Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine

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Teresa Brennan begins her study of affect by asking if there is anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and “felt the atmosphere” (2004, 1). She could have just as easily asked if there is anyone who, after arriving in another country, has not “felt the atmosphere.” An atmosphere distinguishes one context from another and, in doing so, makes places. Gold domed cupolas define landscapes across Ukraine and contribute to an atmosphere of religiosity. When the material and spatial merge with the sensual to create experiences, an atmosphere forms. This means that the material environment can yield its own immaterial form as atmosphere. This is one source of its agency. When an atmosphere is not just felt, but, as Brennan says, begins “getting into the individual” and transmitting the feelings and inclinations of people who circulate in those spaces, then that atmosphere has become affective and both intimate and impersonal.

After years of conversation and observation, I came to appreciate the power and persuasiveness of an affective atmosphere of religiosity and how it shapes the ways people see the world and their place in it. I was always puzzled by what seemed like a paradox: many in Ukraine claim to be nonreligious, nonpracticing, nonbelieving, and yet, they feel a strong emotional attachment to Orthodoxy. What exactly is it that they care about, and why? Slow ethnography over many years has brought into view the “social-aesthetic-material-political worlding” that affect creates (Stewart 2017, 193). This atmosphere forges a collective capacity among the people who live in this place to feel and react in certain ways.
I use this to explain the disgust and respect religion inspires along with the harsh criticism and heartfelt allegiance the church commands. Even though sensational experiences are felt on the individual level, when the sources for those experiences are in the public sphere, they begin to lay the fundamental groundwork, not only for lifeworlds, but also for political orientations and inclinations that are collective and often unshakable.

Before analyzing how vernacular religious practices contribute to an affective atmosphere of religiosity and how this can become politically useful, let me illustrate how an affective atmosphere of religiosity can sway the otherwise religiously indifferent and make them Just Orthodox. Alena is a middle-aged mathematician from Kharkiv, whom I have known for quite some time. In 2019 she was telling me about a recent trip to France. In the process, she described her areligious religiosity that is largely animated by affect. Along with many other traditional tourist sites, she visited Notre Dame de Paris, as she called it. She explained to me that she went there, much as she did to the Louvre, to see beautiful things. But the experience was different than she imagined. When words failed her, she used a gesture to describe her reaction to the cathedral. With folded arms drawn in close to her chest, she shivered and shuttered as if she were freezing. “It’s the spires,” her sister later explained to her. Alena realized that her sister was right. The spires prompted a reaction of recoil, of retreat. She went on to explain the extent to which she recognized this was true. “When I returned home,” she said, again reverting to gesture, with her arms opening wide and flapping as if they were wings. “I realized those round, golden cupolas make me want to soar. They are uplifting. I realized that I was home, that this was mine.”

The reverse sentiment was voiced by Michael Idov, a bilingual Russian-speaking writer who was raised in Latvia and later lived in Moscow and the United States. He said, “I am from Riga, and people from Riga always considered themselves quasi-Europeans. The only thing that tied me to Russia was the language. Otherwise I am a person who grew up among Gothic cathedrals.” Idov uses a comfortable familiarity with Gothic architecture to assert his Europeanness, just as his native country asserted a European heritage to gain European Union membership. As a Russian-speaking resident of Ukraine, Alena responds to the same Gothic style with alienation and a clear sense of not belonging. The golden domes of Eastern Christian churches provoke for her a sense of being in flight, of soaring, and she feels at home among them in Ukraine. The architectural and aesthetic elements of religious buildings that dot the urban landscape in both countries have influenced the emotional palettes and feelings of belonging of both Alena and Michael Idov, albeit differently. Only Alena responds to the atmosphere and aesthetics of Eastern Christian churches, which Alexandra Antohin describes as “a feast
for the senses, the affective qualities of its rituals and spaces as reaching the impossible standard of materializing 'heaven on earth'” (2019, 1).

Alena might feel a sense of heaven on earth in the form of affective sensations when she is near an Orthodox church, but she rarely enters one. The only time she goes into a church is to light a candle for her parents, both of whom are dead and buried in another former republic-turned-independent-state. It is time-consuming and expensive to travel back to the cemetery. She worries that the neighbors criticize her for disrespecting her parents by not conscientiously tending their graves. In place of the cemetery, she goes to church to light a candle, which makes her feel as if she is with her parents. She says she cries whenever she enters a church, and this is perhaps why. She is not invested in prayer, worship, or any other kind of devotional practice that goes beyond remembering her own parents in her own way. But this feeling of communing with her parents, of feeling their presence despite their absence, happens in a church with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Wanting her son to have these connections and experiences as well, she had him baptized. “It’s so that he will feel fully Ukrainian, to feel he belongs,” she explained. Her motivation, once again, has little to do with religion per se but is more about creating relationships with others and securing a means to fully actualize them. Alena’s attitudes reflect the atmosphere in the USSR in which she was raised. The outer Soviet political world that promoted atheism became part of her inner world, just as the current atmosphere in Ukraine, colored as it is with religiosity, becomes a means to maintain a relationship with her parents and her son and to allow them all to belong in Ukraine although they are not ethnically Ukrainian, and Ukrainian is not their preferred spoken language.

I focus on two sources that feed into the creation of an affective atmosphere of religiosity and the feelings of belonging it makes possible: vernacular religious practices and the built environment, specifically the aesthetics of monuments and architecture. These elements combine to create an affective atmosphere of religiosity in Ukraine that informs self-perceptions, guides behavior, and goes a long way in explaining why some people consider themselves Orthodox when they are not religious. Religiosity mediates the material qualities of the built environment and the sensual experience of circulating-perceiving-feeling-thinking-reacting in those lived spaces. Practices that appeal to otherworldly forces inform the encounters and exchanges that occur in those spaces and therefore play a role in articulating relationships and generating feelings of belonging. In this way, an affective atmosphere of religiosity forms an ecology of experience.

Susanne Langer notes that when it comes to conveying knowledge about the precise character of the affective life, language is almost useless (1957, 91; see also
Anderson 2009). Some experiences elude articulation, but that does not mean that they are unknowable or any less relevant, in a political or any other sense. Such socially organized modes of action contribute to visceral and culturally informed self-perceptions that flow into the formation of identities and political views. In an early and path-breaking essay, Michelle Rosaldo argues that “Emotions are thoughts somehow ‘felt’ in flushes, pulses, ‘movements’ of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are embodied thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that ‘I am involved’” (1984, 143). The ethnographic data presented here of vernacular religious practices illustrate how people come to feel involved and connected to others, and specifically how vernacular religious practices performed in an affective atmosphere of religiosity mediate the links between feelings of relatedness and belonging.

**Anthropological Ancestors**

My fascination with atmosphere is something I share with some early anthropological thinkers, although they did not label the phenomenon as such. Gregory Bateson’s classic, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, depicts the analytical and ethnographic dilemmas I have wrestled with in writing this book. The Just Orthodox phenomenon of attachment to a confessional and civilizational tradition is so ethereal that one is discouraged from pursuing it because it is easy to feel but difficult to depict with words. Bateson faced a similar dilemma during his New Guinea fieldwork when he wrote:

> I was especially interested in studying what I called the “feel” of culture, and I was bored with the conventional study of the more formal details. . . . I complained of the hopelessness of putting any sort of salt on the tail of such an imponderable concept as the “feel” of culture. I had been watching a casual group of natives chewing betel, spitting, laughing, joking, etc. and I felt acutely the tantalizing impossibility of what I wanted to do. . . . Equally, I could see each bit as “pragmatic,” either as satisfying the needs of individuals or as contributing to the integration of society. Again, I could see each bit ethnologically, as an expression of emotion. (1972, 81, 85)

I have experienced Bateson’s frustration of seeing and feeling the pragmatic aspects of an affective atmosphere of religiosity (the sacrality of sites and the spiritualized practices performed there) and how it contributes to the feel of culture. I recognize each bit of the transcendent and transactional as constituent elements
of individual religious experience, which contributes to social solidarity even as it satisfies individual needs. When taken together, this yields a sense of shared life-world and belonging. I have experienced this feel most acutely in Ukraine when people mark death with such strong evocations of transcendence that a presence is created from the absence. And yet, there is no clear vocabulary to analyze it. Initially, Bateson referred to an ethos to indicate a constellation of concepts that make up a culture’s affective and emotional aspects. (See Nuckolls 1995, 367 for a critique.) An ethos for Ruth Benedict meant the emotional background and distinct cultural configurations that pattern existence and form the backdrop to thoughts and emotions as revealed in forms of behavior and observable rituals, including death rituals and commemorations (1934, 55).

Dale Pesman’s ethnography of the “Russian soul” springs from such a tradition. To rise above the cliched meanings of the soul as an enduring trope of national and self-definition, she analyzes the soul as “a deceptive lexical item: not just a notion, image, or entity but an aesthetics, a way of feeling about and being in the world, a shifting focus and repertoire of discourses, rituals, beliefs, and practices more and less available to individuals” (2000, 9). Pesman comes close to the ethereal agentive capacities I seek to depict with atmosphere when she refers to the soul in terms of an “‘inner world,’ an expansive, authentic ‘life force,’ and essences of people, places, groups, and other things” (2000, x). I share an interest in essences that inform the lifeworlds of groups, the inner worlds of individuals, and the life forces that motivate them to act. I use everyday religiosity as a lens through which to see the processes of creating these pragmatic bits of the feel of culture in Ukraine today.

