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HEALING FABRICS IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF BULGARIAN PILGRIMS AND THEIR LITURGICAL, ICONOGRAPHIC, AND THEOLOGICAL ENTANGLEMENTS WITH BYZANTINE RELIGIOUS SENSORIUM

MAGDALENA LUBANSKA

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the role of healing fabrics in contemporary practices of Bulgarian pilgrims who visit churches or monasteries hoping to be filled with energies believed to be present there. In order to be able to draw on the effects of miraculous objects (icons, relics) longer, the faithful often temporarily leave clothes or towels next to them, thus enabling their transformation from ordinary objects into transmitters of sacred powers. They also ask priests to bless fabrics with holy water, to anoint them or to pray over them, thus enhancing their healing properties.

I analyze the use of healing fabrics as I try to capture ontological assumptions of their efficacy. An analysis of ethnographic data is preceded by a theoretical introduction in which I highlight the linkage between the orthopraxis of modern-day pilgrims and Byzantine religious sensorium as perpetuated in Eastern Orthodox theology, liturgical rites, iconography, and religious literature popular in Bulgaria

KEYWORDS: religious healing, hesychasm, pilgrimage, *eulogiai*, energy, Bulgaria

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Charge yourself with energy and pray for health in a place famous for miracles, where a part of Christ's cross is buried. They say that the sky is opening at Krüstovden (The Day of Holy Cross)! "Deniz Travel" will fulfil your dreams, by offering a trip to Krüstova Gora for 32 leva at Krüstovden (13–14.09.2013).¹

The above website advertisement of a popular tourist company accurately reflects an attitude common for many Bulgarian pilgrims. Virtually every religious gesture

1. <https://rio.bg/offer/2Mggwn/krstov-den>, latest access 1.12.2013 .

pilgrims make at the shrine involves contact with material carriers of holiness, supported by the belief that they transfer healing powers. The faithful attribute those powers/energies² to certain places, objects (e.g., icons, relics, and different kind of *eulogiai*),³ and substances (water from church springs, *miro*). To activate them they engage in practices such as kissing of icons or relics, touching them, sharing and eating ritual food, sleeping in churches (incubation), and sprinkling with holy water. Clothing (usually new T-shirts and socks) is also temporarily left next to miraculous icons or relics to acquire their healing properties. Less commonly, energy-oriented practices like rubbing one's body with chains once used to restrain possessed people in the Kuklen Monastery may be observed.⁴

According to my observations, the way pilgrims behave at church or in monasteries derives primarily from non-verbalized, semantically modest, embodied knowledge, which is learned by imitating what others do. The faithful speak little about why and what they do at shrines, however, when asked, they explain that they engage in ritual practices at the church or monastery "for health" (Bulg. *za zdrave*). Ethnographic research reveals that health in those formulae is understood as a state of being filled with life-giving, restorative energies.

The argument presented in this article builds on ethnographic field research conducted in expeditions undertaken from 2012 to 2017⁵ in monasteries and churches of southwestern Bulgaria famous for miraculous healings, including Bachkovo, Obradovski, Hadzidimovo, and Kuklen monasteries, the Church of Holy Trinity in Asenovgrad, "Saint Sophia"⁶ basilica in Sofia, and Plovdiv's churches of St Petka "the Old" and St Petka "the New."⁷ The research consisted of participant observation

2. This phenomenon has also been noticed by other Bulgarian anthropologists—see for example Margarita Karamihova, *Dinamika na sveti mesta. Poklonichestva i religiozni pateshestviya v postsocialisticheska Bŭlgariya* (Veliko Tarnovo, 2013 manuscript of dissertation), 219; Galina Vŭltchinova, *Znepolski pohvali. Lokalna religiya i identichnost v zapadna Bŭlgariya* (Sofia: Akademichno Izdatelstvo "Marin Drinov", 1999). However, those authors don't problematize the pilgrims' belief in healing powers and energies in their studies.

3. Greek word meaning consecrated gifts and small blessed tokens (also food) taken upon departing from a holy place and functioning as conduits of the sacred medicinal powers. See Gary Vikan, *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium* (Burlington: Ashgate Variorum, 2003), 6; Aleksandra Sulikowska-Belczowska, *Ciała, groby i ikony. Kult świętych w ruskiej tradycji literackiej i ikonograficznej* (Warsaw: Neriton, 2013), 8.

4. Magdalena Lubanska, "Healing Chains, Relationships of Power and Competing Religious Imageries in the Monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen (Bulgaria)." *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 10, no. 1 (2016): 71–99.

5. In 2012–2015 the research was conducted as part of the scientific project entitled *Anthropological Theories and Social-Religious Life of Orthodox Christian Believers in Local Communities of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Working Group: Centre for Anthropological Studies on Orthodox Christianity* (2012–2015; Dec. 2011/03/D/HS3/01620, Polish National Science Centre, Principal Investigator M. Lubanska)

6. This is the accepted English translation of the official Bulgarian name of that temple—Sveta Sofya—obviously referring to God's wisdom. See Valentina Sharlanova, *The Sofia Mount Athos: The Monasteries around Sofia* (Sofia: Akademichno Izdatelstvo "Marin Drinov", 2013), 25–26.

7. Both churches refer to the same saint. The epithets Old and New are used by the citizens of Plovdiv to distinguish the old medieval church from the contemporary one.

of pilgrims behavior at shrine (documented with photographs and short films), in-depth interviews (recorded and transcribed), and many short occasional conversations with the faithful (e.g., in a queue to a miraculous icon).

The fieldwork focused on the pilgrims' practices, how they learn what to do and how they explain the significance of particular gestures related to material carriers of holiness that they perform in church. I observed the church rites and pilgrims' behavior, I spoke with them, and I also tried to talk with monastery supervisors and people especially active and respected within a given parish, like some priests, monks, and elder women serving in churches, well-read in religious literature and eagerly transmitting their religious knowledge to other parishioners. Sometimes these women compete with priests and monks for the respect of the faithful,⁸ sometimes they cooperate with them. The ordinary faithful usually seek their advice on which local monastery they should visit to be cured of a particular disease.⁹

Eastern Christian pilgrimage cannot be adequately interpreted detached from the liturgical and iconographic¹⁰ sources invoking Byzantine orthopraxis, which abounded in interactions with different kind of healing *eulogiai*. In addition, comparing modern-day religious practices of Eastern Christians in Bulgaria to the lived Christian religion popular in the Byzantine Empire may bring interesting ideas into anthropological analysis of their ontological specificities.

BYZANTINE PATTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMAGES IN BULGARIA AND THE REASONS FOR THEIR BEING OVERLOOKED IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES

In Bulgarian (as in Russian), pilgrimage is called *poklonichestvo*, which is the Slavic equivalent of Greek word *proskynesis*, meaning "veneration," and consists of

8. Several other ethnographers have noticed the important role of elder women in Bulgarian lived religion. See for example Valtchinova, *Znepolski*, 129; Vihra Baeva, *Nishkata na zhivota. Mezdu kolancheto za rozhba i Bogorodichniya poyas* (Sofia: Akademichno Izdatelstvo "Marin Drinov," 2012), 171; Albena Georgieva, *Folklorni izmereniya na hristiyanstvoto* (Sofia: Prosveta, 2012), 108. This is a *longue durée* phenomenon in Bulgarian lived religion and might be explained to some extent by the notorious "absence of priests" in the province going back to the time of Ottoman domination but also applicable to the Communist regime.

