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Paper Icons and Fasting Bodies: The Esthetic Formations of Serbian Orthodoxy

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic data from central Serbia, the article uses the concept of “esthetic formations” to consider how divergent expressions of Orthodox Christianity intersect in postsocialist space. The majority of Serbs identify as “Orthodox” and Orthodox imagery pervades the public sphere—but only a minority engage concertedly with liturgical practice. Through their regular fasting and churchgoing such self-identifying “believers” embody an Orthodox esthetic which is at once connected to—and yet distinct from—the overarching Orthodox cultural context. Whilst for churchgoers such embodiment represents sincerity and commitment, for many others it represents fanaticism and excessive piety. Overall, the article makes two claims. First, that “esthetic formations” are not internally rigid and that esthetics can divide as much as they unite. Second, that embodied esthetics allow different actors to articulate different moral claims about what constitutes sincere Orthodox practice.

Keywords: esthetics, esthetic formations, postsocialism, Orthodox Christianity, fasting, Serbia

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Introduction

At the news kiosks which characterize street corners across Serbia one can often see small paper icons gummed to the front pages of the tabloid newspapers. They are offered as free “gifts,” with the saints depicted generally corresponding to the saint’s day of the publication date. At other times of the year the tabloids give away “consecrated” crosses and pendants, stickers for decorating Easter eggs or, on the major patron saint’s days (*slava*), cheaply-printed pamphlets with the relevant hagiography, and reminders about traditional observances and customs. In 2017, a few days before the beginning of the Nativity Fast, *Politika*, the national daily newspaper, offered a special, lavishly illustrated supplement—*Recipes from Hilandar Monastery*—filled with monastic recipes and fasting suggestions.¹ The paper also promised its readers a free “church calendar” for the upcoming year, which duly appeared on 8th January 2018, affixed to the first page. And, as well as *Pravoslavlje*, the official bimonthly publication of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), at the same kiosks one can purchase glossy magazines with titles such as *The Miracles of Orthodoxy* or *Our Wonderworking Monasteries*.

The print media is just one of the ways in which an Orthodox Christian aesthetic has manifested itself in the Serbian public sphere since the fall of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s. “Religion” is now “present at every step” notes the anthropologist Lidija Radulović at the beginning of her book on religious “revitalization” in Serbia (2012, 5). Or, more critically—under a subsection headed “Drowning in Orthodoxy”—Miroslava Malešević argues that “everything around us is an image of an all-encompassing transformation of the entire society into an Orthodox society” (2006, 116). Certainly, since the 1990s there has been widespread re-identification with Orthodox Christian practices such as baptisms, church weddings, and the observance of patron saint days (see Radosavljević-Ćiparizović 2006). And scholars have written extensively about the apparent “desecularization” of Serbian society and the increasing (potentially excessive) power and presence of the SOC in public life (see, for instance, Ahtik 2004; Aleksov 2008; Blagojević 2008; Subotić 2019; Vukomanović 2008). However, despite the socially acceptable Orthodox aesthetic pervading public space, only a relative minority engage with Orthodox liturgical practice and teachings in a sustained, committed way—an observation which is generally true of other Orthodox countries (Agadjanian and Roudometof 2005, 14–15).

Drawing on ethnographic data from the central Serbian town of Kraljevo, this article explores the intersection between the widespread Orthodox Christian imagery of the Serbian public sphere, the nominal Orthodoxy of much of the population, and the concerted liturgical practice of a small minority.² Following other anthropological work which has successfully considered Orthodox Christianity from a sensory, material perspective (Carroll 2018; Dubisch 1995; Hanganu 2010;

Luehrmann 2018b), I approach the Serbian data through the prism of esthetics. In this context, “esthetics” implies far more than just visual beauty. As in Timothy Carroll’s reading of Jeremy Coote, I understand esthetics as also having a kinetic, oral, and aural dimension and being “centrally linked to what people do and how this is done” (2017, 357). In particular, I engage with Birgit Meyer’s (2009) concept of “esthetic formations” to explore how varying perceptions of Orthodox imagery and practice afford people overlapping and conflicting notions of ethnic and spiritual belonging. Whilst I am not the first to think of Orthodox Christianity as an “esthetic formation” (see Luehrmann 2018a, 16–19), my purpose here is to explore how such Orthodox esthetic formations are not necessarily homogenous entities but may be riven by internal tensions. Through conceiving of fasting and church-centric practice as a form of “esthetic embodiment” (Mascia-Lees 2011) I argue that, in central Serbia, just as “esthetics” brings people into relation, so too it provides the grounds for making distinctions.³

Situating Serbian Orthodoxy

My arguments require some historical and ethnographic context. Following the Second World War, Marshal Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia construed religion as an obstruction to human progress, and sought to impose a new ideology of “Brotherhood and Unity” on the constituent republics. Religious communities were granted certain rights, but overt displays of piety were inadvisable, and religious expression was categorically excluded from the military and educational spheres.

