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ORTHODOX PILGRIMAGE IN EASTERN EUROPE: AN INTRODUCTION

ZOE KNOX AND STELLA ROCK

Pilgrimage, the focus of this special issue, has been much studied—as both practice and concept—by scholars working with disciplines and definitions largely shaped by Western Christian models.¹ Amid the wealth of literature on Christian pilgrimage in Europe, works on Greek Orthodox pilgrimage in particular have challenged assumptions about the nature of pilgrimage as centered on walking, or at least travel (reflecting the Latin *peregrinatio*), rather than veneration (*proskynēma*).² Research on Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe, however, remains comparatively marginal both in terms of quantity and influence—although Jeanne Kormina’s work, as several articles in this special issue demonstrate, has contributed notably to the Anglophone conversation. In part this is because, as Father Dragos Herescu observes, too few of these studies have been translated into English.³ Prominent scholarship on

1. See for example Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, eds., *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, eds., *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (London and New York: Routledge 2006); Douglas Rogers and Katherine Verdery, “Postsocialist Societies: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union,” in James G. Carrier and Deborah B. Gewertz, eds., *The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

2. See for example Veronica della Dora’s work on Meteora in Avril Maddrell, Veronica della Dora, Alessandro Scafi, and Heather Walton, *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2015), 45–87.

3. See his article “Seeking the Sacred through Pilgrimage: A Theological Perspective” in this special issue. In recent years, concerted efforts have been made to overcome the stereotypes and linguistic barriers that perpetuate a sense of Eastern Orthodox Europe as somehow essentially different from the West. For an overview of Russian language work on pilgrimage, as part of Dionigi Albera and John Eade’s efforts to bring Anglophone researchers into dialogue with other literatures, see Stella Rock, “Touching the Holy: Orthodox Christian Pilgrimage Within Russia,” in *International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies: Itineraries, Gaps and Obstacles*, ed. Dionigi Albera and John Eade (New York:

pilgrimage in the region has also focused on Russian Orthodox pilgrimage practices, with several influential studies examining the startling growth of this phenomenon in the post-Soviet period.⁴ The articles in this special issue focus on pilgrimage in Armenia, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania and in so doing allow for comparative perspectives on Orthodox pilgrimage.

Bringing together theological and anthropological perspectives on Orthodox pilgrimage in Eastern Europe adds further nuance to the field, rather than implying a homogeneous “Orthodox pilgrimage” which might be held up against a homogeneous Roman Catholic or Protestant pilgrimage. The varieties of pilgrimage are perhaps best conceived as kaleidoscopic combinations of people, places, rituals, texts, and—key to this special issue—objects. As part of “lived religion,” by which we mean religion as it is experienced, expressed, and conceived by individuals in their daily lives,⁵ pilgrimage is ever dynamic and diverse. Studying it brings texture to our picture of lived Christianity, and greater understanding of the ways individuals seek out the sacred in communities which experienced—to varying degrees—a concerted effort to rupture religious tradition. In important ways, however, pilgrimage also provides a lens that allows us to move beyond a focus on the individual. Pilgrimages have “come to dominate public religious patterns of engagement” in Romania and other parts of Eastern Europe, according to Herescu. They thus have the potential to shape, as well as reveal, the dynamic relationships between churches and wider society, and relationships within churches—with churches here (and for the most part, throughout this special issue) conceived as communities rather than ecclesiastical structures.⁶

In the region examined here, scholars showed limited interest in religion and spirituality in Russia and Eastern Europe before the collapse of Soviet-style state socialism in 1989/1991. As Magdalena Lubanska observes in her contribution to

Routledge, 2015), 47–68. See also the pioneering volume edited by Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2010); Galia Valtchinova, ed., *Religion and Boundaries: Studies from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Turkey* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2010); John Eade and Mario Katić, eds., *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Mühlfried, and Kevin Tuite, eds., *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (New York: Berghahn, 2018); the special issue and introduction by Evgenia Troeva and Petko Hristov, “Sacred Geography of the Post-Socialist Balkans. Transformations of Religious Landscape and Pilgrimage: An Introduction,” *Southeastern Europe* 41 (2017): 1–18.

4. See contributions by Jeanne Kormina and Inna Naletova in Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, eds., *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); and multiple works by Z. V. Kormina, most recently *Palomniki* (Moscow: Izd. Dom VSE, 2019).

5. We are mindful of the multiple problems with this categorization but use it to indicate methodology rather than to establish parameters which exclude particular acts, groups, or sources. See Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 169–74.