It is important to take stock of the larger structural forces, institutions, and power relations that impose themselves on these essences. This is imperative because, as Raymond Williams writes, “The real power of institutions is that they actively teach particular ways of feeling,” and in doing so sustain “structures of feelings” (1961, 312). His writings on art and aesthetics analyze how “an affective register,” taken in its entirety, contributes to a “worlding” that engages—but also moves beyond—a material analysis. Religious institutions have a particular ability to produce a patterned way of thinking, feeling, and living. They foster structures of feeling by declaring some objects, images, and places sacred and worthy of veneration, whereas they condemn others as blasphemous and therefore to be shunned. These attitudes find expression in vernacular religious practices, especially when sacred images and objects are integrated into the materiality of public space. Figure 2.1 is an example of a sacred image with clear religious connotations set in a mundane public space.
In Between the Worldly and the Sacred

Matthew Engelke’s (2012) concept of “ambient faith” provides insight as to how an atmosphere can facilitate or prevent religion moving from the background to center stage in public life. Engelke analyzes the efforts of the nondenominational Bible Society of England and Wales to produce a Christian ambiance to everyday life, which he calls “ambient faith.” This echoes Charles Hirschkind’s analysis of how the seemingly omnipresent sounds of individuals listening to cassette sermons inform the soundscape of markets and street life in Cairo. Hirschkind argues that these ever-present sounds create a particular “sensory environment” such that the ubiquity of sermons permeates public and private spheres to such an extent that it forges an Islamic “counterpublic” (2006, 125). In Cairo individuals willingly inject the sounds of religiosity into public space and daily life, whereas the Bible Society of England and Wales must take it upon itself to purposefully and deliberately infuse worldly contexts, such as shopping malls and coffeehouses, with Christian symbolism. The stated goal of the Bible Society is to gently alter the sensorium of

**FIGURE 2.1.** Icon to St. Tetiana in a Kharkiv metro station in between bank cash machines and metro ticket sales. Such religious iconography in public space is quite common. Photo by the author.
the public sphere to change the consciousness of individuals who circulate in that space so as to produce an ambient faith in the doctrines and teachings of Christianity as recorded in the Bible (Engelke 2012, 156). In both of these contexts, the advantages of being a historically and culturally dominant faith group are immediately apparent. It is unlikely that Muslims in England or Coptic Christians in Cairo would attempt to visually and auditorily introduce their religious practices into public space to change the consciousness of city residents to be more in keeping with their religious traditions.

Still, the results of the Bible Society’s campaigns have been negligible. Its attempts to publicly display angels during Christmastime on a popular shopping street in England were blocked by government officials, who anticipated their constituents’ condemnation. The only figures allowed were such highly abstract renditions of angels that most residents read them in a secular register as decorative symbols or simply ignored them altogether (Engelke 2013, 49–50). Their religious content, and therefore religious affect, was lost. The religious affect of angels was similarly gutted in postwar East Germany when Communist Party officials were faced with remaking the tradition of decorating public space with angels at Christmastime. To render the angels ideologically acceptable, they were renamed “year-end winged figures” (geflügelte Jahresende-Figuren) and allowed to remain as a national tradition. Oliphant writes of the “privilege” Catholicism wields in France to be present in public space because of its ability to be “banal” (2021). Banality stems from assumptions that the Catholic Church is nonthreatening, unobtrusive, and often not even consciously recognized as religion per se because it is perceived as enmeshed in French culture. Precisely because religion is also integral to national culture in Ukraine, iconography, such as the shrine to the Virgin Mary seen in Figure 2.2, which is public facing on commercial space, is not only allowed but is also uncontroversial. However, given the volatility of the greater geopolitical context in this borderland region, such strident assertions of public religiosity are not banal.

Thinking comparatively of how religion can and cannot permeate public space can add to our understanding of how an affective atmosphere of religiosity can be fashioned and of conditions of secular modernity across Europe. Many European countries have a single religious tradition that coincides with state borders. Yet state-churches in Europe have exerted varied levels of influence on politics, and this has unevenly shaped the de-privatization of religion across the continent (Henig 2020; Oliphant 2021; Zubrzycki 2006). As religion takes place in the public sphere, it changes the tenor of public life, less in terms of faith per se and moreso in terms of how it can be used to escalate or quell emotions through religious practices mediating the here and now with the transcendent.
The philosopher Gernot Böhme (2017) was an early and influential theoretician of the interrelationship between atmospheres and aesthetics and their political potential. He characterized atmosphere as a “tuned space” or a “space with a certain mood” and noted that every place has an atmosphere, an already there ambiance, and that atmosphere is borne of materiality and the human encounters that occur there. Some aesthetics are bland or neutral and not at all affective. The interactions that occur there usually reflect that tenor. An atmosphere becomes affective as a product of the intersection of certain encounters and aesthetic elements that frame the feeling body. Ben Anderson argues that atmospheres “emanate” from the resonance between an assemblage of human bodies and materiality, and that it is the

**FIGURE 2.2.** A small shrine to the Virgin Mary on the grounds of a television station building in Lviv. Photo by the author.
resonance that can become intensified (2009, 80). Most scholars have considered atmospheres in episodic terms. In other words, they have studied how the resonance of an atmosphere has been intensified such that it imposes itself on unfolding events or performances, such as revolutions, concerts, or the Olympic Games (Riedel 2020). Here I consider how an affective atmosphere of religiosity has vacillated during extraordinary events, such as the Maidan protests (Stepnisky 2018), to the everyday, such as passing shrines to dead protesters on the way to work. This allows us to see how an extraordinary event, be it the Maidan protests or a transcendent experience, can remake the ordinary by irretrievably transforming it.

Specific sites and the material objects in them engender practices, including vernacular religious practices, that can turn certain places into spaces of intensity by fostering moods. An affective atmosphere is one where the affects of the materialities in a landscape (built and natural) have the potential to generate a new normativizing power, through what Susanne Langer (1967) calls its “open ambient,” as well as shatter norms through “contagions of feeling” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 8). Affective experiences provoke change by permeating public and intimate spheres alike through the sensations and bodily practices they generate that make or remake norms of behavior. Affect understood in such a way is a carrier of energy, characterized by “surges of passion that accompany a judgment,” that serves to link an individual body to the environment in which it is emplaced (Brennan 2004, 22). Affect mediates emotions and the sensations they generate with an inner awareness of external objects that draws attention into the world and culminates in a flow to judgment. This is the sequence of perceiving-feeling-thinking-acting that affect generates. The enormous mural of children with the Ten Commandments seen in figure 2.3 is not a banal statement of instruction. It is meant to provoke. It reminds the residents of the capital of the timeless ethical and moral guidelines Christianity offers.

The unstructured and fluid nature of affect forms the processual that allows it to transmit so freely and feed into an atmosphere. Affect circulates with contagion through practices and encounters that have physiological effects in the form of sensations with motivational power. Seigworth and Gregg note the “hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera” that are found in everyday life and color the “persistent, repetitious practices of power [which] can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm” (2010, 7). In other words, the encounters that occur in spaces with an affective atmosphere can be powerful agents of change. As the next chapter shows, the Maidan protests, as an extraordinary historical event, took an atmosphere pregnant with religiosity and other possibiliti-
ties and intensified them. This facilitated the subsequent insertion of more religiosity into public space and public institutions and, by extension, into the surfaces of exterior lifeworlds and into the inner lifeworlds of individuals as well, thereby infusing ordinary everyday life with the extraordinary.4 This was made possible by the fact that experiences of everyday life, even mundane routines, unfold in an atmosphere of religiosity, which primed religion to be a formidable
resource during and after the Maidan. Let us now consider how vernacular religious practices, as a set of experiences oriented toward the transcendent, are present in everyday life and how they become carriers of the political among the Just Orthodox by informing the relationships that are most meaningful to them.

**Lifeworlds and Experience**

The significance of a particular atmosphere is that it colors lifeworlds and informs the experiences of those who live within it. The concept of lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt* in German, comes from phenomenology. It is meant to distinguish the world as an object of scientific study from a lifeworld of subjective, everyday life experiences. For our purposes, a lifeworld consists of social and embodied experiences that unfold in a particular space and time amid relationships, all of which are shaped by atmosphere. The word experience is conceptualized more finely in German than it is in English. *Erfahrung* refers to experience in the sense of the culmination of daily routines, that is the experience of engaging in vernacular religious practices, my experience as a fieldworker, and your experience on the job. This is distinct from experience in the sense of *Erlebnis*, which refers to discrete happenings or events, such as the Maidan protests or participating in a pilgrimage. An *Erlebnis*, as an experiential event, stands out from the cumulative progression of everyday experiences, or *Erfahrung*. An *Erlebnis*-like experience breaks through the ordinary to create the extraordinary, and in the process transforms the Erfahrung of everyday experiences that follow (Das 2007; Henig 2020; Ries 2012; Willen and Seeman 2012, 4).

The third component of experience analyzed here involves the body and its intersubjective relationship to atmosphere. This is particularly relevant when studying religion. Sensorial experiences of the felt body, whether the result of everyday experiences (*Erfahrung*) or extraordinary experiences (*Erlebnis*), become meaningful and an important source of knowledge when sensations inscribe themselves on the body (Dejarlais and Throop 2011, 88; Luehrmann 2018). This is how one knows a particular moment, place, object, or action is important, true, or sacred. You feel it. It is impossible to deny. It is a “prereflexive form of experience” (Dejarlais and Throop 2011, 88), and this is why moral convictions, and the political attitudes that stem from them, tend to be unwavering. They draw on intuition, emotion, and prereflexive sensations that feel true and real. Breaking down experience into these three elements, ongoing everyday life, extraordinary events, and embodied experience, points to how particular atmospheres shape lifeworlds. The atmospheric qualities of lifeworlds contribute to
the generation of experiences, which then reinforce the affective qualities of atmospheres, carrying the interactive dynamic forward.