However, as secular Yugoslavia weakened in the late 1980s and 1990s, the once marginalized SOC began to reassert its voice and authority (for historical overviews see Radić 2000; Radić and Vukomanović 2014). Rejuvenated, the Church became an effective political operator (see Perica 2002, 123–132), and represented a newly credible expression of Serbianness. In under twenty years Serbia transformed from being a “highly secular country” to a society where an increasing number of people identified as religious, and where the Church had taken a prominent public role (Radić and Vukomanović 2014, 192). Looked at historically, the historian Bojan Aleksov has argued, the SOC “has never before experienced such power and independence” as it does today (2010, 176).

In present-day Serbia, as in other Orthodox countries, ethnic and confessional identities are deeply intertwined and “mutually interchangeable” (Aleksov 2010, 178). According to the Pew Research Center, an American based think-tank, in 2017, 88% of the Serbian population identified as “Orthodox Christian”.⁴ And Kraljevo’s religious complexion reflects the overall trend: 95.82% declared themselves to be Orthodox.⁵

However, whilst it is frequently observed that the vast majority of Serbs identify as “Orthodox,” regular churchgoing is hardly a mainstream pursuit. The sociologist Dragoljub Đorđević

demonstrated how the “confessional identification” of the majority of the Serbian population is very much distinct from their personal religiosity; only a slim percentage actually engage with church life (2005, 195; see also Radić 2010; Radosavljević-Ćiparizović 2006, 65–71). That said, it is undoubtedly true that, during the transitional period, some people increasingly started to enquire about what went on *inside* the churches which had been largely empty during socialism. Young and old started attending liturgies, fasting, reading spiritual literature, listening to homilies, and building relationships with spiritual fathers. But the fraction of the population which continues to actively live their lives “in the faith” remains minimal. Pew places the percentage of Serbs who attend church “weekly” at 7%.⁶ A slightly older, wide-ranging study conducted in 2010, found that only 4.1% attended church “more than once a week” whilst 8.7% attended “weekly” (Radić 2010, 28). Either way, the percentages are small. In short, the sociological research repeatedly flags the apparent mismatch between high confessional identification and low levels of practice or dogmatic “belief”.⁷

Such overall trends were visible during the eighteen months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted between 2016 and 2018. I was based primarily in and around the town of Kraljevo, an ever-expanding urban center which has a population of over 125,000 in its overall administrative area. Fieldwork engaged a demographically-diverse sample of interlocutors, with differing degrees of attachment to the liturgical life of the Church. In practical terms, my research involved extensive participant-observation: attending liturgies and patron saints’ days celebrations, going on pilgrimages, and spending many hours in people’s homes. I conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews and had numerous informal conversations with my interlocutors.

I spent time with those people who would describe themselves as *vernici* (lit. “believers”) and who strive to “live liturgically”.⁸ That is, beyond claiming a confessional Orthodox identity through ethnic affiliation, they seek to lead lives which involve regularly attending the Divine Liturgy and receiving Divine Communion, as well as praying, fasting and confession. The people I spoke with in these more church-oriented social networks come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and are diverse in terms of age, gender, and education. What they have in common is that, for them, Orthodoxy is considerably more than a tacit national identification; it is about “working on one’s salvation,” a process of penitent, personal transformation.

Maya Mayblin (2017) has rightly called for anthropologists to avoid focusing exclusively on the “pious” and consider those who may be more “lenient” in practicing their faith. Some of my own interlocutors would be, in Mayblin’s terms, undoubtedly “earnest”. And to assume that they are a benchmark of Orthodoxy (as much as they might like that) would be to disregard the often-nuanced, emotive and relaxed religious identities of many

other Serbs (see Simić 2005)—and also ignore how Orthodoxy can operate as an overarching tradition not necessarily dependent on liturgical practice. But I argue that the piety of practicing Orthodox is precisely noteworthy in (and inseparable from) its wider context—a country where many people engage with Orthodox Christianity in a fairly non-liturgical way. It is difficult to understand them without situating them in the broader setting with which they are in constant dialogue, and against which they frequently define themselves.