9. Similar advice is given by so-called *ekstrasensi*, also usually women, who believe that some temples are erected in places that are particularly saturated with healing energies. Galina Lindquist observed a similar tendency in Russia, where *ekstrasensi* also frequently refer their clients to specific Orthodox monasteries. See *Conjuring Hope: Magic and Healing in Contemporary Russia* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 54; Galia Valtchinova, "From Postsocialist Religious Revival to a Socialist Seer and Vice Versa: The Remaking of Religion in Postsocialist Bulgaria." Working Paper, no. 9 (2007): 1–31. (Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institution for Social Anthropology)

10. Pilgrim behaviour at Christian shrines perfectly resonates with the icon of the Mother of God Life-giving Spring (*Zoodochos Pege*), particularly popular in the Plovdiv region, and depicting the most famous Constantinople's holy sites devoted to the Virgin Mary, popular already in the fifth century and still active today.

devotional practices encompassing the lighting of a candle, the bowing of one's head, and the touching and kissing of a devotional object. This understanding seems more accurate in conceptualizing the most important aspects of pilgrimage in Bulgaria than the one deriving from the Latin *peregrinare*, meaning "to wander," "to roam," or "to travel abroad." According to my observations, Bulgarian faithful most value visits to churches and monasteries on the eve¹¹ of and during their patronal feasts. What matters to them is not the penitential effort of travel,¹² but rather contact with carriers of the sacred at a time when they are believed to be most powerful.¹³ To some extent, this explains why most pilgrims arrive at monasteries by bus or car and very rarely on foot.¹⁴

A similar notion of pilgrimages was also specific for the Byzantine Empire, where, as Alice-Mary Talbot has observed, pilgrims usually sought a holy place as close as possible to their place of residence.¹⁵ They visited holy shrines in order to surrender to the effects of powers hidden in relics or icons.¹⁶ They stared at icons, kissed them, bowed before them, and touched them (as they did relics), and they consumed, drank, and collected different kind of *eulogiai*¹⁷ during their visit.

The linkage between contemporary pilgrimage practices in Bulgaria and the broadly understood Byzantine tradition arises from geographical proximity and cultural flows, stimulated since Prince (later Tsar) Boris's baptism, from Byzantium in the year 864. Importantly, tense relations between the two countries did not prevent Bulgaria from inculturating Christianity in the Byzantine rite, regardless of the fact that the Bulgarian Church received the rank of Patriarchate in the first half of the

11. Some pilgrims sleep over in the church on the eve of its patron's feast, believing that the saint takes special care of the afflicted during that night, which resembles a practice of incubation very popular in Byzantine Christianity.

12. Which seems to be too easily taken for granted as an inseparable aspect of the Christian pilgrimage—see Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 7.

13. Already Victor Turner noted that all pilgrimage sites have a common characteristic in that "they are believed to be places where were miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again" Turner, *Image*, 6; see also "Introduction," in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, ed. Jill Dubish and Michael Winkelman (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), xxvi. However, neither book refers specifically to Eastern Christian pilgrimage.

14. Compare Jeanne Kormina, "Avtobusniki: Russian Orthodox Pilgrims Longing for Authenticity," in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Herman Goltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 267–86.

15. Alice-Mary Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines: The Evidence of Miracle Accounts," *Dumbarton Oak Papers* no. 56, (2002): 65.

16. Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, rev. ed. (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications, 2010).

17. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Robert Ousterhout, "Sacred Geographies and Holy Cities: Constantinople as Jerusalem," in *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Space in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. Alexei Lidov (Moscow, 2006), 98–116; Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines," 161; Vikan, *Early Byzantine*, 3.

tenth century and sought independence from Byzantine influences.¹⁸ It is also worth stressing that during the Ottoman domination in Bulgaria (beginning in 1393), the Bulgarian church lost its autocephaly and was subordinated to the Patriarchate of Constantinople until 1870. The higher clergy were Greek, which, of course, strengthened the distance between higher clergy and ordinary believers but nevertheless encouraged further assimilation of Byzantine religious patterns in Bulgaria.

Paradoxically, the fact that from the fourteenth century onwards there was little opportunity to create native religious elites in Bulgaria, as the lower clergy were few and poorly educated, favoured the transfer of religious imaginaries mainly in the so-called habitual memory “sedimented in the body” in “non-textual and non-cognitive ways.”¹⁹ Paul Connerton’s observations on habitual memory correspond with Pierre Bourdieu’s statement that each group entrusts to “bodily automatisms those principles most basic to it and most indispensable to its conservation.”²⁰ At the same time, the persistent ontological conviction that healing powers are present in some substances and objects seems to be the basic feature of this habitual memory.²¹ This to some extent explains why many faithful do not feel the need to conceptualize healing objects. They either don’t question the origin of their powers, or they attribute them to energies of God or to the unspecified energies of the cosmos or of Earth. Thus, in their religious imaginaries, we may find influences deriving from eastern Christianity and from alternative, theosophical,²² and new religious movements inscribed in the broader phenomenon of New Age spirituality.²³

I am aware that lived religion in Bulgaria is a complex phenomenon, embracing various components—pre-Christian, Byzantine, Ottoman, theosophic, and those

18. Georgi Minczew [Minchev], “Chrzest Bułgarii,” in *Leksykon tradycji bułgarskiej*, ed. Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa et al. (Warsaw: SOW, 2011), 65.

19. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72, 102.

20. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 94–95.

21. This conviction is analyzed in reference to Byzantine devotional practices and theology by Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Images of the Invisible,” in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 91–145.

22. Especially until the 1980s, the activity of the famous Minister of Culture Lyudmila Zhivkova promoted in Bulgarian society a fascination with theosophy and occultism (of foreign—especially Russian—origin and anchored in the teachings of the widely acknowledged native theosophist Petăr Dūnov and the clairvoyant Baba Vanga), see for example Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa, *Haeresis Bulgarica w bułgarskiej świadomości kulturowej XIX i XX wieku* (Warszawa: SOW, 2005); Svetoslava Toncheva, *Out of the New Spirituality of the Twentieth Century: The Dawn of Anthropology of White Brotherhood and the Unified Teaching* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2015).

23. Analogical phenomena have also been noted by other scholars studying contemporary Orthodox Christian communities, such as Jeanne Kormina and Zuzanna Grębecka, and they rather emphasize in their research the theosophical and New Age provenance of pilgrims’ concepts of energy. See Kormina, “Avtobusniki,” 276; Zuzanna Grębecka, *Słowo magiczne poddane technologii: Magia ludowa w praktykach postsowieckiej kultury popularnej* (Kraków: Nomos, 2006), 176, 315. The Orthodox Christian approach to healing revealed in theology and lived religion has also been overlooked in Jill Dubish and Michael Winkelman, eds., *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014).

related to the activities of new religious movements—and I have referred to all of them in my previous works.²⁴ However, the most accurate point of reference revealing the importance of different kinds of material carriers of holiness, of their efficacy and ontological status also for modern-day pilgrims, is the Byzantine religious sensorium.

Paradoxically, these specific connections have not until recently been taken into account by academic studies on lived religion in Bulgaria. This stems from an epistemological resistance to studying the influence of Christianity on lived religion in post-socialist European countries, a tendency present both in Western and Eastern European social sciences.²⁵

One of the reasons for this resistance was the ideological oppression of academic institutions during the communist regime, prompted by a fear of the political potential of Christianity, which was seen as a real threat to communist ideology.²⁶ Thus, social scientists were encouraged to focus their attention on pre-Christian elements in their studies of local religiosity. Christianity was seen as a superficial accretion, beneath which more vital and important beliefs and rites were hidden.

Problematic relations with Christianity, seen to be compromised as a religion involved in colonial domination, explain to some extent Western anthropologists' lack of interest in this religion. According to Joel Robbins, anthropologists often assume in advance that Christianity is not culture-forming and thus overlook its influence on the local communities they study.²⁷

When conducting research on lived religion in post-socialist countries, Western scholars usually emphasise the importance of socialism as the crucial factor explaining the specificity of today's lived religion. As a result, they sometimes underestimate the importance of earlier historical and cultural processes that have impacted religiosity in these countries.

In the last twenty years, however, the situation has changed diametrically²⁸ and it is not a coincidence that similarities between Byzantine and today's Bulgarian religious imaginaries, previously neglected in scholarship, have recently emerged as a fascinating field of study, complementing earlier interpretations focused on folklore and/or socialism.²⁹

24. Magdalena Lubanska, *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes: Studies on Religious (Anti)syncretism* (Berlin-Warsaw: De Gruyter Open, 2015); Magdalena Lubanska, *Praktyki lecznicze w prawosławnych monasterach w Bułgarii. Perspektywa antropologii (post)sekularnej* (Warsaw: WUW, 2019).

25. Chris Hann and Herman Goltz, "Introduction: The Other Christianity?" in *Eastern Christians*, 1–32.

26. Georgieva, *Folklorni*.

27. Robbins, *Introduction*.

28. Fenella Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5; Suzanne Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of Repugnant Cultural Other," *Social Research*, no. 58/2 (1991): 372–393; Joel Robbins, "Introduction to the Symposium. What is a Christian? Notes Toward an Anthropology of Christianity," *Religion*, no. 33, (2003): 191–99.