I think of an atmosphere as an ecology of experience, informing our capacity to act and to be acted upon in the sense of ongoing daily life as well as extraordinary events, both of which can potentially create embodied experiences. This means that atmosphere, as an ambient space, connects relational structures and the material environment with the interiority of individuals. (Riedel 2020, 269). An atmosphere is already there and different from our “corporeal attunement to it,” which is what affect creates (Slaby 2020, 275). Affect tunes a body’s relation to the material world or bodies’ relation to each other by creating a register of experience that precedes conscious, rational understanding.

Therefore, a tripartite analytical perspective that incorporates everyday religiosity (material culture of place and vernacular practices), extraordinary events or happenings (the Maidan), and the embodied experiences that result from both reveal how lifeworlds come into being and the role an affective atmosphere plays in the process. This makes vernacular religious practices a mediating factor between the material qualities of the built environment and the immaterial qualities of atmosphere, which is what creates sensual experiences. Various everyday practices, such as prayer or meditation, or extraordinary experiences, such as death and burial, are stimulated and colored by atmosphere. In their appeal to otherworldly forces, vernacular religious practices inform the encounters that occur in places with an affective atmosphere of religiosity, thereby making lifeworlds and animating relationships among the living, the dead, and the divine.

Reading Signs in the Urban Landscape

Reading recognizable semiotic forms in a religious register is fundamental to creating and sustaining an affective atmosphere of religiosity. To give a straightforward illustration, it has become common for some pedestrians on Ukrainian streets to cross themselves when they pass before a church. They do not do this when they walk by other buildings. The architectural and aesthetic elements of the church signal to the pedestrian that they are in the presence of a sacred space, a point of access to otherworldliness. Some people, having read these signs in a religious register, make a gesture of piety to signal their acknowledgment of this social fact.

Illustrating the importance of historical context to this phenomenon, Soviet antireligious campaigns were meant to encourage pedestrians to read the cupolas, crosses, music, and other such signs in a historical or aesthetic register,
or ideally, to ignore them. As a result, over time many people in the Soviet
period understood churches to be something of a museum, much as Alena still
does. They would go there to view beautiful art, architecture, and other objects
that might inspire awe, but the political goal during the Soviet period was for
these signs, and any experiences they might trigger, to be understood in a deci-
sively worldly way.

Recall that the banner proclaiming “Freedom Is Our Religion” was intended
and largely read in a political register, as an assertion of a political principle—
freedom—that could be enshrined in religion. The clergy who objected to the
message on this banner read it in a religious register. Religion for them is not
about freedom. Rather, they countered, religion gives guidance, some would even
say firm rules and punishment for their violation, to regulate behavior so as to
achieve salvation in the afterlife. An exasperated Orthodox priest lamented to
his congregation, “In the twenty-first century we have made a cult of freedom.
We think we are free to do what we want, when we want. But this leads to slav-
ery. You think you can drink whenever you want and how much you want? You
will be an alcoholic. Our religion is not freedom. Our religion is the laws of God.
In order for people in a society to be truly free, they must observe the laws of
God.” State authorities who mounted the banner counted on a secular reading
of President Poroshenko’s slogan and on the positive associations religion would
deliver to benefit his standing in advance of the election.

Affect-driven processes of feeling-thinking-acting are filtered through a se-
miotic ideology as people interpret signs. Webb Keane defines a semiotic ideol-
ogy as people’s underlying assumptions about what signs are, the functions they
serve, and the consequences they might produce (2018, 65). Semiotic ideologies
provide insight into prereflective experiences and the presuppositions that un-
derpin worldviews. Both reveal understandings of agency and form the foun-
dation of a lifeworld. Sign vehicles go well beyond language to include sound,
smell, touch, and pain, all in historically contingent ways.

Ideology signals the diverse ethical and political consequences that emerge
from different understandings of provenance (divinely inspired, arbitrary, or
naturally emergent). Disagreements over provenance are often the root causes
of conflicts involving religion that elude compromise. Interpretations of experi-
ences and historical events and the appropriate response to them trade on un-
derstandings as to who and what one considers capable of agency and intention.
This frames how judgments are made as to who is responsible. In sum, semiotic
ideologies center on the intersection of reading signs, engaging sensory modal-
ities, and the ethical and political implications that result from this process.

Keane recalls an example familiar to anthropologists to illustrate the relevance
of semiotic ideologies for structuring feelings, reactions, and experiences. E. E.
Evans-Pritchard studied witchcraft among the Azande. He noted that if a termite-ridden granary collapses when a person is sitting under it, for the Azande the cause of the collapse is perfectly clear: termites ate the granary’s wooden supports. Why the granary collapsed when that particular person was sitting under it is equally clear: witchcraft caused that person’s misfortune (1937, 22–23). A semiotic ideology mediates the connection between a sign vehicle (the collapse of the granary) and its object (suffering) to make meaning. In other contexts, why a particular person suffered because they were under the granary at the exact moment it collapsed would have been explained by bad luck, angry ancestors, or divine punishment for moral transgression, for example.

Once, while giving a lecture in Lviv, I evoked Evans-Pritchard’s famous example. ‘How would you understand the reason for the granary’s collapse?’ I asked rhetorically. ‘The Russians did it,’’ a young man in the first row shot back with deadpan irony. The members of the audience began to shyly laugh, having recognized an only somewhat caricatured version of their own semiotic ideology. Never mind witchcraft, bad luck, and the like. The Russians make things collapse.

Local, historically specific underlying assumptions govern which signs are meaningful, how they function, and their consequences. This is why the reaction of two Russian speakers raised in the USSR can be so different. One sees Gothic cathedral spires, feels recoil, and realizes she does not belong. Another sees Gothic cathedral spires, feels a sense of familiarity, and this reaffirms his Europeanness and belonging. A semiotic ideology also governs ironic interpretations of signs, including holding Russians responsible for the collapse of a mythical granary. The assumptions and understandings used to make meaning (and humor) are shared. The evolution from a mere presence of religious signs in the urban landscape to an affective atmosphere of religiosity hinges on reading signs in such a way that they prompt a flow of feeling-thinking-acting. For this reason I do not use affect interchangeably with feeling or emotion. A key aspect of affect is its motivational flow into action that generates the experiences that characterize a particular lifeworld.

Some signs can be read in a blended register. Anna Grzymała-Busse (2015) analyzed the multiplex ways national and religious identities fuse for mutual enforcement in several countries. In Ukraine this process of fusion occurs via cultural appropriation. In other words, religious practices, objects, and sites are secularized into culture or cultural heritage. When forms of religiosity are appropriated into a nationalized cultural heritage that belongs to all citizens, these religious objects, symbols, and sites retain meaning collectively and individually (Wanner 2020). At any given moment they can pivot to the sacred. For example, many Just Orthodox have icons in their home and claim the icons serve
a decorative function. Yet, they always have the potential to become an object of veneration and revert to their religiously intended use. Similarly, a Just Orthodox could become a pious believer. The potential works in the other direction as well. Icons could become not just decorative objects but decorative objects that are ignored. Someone who is Just Orthodox could become even more alienated from religious institutions. The affective atmosphere of a person’s lifeworld makes the difference. The key point is that the icons are already there, to be enchanted or ignored. Someone who is Just Orthodox already feels a connection to Orthodoxy. This duality gives the presence of religiosity in everyday life a certain relevance, even among nonbelievers, doubters, critics, and seekers.

Let us now consider how the signs present in everyday forms of vernacular religiosity are read and acted upon such that they color the lifeworld of those who live among them. We will look at how this process creates meaningful spaces and shared attachments before turning to how this process can be made politically useful.

**Places Animated with Prayer**

Place-making is a cultural mechanism by which everyday lived experiences can breed attachments. The concept “place animated with prayer” (namolene mistse/ namolennoe mesto in Ukrainian and Russian) is widely known although it came into common parlance only after the collapse of the USSR. It is used to note especially sacred places with a historic character from more recently built ones. Developing such concepts involves a “creative process of inventing values and ascribing them to things and places” (Kormina 2010, 277; 2019). Namolennist’, or prayerfulness, is a semiotic form that contributes to an affective atmosphere of religiosity and a certain sensory regime that “makes belief” by ascribing certain values of sacredness to particular places (Meyer 2014, 214). I first heard this expression in 2008 at the same time a friend did when she was criticized for the church she chose for her son’s baptism. She is not a religious person and simply chose an attractive neighborhood church near her home in Kharkiv. Her friends said this church was not a place animated with prayer; therefore the protective power of the baptism was diminished. The Goldberg Church, she was told, which is part of the UOC-MP, would have been a far better choice for her son because it is the place most animated with prayer in Kharkiv.