Indeed, as well as speaking with such “believers” I also spent a lot of time in the company of those who, whilst identifying as “Orthodox” were skeptical about regular churchgoing. Frequently these were women and men with graduate level education, ranging from school teachers to charity workers.

Esthetic Formations

Postsocialist central Serbia—where relatively few people are active churchgoers, but where Orthodox imagery percolates into public space and the homes of those who do not live “liturgically”—is a fruitful context in which to consider Meyer’s notion of “esthetic formations”. Meyer contends that the shortcoming of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” is that he fails to capture the embodied, material dimension. Communities “need to materialize in the concrete lived environment and be felt in the bones” (2009, 5), she argues, and we must thus attend to “the role played by things, media, and the body in actual processes of community making” (ibid., 6). To this end, Meyer proposes the term “esthetic formations.” “Esthetic” refers to “the affective power of images, sounds, and texts over their beholders” and thus how “imaginings materialize and are experienced as real” (ibid., 6–7). “Formations” captures the processual, formative dimension and so avoids construing community “as a fixed, bounded social group” (ibid., 7). “Esthetic formations” thus describes “the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things” (ibid.).

In Serbia—and in postsocialist Orthodox contexts more broadly—there are various scales at which “aesthetics” could be said to form allegiances with wider social groupings. In one sense, the 88% identifying as “Orthodox” arguably partake in a “shared aesthetics”. The icons in living rooms, on shop counters, in police stations, primary schools, and in currency exchange kiosks are *Orthodox* icons, emanating from a shared Eastern Christian tradition. And, recurring across the landscape, Orthodox churches and monasteries are architectural signifiers of that prevalent faith tradition. Around Christmas, a taxi driver presented me with a complimentary cardboard calendar, emblazoned with the renowned “White Angel” fresco from Mileševa monastery in southwestern Serbia—and the contact details of his taxi company. The sheer materiality of Orthodox practice

lends itself to the production of such an all-encompassing esthetic, which frequently evokes Serbian national belonging just as much as it does the spiritual. It is certainly true that the peculiarly Orthodox sensory constellation of sound, sights and movement “produce quite strong distinctions from non-Orthodox outsiders” (Luehrmann 2018a, 16). In its ubiquity and social acceptability, Orthodox imagery is, arguably, a constituent part of “valued perceptual experience” (Coote 2006, 283) in central Serbia.

However, to overly focus on Orthodox media at a *visual* level is to overlook certain local evaluations of esthetics, evaluations which have to do with sincerity of faith, personal transformation, and commitment. If esthetics is about how “imagination materialize and are experienced as real” (Meyer 2009, 7), then we should also recognize how different people might ascribe various materializations differing degrees of moral weight. Practicing Orthodox Christians find themselves inhabiting an environment that is, from their perspective, overwhelmingly Orthodox in a superficial, but not liturgical, sense. Displaying icons and occasionally observing the main feast days is not enough, they say. Faith has to be practiced, “witnessed”. And these Christians thus critique the “popular” ways in which Orthodoxy is (in their view) misused, misunderstood, and decontextualized.

At this juncture, then, we have to consider (with Meyer) *bodies* as sites where an Orthodox esthetic may be expressed—and contested by others. In her analysis of the Arts and Crafts movement and how it “estheticizes life,” Frances E. Mascia-Lees suggests that “esthetic embodiment” is “a somatically-grounded, culturally mediated, affective encounter with the beautiful” (2011, 7). Particular styles produce particular forms of embodiment. Indeed, as well as sharing in the widespread Orthodox esthetic of postsocialist Serbia, through frequent Liturgy-going and fasting, churchgoing Orthodox materialize the Orthodox imagination (to borrow Meyer’s vocabulary) through *practice*. For Mascia-Lees’ Arts and Crafts enthusiasts, “certain commodities come to be seen as beautiful” and consequently “this form of beauty constitutes a significant dimension of their lived experience” (ibid.). Likewise, practicing Orthodox respond to the beauty of Orthodox Christian spirituality with their bodies.