6. Vera Shevzov, “Letting the People into Church: Reflections on Orthodoxy and Community in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars*, ed. Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, (University Park: Penn State Press, 2003).

this special issue, the ideological constraints on academic inquiry meant that lived Christianity could not be seriously studied by Bulgarian scholars during the communist era. Instead, religious beliefs and practices were blithely attributed to pre-Christian traditions.⁷ In the past three decades, the burgeoning interest in the subject has begun to plug significant gaps in our knowledge, particularly of lived religion. These countries are bound by the shared twentieth-century experience of state socialism, more long-lived in Armenia, which became part of the Soviet Union in 1922, than in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, which came under the Kremlin's sphere of influence after World War II. The contributors differ in the importance they attribute to the influence of the communist past on contemporary pilgrimage practices. Lubanska, for example, explicitly rejects it as the primary influence on her subjects, arguing that much earlier historical and cultural processes predominantly shape Bulgarian attitudes to healing fabrics and pilgrim practices. In contrast, Konrad Siekierski argues that the way pilgrims treat the Gospel books in the Matenadaran (a flagship museum in Armenia) has been partly shaped by "Soviet legacies of desecration, museumification, and heritagization of religion."⁸ In her examination of pilgrimage sites in Subcarpathia, Iuliia Buyskykh notes that communist-era population shifts and the post-World War II relocation of state boundaries uprooted Greek Catholics and Orthodox Ukrainians. In her observations, these religious communities "tend to re-root through pilgrimages."⁹

It is a truism that the communist attempt to eradicate religion was ultimately a failure. Policies like the closure of churches and the destruction of pilgrimage sites in these regions had uneven impact. Despite the authorities' sustained attempts to end popular religious practices, sometimes aided by ecclesiastical bodies, pilgrimage continued during the communist period, often without clerical oversight or even institutional approval.¹⁰ In Russia this contributed to what Gregory Freeze has described as the "empowerment" of the laity, a phenomenon he attributes to deepening the divide between the Moscow Patriarchate, the leadership of the Russian

7. See her article "Healing Fabrics in Contemporary Practices of Bulgarian Pilgrims and their Liturgical, Iconographic, and Theological Entanglements with Byzantine Religious Sensorium" in this special issue.

8. See his article "Scripts, Saints, and Scientists: The Social Life of Gospel Books in an Armenian Museum" in this special issue.

9. See her article "Routes to the Roots: The Revival of Greek Catholic Sanctuaries in Eastern Poland" in this special issue.

10. For discussion of the Soviet Russian context, see for example Ulrike Huhn, "С иконами и песнопениями, или епископ, сбежавший от своих прихожан. Массовые паломничества в России эпохи Сталина и Хрущева" *Государство, Религия, Церковь* 3–4, no. 30 (2012): 232–256; Stella Rock, "They Burned the Pine, but the Place Remains all the Same": Pilgrimage in the Changing Landscape of Soviet Russia," in *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Catherine Wanner (Washington, DC: Centre Press, 2012), 159–189; "The Life of Dry Bones: Pilgrimage to Relic Shrines in Soviet Russia," in *Relics, Shrines and Pilgrimages: Sanctity in Europe from Late Antiquity*, ed. Antón M. Pazos (London: Routledge, 2019), 203–222; and contributions by Sonja Luehrmann and Stella Rock in Zoe Knox and Julie deGraffenried, eds., *Voices of the Voiceless: Religion, Communism, and the Keston Archive* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 13–15, 84–86.

Orthodox Church, and ordinary Orthodox believers.¹¹ In other contexts, these articles demonstrate not just the survival of popular religious practices like pilgrimage but their revival. Despite communist-era policies, the sacred continues to be sought in both traditional and innovative ways.

ORIGINS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The route to this special issue has been—appropriately for a collection focused on pilgrimage—walked with many. While as guest editors we take ultimate responsibility for the content and framing of this special issue, its genesis lies in conversations between Tobias Köllner, Magdalena Lubanska, and Stella Rock about the need for further attention to pilgrimage in Orthodox Christian contexts. Under the auspices of the Religion and Spirituality in Russia and Eastern Europe (RSREE) Study Group, Zoe Knox was able to secure funding from the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) for a workshop entitled “Seeking the Sacred: Socialist Legacies and the Holy in Russia and Eastern Europe.” It was co-financed by, and held at, the University of Leicester in April 2019, and we are grateful to both these funders to bringing participants together in real time and place.