I began to inquire what a place animated with prayer is exactly and why a baptism at the Goldberg Church would yield greater protection than at another church. I was told that if people come to a particular place and pour out their heartaches and hopes in prayer, they leave something of themselves behind. This
creates a special zone of “positive energy,” even “raging energy,” which can be felt by subsequent visitors. The powerful sensations such sites produce can burgeon into transformative experiences that result in healing, relief, visions, removal of hardship, fulfillment of requests, and other miraculous feats. The corporality of the experience such energy produces is taken as evidence of its truth. Places animated with prayer, such as the Goldberg Church, are “energized places where a connection to God exists,” and this, not the institution or a deity, is what makes for transformative experiences, including an especially protective baptism. In other words, when a place is understood to be animated with prayer, its materiality (aesthetics and objects) discharges affective energies that are transmitted to and among individuals in that place. Experiences involving energy, or bio-energetika, with its blend of science and religiosity, involves tangible manifestations of energy as a means to engender change. Stimulating the transformative powers of energy became particularly popular during the religious renaissance, as it was called, that occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Darieva 2018; Golovneva and Shmidt 2015; Lindquist 2005; Panchenko 2012).

The ritualized discursive act of praying over time is believed to have a sacralizing function. There is no defined sense as to how prayers should be performed or how many believers must pray before a place can be considered namolene, which introduces a pronounced element of indeterminacy to a specific status. Such a designation becomes an underlying assumption of a semiotic ideology when enough people recognize, replicate, and interpret their transformative experiences as coming from the power of the energy believed to reside in these places. The designation puts in place an upward spiral as people anticipate and imitate the experience of energy and ascribe a transformative power to it. By doing so, they perpetuate the cycle of validating the energy’s power and reaffirming the status of a place as “animated with prayer.” Part of the appeal of a place animated with prayer is that it demands little performative competence and no clerical intermediary (Kormina and Luehrmann 2017; Panchenko 2012). There is no prescribed ritual that must be performed there. Anyone can partake by innovating their own ritualized behaviors to appeal to otherworldly forces. Although places animated with prayer are sometimes natural spaces, such as springs or groves, if they are part of the built environment, they are frequently connected to a church or monastery. This is one of the many ways that official religious sites host a variety of worldly inspired, vernacular religious practices.

Once certain places are recognized as carrying this energy, they serve a mediating role, conjuring up the presence of energy that is so sought after for its transformative power. For many, the experience of visceral sensations of an unseen realm, where the presence of specific people is felt, regardless of whether
they are dead or alive or known or unknown, can be both calming and invigorating. Presence is relational and takes the here and now as a starting point. The problems that prompted a person to visit a place animated with prayer can suddenly seem surmountable against the vastness of an otherworldly realm. These experiences also introduce expansive dimensions of time. Feeling the energy from the depth of history and one’s own ancestral roots in a particular place can deliver comfort and empowerment. The transformative power of this energy stems from the connection it makes to the place and to others who have come before and animated it. When experiences of energy are frequently replicated at a specific place, an informal consensus emerges that declares the place animated by the faith-based practices of prior generations, evoking the original meaning of religion as a binding, connecting force.

The meaning of the designation is specific, but the type of place is open-ended, making for unlimited potential for spatial enchantment. One of the signs associated with a place animated with prayer is a deep mythological vision of a holy past. This is often projected onto a site where a church or monastery now stands with the assumption that pre-Christians worshiped there too, deepening the deposit of devotional energy and marking the site a “place of forces” (mistse syl/mesto sily in Ukrainian and Russian) (Golovneva and Schmidt 2015; Lesiv 2013, 118).

It is difficult to classify space as either secular or sacred. In Europe empty churches are increasingly converted into exhibit space, concert halls, and conference centers. They still retain something of a sacred atmosphere, what Birgit Meyer (2020, 25) calls a “sacred residue,” even after being reframed as sites of cultural heritage. These religious buildings might be repurposed to house worldly activities, but the spectrum of appropriate uses is limited in recognition of the building’s past. By contrast, many religious buildings during the Soviet period were repurposed for profane uses. The Goldberg Church in Kharkiv, for example, was turned into a warehouse from 1925 to 1941 before it was reopened during German occupation of the city. Many churches suffered a harsher fate. They were repurposed as dance clubs and swimming pools to destroy the sacred residue left by the devotions of past generations. Declaring the Goldberg Church (and others) animated with prayer in a post-Soviet era is a rhetorical device to purify decades of profane use or neglect. It reestablishes sacrality and reverence for the space by emphasizing the sincere worship of ancestors that occurred specifically in this place and induces forgetting of the decades of desecration.

The Goldberg Church was built from 1907 to 1915 by a Jewish convert to Orthodoxy when he became the head of the merchant guild. Local lore has it that, in gratitude, he gave the church to the city as a gift. The church’s actual name is Three Saints Church, but no one calls it that. Goldberg ran his paint and hardware business with two of his brothers, who also converted to Orthodoxy, per-
haps explaining the official name. Not only the church’s provenance from Jewish converts but also its aesthetic and architectural elements are read in such a way that it has earned the designation “animated with prayer” in the superlative.

As one enters the vestibule, floor-to-ceiling ornamentation of naïve folk renditions of sunflowers, cherries, and strawberries greet the visitor and create an unusually playful atmosphere. Painted by a Russian artist brought in expressly from St. Petersburg to create a uniquely Ukrainian folk motif, the vestibule sets the stage for the bright light that streams down from the multitude of windows in the cupola into an open hall. The mysticism of some Orthodox churches is created by the fact that they tend to be shadowy places with minimal natural light, filled with smoke from candles, incense, and human breath. This church breaks with those atmospheric and architectural conventions. In addition to the light, there are no central pillars, which makes for a single open space that was considered quite a feat of construction at the time (see figure 2.4). By local standards, this church is not particularly old, a quality usually attributed to namolennist'. However, its choir is famous for medieval Byzantine chants. Music, icons and decorative elements, are sensational forms that mediate practices, patterns of feeling, and contribute to

FIGURE 2.4. Inside the Goldberg Church of the UOC-MP in Kharkiv. This church is considered the place most animated with prayer in Kharkiv. Photo by the author.
making religious subjects (Meyer 2014). Such sensational forms, of which there are a plethora in Orthodoxy, govern the engagement of bodies in certain practices that can create experiences, even transformative experiences, of feeling the presence of energy. When such sensational forms are read as religious and are in constant circulation, they promote an affective atmosphere of religiosity by appealing to the senses and by catering to an underlying assumption of lived space as enchanted.

**The Goldberg Church**

Natalia is Just Orthodox to the extent that she drops in to this church to light candles but does not attend services. She is aware that the church is associated with the Moscow Patriarchate, but this plays no role in her decision. She describes in Russian the atmosphere of the church as one of peace and comfort that transports her into a state of calmness, and this is what motivates her to come:

> When you arrive in a namolennoe mesto, you realize right away that you are where you need to be. You feel a sense of comfort when you approach icons and feel God’s grace. Such a sensation. Such calmness (spokoistvo). You arrive, you make a request, and you understand that there is an answer. This is why you become calm. . . . That’s the kind of atmosphere that exists here . . . you feel some kind of awe and you just start to speak quietly. . . . In that atmosphere of calmness, you suddenly feel warm and you leave with these feelings. You just fall into that aura and you become calm. You feel there is some kind of protection around you and you gain strength from that.

She searches for her grandmother’s energy at places animated with prayer because she believes that her grandmother is the source of the protective powers that have positively shaped her life. Although this could be considered a form of ancestor worship, it mirrors official church doctrine that acknowledges the ability of saints to intercede on behalf of the living. At forty-eight, Natalia has been happily married for twenty-six years, as were her sister and mother. Her grandmother was the only person she knew in the Soviet period who admitted to being a believer. She attributes her family’s harmony to her grandmother’s intervention through prayer when she was alive and the work of her spirit today, and she understands the sensations of energy she experiences at this namolene miste as her presence. She comes anticipating and searching for these sensations as part of a process of “inner sense cultivation” so germane to religion and routinely experiences them (Luhrmann and Morgain 2012, 363).
The affective atmosphere of such places, created by light, music, visual stimulation, and other sensational forms, sets in motion a mimetic faculty as people attempt to imitate the experience of restorative energy that has been described to them (Gebauer and Wulf 1995, 26). Bodily sensations induced by the affective atmosphere confirm the existence of energies at places animated with prayer. In this way, the mimetic faculty predictably sets in motion an affective flow in which sensations lead to thoughts and actions and culminate in experiences. When there is an informal consensus that experiences of energy at a particular place fulfill requests and deliver the desired transformation, the place is considered namolene. Ultimately, then, becoming a place animated with prayer rests on the human ability to imitate a sought-after experience. This reflects Michael Taussig’s succinct definition of the mimetic faculty as “the nature that culture uses to create second nature” (1993: xiii). It becomes second nature for visitors, such as Natalia, to both anticipate and experience the energy of an affective atmosphere as it circulates around her.\(^7\)

Natalia enters the church with the expectation of experiencing certain sensations that will provide relief and otherwise make her feel calmer than when she entered. Using icons and candles, she has developed the ability to conjure up the felt presence of her grandmother. These experiences are increasingly filtered through a semiotic ideology that reaffirms an underlying assumption that some places are animated with otherworldly powers. These places are situated within political borders. By repeatedly visiting this place animated with prayer, Natalia’s connection and attachment deepens, not only to the dead who continue to positively influence her life but also to the Goldberg Church where these encounters occur. Dropping into this church is not a political act for her. It carries purely personal benefits. Because her visits root her in this place and connect her to ancestors who were also rooted there, she could be made to care about the fate of this church, which is situated in a region on the edge of a war zone. Her improvised and episodic, but nonetheless sincere, forms of religious practice are symbiotic to a religious institution that has become a pawn in geopolitical tensions. This heightens the importance of supporting secular powers that can deliver continued access to these otherworldly powers.