29. Maria Shniter, "Bolnoto tyalo v konteksta na pravoslavната tradiciya," *Bulgarian Folklore*, no. 42/2 (2016): 126–41; Elka Bakalova, *Kultūt kūm relikvite i chudotvornite ikoni. Tradicii i sūvremennost*

This change of scope in scientific interests visible in anthropology was felt much earlier in Byzantine studies, in which many religious practices—previously described as typical for popular religion and contradicting its official dimension—are being recognized as in fact both influencing and being influenced by Byzantine liturgy and theology.³⁰ Thus, earlier historical and cultural factors are now being recognized as having an impact on today's religious practices and imaginaries but including them in analysis requires scholars to develop a suitable theoretical apparatus for their explanation.

The approach addressed in this article is meeting the requirements of anthropological tuning on emic ontological sensitivities analyzed in reference to their own cultural background. The presented considerations also make a modest attempt to fill the gap in anthropological studies on Eastern Christianity, dominated by its Russian variety, thus underrepresenting its other variants—for example, Bulgarian.

THEOLOGICALLY-INSPIRED ANTHROPOLOGY IN SEARCH OF EMIC ONTOLOGICAL SENSITIVITIES

Anthropologists Martin Holbraad and Axel Pedersen claim that the creation of concepts in anthropology involves the adoption of alternative ontological assumptions to those already taken for granted within this discipline of knowledge.³¹ Finding such concepts often involves the need to move away from the Western-centric interpretive framework, rooted in the post-Enlightenment and post-Reformation epistemologies, hidden in seemingly cognitively neutral definitions,³² and often labeled as the “mentalistic bias”³³ of anthropological theory. One of the symptoms of this bias was that anthropologists excessively focused on the category of faith and meaning as keys to understanding religious practices and beliefs, and they regarded rituals unjustified by beliefs as “empty forms.” Moreover, in this theory, there was a visible tendency to treat the material dimension of religion as secondary to its “spiritual” and discursive

(Sofia: BAN, 2016); Maria Shniter, *Pūtishta pres pravoslavniya ritual* (Sofia: Istok-Zapad, 2017); Baeva, *Nishkata*; Yana Gergova, *Kultūt kŭm sveti bezsrebŭrnitsi v Bŭlgariya* (Sofia: Gutenberg 2015); Magdalena Lubanska, “Life-Giving Springs and The Mother of God Zhivonosen Istochnik/Zoodochos Pege/Balŭkliyska: Byzantine-Greek-Ottoman Intercultural influence and Its After Effects in Iconography, Religious Writings and Ritual Practices in the Region of Plovdiv,” *Slavia Meridionalis*, no. 17, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11649/sm.1252>.

30. Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine*; Ousterhout, “Sacred Geographies”; Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*; Talbot “Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines.”

31. Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 64.

32. Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

33. Birgit Meyer and Joel Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no 2 (2006): 287.

manifestations.³⁴ This theory rejected the ontological possibility of agency being mediated by material means and dismissed belief in such agency as a manifestation of magical thinking, fetishism, cognitive infantilism, or “folk religiousness” (as it was seen in Polish and Bulgarian anthropology). Within Eastern Christianity, however, tactile contact with the sacred is not regarded as inferior to verbal or visual contact. They are all theologically approved as correct ways of accessing the sacred.

As anthropologists trying to overcome this bias³⁵ attempt to develop new interpretative approaches close to ontologies recognized by communities within which anthropologists conduct research, they may find inspiration from theologians as they both try to conceptualize ontologies approved by particular societies or communities.³⁶ However, the cognitive endeavours of anthropologists and theologians differ. The former search for social theories to explain the world of the communities they study; the latter are intent on explaining the world in relation to God as the most important point of reference for humans.

Theologies are not only capable of moderating and constituting religious experiences, but also verbalizing and naming them.³⁷ This applies to the category (among others) of God’s grace understood as divine energy, present in Orthodox theology since the Middle Ages but absent in the theology of Western Christianity. Similarly, the concept of sin understood as a state of illness from which the sinner needs to be liberated and healed, rather than a crime for which one needs to be punished,³⁸ seems crucial for the proper understanding of the implicit relationship between veneration, prayer, and surrender to the healing powers of the sacred. Regarding religious life as a way of healing the soul and the body is a key element of Orthodox Christian theology, which in the Byzantine period became adapted to the needs of the faithful and foregrounded and referenced the role of Jesus, who himself performed many miracles of healing, a fact strongly emphasized in the Gospels.

34. Birgit Meyer, *Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006); Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 124; Chris Hann, “Eastern Christianity and Western Social Theory,” *Erfurter Vorträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums*, no. 10 (2011): 8.

35. Sonja Luehrmann, “A Dual Quarrel of Images on the Middle Volga: Icon Veneration in the Face of Protestant Pagan Critique,” in *Eastern Christians*, 65; Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

36. Derrick Lemons, “Introduction: Theologically Engaged Anthropology,” in *Theologically Engaged Anthropology*, ed. Derrick Lemons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–17; Timothy Larsen and Daniel King, “The Dependence of Anthropology on Theology,” in *Theologically Engaged*; Joel Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285–94; Joel Robbins, “World Christianity and the Reorganization of Discipline: On the Emerging of Dialogue between Anthropology and Theology,” in *Theologically Engaged Anthropology*, 226–43.

37. I discussed the epistemological advantages of familiarizing oneself with Orthodox theology to develop an emically sensitive anthropological theory in Magdalena Lubanska, “Problemy etnograficznych badań i religijnością,” in *Religijność chrześcijan obrządku wschodniego na pograniczu polsko-ukraińskim*, ed. Magdalena Lubanska (Warsaw: DiG, IEiAK, 2007), predating similar reflections of the editors and authors in Chris Hann and Herman Goltz, eds., *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

38. John Meyendorff, *Teologia bizantyńska. Historia i doktryna* (Kraków: WUJ, 2007), 185.

The biblical example which may help to strengthen faith in the healing properties of “sacred clothes” can be found in the Gospel of Mark, describing the woman suffering from a haemorrhage who was healed after touching Jesus’s cloak. The moment the woman touches his cloak (Gr. *himation*), Jesus feels that “the power (Gr. *dynamis*) had gone out from him.”³⁹ I consider this passage to be significant because the suggestion that the power of Jesus was also present in his clothes seems compatible with the imaginaries of the Orthodox Christians, who often say that what really heals them are the divine energies.

The relationship between faith and physical and spiritual health and the role of Divine energies in this process are uniquely conceptualized in hesychastic spirituality (recognized as an official expression of the Orthodox faith at the Council of Constantinople in 1351), the origins of which derive from the Desert Fathers, wherein the goal of spiritual life is to heal man and lead him to a state of “deification” understood as the “spiritualization of man by divine energies.”⁴⁰ “The healing process is achieved through the synergy of the energy of God’s grace and the will of man.”⁴¹ I did not record among the faithful any direct references to the concept of deification (which requires sophisticated theological knowledge), but I could observe their synergistic relations with the sacred objects aimed at obtaining God’s healing grace or blessing (Bulg. *blagodat*), which is in accordance with Eastern Christian theological assumptions.

Divine energy was already a crucial theological category describing God’s presence and mode of acting in this world at the time of the Council of 787, which distinguished the veneration devoted to religious images as carriers of divine energies (Gr. *proskynesis*) from the praise owed only to God (Gr. *latreia*). Treating icons and relics as causative due to their own immanent powers, and not thanks to the divine grace that acts through them, was considered to be inaccurate according to Orthodox theology and ontology.

Orthodox theology describes God’s grace/divine energies as uncreated and at the same time constituting the “manifestation of his being outside,” in the world, and it was with their help that God was to create man and the world.⁴² Energies are understood in terms of divine agency and the divine light revealed during the Transfiguration scene on Mount Tabor, as illustrated by icons depicting that biblical event.

In the fourteenth century Gregory Palamas explained that the splendour of Tabor was uncreated divine energy⁴³ and went on to explain that God in his essence remains unavailable to man—he is completely transcendent—however, one can

39. Mk. 5:21–43, Lk. 8:46.

40. Krzysztof Leśniewski, *Nie potrzebują lekarza zdrowi . . . Hezychastyczna metoda uzdrawiania człowieka* (Lublin: KUL, 2006), 122.