For my liturgically-engaged interlocutors, it is precisely this moment of embodiment which is indicative of sincerity and commitment, and which makes less embodied versions of Orthodox esthetics appear shallow to them. This local point of view invites us to further clarify how we think about “esthetic formations.” First, we have to enquire into how a practice-oriented “esthetic formation” emerges *within* an overarching-national “esthetic formation”. In this ethnographic context, “Orthodox” esthetics both unites and divides: it delimits a shared historical faith tradition, but can also be articulated to stake out

divergent ways of belonging to it. Second, we have to understand how embodiment is not only an expression of esthetics, but also a way through which esthetic formations are imbued with moral hierarchy, played off against each other, and critiqued.

In Kraljevo, embodied, liturgical practice emerges into a public space already inflected with an attentiveness to Orthodoxy. For Meyer, the relationship between “religion” and the presumed secularism of the “public sphere” is ambiguous (2009, 21). Certainly, as I suggested above, there has been much debate about the role of the institutional Church in Serbian society and its potential incompatibility with democratizing processes. However, in Kraljevo, tensions arise not solely because “religious formations” have breached a supposedly secular domain, but because they raise questions about what constitutes good, “sincere” Orthodox practice. Friction occurs, not because of essential religious differences, but because different people are *related* by a shared Orthodox esthetic which provides them with the tools to express their own religious identities and critique the zealous excesses or laxity of others. Distinctions are meaningful precisely because they are elaborated within a shared Orthodox idiom.

For Silvia Gherardi, communities are sustained and reproduced by the collective process of “taste-making”: “taste is learned and taught as part of becoming a practitioner and it is performed as a collective, situated activity” (2009, 538). Practice, she argues, is always *more* than simply doing—it involves honing tastes and collective appraising. To follow such a line of enquiry, one could discuss how Orthodox Christians evaluate the singing at the Divine Liturgy (see Engelhardt 2015), their appreciation for particularly pertinent homilies, how they pray (Luehrmann 2018a), and how they choose to venerate icons (see also Carroll 2017, 355). One could describe the “style” of church environments themselves: CDs of Byzantine chanting, the lingering smell of incense after a Liturgy has been served, texts written invariably in Cyrillic (not Latin) script.⁹ In an Orthodox setting, various esthetic forms are deeply intertwined with ethical commitments (Carroll 2017). However, here my emphasis is different to Gherardi’s. Not how a group centripetally cultivates its core interest, but how it comes into being in part *dialogically*, through defining itself against others. What and where are the edges of an “esthetic formation”?

From “Traditional” to “Liturgical” Orthodoxy

In contemporary Serbia it is quite possible to meaningfully operate within an Orthodox symbolic idiom without actually getting up at 7am on a Sunday to stand in the Liturgy for around ninety minutes. Churches are generally open from morning until evening so that members of the public can call in whenever they feel the need, regardless of whether there is a service happening or not. People come to light candles for the living and dead at a

time of their choosing, and doing so requires no intervention of a priest. Church shops stock icons, incense, and spiritual literature for people to purchase and later consume in the comfort of their own homes. Getting married in church, getting a child baptized, or having a priest come to bless one's home before Easter all incur financial charges, but are not dependent on regular church attendance. Attending the Liturgy and taking Divine Communion regularly is a matter of personal choice and feeling.

For instance, Ana¹⁰ is a primary school teacher in her mid-thirties, and would be offended to be known as anything other than an Orthodox Christian. She was baptized as a baby and her family celebrate Christmas, Easter and their *slava*, the feast of St Nicholas, on 19th December. Before the *slava*, the parish priest comes to her apartment, as is customary, to bless the home and a bowl of water which will be used for cooking and medicinal purposes throughout the year. When I visited Mount Athos in Greece—a center of monasticism and spirituality revered throughout the Orthodox world—Ana was eager for a connection with that holy place. She duly gave me a list of items to purchase and bring back for her: icons, prayer ropes, incense. Occasionally, she visits monasteries with her family and describes the beautiful “feeling” (*osećaj*) she experiences there. “What is religion?”—she once asked rhetorically—“it’s when you feel something at a spiritual level”. However, whilst Ana apparently elaborates her religiosity within an Orthodox idiom she rarely participates in liturgical worship. As well as disliking the crowds, she finds it tiring:

I don't go – and this is a stupid reason – because it's too long. And you can't sit. ... Here you're meant to listen to the whole Liturgy. But I can't. How can you listen to every word if you're thinking about how much your legs are hurting?!