**An Animated Neighborhood**

The first time I visited the Goldberg Church I was with Viktoria, a historian of the city, and she wanted to introduce me to Yurii, a literary scholar. He has dedicated his professional life to promoting the writings of Yurii Shevelov, a linguist, essayist, and literary critic who lived in Kharkiv until he fled to the United
States during World War II. Yurii’s dedication to Shevelov reflects the sacred status of writers as beacons of truth, wisdom, and beauty and the pious devotion with which they are revered among members of the intelligentsia in this part of the world. Yurii’s house is filled with handwritten manuscripts and books. It amounts to a shrine to the writer’s life.

The Goldberg Church is in a private sector, a neighborhood of small, one-story homes without running water, encircled by wooden fences and connected by a maze of dirt roads. When Yurii asked what brought us to this neighborhood, I explained that I wanted to see the most *namolenoe miste* in Kharkiv. His grandfather had been a priest in the church, and many of the neighboring homes also belonged to clergy and are now inhabited by their descendants. For this reason, Yurii considers the entire neighborhood animated with prayer, and he has no intention of ever leaving it. He recited the church’s history in minute detail. When I mentioned that I found his account of great interest, he replied, “To some it is interesting, to others it is sad” (*summno* in Ukrainian). The church and its sordid fate during the Soviet period represented both the zenith of human accomplishment and the nadir of human madness, Yurii insisted.

He is not a believer and voraciously criticizes the Orthodox Church, with special wrath reserved for the Moscow Patriarchate. This does not stop him from being an Orthodox sympathizer and decorating his home with a variety of religious artifacts, including icons, prayer beads, and embroidered cloths. For him, these objects are a sign of his cultural heritage and indicate that he is, as he put it, a “patriot of his country.” These religious objects are a material manifestation of a semiotic ideology that Yurii uses to express his political views and his devotion to promoting his cultural heritage, which centers on literature and religion. When a historically dominant religious tradition informs aesthetic sensibilities, it can strengthen attachments to the religious among nonbelievers by allowing them to appropriate and secularize religious objects as art, cultural heritage, or political statements. Yurii’s religious artifacts trade on his underlying assumption of the organic integration of national identity and religiosity, giving an ideological meaning to these objects. When a certain faith tradition is a defining pillar of nationality and the institution that claims to be its protector is a political agent, promoting literature and displaying art can become vehicles to articulate political views and feed religiously infused subjectivities.

Illustrating how the political and historical context can change the semiotic ideology through which religious objects are perceived and experienced, the Soviet state vigorously tried to demystify the otherworldly powers of religious objects by claiming that they were mere art objects devoid of sacred residue. Later, in the 1990s, both the Ukrainian and Russian governments, in an effort to silence right-wing extremists, sought to prohibit the use of religious signs and sym-
bols to make political statements. Especially since the war began in 2014, both states encourage a nationalist reading of religious signs and have become more tolerant, and at times even encourage, the use of religion to make political statements. This illustrates the changing underlying assumptions as to what constitutes reverence, critique, and blasphemy.

Although Yurii is an atheist, he uses icons and other religious objects, like his beloved author, to express his ardent pro-Ukrainian political views in this Russified city in close proximity to a contested border. In surveying the decor in his home, I was reminded of Kathleen Stewart’s observation, “Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving” (2007, 15–16). These religious objects anchor his small home, with its Clerical origins, in the dramatic history of the Soviet Union’s promotion of militant atheism. They announce his allegiance to the Goldberg Church, even as he fiercely criticizes the UOC-MP for its subservience to an imperial state and his respect for his grandfather, even as he lambasts the clergy of today. These religious objects are meaningful to him because they express his personal biography and cultural heritage, his political views on national allegiance, and his commitment to dissidence to state powers.

As I went to shake his hand before leaving, Yurii chastised me for standing over the doorway. A long-standing and widely observed custom has it that spirits lurk beneath the threshold and might surface if greetings of arrival or farewell are expressed there. Avoiding the threshold has become second nature for him and he instinctively does it even when the custom trades on the ability of malevolent forces to inflict harm while hiding under a clerical home in a neighborhood animated with prayer. The mimetic practice of not shaking hands over the doorway is common, as are many other such folk customs. They, too, contribute to an affective atmosphere of religiosity because they trade on underlying assumptions of animated places and unseen, otherworldly forces capable of transforming a person’s life. They are not carriers of the political the same way as practices connected to institutional settings are. Nonetheless, such semiotic forms of vernacular religiosity are part of a web of practices that draw on a concatenation of otherworldly forces inhabiting the same space as humans. These practices have created second-nature otherworldly instincts in Yurii even as he insists he is an atheist.

**Living among the Saints**

Vernacular religious practices move with great ease from public to private spaces. Even the most intimate spaces of home can be the sites of vernacular religiosity.
Yurii might be a member of the intelligentsia, but similar instincts, impulses, and practices of religiosity can be observed among others of different social standing. For example, Raisa lived in many places in the USSR as the wife of a military officer before settling in Kharkiv, her husband’s hometown. She keeps icons of saints in her apartment to improve the aura and to extend the benefits of the ritual, practiced across the confessional spectrum, of having a member of the clergy bless a residence or a business to generate the kind of positive energy and protective powers attributed to a namolene mistse. This is another way in which institutional religion and vernacular religiosity symbiotically fuse in the home.

A room in Raisa’s apartment has a sacred corner with icons, pictures of saints, and an altar with holy water. She does not call her home a place animated by prayer, but she deliberately fills it with many of the same objects Yurii displayed. She does it to create an atmosphere of prayerfulness, whereas he did it to affirm the religiosity of his cultural heritage. Referring to the pictures of saints in her apartment, Raisa says, “They help us and I see the active help that is coming from the saints. Things don’t just happen like that. It is a blessing that is coming from them. Because of our sinfulness, we don’t see it, but our prayers extinguish the fire. This brings light into this room. This is what is called namolennost,” she says.

Just as Natalia searched for her grandmother’s energy at the Goldberg Church, Raisa enters this room, with its religious images and objects, to feel the presence of her daughter and son-in-law, who were expecting a child when they were killed in a motorcycle accident four years earlier. Using the saints to imagine them and feel their presence allows her to create a prayerful atmosphere that delivers blessings after this tragedy. The human capacity for imaginative, image-based, sensuous communication, whether from icons of saints or visions of the dead, provides an alternative means of apprehending and acting upon the world and making connections to others through experiences of presence. Individual ritualized behaviors create these experiences in a church, in a neighborhood, and at home, extending the ambient atmosphere of religiosity from official religious buildings to everyday life in public as well as privatized spaces. Prayerful and secular places, and the objects in them, blend into a singular atmosphere of religiosity.

Maria finds namolene energy in the home of others. She was born into a non-practicing Orthodox family but was told that she was christened in secret by her grandmother as a child. In the last few years, following the lead of her mother and father, she began attending a Protestant church in Kharkiv. She has stopped short of being christened again but is otherwise an active participant in her new church’s activities. When asked if she had experienced a place animated by prayer, she named two: the Svitohirsk Lavra in Donetsk and the apartment where her weekly prayer group meets. She, like most, is unclear as to what ex-
actively makes a place namolene. But for her the apartment qualifies. “You come into this apartment, and you feel right away an atmosphere of kindness, of warmth,” she explains. “That’s why I think that this phenomenon of places animated by prayer really exists. There is some kind of special energy that exists in this apartment.” What the apartment and the monastery have in common for her is that she goes to both places with the goal of getting to know God and of getting to know herself. “These are the two best sacred places I know,” she adds. Yet they are judged namolene by entirely different criteria. One is prayerful because it is a historically valuable lavra, the highest distinction of sacredness for an Orthodox monastery. The apartment is namolene because of the tenor of exchanges that occur there and the relationships that form, which give this place its own distinctive aura. In both places, certain energy exists that makes the prayer of others palpable and meaningful to her.

The prevalence of blending of institutional religion with self-designed forms of spirituality is part of a larger global trend (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The affect a material setting generates can act as a bridge, linking sensations to emotional knowledge to reactions. This prompts those who are in this space to think, act, and feel in particular ways, often with such swift flow that the shift from feeling to thinking barely registers. As such, affect returns us to a holistic perspective that refuses to isolate aspects of lived experiences, whether they occur in public or private spaces, from the thoughts and reactions that both trigger and emerge from them.

Vernacular religious practices create these experiences in private, intimate places, such as homes, and in public places, such as churches and neighborhoods. Making extra-institutional places sacred, or animated by prayer, reflects the “work of the imagination,” as Appadurai (1996) terms it, because it engages theogies and utopian aspirations for kindness, warmth, and hope through the mundane, routine experiences of everyday religiosity.

An atmosphere depends on presence. Presence also matters when considering how a person comes to feel involved and connected to others. Tanya Luhrmann (2020) has made a significant contribution to our understanding of how individuals learn to feel the presence of God and otherworldly forces. The crux of her argument is that people do not worship because they believe. Rather, they believe because they worship. Processes of real-making allow individuals to feel the presence of spirits, energies, and the like and affirms that it is possible to form a relationship with otherworldly forces, and that they are powerful and capable of influencing lives. Spirits are made real through communal experiences in which people hear stories and learn techniques that help them feel and then recognize sensations as the presence of otherworldly forces manifest as God, the dead, and so on. The repeated practice of conjuring up that presence changes
the way people experience their own inner worlds, which is why engaging in these practices is often transformative. When communal experiences are interpreted through a faith frame, this allows a person to anticipate, imitate, and eventually habituate spiritual experiences through the use of cognitive strategies to see and feel the presence of invisible others.