41. Leśniewski, *Nie potrzebują lekarza*, 15.

42. Elżbieta Przybył, *Prawosławie* (Kraków: Znak, 2006), 92.

43. As Leonid Uspienski notes: “In its teachings on the splendour on Mount Tabor the Church points out that the transformative divine agency takes its origins in uncreated and indestructible light, in the energy of the Godhead, which is perceived and contemplated in the body.” Leonid Uspienski, *Teologia ikony* (Poznań: W drodze, 1993), 199.

experience his actions and favors through divine energies/actions (in themselves immanent and penetrating matter), somehow making God present in this world.⁴⁴ At the same time, Orthodox faithful in Bulgaria often view energies in terms of divine power emanating from certain objects and substances.

This ontological conviction applies not only to icons and relics (Old Slavonic *moshti*,⁴⁵ Gr. *leípsano*), but also to *eulogiai*, such as fabrics that gain this status after being anointed with oils, blessed with holy water, or placed in direct contact with relics or icons believed to have miracle-working powers. This property of icons and relics is often referred to in mystagogies (introductions or initiations into liturgy) such as the one by the famous bishop Symeon of Thessalonica,⁴⁶ as well as in synaxaria, typica, and generally in texts about liturgical service invoking apocryphal accounts of their origins. As a result, I believe that religious feasts play a major role in the belief in the healing properties of textiles that have been prayed over and blessed in the sacred space of the church. Notably, such church holidays include the translation of the Holy Mandyllion from Edessa to Constantinople (celebrated on August 16)⁴⁷ and the Placing of the Robe of the Theotokos in a church in Blachernae (celebrated on July 2).⁴⁸ In Bulgaria, the stories of relics venerated on those days are also known to highly religious faithful from the *Lives of the Saints*, a publication which enjoys

44. Gregory Palamas, "Obrona szczegółowa," in Palamas, *Bułgakow, Łosiew. Rozważania o religii, imieniu Bożym, tragedi i filozofii i, wojnie i prawach człowieka* (Warsaw: Scholar, 2010), 129–63.

45. Notably, this word, which only refers to the bodily remains of saints, derives from a root meaning "to be able to do something, to have power or force to do it." See Bakalova, *Kultūt*, 28, 74. By foregrounding the ontological property of those objects as carriers or vehicles of divine power, this etymology may influence the belief that the faithful have in their efficacy by drawing their attention to their apparent powers.

46. Symeon z Tesseloniki, *O świątyni Bożej*, [*Expositio the Divino Templo/On the Temple of God*] (Kraków: WUJ, 2007). According to the Bulgarian Byzantine scholar Georgi Minczew [Minchev]—who wrote the foreword for this book—the Orthodox Christian liturgy has remained practically unchanged since the first half of the fifteenth century, and Symeon's commentaries have retained their currency and gained popularity in translation, achieving influence in the post-Byzantine world thanks to numerous editions. See Georgi Minczew, "Cała świątynia staje się mieszkaniem Boga." Bizantyńskie mistagogie—wykładnia i komentarz liturgii niebiańskiej [The whole temple turns into a house of God. Byzantine mystagogies—interpretation and commentary on the heavenly liturgy], in *O świątyni*, 8.

47. As Leonid Uspienski notes, the stichera from the Matins of that feast often reference the story of King Abgar, who was healed of leprosy by the Mandyllion (Uspienski, *Teologia*, 23); a tenth-century apocryphal piece, *The Story of the Image from Edessa*, also played a major role in popularizing this form of veneration.

48. In this case the main source of knowledge about their history is the *Historia Euthymiaca*, probably written early in the sixth century, named after an otherwise unknown monk Euthymios, and attested in John of Damascus' Second Sermon on the Dormition (Hom. II in Dormitionem B.V. Mariae, PG 96, 748–75). I am familiar with this work as it appears in a Polish-language sourcebook edited by Fr. Marek Starowieyski, *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu. Ewangelie apokryficzne*, Part 2, (Kraków: WAM, 2003). The origins of the veneration of Mary's robes are also narrated in an apocryphal *Tale of Galbrios and Kandidos*, probably written in the fifth century, recorded in the synaxarion of Constantinople, and read out on the Feast of the Placing of the Robe of the Theotokos in Blachernae, a celebration instituted in the twelfth century. See Starowieyski, *Apokryfy*, 827. It tells the story of miracles that happened by virtue of the robe of the Mother of God, which was held in a secret room in the house of a certain Jewish

considerable popularity in Bulgaria and which my respondents often referenced or even eagerly pulled from bookshelves to make a point in our conversations.

The belief that sacred substances and objects have a miracle-working power is also communicated through prayers recited by priests during rituals, through the behaviour of other worshippers in the church, and through accounts of healings depicted in icons that the faithful may see in churches. In southwestern Bulgaria, the Theotokos as The Life Giving Spring is one such immensely popular icon, depicting pilgrims around the healing spring *zoodochos pege* in Constantinople who are pouring its waters onto their bodies, hoping to be miraculously healed. This icon affirms the belief in healing springs (*ayasmo*) located in or near many monasteries.⁴⁹

These sources may be also seen as means of specific “semiotic ideologies” understood as “a reflection upon, and an attempt to organize people’s experiences of the materiality of semiotic form. Not only language but also music, visual imagery, food, architecture, gesture, and anything else that enters into actual semiotic practice functions within perceptive experience by virtue of its material properties.”⁵⁰

As Bissera Pentcheva rightly notes, when describing Byzantine sensorium, we should rather refer to the category of *synaesthesia*, understood as experiencing the sacred with all the senses enriching each other at the same time. Pentcheva conceptualizes this phenomenon as a “multimodal sense of perception” characterized by sensual “saturation” and “synchronic arousal of all the senses.”⁵¹ This kind of sensorium was orchestrated both by Byzantine lived religion and theology and is also applicable for the religiosity of Eastern Christians in Bulgaria today.

HEALING FABRICS IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF BULGARIAN PILGRIMS: ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES

As mentioned earlier, in order to be able to draw on the healing effects of miraculous icons, relics, or substances for a longer time, the Bulgarian faithful often temporarily leave clothes (generally T-shirts and socks, or towels) in front of them. According to the Bulgarian faithful, fabrics “incubating” in the church, blessed with holy water, anointed with consecrated oil, or prayed over by the priest are transformed from ordinary objects into transmitters of God’s energy/power. At the same time fabrics, unlike miraculous icons and relics, are considered to be equipped with sacred powers

woman, and which affected people who were spending the night next to them. Importantly, this story is implicitly referenced in *The Lives of Saints* popular among Bulgarian faithful.

49. Lubanska, “Life-giving.”

50. Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 21.

51. Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual*, 43.

only temporarily, losing with time their healing properties. Therefore, in difficult cases requiring prolonged therapy, the clothes are blessed several times at certain intervals.

Pilgrims often leave clothes in the church just before their own or their relatives' surgery. It is usually pajamas or a nightgown, which is later taken to the hospital.

- W.: Well, the clothes are put here on (. . .) because I had surgery, this is my daughter who once brought a nightgown. It stayed in the church all night . . . and then . . . Well, look, I'm 77 years old. And 25 years ago I was very sick.
- M.L.: All night?
- W.: Yes. It stays in the church all night, and then you take it [woman, about 80 years, 11/11/2012, Obradovski Monastery].