In fact, Ana was generally perplexed at the idea of attending church regularly, and slightly suspicious of those who did. Once, I met her as I sprinted across town, late for Vespers. She looked at me quizzically: “Why are you going there? What new thing do you get? It's all the same” [i.e. The ritual is unchanging]. The simple point is that a conscientious and regular engagement with Orthodox liturgical practices is not unmarked in Kraljevo; it is noteworthy in the eyes of other people. (That I, a foreigner, should have chosen to participate undoubtedly compounded this bizarreness.) As Radulović observes in her own ethnography, an apparently excessive dedication to churchgoing can generate skepticism and disdain, with some of her informants suggesting that it could be as harmful as other forms of addiction (2012, 118–119). For Serbs who see their Orthodoxy in more cultural terms, regular churchgoing can appear to be a leg-aching, peculiar and even excessive pursuit (see also Simić 2005, 65–69). Such people—who may also be highly cynical about

the institutional SOC—sometimes evoke personal relationships with God, relationships where collective worship is superfluous and intrusive (see also Nedeljković 2001, 92).

However, for those who wish to practice Orthodoxy in the way the Church teaches, it is not enough to cruise along unreflexively in a nominal Orthodox idiom. Being Orthodox demands liturgical living, self-identifying “believers” argue. As one priest said, bluntly: “without the Liturgy, Orthodoxy has no point”. Attending church only for Easter, Christmas and the family *slava*, and fasting only on Christmas Eve and Good Friday is inadequate, they say. But such practicing Orthodox are not simply arguing for routine, dutiful attendance. Rather, following the exemplars in the Gospels, they hope to transform themselves as persons and so strive for salvation. In this view, the “traditional” aspects of the Serbian Orthodox cultural tradition are essentially invalidated if not coupled with a concerted, and continuous effort at work on the self within the Church, in step with God.

Beyond the act of regularly attending church for the Divine Liturgy on a Sunday and possibly for morning or evening services throughout the week, a “liturgical life” is physically marked in other ways. Most notable is how the fasting calendar shapes people’s eating habits (see also Lackenby 2021). At its simplest, in terms of nutrition, “fasting” implies abstention from meat, fish and dairy products. The severity of restrictions shifts depending on the particular fast and calendar day, dictating whether one should be fasting with food prepared “on oil” or “on water”. For the purposes of my argument there is no need to go into great detail about technicalities. In short, the liturgical year revolves around four principal fasts. The Nativity Fast leads up to Christmas on 7th January.¹¹ Great Lent—the longest fast—spans the 40 days leading up to Holy Week. The Apostles’ Fast begins on the second Monday after Pentecost and continues until the feast of Saints Peter and Paul on 12th July. Finally, the Dormition Fast lasts from the 14th to 28th August, the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. As well as some other fasting days for major feasts, a fast is kept on Wednesdays (in remembrance of Christ’s betrayal), and on Fridays (in remembrance of His Crucifixion).

Taking Divine Communion always demands some form of prior fasting in spiritual and bodily anticipation. Thus, observing all of the fasts—as more practicing Orthodox do—means being able to take Communion regularly, without having to undertake any exceptional preparation. Many less-regular churchgoers in Kraljevo, for example, choose to receive Communion either at the beginning or end of each of the main fasts. However, for regular churchgoers, fasting is an ongoing, formative process that helps to nurture a particular outlook on life, as opposed to being a “tradition” to be periodically observed.