The idiosyncratic elements of vernacular religious practice I have observed involve less of a cognitive approach characterized by learned techniques. Rather, they depend more on an imitation of techniques useful to stimulate visceral, sensual experiences through the use of yearnings, memories, dreams, and other sensory registers to generate embodied experiences. Nonetheless, Luhrmann’s overall point that “kindling” the presence of otherworldly forces, through vernacular religious practices or some other means, leads to real-making, regardless of whether this is understood as the presence of the dead, the existence of a soul, the purifying experience of bathing in a sacred spring, and so on.

Relationships with higher powers explain why, during the Soviet era, in particular, members of underground religious communities, having had meaningful spiritual experiences that created relationships with otherworldly forces and with other community members, were motivated to participate in communal life even though it frequently meant risking humiliation, sometimes even on a daily basis, and the ever-present threat of imprisonment and death. \(^\text{10}\) This also helps to explain why Alena, Natalia, and Raisa use a church, its candles, icons, and incense to maintain an ongoing relationship with dead relatives and keep them present in their lives. The material culture and aesthetics of Orthodoxy are the means they use to provoke embodied experiences that they understand to be the presence of their kin. These experiences color lifeworlds and illustrate how the public sphere of a particular historical moment and a person’s most intimate feelings can be mutually constituting. The religious imagination offers the added ability to present a vision of the future and agents in the form of higher forces that are capable of realizing it.

**Pilgrimages to Sacred Places**

In addition to visiting places animated with prayer, many Just Orthodox participate in pilgrimages. Given the war, the keen interest in the granting of the *tomos*, and the support for a local church, I was curious how the connection to the Moscow Patriarchate might affect, if at all, enthusiasm for monastic visits when the monastery was part of the UOC-MP. We saw that allegiances to the Goldberg Church remained steadfast for reasons that had nothing to do with jurisdiction. I visited one of the most coveted properties of the UOC-MP, the
Pochaiv Monastery, as part of a pilgrimage group. In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet-era practice of forcibly transferring church buildings that were not destroyed to the Russian Orthodox Church had already generated much conflict on the national, and especially local levels, after attempts were made in the final years of the Soviet Union to re-transfer them back (Naumescu 2008). Since that time, fierce disputes have raged over the return, the possibility of return, or denial of the return of churches. Deciding on the fate of a highly coveted UOC-MP monastery located in European-oriented, nationalist-leaning Western Ukraine during armed combat with Russian-backed forces was a formidable task to even consider. Now that there is an Orthodox Church of Ukraine the issue of transfer, like a phantom, haunts those discussions.

Before the war broke out, pilgrimages ignored political borders and transported Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians to shared sacred sites all over the former USSR and even around the world. Jeanne Kormina characterizes this widespread form of religious practice as “nomadic religiosity” because it forms “temporary communities of practice” on the move (2018, 144). Orthodox clergy lament that so many prefer such travel to attending a liturgy. A veritable religious tourism industry, sponsored by denominations, parishes, and purely commercial travel agencies, offers a mix of travel catering to pious devotion, self-help, vacationing voyeurism, and spa-like cleansing experiences for the deeply devout and curious alike.

The war has remade this nomadism as travel from Ukraine to Russia has all but halted, and movement in the other direction has significantly fallen off. This has not changed the number of pilgrims to the Pochaiv Monastery. The war has simply changed where the pilgrims come from. Russians and Belarusians might travel to Ukraine in far fewer numbers, but Ukrainians do not leave, so for the monastery it is business as usual.

The hotel at the Pochaiv Monastery has 1,000 beds, and it was booked over capacity on the winter days in February 2017 that I was there. Pilgrimage agencies offer convenient, two-day trips that include visits to three monasteries with miracle-working icons, a cemetery, and a sacred spring. The fee, at the time equivalent to US$20, covers transportation, modest accommodation, and most meals. (Previously, it had been less than one-third this price, so this seems expensive to most Ukrainians.) A text message instructed us to “meet at the tank.” An old Soviet war memorial featured wilted World War II-era weaponry, including a tank, and faded images of destroyed hero cities. As I headed toward the tank at 6:45 a.m., I could see in the distance a woman wearing a long black skirt and a scarf covering her head and hair, attire that was expected of women at monasteries. Her name was Valentyna, and she distinguished herself from all the other participants in the pilgrimage group because she observes the fasts,
regularly takes communion, and generally has reverence for the institution. This would be her fifth or sixth trip to Pochaiv. She could not remember exactly. She had also been to numerous other monasteries and was planning another pilgrimage for the following week. At sixty-three, she has time to travel. She retired three years earlier from her “man’s job,” as she called it, as an electrical engineer at a construction firm in Kharkiv. She is highly educated, speaks English, and has traveled extensively throughout Europe.

As we settled into a small van, just barely fitting all the bags, she peered out at me over her gold-rimmed glasses, with several gold teeth glimmering to match, and told me how she prefers to travel by herself. “Why don’t you travel alone to Pochaiv then?” I asked. “Because to go alone would be tourism,” Valentyna responded. “You would travel about the monastery with people of different faiths for whom the monastery would have other meanings, probably as just a cultural and historic landmark.” She assumed, probably correctly, that, excepting myself, the others in the group, even those who had signed up through a travel agency, still wanted and perhaps even yearned to experience the monastery’s affective atmosphere. This is why they chose to form a temporary group of shared needs and come to the monastery as pilgrims, not tourists.

The other women participated for various reasons. Tatiana, a forty-one-year-old lawyer who lives in Kharkiv, explained that while she was divorcing her husband, she went through a difficult period and often felt poorly. The place where she found the most comfort was on a bench at the St. Pokrovskyi Monastery in Kharkiv. She explained, “I would just sit on that bench. I didn’t even go into the church. I don’t know why I did that. I just wanted to sit there. Maybe because there really was some kind of energy there. I felt it but I can’t explain it.” The habit of going to this bench when experiencing difficulties meant that the monastery was an integral part of her everyday life. A bench became the point of access to the therapeutic qualities of being near saints, angels, and other supernatural forces. This experience of feeling the atmosphere of place by finding comfort and energy on a bench inspired her to travel to other monasteries. After she married for a second time and was feeling better, she first traveled with a friend to Crimea in 2013, before the peninsula was annexed to Russia, to visit a spring at a women’s monastery.

Some participants in this pilgrimage were vacationing with a purpose, whereas the others came for redress. We were thirteen women and one man, who was the thirty-four-year-old son of one of the women. He was celebrating his birthday on this journey, and his mother had gifted him the pilgrimage. At one point, his mother offered everyone wine and sweets to celebrate her son. There was also a mother-daughter pair who had registered through a travel agency, and two well-heeled young women who were clearly friends. They wore fur coats, had
perfectly manicured fingernails, and designer handbags. Yet they showed up without skirts, scarves to cover their heads, or long shirts for bathing in the sacred spring. The tour guide, prepared for pilgrim-tourists who know little of monastic life, had an extra skirt, which meant that only one of the women was obliged to wrap a scarf around her legs as a makeshift skirt to be in keeping with the monastery’s dress prescriptions for women. All six of these pilgrims reserved double rooms in the monastery hotel to enhance their bonding experiences, whereas everyone else slept in open rooms that held upwards of ten beds each. They were vacationing with a purpose; they wanted to take advantage of the blessings that a monastery could deliver and admire the beautiful icons and churches, but they also wanted to enjoy themselves.

The other women had clearly come to find relief from some form of woe that had beset them. Many were in their late twenties or early thirties, an age where two types of difficulties can set in: either they have no partner, or their partner is problematic. Some want children and others want their children to be healthy. These women kept to themselves and were quiet to the point of being somber. Their need to feel the therapeutic, healing energy seemed more urgent. They were shouldering the gendered responsibility of caring for the well-being of their families. One of them, Zhanna, was on her third pilgrimage to Pochaiv. She came to pray for the health of her husband, who for three months prior had visited doctors to heal a hacking cough. She thought he had walking pneumonia, but no medicine seemed to help. One week earlier he left for Israel to receive medical treatment there, and Zhanna left for Pochaiv to put in prayer requests for the monks and nuns to pray, with their learned piety, for his recovery. Each was doing their part to restore his health.

Once we arrived at the monastery, a seminarian gave us a tour. Aware that many people come to the monastery for its affective powers, he warned against expecting the aura or magic of the monastery to heal. He countered with appeals to turn off the television. He wanted us to read, go to adult Sunday school, and study the symbolism of the liturgy. Much like the British Bible Society, he wanted us to learn and for there to be a conscious, informed aspect to our religious experiences. Orthodox church services are sung in Church Slavonic, a liturgical language, which, like a Latin mass, is not readily comprehensible to most. Although a sacred language is meant to be a mystical vehicle to a religious experience, it frequently has the opposite effect, making parishioners passive bystanders. Knowledge, the seminarian countered, is the best insurance against boredom during long services. It would help us, he insisted, to retain a focus on the state of our eternal soul. How do we know we have a soul, he rhetorically asked? Because it hurts, the women answered in unison. Fully prepared for the response, he nodded in agreement. This, I understood, was the purpose of the
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trip: to reduce the pain of an aching soul, the reasons for which were as varied as there were visitors.

