and monks in the Soviet period. An eparchial meeting in Pskov agreed that this rite was illegal and hence the women were not nuns. However, this decision had no effect; Tatiana Groyan, who moved to Moscow after the death of the elder, now calls herself 'schema-nun Nikolaya' and continues to wear a black nun's habit, at least in public.

Not only does the Life of Nikolay Gurianov in Groyan's version differ radically from other variants of his biography, she also ascribes fascinating miracles to him. Her memories about the *starets* contain impressive miracles which probably provoked the passionate response of Izbortsev detailed above. One of these narratives describes an episode when, shortly before his death, Father Nikolay was taken up to heaven:

As Father himself witnessed, he came into the spiritual world of silence, dazzling light and wide open space. He was out of his body and enjoyed the divine delights of the Communion.³²

Confrontations between fundamentalist believers who appropriated the house, archives and, to some extent, the grave of *starets* Nikolay, and their opponents, take the form of a sort of 'discourse war'. Each group is producing its own variant of hagiography, for example, the biography and miracles of the proposed saint. In some fundamentalist congregations, Father Nikolay has already been venerated as a saint, together with such ambiguous historical figures as Grigori Rasputin and Ivan the Terrible.³³ Interestingly, in their attempts to appropriate Father Nikolay, the people of the Groyan circle produce an icon which combines both 'private' and 'political' symbols of his sanctity. The icon portrays Father Nikolay as a monk standing with the icon of Grigori Rasputin

³¹ I. Izbortsev, 'Ne umolchim o vazhnom' ['Let's Not Keep Silence About Important Things'], *Blagodatny ogon'*, 11 (2004).

³² Groyan, 'Nebesny angel', p. 13.

³³ One of these congregations is led by Father Alexander Sukhov (Leningrad oblast), who was excommunicated by the ROC in 2007.

and Prince Alexii in his hands, a little cat on his right side and a couple of birds on his left. Probably the birds appear on the icon not only because he liked to feed them, which must seem a strange habit from the villagers' point of view as to feed wild birds is an urban idea, but also because of one more story about his cat Lipa. The story says that once when Lipa was a little kitten he caught and ate a bird. Father Nikolay reproved him for his misbehaviour and the cat was so ashamed that he never again caught a bird for the rest of his life. The schematic, though recognizable, landscape of the island of Zalita depicted in the icon behind Father Nikolay possibly expresses the idea of his locality and authenticity.

For a while, it looked as if the mainstream Church had lost its struggle for this *starets*. However, recently, in 2009, 2010 and 2011, several large volumes of carefully edited memories about Father Nikolay have been published by respected Church publishing houses, and this is probably a sign that the ROC is still interested in promoting its own variant of this popular saint's portrait. The official Church media tend to present Nikolay Gurianov as an ideal parish priest. In the contemporary setting, where anticlerical moods are so widespread among believers and the wider public, the ROC urgently requires a positive image of a popular pastor, a role which fits Father Nikolay perfectly. It is no coincidence that the portrait of Father Nikolay, familiar to many believers, was put on the cover of the booklet for those believers who are still learning how to live a proper religious life within the church walls. This small book provides teachings about the regular sacrament of confession and the role of the priest in this Christian ritual and does not say a word about Father Nikolay.³⁴

Conclusion

Living saints pose considerable problems for a centralized, bureaucratic religious institution like the Catholic Church, for they obviate altogether the need for priestly intermediaries. The personification of the sacred center is a movement to the limits of ecclesiastical control, a control which begins to be regained only with the death of the saint and his or her transformation into a mute, hieratic, domesticated shrine.

³⁴ *O chem govorit' na ispovedi sviashchenniku* [What to Tell a Priest in Confession] (Moscow: Kovcheg, 2010).

When writing this, John Eade and Michael Sallnow had in mind the case of Padre Pio, analysed by Christopher McKevitt in their edited volume.³⁵ However, this observation can be extended to the Orthodox Church too. The charismatic authority of living saints, *startsy*, poses a challenge to the official Church, whose legitimacy is based, using Max Weber's classical typology, on the legal-rational type of authority. At the same time, the Church tends to represent itself as a traditional pre-modern (and even anti-modern) institution in order to stress its role as a vehicle for transmitting national traditions throughout the troubles that affected Russia in the twentieth century. This dissonance between real practices and their discursive representations leads to the credibility gap faced by the Russian Orthodox Church. This is probably one of the reasons why many people prefer to practise religion outside the church walls, without being controlled by a parish priest or a congregation. Very different in their political orientations and regularity of their religious life, all these people can accept an intimate and to some extent folkloric image of a saint who was attached to his cat and knew the future.

Chapter 8

Walking to Mother Teresa's Grave

Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC

... it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels.

Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins*¹

'Pilgrimage, it seems, is written into our DNA,' says Don Belt in *National Geographic's* recent special edition on Sacred Journeys.² According to a Catholic Church document for the Jubilee Year 2000, 'pilgrimages symbolize the experience of the *homo viator* who sets out, as soon as he leaves the maternal womb, on his journey through the time and space of his existence'.³ Indeed, throughout history 'human beings have always walked in search of new goals, investigating earthly horizons and tending toward the infinite'.⁴ Pilgrimage, it may be said, 'is a global enterprise of deep antiquity and powerful psychological appeal'.⁵ Not surprisingly, then, today as in the past, millions of people – around 300 million, according to *National Geographic* – go on pilgrimage every year. Among Christians, too, pilgrimages hold – and, it seems, increasingly so – an important place in the practice of their faith. Such sacred locations include churches, sites of apparitions, shrines honouring a saint or saints, birth places of the saints, the sites of their activities or of their martyrdom, or their tombs.

This chapter presents pilgrimage to the tomb of Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata (as Calcutta is now called) as an example of a contemporary, popular phenomenon that exhibits both traditional and contemporary aspects of pilgrimage.

¹ Quoted in N. Shrady, *Sacred Roads: Adventures from the Pilgrimage Trail* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999), p. i.

² D. Belt, 'Sacred Journeys', *National Geographic Magazine*, Special Edition (2010), p. 24.

³ Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *The Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee* (Vatican City, 1998), 43.

⁴ *The Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee*, 1.

⁵ E. Munro, *On Glory Roads: A Pilgrim's Book about Pilgrimage* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. xi.

³⁵ C. McKevitt, 'San Giovanni Rotondo and the shrine of Padre Pio', in Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*, pp. 77–97.