Looking at Kraljevo, then, we might speak in terms of a non-institutionalized “Orthodox complex space” (Pop 2011),

wherein people use various factors to navigate their sense of religiosity, and where esthetics can be divergently appropriated and embodied. Indeed, given the ubiquity Orthodox Christianity in central Serbia, people can define their own religiosity through their construal of other people's; Kraljevo's residents critique each other's church-centric practice (or lack of it) through fairly loaded categories. Practicing Orthodox sometimes describe their compatriots (rather disdainfully) as "traditional believers". That is, those people who observe Christmas, Easter and their *slava*, but who demonstrate no further liturgical commitment. Liturgical taxonomy also distinguishes between people who are "pobožni" (pious/devout) and those who are "religiozan" (religious). Practicing Orthodox see themselves as striving to belong to the former category (which for them implies cultivating a deep relationship with a "living God") and many other Serbs as belonging to the latter (the "religiozan" tag connotes a ritualistic, ill-defined spirituality, lacking sincere faith). Simultaneously, however, people like Ana accuse regular churchgoers of being "zealots" or "fanatics". Moreover, a more secular person might refer to herself as "a traditional believer" (*tradicionalni vernik*), thus flagging an Orthodox identity but distancing herself from liturgical practice. But, just as one friend assured me that he was definitely "Orthodox, but not some big believer" (*veliki vernik*), a younger, very observant interlocutor explained that, *unlike* himself, his parents were merely "traditional Orthodox". In a sense, then, "believers" and "traditional believers" hold each other in place because they each claim to be what the other is not.¹² What, though, are the more embodied, physical dimensions of this mutual making sense of others' religiosity? To think through these dynamics it is necessary to say a few words about how practicing Orthodox move in and out of interaction with one another.

Awkward Esthetics

Regular churchgoers come together at Liturgies and other services and then afterwards at the sociable gathering where people sit around and drink coffee, the so-called "Liturgy after the Liturgy". Groups of friends also meet at patron saint day celebrations, when traveling by car to visit monasteries, or when going on coach trips to holy sites in the region. But it would be inaccurate to speak of a "communal daily life" of regular churchgoers in Kraljevo. They do not socialize exclusively amongst themselves (nor do they necessarily want to), and many younger churchgoers (in their mid-twenties) live with their Yugoslav-generation parents who are fairly uninterested in, and even skeptical about, a liturgical way of life. Some of my acquaintances (both women and men) have spouses who are not hostile to, but basically uninterested in, liturgical Orthodoxy. Meyer is thus right to move away from speaking in terms of "bounded" communities toward dynamic, processual "formations" (2009, 7).

However, although practicing Orthodox Christians are not a homogenous group consistently delimited in a spatial sense, in materializing shared imaginations through “embodied esthetic forms” (ibid.) they produce a sense of shared endeavor, and—unavoidably—distinguish themselves from other people in numerous non-ecclesial, social settings. For less practicing people, the Orthodox esthetic that believers embody can appear to be bizarre and disconcerting. But such embodied liturgical behavior appears bizarre and disconcerting to onlookers because it emanates from a widely shared Orthodox tradition and so can be gauged on that scale. What I mean by this is that whilst believers’ behavior is unmistakably *recognizable* to less practicing people (who share the culturally Orthodox setting) it also strikes them as being slightly off the mark, excessive and unnecessary. This is not a violent, conflictual tension but rather one where those less familiar with liturgical practice may feel awkward in the presence of—or even amused by—such displays of piety. How, then, do different esthetic formations collide?

Liturgical practices make believing bodies visible and noticeable in ways that they were not before. For example, it is increasingly common for people with a sympathy for Orthodox practice to cross themselves three times as they walk past a church, or when they hear the church bells chime. However, as well as noticing this practice on numerous occasions, I also recorded several instances of other people telling me (rather skeptically) that this habit was new and that it struck them as excessive, performative piety.

Other practices stand out, too. Striking for those who were either not brought up in a churchgoing family, or who do not attend church regularly, is the act of the full prostration (in Serbian, *metanija*). In this penitent gesture a person lowers themselves to their knees, head touching the floor, hands clasped in front. Two women who worked in a shop told me—through much laughter—that they had once walked into church when the entire congregation was on the floor in prostration. It was, they said, like entering “a mosque”. Prostrations are germane to Orthodox practice, especially during Lent when the emphasis is on repentance. However, they can also stand out to those who are not familiar with them, challenging commonplace understandings of what Orthodoxy is.

Just as such awkward difference manifests itself through people’s physical movements, so too it does through language. As Jeanne Kormina (2013) has observed in Russia, the resurgent interest for Orthodox practice in the postsocialist world has nurtured a particular vocabulary or “sociolect” within church circles. Regular churchgoers generally refer to each other as brothers or sisters “in Christ”; and the standard greeting is “*Pomaže Bog!*” (God helps!), to which one replies “*Bog ti pomogao!*” (May God help you!). Beyond these more basic examples, there are numerous words and phrases in

circulation. Through paying attention to the use of (and reaction to) such words, one can examine a person's relationship to Orthodoxy, and so chart the blurred "limits" of liturgical practice.