A pilgrimage is an efficient means to do so. A monastery offers many possibilities for accessing otherworldly powers through places and things to alleviate suffering. Pilgrims visit the various churches and chapels that dot the monastery grounds on their own and can, if they choose, participate in formal rituals such as confession, communion, and late night and crack of dawn liturgies. One can appeal to God, the saints, elders, monks, and ancestors using sacred spring water, holy water, miracle-working icons, relics, prayer requests, and candles. The shops on the monastery grounds are filled with crosses, books, icons, and a plethora of other religious objects to purchase and take home, as well as bread, honey, tea, and other consumables made by the monks. Each of these material things mediates the religious experience by helping to generate a sense of presence by delivering, in this case, protective or healing energy. Purchasing goods also allows for the recreation of the energy and atmosphere of the monastery elsewhere.

FIGURE 2.5. Many pilgrimages include the purifying experience of bathing in a sacred spring. Precisely because this is so widely practiced, a public park in Kharkiv also includes a sacred spring for bathing, replete with Eastern Christian symbolism, in this otherwise public secular space. Photo by the author.
Tetiana was one of the women who brought a fur coat but none of the other requisite clothing. Over the course of the pilgrimage, she purchased books on healing children and put in numerous prayer requests for good health and the dead. A pilgrim can order prayers to be said by the monks. When the monks apply their learned piety in supplications, the belief is that those prayers will be more effective. This brings the UOC-MP monastery and the monks who live there into the networks of care and responsibility for loved ones that women primarily shoulder (Luehrmann and Kormina 2017, 7). It becomes a collective effort between Tetiana, the caring mother, and the erudite monks to help heal her children. The cost of requesting prayers is based on the number of names the monks are asked to pray for. While recording each prayer request, the monk inquired: “Are they all Orthodox? Of the Moscow Patriarchate?” She was the only member of the group who responded that her family members were not believers, which meant she had to pay more. All others automatically responded in the affirmative. “Yes, they are all believers and yes, of course, they are of the Moscow Patriarchate.” Privately, however, many spoke differently. Zhanna emphatically told me that she goes to whichever church she wants and that it was none of the monk’s business.

Just as the monk seemed to have no difficulty asserting that the Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was the only True Orthodox Church, making the other Ukrainian churches apostate schismatics in spiritual sin and error, the women lied straight to his face with no regret. They told him what he expected to hear so that he would give them what they wanted, reflecting the transactional social nature of religiosity. These women accept the higher authority and greater proximity to the divine that the monks of Pochaiv have. Their willingness to involve them in caring for their families has little to do with the formal affiliation the monastery has to the UOC-MP. They even resent this suggestion.

The duplicitousness of saying one thing and doing another is illustrative of consumerist attitudes toward spiritual consumption and the deep-seated mistrust and cynicism that fuels institutional disaffection and anticlericalism, especially among the Just Orthodox. Such critical attitudes do not diminish the desire for otherworldly help to solve problems in the here and now. They do, however, inspire those in need to make minimal commitments and only agree to participate in temporary communities, such as this pilgrimage, as a forum preferable to membership in a parish. Pilgrimage reflects both the attraction of the monastery as a privileged place and monks as privileged people to access otherworldly energy. It is also a means to live a Just Orthodox commitment to a faith tradition. Pilgrims do not have to choose a parish, and by extension a single denomination. Therefore, there is no risk of receiving condemnation for choosing the wrong church.
Otherworldly Powers of the Land

This pilgrimage, like many others, culminated with the purifying experience of immersion in a sacred spring. This was the highlight of the trip, and everyone cast aside the possibility of falling ill and participated except for the pious pilgrim Valentyna and myself. The two of us simply could not make that leap of faith. The water in February was a near-freezing 2 degrees Celsius (35.6°F), and the surrounding snow and ice made it seem even colder. There were two options for immersion: a gender-segregated covered area or an open pool (see figure 2.6). Immersion was conducted under the guidance of Marina, the tour guide, who doubled as a lay expert on the ritual. After Tetiana, the woman who admitted that her family members were nonbelievers, immersed herself in the spring, as promised by Marina, she felt a certain “lightness.” She said that she suddenly understood why christenings involve water. “At first,” she said, “the spirit was so heavy that I could hardly breathe. And then lightness. Marina said to me, ‘Do you see how light you feel? It is true! You have taken the bad out of yourself.’ I believe it. Maybe because I am the kind of person who believes things. I am not a skeptic. I accept this on faith.”

The sensations delivered by immersion in freezing waters at a sacred spring were enough to transform her self-perceptions and validate the trip. She had come on this pilgrimage with a goal in mind. Now that the bad had been removed, she could return to her daily life with that knowledge. On the bus back to Kyiv she was speaking of her next trip to a sacred spring. Discussions focused on which monasteries are accessible given the roadblocks and checkpoints the war has imposed. Valentyna mentioned that when she is unable to go on pilgrimage, a public park in Kharkiv offers the possibility of an immersion experience. An iconostasis-like triad of icon-like images of saints stands before a cross-shaped pool filled with spring water that doctors claim is the purest water in Kharkiv. This vernacular version of a religious ritual practiced in secular public space is uncontroversial. Because such vernacular religious practices are meaningful and common, they are even incorporated into a public park, which contributes to an affective atmosphere of religiosity (see figure 2.5).

Inbetween Believers and Nonbelievers

The behavior of Just Orthodox reveal several key factors to explain why an atmosphere of religiosity emerges in Ukraine and why it becomes affective, but not in other societies with a historically and culturally dominant faith tradition. The Bible Society of England and Wales, for example, tries to create ambient faith,
which centers on shared beliefs that draw on textual and clerical authority upheld by an institution. The work of learning and applying biblical teachings is difficult. Susan Friend Harding (2001) and Tanya Luhrmann (2012) have analyzed the extensive efforts believers make to feel the presence of God among Baptists and Charismatic Pentecostals, respectively. The same is true for Eastern Christian believers. Naumescu’s (2019) study of Syrian Oriental Orthodox in Kerala, India, for example, reveals the taxing nature of learning biblical teachings, mastering

**FIGURE 2.6.** Bathing in the Sacred Spring. Some people come on their own and others as part of a pilgrimage group. This is the gender-segregated, covered area for bathing. There is also an open-air area so that families can bathe together in the spring. The spring pool is surrounded by large icon-like images and short citations from the bible. Photo by the author.
the art of prayer, and the elaborate recitation contests that exist to encourage this rigor. Coptic Christians in Egypt expend enormous efforts to teach how to select an appropriate saint to pray to (Heo 2018). Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014) use their ethnographic research among Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox in Syria and Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia to argue that Orthodox Christianities form religious worlds that center on correctness (the “ortho” in orthodoxy). When confronted with moral imperfection, they defer to scriptural, oral, and aesthetic practices to form a world “that rests on an authorizing tradition” to rigorously determine correct behavior.

I share the goal of trying to understand the religious world a confession can create and how the presence of invisible others can be made real. Yet, the Just Orthodox offer several important interventions. First, those who self-describe as Just Orthodox actively seek to escape the confines of an authorizing tradition and the obligation of correctness because it carries the vulnerability of incessant judgment. They prefer a greater degree of agency and self-reliance in determining what is correct.

Second, their religiosity exists in relation to an authorizing tradition, rather than resting on it. They reject denominational allegiance, but not the authorizing tradition on which it is based. Their emotive, embodied vernacular practices, such as pilgrimages to sacred sites, venerating icons, and immersion in sacred springs, use the authorizing tradition to validate spiritualized practices that respond to individual needs and desires. These forms of vernacular religiosity can be practiced at any time and at a site of one’s own choosing. Yet they are symbiotic to institutionalized religion, which helps make the presence of God, spirits, energies, and so on real because the institution and the tradition it embodies provides the “faith frame,” or interpretive framework, that primes individuals for an embodied experience to be understood in transcendent terms (Luhrmann 2020, 1–20).

This means that vernacular religious practices exist between institutional sites (churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and the like) and individually chosen sites (at home, in a neighborhood, or on a bench). This allows the Just Orthodox to draw on institutional validation and individual improvisation as needed to “kindle the presence of invisible others,” however they might be understood (Luhrmann 2020). These practices thrive because they do not need to form a stable community or make moral judgments, although they often do. Communities of Just Orthodox form bonds that exist as needed on a sliding communal scale from the familial, local, national, to transnational. These communities can be as temporary or as permanent as they need to be. Vernacular religious practices do not require institutional affirmation, although they benefit from it. This gives these practices considerable flexibility, tenacity, and validity, which is why
they endure. These are the key differences that distinguish the Just Orthodox from pious, devout Orthodox believers and from others who practice forms of vernacular religiosity that also involve energy and aura and could be called New Age, pagan, or superstition.