It is important that the clothing comes into direct contact with the body. Clothing is also brought to church by the mothers of sons who are leaving for the army or for a military mission:

Clothes are something intimate and in a sense it is something that represents a man. One example I can give is soldiers who are going to war and who were given a uniform and then left their belt and cap at home. And when, in the war, they were lost without a trace, or their bodies were obliterated by a bomb, those women would bury their belt and cap instead of their bodies (. . .). Besides, madam, see. People come to the Rilsky Monastery and leave there regularly their clothes under the sarcophagus of the Saint, Ivan Rilsky. They are left there and later they are treated as holy. Mothers bring T-shirts to their sons who are soldiers, they leave them there and they tell them later: "Put it on, my son," to be protected by Saint Ivan Rilsky, and so on. [Bishop Tikhon, 67 years old, 17/11/2012, Sofia]

Timothy Carroll understands the phenomenon of "affective cooperation of things and the coactive affect of the holy things towards Orthodox persons in their effort to be holy" in terms of "holy contagion."⁵² Jeanne Kormina explains the process of objects' transition into containers of grace or holy energy as the outcome of the so-called *namolennost*—the volume of prayers said in their presence.⁵³ All these concepts seem to support the importance of synergetic relationship between the faithful and the sacred materializing its power in different objects.⁵⁴

52. Timothy Carroll, *Orthodox Christian Material Culture: Of People and Things in the Making of Heaven* (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), Timothy Carroll, "Im/Material Objects: Relics, Gestured Signs and the Substance of Immaterial," in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joannie McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 119–33.

53. Kormina, "Avtobusniki" 276.

54. Gabriel Hanganu, "Eastern Christians and Religious Objects: Personal and Material Biographies Entangled," in *Eastern Christians*, 33–56.

Through their affordances⁵⁵ and culturally grounded ontological explanations of their specifics (that sanctity is transferable through physical contact), these objects affect the faithful and encourage them to interact with them in a certain way; while the faithful “activate” their medicinal properties through “appropriate ritual engagement.”⁵⁶ Without this engagement, the healing power of these objects would remain latent. Time also seems to play an important role in the therapeutic contact between the afflicted and healing fabrics.

As a kind of *eulogia*, fabrics are worn by afflicted persons for a particular interval of time (usually a week). During this time the sacred powers that inhabit the fabrics are believed to penetrate the bodies of the faithful. They are treated as conduits of sanctity, analogously to the pieces of cotton (Bulg. *pamucheta*) or handkerchiefs after application to miraculous icons or relics. To illustrate this similarity, I quote below a pilgrim on the application of a swab to the relics of St. Cosmas and Damian in Kuklen Monastery:

Yes, they come here. They kiss relics. They give you a cotton swab and apply it to the relic. If someone is sick, he puts it under the pillow and sleeps on it, and thanks to this he is recovering. And if someone has a wound, he simply applies it to this wound, and keeps it on, so that the swab will soak up with blood. They say it helps a lot. [pilgrim, about 75 years, 2013, Kuklen Monastery]

Just as the Mandyllion acquired its healing properties after touching Jesus’s face, clothes, and towels gain these properties from icons and relics. Like the Mandyllion, they can be passed on to people who have not come into contact with the “holy body” in person. It is worth adding that the history of the Mandyllion of Edessa is known to some of the Bulgarian faithful (for instance from the book *Zhitya na svetcite* [Lives of Saints] read by elder women religiously active in their parishes), and the importance of the Mandyllion is emphasized by the relevant icon, which is often placed above the Beautiful Gates of an iconostasis.

It should be noted that the Mandyllion, treaded as a relic-icon, replaced Jesus in the mission to heal the sick King Abgar of Edessa. According to the Christian tradition, Christ gave to Ananias (who was King Abgar’s messenger) a letter with a towel that miraculously retained his image (that is why it is named *acheiropoiatoi*, not made by human hands) when Jesus wiped his face with it. In this way the Mandyllion “was as icon because of its image, but it was also a relic, by virtue of Christ’s contact with it.”⁵⁷ At the same time, this story is more appealing to the imaginaries of ordi-

55. James Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York and London: Psychology Press, 2015).

56. Hanganu, “Eastern,” 39.

57. Vikan, “Early,” 80

nary faithful than sophisticated theological arguments, a fact that was already clear to John of Damascus, who invoked it in a dispute with an iconoclast.⁵⁸

Equipped with healing and apotropaic powers, fabrics are worn by the faithful or carried close to their bodies as a prevention against disease, or charm. As such, they belong to the special kind of objects known in the Eastern Christian tradition as blessings. Having possibilities to absorb holy water and holy oil, they may transfer their powers to individuals who make contact with them. The ontological transformation into objects filled with healing powers may occur also thanks to the so-called incubation (prolonged staying in the church next to the icons or relics). Afterwards they themselves become agential, meaning capable of transferring sacred powers or energies into the human body. In some churches the devotees leave the new clothes as *charisteria* (thank-offering votives), which are later sold in the church shop and bought by other faithful as *eulogiai*. Having possibilities to absorb holy water and holy oil they may transfer their powers to individuals who contact them. The transition of clothes from votives into *eulogiai* happens due to the exchange between the faithful. The church, as the agent of this exchange, finds opportunity for the commercial use of the clothes.

At the same time, there is a widespread belief among believers in the existence of negative energies that are responsible for illness, mental disorder, and, in general, any failures they may experience. Although the effect of charm and magic is, in the feeling of the faithful, identical (bad energy coursing through and penetrating the body and mind of a particular person), each of them requires a slightly different approach when it comes to reducing their influence. According to these believers, the negative energies penetrate the organisms due to someone's "evil look" or through contact with objects that carry evil powers. Charms or a belief in the evil eye is immeasurably reminiscent to the Russian *sglaz*, which refers to both the activity and its effect.⁵⁹ The interlocutors told me that such a view may come from a man who has no bad intentions, but in looking briefly at another man he may happen to envy him something. In the minds of the faithful these situations constitute the reverse of healing practices, including church rituals, as actions which set up relations with God's and the saints' healing energy.

It is with the intention to undo witchcraft that Bulgarian believers often go to church or monastery; some do so also preemptively.

Sometimes a lot of time passes before the victim of these practices finds out what caused them. In this case, so-called St. Cyprian's prayers have the higher esteem for pilgrims, as prayers devoted particularly to undoing charms and releasing oneself from bad energies thrown on them by their enemies. Women who suffer from infertility usually practice submitting themselves to the powerful effect of Virgin's Mary mantle or belt.

58. John of Damascus mentions this in *An Exact Disposition of Orthodox Faith*—Jan Damascęski, *Wykład wiary prawdziwej* (Warszawa, PAX: 1969), 234.

59. Galina Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope: Magic and Healing in Contemporary Russia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

Fabrics used by the pilgrims, unlike miraculous icons and relics, are considered to be equipped with sacred life-giving (Bulg. *zhivotvorni*) powers only temporarily, losing with time their healing properties.⁶⁰ Therefore, in difficult cases requiring prolonged therapy, the clothes are blessed several times at certain intervals. Sick people preparing for medical treatment or surgery often attend the so-called *eleosveshteniye* or *maslosvet*.

Sacrament⁶¹ of anointing with oils

“*St. Sophia*” basilica in Sofia, July, Wednesday morning, 2013, around eleven o’clock. A dozen women gather in front of the iconostasis, putting clothes and small towels on the table situated on the left side of the church. Women are bustling around the table. There is the rustling of plastic bags from which they pull out their clothes. Each of them tries to find the most attractive place for her things. Finally, a priest appears and stands in front of the women in the main nave starting the prayer. He reads a fragment of the Gospel about the prudent and foolish virgins,⁶² and then in turn puts the open Bible on the bowed heads of women for a while. At some point, he also sprinkles the faithful with holy water. Drops of water fall on the face and neckline of a sixty-year-old woman standing next to me. I see her smiling and closing her eyes. For a moment, as if in a state of elation, or maybe even ecstasy, she freezes in this position.

The next part of the rite of anointing with oils, in addition to reading other Gospel passages and prayers, includes applying to the faithful an *epitrachelion*⁶³ of the priest. The priest stretches it over the leaning women who gather around him. Finally, he anoints the faithful with oil (Bulg. *elepomazaniye*). The priest asks each person for his or her name and, making the sign of the cross, he rubs oil on the foreheads, cheeks, chins, necks and outer sides of the hands of the faithful. Then he goes to the table and the things laid out there and also applies an oiled pad to them. In the opinion of the faithful, this activity causes these objects to acquire apotropaic

60. Although, of course, fabrics having the status of a relic are known in the Orthodox tradition, such as the belt of the Mother of God

61. It is worth mentioning that Byzantine theology does not recognize the Western distinction between sacraments and sacramentalia. See Meyendorff, *Teologia*, 179.