In colloquial Serbian, for instance, the word for "priest" is "pop". It carries an edge of familiarity, but also of anonymity: "the pop came to my house". Those who attend church regularly have learnt that "pop" is improper and impolite. They will almost always refer to a priest as "Father" (*Otac*) and address him as such using the vocative "Oče" (as in, "bless, Father!", "*blagoslovi, Oče!*"). This divergent use of nomenclature was starkly illustrated when I went with Aleksandar—a man in his fifties, a regular churchgoer and rigorous observer of fasts—to visit his cousin, Miša. In the course of our long, beer-fueled conversation, Aleksandar recalled some dealings that he had had with his parish priest, Father Petar (*Otac Petar*). Miša promptly exploded with laughter. "No, Aleksandar," he corrected, with mock sympathy and reminding him of his biological kin: "your *father* was Ivan Simić". Calling a priest "Father" struck Miša as ridiculous, an affective bond to the clergy that was disproportionate. You call priests "pop," he clarified, quite drunkenly.

However, critical assessment of others' Orthodoxy cuts both ways. I opened the article with the icons gummed to tabloid front pages. Whilst one man I met at church avidly collected such icons (telling me that he bought the paper precisely so as to acquire them), other churchgoers found the practice distasteful. One friend observed that, since the icons appeared in the same publication as photographs of posing, near-naked young women, the context was grossly inappropriate. "I don't like that sort of popularization," he said, "you need to have some limits". The tabloid icon phenomenon was lambasted by the Belgrade priest Father Vukašin Milićević in a television interview. He called it a "banalization," suggesting that icons lose all meaning in such contexts.¹³ For believers, icons of saints are holy objects of veneration, conduits for the Divine. And it is their removal from that context which provokes skepticism. Ivan, an insurance salesman in his thirties, ridiculed what he termed the "*pro forma*" use of icons amongst those who rarely attended church, and the way that people sometimes (naively) perceived them as lucky charms.

A more political example came in January 2017 when Serbia provocatively sent a train (emblazoned with the words "Kosovo is Serbia" in twenty-one different languages) from Belgrade toward the Kosovar border. Serbia has never recognized Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, seeing it as an integral part of its territory and the "cradle" of its civilization. The interior of the train was, notably, decorated with enormous, full-color adhesives depicting frescoes from ancient Serbian Orthodox monasteries. One middle-aged churchgoer whom I interviewed was affronted by the apparent intrusion of politics into the devotional sphere, provoked at the idea of Orthodox

artistic heritage ornamenting the vestibules of public transport. A train, he observed with considerable dismay, “is not the place for frescoes”. Practicing Orthodox claim that iconography—indeed Orthodox practice more generally—cannot be tokenized or manipulated politically, but must be integrated into an all-encompassing affective relationship to this world and the next (see also Carroll 2018, 150–168). As I suggested above, fasting is one means by which they bear out—and embody—this commitment.

Fasting Bodies

Being concerned with food—an obviously universal concern for Serbians of all religious persuasions and none—the Church’s fasting calendar makes people visible when they eat differently. Through fasting, people’s bodies become an expression of an Orthodox esthetic, in a way that is obviously reflective of the overarching Orthodox context, but also indicative of a new, distinct and emergent “esthetic formation” within it.

Of course, fasting is never merely about eating. Through fasting, Orthodox Christians prepare themselves spiritually for the feast at the end of the fast, whether that be the “feast” of Divine Communion or a major Orthodox holiday. It is—at least in theory—a process of spiritual cleansing, of deemphasizing the body so as to enable more prayerful thoughts. One woman in her mid-twenties said that “you restrict yourself a little, so as to get back to the basics of faith”. Other people spoke of fasting as a process of working on one’s relationship to self, and, by consequence, to those around you, and to God. Abstention from eating certain things should not be the ultimate focus, priests say—it is a means to an end (see also Lackenby 2021). However, for the purposes of this article I focus primarily on the embodied, material dimension of fasting and how this affects both those who undertake it and those around them.