All contributions focused on Eastern Christian contexts, for the purposes of this special issue conceived as embracing the denominations of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Greek Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity. The workshop brought scholars researching the complex relationships between people, places, and things in contemporary Armenia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Russia together with respondents working beyond these chronological, denominational, and geographical boundaries. In addition to articles included here, Tünde Komáromi presented research conducted among pilgrims at the Romanian Orthodox monastery of Nicula—a Greek Catholic shrine until 1948—which dialogued with both Herescu’s and Buyskykh’s work, and Rock and Köllner shared their research on Russia. The content of this special issue, then, has benefitted immeasurably from collective discussions at, and feedback after, this workshop, as well as the thoughtful responses from Timothy Carroll, Marion Bowman, and Page Herrlinger. These workshop respondents were invited to take a view from beyond the post-communist context in order to challenge exceptionalism and integrate papers into broader debates about the secular and the

11. Gregory L. Freeze, “From Dechristianization to Laicization: State, Church, and Believers in Russia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, nos. 1–2 (2015): 6–34. In a similar vein, the anthropologist Alexander Panchenko identified a “reorganization of religious consumption” in relation to Russian Orthodox believers’ attitudes toward pilgrimages to sacred sites. He argued that Soviet antireligious campaigns in the countryside led to a post-Soviet rural vernacular religious culture inflected with the discourse and patterns of urban spirituality. Alexander Panchenko, “‘Popular Orthodoxy’ and Identity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Ideology, Consumption and Competition,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 321–340.

sacred, including how we define and apply these contested terms, in contemporary and historical Europe.¹²

MAJOR THEMES

Two themes arose repeatedly during the workshop and in the articles in this special issue. First, these articles all speak to a major theme in the study of lived religion: boundary crossing. By its very nature, the act of religious pilgrimage crosses from the material, as pilgrims move through the physical world on their journey, to the divine, as they seek the transcendent.¹³ Buyskykh's study of Greek Catholic and Orthodox Ukrainian pilgrims in Polish Subcarpathia highlights the crossing of geographical (across the Polish-Ukrainian border), ethnic (Polish, Ukrainian), denominational (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Orthodox), and temporal boundaries (for her interlocutors, the past is ever present). Indeed, embedded in Buyskykh's methodology is boundary crossing, as she moves from participant to ethnographer.

Dragos Herescu straddles several boundaries as ordained priest, pilgrim, and researcher, and both his and Magdalena Lubanska's contributions confound the boundaries of "lived religion." Herescu shares his observation of a woman holding her phone over the relics of St Parascheva, apparently live-streaming them, bringing the traditional and the modern together in a startling way. The complexities of that encounter are unpacked in his article reflecting on how Orthodox churches might respond to the individualized experience of pilgrimage which, for him, sits uncomfortably alongside its communal, church element. Lubanska's observations of pilgrims at healing sites in south-western Bulgaria further complicate the perceived divisions between individual and ecclesiastical, lay and clerical, as she explores the dynamic relationship between clerical discourse and lay interpretation and activity and the diversity of both. Acknowledging the multiple influences on pilgrims' imaginaries, from internet forums to the particular strands of Bulgarian New Age spirituality, Lubanska contributes to the rebalancing of contemporary approaches to lived religion by privileging the "Byzantine religious sensorium" over the heterodox spiritualities of the late communist period. She identifies a range of liturgical, iconographic, biblical, and hagiographical bridges between pilgrim practices and Orthodoxy's "extremely intricate and sophisticated theology," revealing for example the braiding of hagiographical narrative, iconographic image, and holy objects in Bulgarian fertility rituals.

12. In some respects, this is the continuation of thinking stimulated over a decade ago by Catherine Wanner. See Catherine Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Centre Press, 2012).

13. This point is made in Avril Maddrell, Veronica della Dora, Alessandro Scafi, and Heather Walton, *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4.

An additional boundary challenged by Konrad Siekierski's article in particular is the blurred line between the sacred and the secular, a dichotomy that is increasingly contentious in the field of pilgrimage studies as elsewhere. Armenia's treasured Gospel books occupy an ostensibly secular space, a museum, but one with exhibition halls that resemble the "interiors of medieval Armenian churches." Museum workers become pilgrims as they venerate manuscripts in the privacy of the repository, and the books are both valued heritage and sacred objects. In a more literal example of boundary crossing, some books do not remain within the museum walls but are taken out to participate in religious feasts.

As the contributions to this special issue suggest, pilgrimage is implicated in, and intersects with, economic, political, and other ostensibly "secular" forces. The relationship between the sacred and the secular in this context is invoked by the title of Ian Reader's seminal work *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*.¹⁴ In the Russian context, these intersections have been scrutinized most carefully by Tobias Köllner.¹⁵ Challenging comfortable acceptance of such entanglement, Herescu observes how the "imperative of Revelation" is impeded by the way pilgrimage to St Parascheva in Iasi "serves to reinforce the socio-political and cultural-historical meta-structures that dominate Romanian society."