62. Mt 25:1–13

63. As Warren T. Woodfin notices, “the epitrachelion, or stole, was sine qua non of the priestly vesture in Byzantium. It is first mentioned in the eight-century liturgical commentary of Germanos of Constantinople (. . .). The use of epitrachelion at the liturgy was imposed, on pain of heresy, by a canon of indeterminate date (. . .). The sacred character of the vestment is attested by the fact that Byzantine law allowed priests to swear on the epitrachelion rather than on the usual book of Gospels.” *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10–11. According to Germanos of Constantinople, epitrachelion symbolically represents the rope by which “Christi departing for his passion, was brought before the High Priest,” Woodfin, *The Embodied*, 104, while according to Nicholas Kabasilas “the stole upon the neck signifies the grace of priesthood poured out upon him [the priest],” quoted after Woodfin, *The Embodied*, 106.

and healing properties. As such, they become extremely effective when a sick person wears them or keeps them close to the body.

The oil is treated here as a substance that transmits the healing, life-giving powers of God, or the “fragrant and living power of the Spirit,” in Symeon of Tessoniki’s phrase.⁶⁴ The oil gains special qualities thanks to the powers it acquires after the descent of the Holy Spirit summoned by the priest. According to the description of the course of the sacrament of anointing with the oils described in the Bulgarian *Trebnik*, the Holy Spirit is called on seven times to descend and to heal the sick person. I am quoting one of these types of prayers below, considering it to coincide with the expectations of ritual expressed by the faithful:

Holy Father, Physician of the soul and the body, who sent your Only Begotten Son, our God, Jesus Christ, to save us from every disability and death: please deliver also your servant (name) from the carnal and spiritual illness that he/she experiences and bring him/her back to life (Bulg. *ozhivotvori*) through the blessing/grace (Bulg. *blagodat*) of Christ, prayers to our Queen Mother of God the Virgin Mary, power of the venerated and life-giving (Bulg. *zhivotvoryasht*) cross, the intercession of praised heavenly disembodied forces and the famous prophet, forerunner John the Baptist, saints worthy of glory, and of the Apostles. . . .⁶⁵

The terms “blessings,” “grace,” and “life-giving” feature in the words of this prayer, and these are terms invoked by the faithful themselves to describe the phenomenon of healing. Using these words, they explain the experience of supernatural agency. In this context, health equates with acquiring life-giving forces (*zhivotvorni*). The term *zhivotvorni* used by some of the faithful to describe the healing energies may be regarded as an important emic category. This word penetrated the vocabulary of the faithful from the liturgical language.⁶⁶ This seems to correspond with Timothy Carroll’s finding that the “symbiotic relationship between the textile and the faithful is seen to use and restore the ‘breath of life’ found in material things.”⁶⁷ It also resonates with the observation of Stella Rock, who recorded the frequent use of the word *blagodat* in the discourse of the Russian pilgrims and their willingness to experience it at the holy place.⁶⁸

The sacrament of anointment with oils, as described in the *Trebnik*,⁶⁹ is prescribed for seriously ill people, and seven priests should perform it. According to John Meyendorff, the plea for healing in this context takes place in the context of

64. Symeon, *O sviatyni*, 34.

65. *Trebnik*, (Sofia: Sv. Sinod na Bŭlgarskata Tsrkva, 2002), 177.

66. Lubanska, “Healing chains.”

67. Carroll, *Orthodox Christian*, 72.

68. Stella Rock, “Seeking Out The Sacred: Grace and Place in Contemporary Russian Pilgrimage,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook, Mediterranean, Slavic and Eastern Orthodox Studies*, no. 28/29, (2012/2013): 193–218.

69. *Trebnik*, 166.

atonement and spiritual salvation, and not as an end in itself; the anointment symbolizes divine forgiveness and liberation from sin.⁷⁰ However, to the faithful the physical or medical aspect of healing is just as important as its spiritual meaning.

Although according to the *Trebnik* it can be done by one priest only in a unique situation, in practice this variant is the most common, for which the priests themselves give practical reasons. *Eleosweshteniye* (or *Holy Unction*) can be celebrated in the church or at home—it is important that a table is prepared beforehand, on which the Gospel and a dish with wheat and an oil lamp (Bulg. *kandilo*) are placed. Seven dampened pads wrapped with cotton (as many as there are priests) are put inside the lamp. They are used for anointing the sick with oil.⁷¹

When I asked Bulgarian Orthodox priests about the origin of the practice of anointing clothing with oils, they claimed that this practice developed in times when reaching the monasteries was very difficult for the sick, and their clothes were brought to the church by their relatives as a substitute for their presence. The priest blessed them and consecrated them, and it was believed that their owners had a chance to regain health after putting them on. On several occasions during field research, I also heard about the very rarely applied practice of putting all the liturgical vestments taken off by the priest on the afflicted person. It is not described in the book of religious services or *Trebnik*, or—as far as I know—in any liturgical book.

The sacrament of anointing with oils is customarily celebrated on Wednesdays. One of the key moments of this sacrament is the imploring invocation to God, asking him to consecrate the oil. Many believers can identify/sympathize with its words, which are as follows:

“O God, who is saving (Bulg. *iztselyavash*) our contrite souls and bodies with your wisdom and generosity, You Alone, the Lord, do consecrate this oil to heal those who anoint with it and do **remove every suffering, and every carnal and spiritual impurity and all evil**, and in this way may be praised your Holiest Name—of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—now and forever and for ever and ever. Amen.”⁷² These words provoke the *teleiosis*, the transformation of ordinary oil into a substance endowed with the power to distance suffering caused by bodily and spiritual diseases (defined as impurity and evil).

The rite of anointing purifies the unclean, and that is probably why the Orthodox Church accepts that it serves not only for healing but for forgiveness of sins.⁷³ It should be emphasized that the anointing of clothes is not mentioned in the *Trebnik*. Meanwhile, for the faithful themselves, it is an important addition to the ritual. They wear “anointed clothing” for a while, hoping to heal themselves from disease (or to prevent it).

70. Meyendorff, *Teologia*, 188.

71. *Trebnik*, 145.

72. *Trebnik*, 166.

73. Archimandrite Avksentiy, *Liturgika* (Plovdiv: IMN, 2007), 181.

Although the faithful themselves are also sprinkled with holy water and anointed with oil, they are convinced that the effect of this ritual is strengthened when they wear clothes soaked in these substances for some time. Probably not without significance is the fact that the substances stay in the fabric longer than on the surface of the skin. Clothes and towels lying on the table absorb the fragrances and blessed oils, and, because of these physical characteristics, they are even more eagerly perceived by the faithful as conduits of divinity. They become a kind of *eulogiai*. In the case of lived Christianity in Bulgaria, nothing spiritual can be present without something physical and material (which is the opposite of the iconoclastic attitude to the sacred).⁷⁴ In this case, what is “spiritual,” (that is, God’s blessing) first penetrates into water and oil and then into the fabrics brought in the church. The ritual ends with a blessing and the priest’s recitation of a forgiveness of sins.

ST. CYPRIAN’S PRAYERS

In turn, St. Cyprian’s Prayers, considered to be particularly effective in the removing of charms, are recited mostly on Thursdays but occasionally also on Sundays (this applies, for example, to the Church of St. Nedelya/Sunday in Sofia, which is related to the fact that its patron is Saint Nedelya). They boil down to a rather short ritual: the reading of the prayer and the consecration of food, clothes, and other items arranged on a table. I observed this ritual in two churches: Saint Petka the New in Plovdiv, and the church of Saint Trinity in Asenovgrad. In the first church, one of my interlocutors, who caught my attention because she kissed all the icons in the church and stood for a moment in front of the royal doors with outstretched arms, said that she usually leaves a ring or keys on the table:

- I put what I want. I just feel that way, and I do it this way. Well, because clothes, just put on your clothes once, and wash them out. And in turn these are eternal things. Rings, it’s that, in turn the keys are opening the apartment, so it’s good that they are sanctified, so it’s better than the clothes. And every time I’m here I consecrate them.
- M.L.: You mean, you can do it every week?
- Of course. They purify themselves in this way.
- M.L.: What are they purifying from?
- You can clean it separately.
- M.L.: Why are they cleaned?

74. Matthew Engelke, “Dangerous Things: One African Genealogy,” In *Things, Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 56.

Figure 1. The moment before St Cyprian's prayers in the Church of Saint Petka "the New" in Plovdiv.