Third, although the informality of these practices is born of institutional disaffection and anticlericalism, rather than attempting to roll back secularism, vernacular religiosity integrates worldliness and institutional religion and does not challenge either (Bowen 2008; Engelke 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006). Secularism can be used to protect and accommodate religious minorities in a religiously plural society and to prevent a confessionalized public sphere from emerging (Asad 2003, 182–83). Here we have a braiding, a symbiotic blending, of individualized religiosity, institutional forms of an Eastern Christian faith tradition, and secular impulses. A form of syncretic secularism results, which simultaneously allows for processes of secularization and sacralization to unfold in public space by meshing seemingly opposed inclinations and desires in novel re-conceptualizations of religiosity (Wanner 2014, 435). This obscures the distinctions separating the religious from the secular and the religious from the political, and renders futile efforts to reinforce the barriers that separate them. In this way, religion goes public and becomes a malleable political tool as a form of “ethno­doxy,” as Karpov, Lisovskaya, and Barry (2012) call it, meaning a vehicle to closely integrate religion, cultural heritage, and belonging. Integrating religion into a collective and individual sense of self paves the way for religious symbolism to be integrated into public parks, metro decor, corporate headquarters, and residential buildings. Sometimes the state spearheads the process of blending religion into national heritage. Other times it is religious groups themselves.12 When practices naturalize religion as an organic social fact and normativize the presence of the transcendent, religion is able to hide in plain sight.

Finally, having forgone the insistence on correctness and replaced it with forms of individually tailored, somewhat improvised practices, the ensuing fracturing opens up greater possibilities to instrumentalize Orthodoxy politically. By forgoing the hard work of learning approved techniques to evoke the presence of otherworldly forces in favor of practices that are personalized and more readily available, an engagement in religiosity results that draws on institutionalized religion, however tenuously, and assimilates it into everyday life. Therefore, cultivating the “dangerous passions” of religious zeal are not always the most effective means to deliver the power to politically persuade, as illustrated by Michael Billig’s (1995) study of “banal nationalism.” Daily experiences of circulating in an affective atmosphere of religiosity can forge attachments that prime people to see themselves as Orthodox, and to act and react in certain ways because they share understandings and moral attitudes regarding relatedness and attachments to
certain places. This can render the fates and fortunes of religious institutions of vital importance to the Just Orthodox and even to nonbelievers.

**How the Political Gets into the Person**

To analyze how an affective atmosphere of religiosity can become politically useful, let us consider two analogous cases that directly illustrate how atmospheres and reading signs in public space can be connected to the cultivation of political proclivities. In the United States, pressure is mounting to remove Confederate iconography from public space. Growing numbers of people identify Confederate symbols as keeping racial hierarchies alive by allowing continued tolerance, if not endorsement, of the racial inequalities the Confederacy sanctioned. Monuments communicate shared values and serve as sites to gather to reaffirm them. One month after the white supremacist Dylann Roof tried to start a race war by killing nine African American parishioners in a church in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015, the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina State House, the last southern house to fly this flag. In the summer of 2020, following outrage over the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, thirty-eight Confederate monuments were removed, five were relocated, and sixteen public parks and schools were renamed. These actions were taken in response to broad public recognition that ambient iconography in public space functions as a succinct yet powerful statement of values that serve to normativize racial hierarchies and discriminatory behaviors. It often becomes politically untenable to maintain signs that are not read, and therefore not acted upon, in a unified fashion. The accelerating efforts to remove Confederate symbolism from public space, and to question the moral message of certain monuments, suggest that there is growing recognition in the United States that perceiving certain signs leads to an atmosphere of racism, to harboring “unthought thoughts” (Pile 2010,12), and creating prereflexive forms of experience, all of which feed political behaviors.

In a parallel situation, the Ukrainian parliament banned the display of communist and Nazi symbolism in public space in 2015. Decommunization laws mandate the removal of monuments, holidays, and commemorative events that honor communist historical figures and communist ideals. They also bar the naming of streets, towns, cities, and other public sites that could be construed as communist. Law 2558, “On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propagation of Their Symbols,” was in the making prior to the Maidan protests, but after the war broke out, it was fast-tracked into implementation.
This remake of public space was bundled with other efforts to alter the political values and political behavior of Ukrainian voters. Provisions within the same legislation made punishable the denial of the criminal nature of the “communist totalitarian regime of 1917–1991.” Decommunization allowed for the opening of former NKVD-KGB secret police archives and for public recognition of anyone who fought in any capacity for Ukrainian independence. Terminology, such as the Great Patriotic War, was rejected in favor of European conventions of referring to World War II, using European commemorative dates for the war’s end (May 8, not May 9), and reframing Victory Day as Day of National Remembrance and Reconciliation. Some historians and public figures objected, arguing that cleansing the public sphere of the Soviet past deceives the citizenry. It suggests change has occurred in the thinking and practices of governing officials and masks the prospect that it has not.15

The same government authorities who backed the creation of the OCU offered an ethical argument to justify this purge of public space. They claimed that it provides justice to the victims of communist oppression. Left unsaid was that after weaponizing religion to create distance from the ROC, this purge of communist symbolism is a parallel process of weaponizing history. New signs in public space can potentially remake understandings of historical experience that hinge less on the greatness of Soviet victory during the Great Patriotic War and more on the ongoing Ukrainian national struggle from colonial oppression. Recasting communist signs in the public sphere remakes ethical and political orientations. In sum, in a pragmatic sense, removing or adding iconography shapes the assumptions and presuppositions that inform political inclinations and erases or creates focal points to protest or promote alternatives to the status quo.

When religious signs, weighted with otherworldly presence, circulate with great frequency in the aesthetics of the built environment or in popular vernacular practices, they become one of the factors that makes a nonbelieving, nonpracticing person Just Orthodox. They eviscerate any clear distinction between an individual and the environment and make the impersonal qualities of aesthetic and architectural elements and one’s own feelings and practices quite intimate. Brennan asserts, “While its wellsprings are social, the transmission of affect is deeply physical in its effects. It is moreover the key to the social and scientific understanding of what have hitherto been theological mysteries” (2004, 23).

When people circulate in affectively charged places and experience sensations or energy as theological mysteries, it is because they understand these sensations as a form of presence. Feeling the presence of dead children or grandparents can be interpreted as evidence of an otherworldly realm or divine power. The relevance of such experiences depends on the underlying assumptions used to interpret them because this is what guides thought and behavior. When there is
widespread belief that particular places generate such experiences, another layer is added. These sites become “moody force fields” as spaces of intensity, such as the Goldberg Church and its surrounding neighborhood and the venerated Pochaiv Monastery and its nearby springs. These places are known to spark embodied experiences in the form of sensations (Stephens 2015, 2). When enough people have the experience, for example, of lighting a candle or submerging themselves in a sacred spring and the intended result materializes, then these practices, along with the sites where they occur, begin to produce an affective atmosphere.

Place-making is a cultural mechanism by which everyday lived experiences can make a place sacred. When this sacrality is recognized as one’s own and yet shared with others, it can breed attachments and feelings of belonging, both of which have the potential to escalate into political inclinations and even political attitudes and actions. Orthodoxy is elastic and porous enough to accommodate nonbelievers, doubters, and critics because of its historic conceptualization of an organic assemblage unifying a church with a people in a particular place, usually a nation-state. This forms the basis of religious identity for people who live in that place that is understood to be inherited, eternal, and transcendent. Regardless of whether or how one believes or practices, and how this measures up to an authorizing tradition, any East Slav can claim to be Orthodox and part of its religious world.

Each time someone such as Tetiana, Zhanna, or Valentyna has a transformative experience at a sacred place, they build an attachment to that place and to the imagined others whose faith made it sacred to begin with. That attachment, be it to a UOC-MP monastery or another religiously consecrated site, breeds a will to keep that place accessible. When place-based forms of vernacular practice are politicized by political, cultural, and ecclesiastical leaders, an attachment to place can be understood in terms of state sovereignty. Once place-based sensational forms are perceived and experienced through a semiotic ideology, leading to ethical or political judgments informing behavior, then the affective atmosphere of religiosity can become a political resource capable of mobilizing believers and nonbelievers alike. Given the meaningfulness of the transformative experiences that occur at these places through vernacular religious practices, allegiances turn to the state powers that can secure ongoing access to places with otherworldly powers. When people mobilize to act collectively, as they did during the Maidan protests, an affective atmosphere becomes a facet of politics. It transmits public feelings that sustain a collective and put people “in the mood” to agitate for change. This is vitally important for the success of any political action or social movement. Regardless of how valid a critique of power or feasible the desired change, collective action is simply not possible unless people are in the mood to pursue it, as Jonathan Flatley (2008) asserts.
This is where religiosity is key to shaping the intersubjective relationship between a particular historical context and the sentiments that color it. Numerous theoreticians have alluded to the importance of “mood” in slightly different terms. Clifford Geertz famously characterized religion in terms of the “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” it creates (1973, 90). Raymond Williams referred to “structures of feeling” to understand the dynamics of socially shared emotional experiences that contain a measure of “the emergent,” of something that has not yet happened (1977). Benedict Anderson notes (2006) the feelings of “deep horizontal comradeship” that characterize the relations among people of a nation. In each of these instances, we are talking about affect that spurs sensorial, emotional experiences and generates knowledge, albeit often unspoken. An atmosphere colors how this process unfolds and the sensations and experiences that emerge, making these experiences pregnant with possibility.

When vernacular religious practices occur at certain sites that are understood as religious because the experiences that occur there connect an individual to an otherworldly realm, then an affective atmosphere of religiosity at these sites begins to take root. The affective qualities of such places provoke “visceral shifts in the background habits and postures of a body” (Anderson 2006, 737) once their otherworldly capacities are recognized. Having considered how vernacular religious practices and iconography in public space contribute to affective atmosphere that has political implications, we now turn to an unexpected historic event, the Maidan protests, that unleashed this potential.