Second, each contribution to this special issue engages with the physicality of pilgrimage, reflecting both the material turn in the study of religion, the sacramental nature of Eastern Christianity, and what Herescu's contribution calls the "Incarnational imperative." Both Siekierski and Lubanska highlight the importance of tactile access to the holy.¹⁶ Lubanska's pilgrims engage with the material fabric of the Bulgarian shrines they visit in intensely tactile fashion, rubbing objects on their bodies, wearing clothes incubated at the shrine, either engaging directly with the tangible holy or facilitated to do so by shrine clergy. Siekierski's pilgrims also seek direct contact, kissing, touching, and rubbing objects and fabrics on the Gospel books that embody the holy much like relics. The most venerated Gospel books speak, protest when overburdened, miss their devotees; they may be adopted by childless couples; as "home saints" they form reciprocal, patronal relationships with their custodians as well as responding to requests from pilgrim petitioners. Manuscripts loaned out for patronal feasts may be venerated through covers—an impediment for some pilgrims—and while in the museum, "temporal physical contact" is facilitated by museum staff who place photographs within their covers.

Siekierski's Gospel books also alert us to the complex relationship between context and the visibility of the sacred, a dynamic also at play in the pilgrimage in Iasi explored by Herescu. The Gospel books continue to "live" despite museumization,¹⁷ and,

14. Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace* (London: Routledge, 2013).

15. Tobias Köllner, *Practising without Belonging?: Entrepreneurship, Morality, and Religion in Contemporary Russia* (Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2013).

16. This is discussed in Rock, "Touching the Holy."

17. Cf. C. Antonova, "The Role of Religious Art in Post-Communist Russia," in *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents. Global Diversities*, ed. T. T. Ngo and J. B. Quijada, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 222.

although they are venerated in different ways in different visual settings (ecclesiastical feasts, exhibition halls, museum repository), re-contextualization has not changed their meaning. However, while facilitating broader veneration, display in the exhibition halls restricts devotional access for museum staff, for whom the glass is an impediment after their unimpeded access in the repository. St Parascheva's relics are accessible in the cathedral in Iasi year-round, but during the "visual rhetoric"¹⁸ of the annual pilgrimage they are ceremonially processed and displayed outside, "an incarnate vision of the beauty and glory of heaven." Pilgrim response to this vision of beauty—already extensively curated via ecclesiastical and other media—may include bringing distant observers into the shrine via video calls. This is perhaps a digital equivalent of touching clothes against relics for the sick left at home, facilitating vicarious access to the saint, and for Herescu it reveals a "tension between the Incarnation imperative, understood as 'ritual action and the transformation of vision' and vicarious embodiment." Herescu's pilgrims—much like Lubanska's pilgrims—"seize the sacred" in ways that combine the personal and the ecclesial, in creative responses to liturgical cues.

In contrast to these contributions that foreground the visibility of the sacred, Buyskykh reflects on how sacred sites may be "completely unseen in the regional religiouscape," known only to the seeking pilgrim. The delegitimization of Greek Catholicism in the region meant that while some churches were saved from desecration by being subsumed into the Orthodox church, others were demolished. Pilgrimage, here, is part of continuing efforts to find, restore and make visible shrines which were desecrated in the communist era but are still conceived as holy. Drawing sensitively on rich empirical material, Buyskykh highlights important interconnections between religion and difficult memory. In this context, pilgrimage enables the dislocated and their descendants to create bonds with the places venerated by their ancestors.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In 2015, Dionigi Albera and John Eade called on their fellow scholars of pilgrimage, especially those in the Anglophone world, to engage more seriously with the work of researchers from outside the Anglophone scholarly tradition. In addition to reading their work, they appealed to scholars in Europe and North America to consider what the study of contexts beyond the Christian (and predominantly Roman Catholic) tradition might add to pilgrimage studies. The edited collection *International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies* was partly a challenge to pilgrimage scholars to throw open their gated communities, academically speaking, and welcome the unfamiliar, indeed the challenging, in order to take the field forward.¹⁹

18. Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines," *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 1079–1106, cited in Herescu.

19. Dionigi Albera and John Eade, eds., *International Perspectives on Pilgrimage Studies: Itineraries, Gaps and Obstacles* (London: Routledge, 2015). A follow up volume *New Pathways in Pilgrimage Studies: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017) broadens the scope even further.

Our Leicester workshop and this special issue respond to Albera and Eade's call in a modest but—we hope—important way: it attends to pilgrimage contexts often overlooked, and to certain pilgrim practices for the first time. Buyskykh's article invites further pondering of pilgrimage to empty, invisible, and ruined holy places, and Siekierski's of the pilgrimages undertaken by museumized holy objects. Herescu calls for interdisciplinary research on the impact of pilgrimage on religious practice and the "socio-ecclesial body," and Lubanska for international, comparative research on healing rituals. This special issue points to rich possibilities for future collaboration for scholars across the world working on Orthodox pilgrim practices, and for the exciting possibilities of comparative and transnational research on this growing phenomenon. It also reflects our collective enthusiasm for the potential of multi- and interdisciplinary research in this field, and a desire to generate further opportunities for collaboration. This is, in short, the start of an important conversation.

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