- **Because they take [Bulg. *popivat*] negative energy** and clean themselves in a special way. We clean things differently, golden things in one way, different things in another. There are different ways.
- M.L.: Do they take this energy from people?
- Yes, from people, maybe from you. For example, if you had experienced something and someone had offended you, in this way you actually took over his negative energy.
- M.L.: Oh.
- They consume energy [woman, *ekstrasens*, about 50 years, 26/06/2014, Plovdiv]

In the church of St Petka "the New," a ritual took place just after the morning liturgy. When I visited this church on June 26, 2014, one of the priests said the Cyprian prayers and blessed the clothes brought by the faithful, while another expressed his dissatisfaction. It was Father E., a priest in the church of St. Petka "the Old," with whom I met earlier in June 2013. He pointed to a woman standing in the church, opposite the Beautiful Gates, with her arms spread out and a red thread tied around her wrist. The same woman after a while began to come to all icons in the iconostasis and started to kiss them. In conversation with me Father E. classified her behavior, as

well as St. Cyprian's prayers, as superstitious, having nothing in common with Orthodox Christianity. According to him, whenever the faithful rely solely on things and rites and forget about God as the source of grace, they become like pagans (Interview by author. July 4, 2013).

I suppose that the popularity of St. Cyprian's Prayers results from their specific performativity and their semantic virtues. They repeatedly call on God to reject demons from the life-space of a given man and to take away the magic of which he has become a victim. At the same time, they speak directly about the multiple instances associated by the faithful with the magic they fear. Calling by name its reflections, this prayer somehow takes control over them. Below is a fragment of it:

(. . .) Because I did not know You before, O God Almighty
 But it is you, God, who turned to me the unworthy
 You have blessed me and made me worthy to live with love and faith in Your
 mercy
 And that I should annihilate the power of magic (. . .)
 Therefore, my God, please accept my humble prayer
 And if someone suffers from an evil spirit or becomes an object of magic,
 Which interferes with your people and their homes
 Please, please
 That he will be immediately released after saying this prayer with faith before
 God
 In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit
 Amen
 And wherever this magic was done, let it flee from your servants
 With the power of a pure and life-giving cross that deflects any unclean force
 Amen
 If magic is placed under the threshold, skin, or iron, or stone, or under the
 ground,
 Or a tree, let it burst like smoke
 Or how it is written in ink, or the blood of a man, or in the blood of belongings,
 or fish
 And however it is done, let it scatter and leave your servants.⁷⁵

Advice on what St. Cyprian's Prayers are and how they work is exchanged on online portals, not only Orthodox sites, but also occult sites that are devoted to health issues or miracles. On one of the forums, for example, the moderator of the page with the significant nickname of "Kaballa" responds thus to a complaint against a priest who refused to use this prayer because he considered it apocryphal:

75. *Molitva na sv. Kipriyan Protiv Magii, uroki, loshi Ezitsi i Bolesti* (Sofia: Sv. Blagoveshteniye, 2001), 81.

If these prayers are apocryphal, then logically, it follows that they are heresy, right?! It is interesting, however, that Cyprian was considered a saint. I do not know where this idea came to your mind, unless you do not know these prayers. I ordered them and I know that they are said for three days over a row of clothes. And this is the prayer that this priest considers as apocrypha (. . .). Of course you can say them by yourself. I carry it with me on a piece of paper.⁷⁶

The same woman advises the other woman to choose another priest and even informs her about the price for the service of saying these prayers—10 leva for one prayer, 30 leva for the recommended three. She also explains to another person that even if someone is not sure whether he was a victim of magic, he may still use these prayers.

Among the questions posed by Internet users, there is also the question of whether these prayers can be said in someone's name, also on behalf of a person who does not believe in the existence of magic but who is—in the questioner's opinion—overwhelmed by it. When reading Internet forums where recommendations for these prayers and the accompanying rituals appear, you can also find out which situations are thought to qualify a given person to take advantage of this practice. These include, among others, the following: a persistent headache, a sudden change in another's or one's own behaviour, or some misfortune. One such case was recounted by N., a twenty-year-old student who advised her friend to pray for his father and introduced her friend to the priest:

He came, I brought him to the church one morning and the priest told him to bring some of [his] father's clothes. But those that he wears close to the body, like a T-shirt. But something that is worn close to the body, because you have to wear it for a lot of days. And he told him to leave the T-shirt and to come for three consecutive Thursdays. This means, on the first Thursday, clothes and holy water are left, the next Thursday it is taken away and his father is supposed to wear it a whole week and then the next Thursday he leaves them again. And so he does three Thursdays in a row. This means for the first two Thursdays I came with him. On the second I was waiting for him outside. And he told me that his mother gave a T-shirt to his father, but he was not aware that some prayer was being said over it and his father wore it without knowing about that. There was improvement. The man got better. I mean, I think that over these clothes are said St Cyprian Prayers and some others against magic and charms and so problems are solved [student N., approx. 22 years, 4/07/2013, Asenovgrad].

As soon as the service ends and things are considered to be sanctified—"prayed over" (Bulg. *ocheteni*)—the priest explains in detail, as he does each morning, how

76. <https://kaballa.wordpress.com/КИПРИЯНОВИ МОЛИТВИ>

many days one should dip the pads in oil and wipe them in specific places in order to save the person or undo the spell.⁷⁷ Clothes, along with holy water, are brought to the church on Thursday and left in it for a whole week, then worn for a week and again left in the church. This cycle should be repeated three times. Those who are more involved in liturgical practices believe that in order for prayer to be effective, priests and persons subjected to this ritual should fast and take part in the liturgy. It is also recommended that one partake of Holy Communion.

Maria Shniter claims that prayers against “charms” recited in the church are a completely new phenomenon in Bulgaria, because by the end of the nineteenth century the faithful sought the help of the priest and separately of the rural healer.⁷⁸ According to the researcher, the popularity of St. Cyprian Prayers and their recitation in some of the Bulgarian churches results from the Russian influence on Bulgarian liturgical practice which followed the fall of communism.⁷⁹ At the same time, Shniter does not reject the possibility that it has blossomed in Bulgaria.⁸⁰ According to the Russian liturgist from the last century, Alexander Almazov, the prayers of St. Cyprian and many other healing prayers are of Greek origin, and the oldest sources available to us containing these prayers date from before the tenth century.⁸¹ Almazov claims that the healing prayers were of secondary character and imitative of the sacrament of anointment and that in the Greek euchologies they are used to supplement this sacrament.⁸² He also believes that they did not penetrate the Russian Trebnik directly from Greece, but from the South Slavic countries.⁸³ He writes that later they began to constitute an independent ritual and appeared quite late in the Russian Trebnik.⁸⁴ Shniter notes that in Slavic euchologies they were rare,⁸⁵ which does not rule out Almazov’s thesis that they came from Greece to the South Slavic countries, hence to Russia, and after some time (from the 1990s) they returned to Bulgaria from Russia. Shniter writes that the popularity of these prayers in Bulgaria is associated with the phenomenon of the “secondary folklorization of worship.”⁸⁶ It seems to me that in a situation where the St. Cyprian Prayers are recited by some priests in church, one can also talk about their “secondary liturgization.”

77. Georgieva, *Folklorni izmereniya*, 115.

78. Shniter, “Bolnoto tyalo”, 139

79. Shniter, “Bolnoto tyalo”, 134

80. Shniter, “Bolnoto tyalo”, 138.

81. Aleksandar Almazov, *Vrachevalnye molitvy, K materialam i izsledovaniyam po istorii ruskogo rukopisnogo Trebnika. Ikonomicheskaya tipografiya pochtowaya* (Odessa, 1900), 93, 98.

82. Almazov, *Vrachevalnye molitvy*, 17, 98.

83. Almazov, *Vrachevalnye molitvy*, 97.

84. Almazov, *Vrachevalnye molitvy*, 91.

85. Shniter, *Pütishta pres*, 271.

86. Shniter, *Pütishta pres*, 134.

Virgin Mary's Robes and Belt for Women's Infertility

The last practice associated with healing fabrics that I would like to mention is related to the cult of Mary's robes and belt. It is less popular than the practices I described earlier. Manifestations of this cult can be found, for example, in the church of the Golden Apple in Gorni Voden, as well as in the chapel of Saint Zona (or Saint Mother of God of the Holy Belt) in Melnik situated in another region of Bulgaria. This practice seems to be closely related with the cult of the Virgin Mary's fabrics propagated at Vatopedi Monastery in Greece, a popular pilgrimage site, especially for Bulgarian pilgrims living close to the Bulgarian-Greek borderland.

In-depth research on this subject was conducted by the Bulgarian folklorist Vihra Baeva.⁸⁷ Rituals for healing infertility problems are practiced on the eve of the feast of Saint Mary's Akathist and on the feast day itself in the church of the Golden Apple. They involve sleeping in the monastery and eating an apple that has hung for some time in front of the miracle-working icon of the Virgin Mary. In addition, the church is circled three times with cotton thread (white, red, or blue) by the infertile women. The thread is then broken and folded to a length of 1.5 meters, and its two ends are bound together.⁸⁸ Next, the thread is left at the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God. In this way the thread becomes the *eulogia*, and women wear it around the waist for forty days with faith that they will become pregnant during that time. Then they can put it under their pillow and sleep on it to prolong its impact on their body. The treatment of infertility is primarily directed at women; their partners only consume the healing apple with them, and they do not have to circle the church or wrap the threads around themselves.

Some Bulgarian researchers claim that this practice derives from Greece, from the Vatopedi Monastery, but that it has undergone a local transformation,⁸⁹ with the belt replaced by a thread and new elements added (threading the church building with a thread as well as circling it). The Vatopedi Monastery is currently producing special belts designed for infertile women to carry, which are considered miraculous as a result of contact with the original relic of Mary's belt preserved there.⁹⁰ These belts are imported by some pilgrims. One of my interlocutors also told me about this, revealing how women receive the healing belts:

The Theotokos belt is in Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos. I was there and it is very interesting. There, the monk spoke Greek, but we did have a translator. And how they took the relics of the saints there, part of the Mother of God's coat

87. Baeva, *Nishkata*.

88. Baeva, *Nishkata*, 57.

89. Baeva, *Nishkata*, 72, 116; Teodor Peev, "Za prasnitsite Poyas Bogorodichen i Zlatnata yabŭlka," in *Neprochetenie stranitsi iz minaloto na Asenovgradskiya kray* (Asenovgrad: Ekobelan 2006), 44–46.

90. Baeva, *Nishkata*, 115.

was there, there is also the bone of Saint John the Baptist, it's there, with all the fragrances you have feeling that you are falling into a trance. And at the end they gave us a belt that helps [women] to get pregnant. They gave it to everyone. And I kept it for half a year at home and oil (miro) for the anointing, and finally gave it to my mother, asking her to give it to those in need [man, approx. 40 years, 25/06/2014, Plovdiv]

The Vatopedi Monastery is now a thriving religious center which, despite the ban on women's admission, conveys its message in a mediated but effective way, also affecting the religious habitus in southern Bulgaria. It seems that the belts produced there by the monks, being a copy of the belt of Mary stored there, have become popular in the regions of Bulgaria bordering with Greece.

In my opinion, when analyzing the ritual of putting on the threads by the infertile women, it is worth considering another "Constantinopolitan" trope, which leads us to the Empress Zoe. In an anonymous twelfth-century manuscript containing a compilation of texts about miracles associated with Zoodochos Pege, which is stored in the Vatican (Vat 822, fols. 1807v-207v) and known to me in translation by Alice-Mary Talbot and Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, miracle number 26 recounts how the Empress Zoe—coping with infertility problems—learns about the practice of girdling herself with silk thread equal in length to the icon of the Mother of God. The text says of the Augusta Zoe that, "measuring out a skein of a silk equal in length to the icon of the Mother of God, which is on the right [of the image] of the Saviour in the Refuge, and wrapping it out around her loins, through the providence [of the Virgin] she conceived the celebrated emperor Constantine."⁹¹

From the description it appears that it was an icon placed in the templon, located in the church dedicated to Mary's Shelter or Kataphyge, which was placed at the healing spring. I cannot answer how and when the message reached Orthodox believers in Gorni Voden or Melnik. I cannot assume in advance that it has been maintained for centuries. However, the description I have found indicates its connection with Constantinople and the imaginarium of Eastern Christianity specific to this city, as well as with religious literature describing the wonders at Pege. A variant of this miracle is contained in a brief, barely one-point description of the Feast of the Deposition of the Holy Cincture of the Mother of God, which appears in the Bulgarian *Lives of Saints* that I have already mentioned.⁹² They popularize a story about how Mary's belt was specially removed from the reliquary by the Patriarch to heal Empress Zoe, who suffered from a spiritual illness. At that time the Patriarch was to spread the belt over her, and as a result the empress immediately recovered. According to the book, a holiday was to be established as a reminder of this miracle. Considering that the same empress was to be healed once from the belt of Mary and once from the silk

91. "Anonymous Miracle of the Pege," in *Miracle Tales from Byzantium*, trans. Alice-Mary Talbot and Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 267.

92. *Zhitiya*, 405.

thread equal to the icon of the Mother of God of Kataphyge, it is easy to understand why the imaginaries of the faithful could identify these healing objects as containing the same healing energies.

That infertility was to be cured by a thread may be related to the fact that thread appears in Marian iconography in a scene directly related to the conception of Jesus, or the Annunciation. This turning point in Mary's life, described in the Apocrypha of the *Proto-evangelium of James*,⁹³ seems to be much more related to infertility treatments taken at the church in Gorni Voden than the moment of the Assumption captured in the scene when the Virgin Mary hands over her belt to St Thomas (shown on the icon of the Assumption in Gorni Voden and, according to Vihra Baeva, connected with this practice). According to the above-mentioned apocrypha, the Annunciation happens when Mary is weaving the veil for the Jerusalem temple and therefore keeping a red distaff in her hand. This red thread is associated with the silk thread which Empress Zoe wraps around her waist. It is noteworthy that in Gorni Voden women are just strung with threads of this color, while the binding of the red threads on the wrist is a typical apotropaic practice to protect the wearer from the effects of charms. Probably women choose this color for the treatment of infertility due to the assumption that this condition is caused by someone casting a spell on them.

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of healing fabrics as carriers of God's grace and energy cannot be adequately elaborated when detached from the impact on pilgrims' imaginaries of liturgical and theological sources from religious socialization gained at church (looking at church and monastery scenery, imitating others, and following advice given by people recognized as more religiously engaged, and whom the ordinary faithful respect). Sometimes pilgrims also acquire their knowledge from the Internet.

After my studies, I conclude that Eastern Christianity, responding to the needs of ordinary faithful, developed an extremely intricate and sophisticated theology regarding the ontological status of icons and relics as objects able to make present the divine powers or energies. This theology officially distinguishes proper cult/worship (*latreia*) from veneration (*proskynesis*), although in practice it creates favorable ground for a synergic relationship of the faithful with these sacred objects⁹⁴ and encourages ontological conviction of the special healing powers of sacred objects and substances. This conviction, as I have shown, is transmitted through Eastern Orthodox iconography, liturgical practices, religious books, and embodied knowledge.

93. "Protoewangelia Jakuba" [Protoevangelium of James], in *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu*, Vol 1., ed. Marek Starowieyski (Kraków: WAM, 2003), 266–90.

94. Hanganu, *Eastern Christians*, 47.

At a basic level Eastern Christian theology—recognizing the existence and actions of divine energies in the world, as well as their positive, restorative impact on human well-being—coincides with the vernacular imaginaries of the faithful concentrated on religious healing (and it is the phenomenon of a *longue durée*).

Pilgrims themselves generally do not consider whether the manner in which they perceive healing energies is consistent with theological interpretation. What matters is their healing performativity/action. They learn about the healing effect of sacred objects primarily through bodily practices. They observe each other in holy places and imitate the ways of entering into relationships with material objects undertaken by others.

The relationship between health and faith in Orthodox communities deserves further comparative research conducted by an international interdisciplinary research team, conducted in parallel in several Orthodox countries. For their full understanding, both in a synchronous and diachronic perspective, it is necessary to know the broader context of their functioning. Certainly, it is worth taking into account the role of pilgrimages and important religious centers in the religious socialization and religious imaginaries of the Orthodox faithful.

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