There is an unmistakably corporeal dimension to accounts of fasting. Sometimes this is evoked in terms of frustration at not being able to eat certain dairy products, or longing for the taste of a burger, or savoring the last slice of cheese-topped pizza before the beginning of Great Lent the following day. Others, by contrast, report feeling absolutely no appetite for non-fasting food during fasting periods. One man in his mid-twenties said he had less sexual energy when he abstained from meat. Another man, rather more vividly, observed that the toilet cubicle smelt more pleasant during a meat-free (fasting) diet. In breaking their arduous fast on Easter day, people eat cautiously, aware that the stomach needs time to re-adapt to such “heavy,” fatty food. But it is also possible to observe people’s physical delight at (finally) being able to eat a boiled egg or drink a chocolate milkshake. Like iconography and incense, hungry, non-lustful and craving bodies are also materializations of the Orthodox imagination—albeit in ways that are not always

inconsequential. What, then, are the social ramifications of embodying an Orthodox esthetic through fasting?

Indeed, in aspiring to lead liturgical lives practicing Orthodox Christians can occasionally find themselves at odds with much of the Serbian population (Lackenby 2021). Certainly, fasting has become something of a social phenomenon in contemporary Serbia, with many supermarkets stocking a range of suitable “fasting foods,” and bakeries indicating goods which do not contain dairy products or oil. In the introduction, I mentioned that *Politika* published some fasting recipes. However, this does not mean that everybody rigidly observes the fasts in the way that priests would advise.

One example comes from a dinner I had with Radmila and Vladan, a couple in their fifties. Both proudly identify themselves as Serb and Orthodox, and over the course of fieldwork we spoke at length about religion, politics and nationhood. Radmila—who runs her own business—particularly enjoys going on the coach trip pilgrimages organized by one of the churches in Kraljevo. But she and her husband rarely attend formal liturgical worship and choose to observe fasts as and when it is meaningful for them. At the beginning of July, I spent an evening at their home, and Radmila set the table with deep fried pirozhki, dried hams, and different sorts of cheese. As we ate, their neighbor, Nada, joined us. I know Nada well. She is a retired woman who, when she is not at home cooking and cleaning, spends a lot of time attending church services. Radmila and Vladan cordially invited Nada to join us at the table and eat something. But Nada calmly refused: being the beginning of July our meal fell during the Apostles’ Fast. My hosts were somewhat oblivious to the liturgical calendar; Nada was not. She gracefully declined the offer (accepting only a single glass of beer) and sat at the table whilst we continued to eat. But Nada’s discreet refusal to partake of the food led Radmila and Vladan to justify (again) that they preferred to follow their own rhythms when it came to fasting. There was no hostility, but it was one of numerous banal instances of when the liturgical calendar sets fasting bodies apart.

However, adhering to the fasting calendar can produce more consequential organizational tensions. A few days after the dinner I have just described, I was involved—along with a group of people from church—in the filming of a historical drama series at various monasteries around Kraljevo. We were extras. The first day of shooting fell, again, during the Apostles’ Fast. At lunch time, when my interlocutors queued up at the catering van, they all asked for the “fasting” option. But there was, the increasingly flustered woman at the serving hatch explained, no such option. The film company had clearly overlooked to provide something suitable. “I don’t know what to give them,” she complained to her colleague. In the end she served out bread rolls with a vegetable side dish. Later

that day somebody did a head count and placed an order for “fasting sandwiches” to be prepared for the next day of filming. Again, liturgical bodies stood out. My interlocutors—with their rigid insistence on certain eating foods at certain times—became a slightly irritating presence and organizational concern.

One should not underestimate the annoyance that a person’s insistence on fasting can provoke in those around them. Milica—a Belgrade-based foreign language teacher in her early thirties—described going for a coffee with her friend. It happened to be during Great Lent. Milica ordered cappuccino with cream and asked her friend whether she would like the same. Milica mimicked the aghast reaction she received: “No! I’m fasting on water!” Milica was both amused and perplexed by such a put down. Milica goes into churches occasionally to light candles, though she does not participate in regular worship or fast. She explained to me that, in her personal understanding, fasting had more to do with seeking to improve one’s behavior and comporting oneself in an upstanding and moral way. Her friend’s dramatic rejection of a milk-based coffee struck her as quite ridiculous (even though it makes perfect sense within the logic of fasting). A comparable case came from an acquaintance who works in a local library. On the occasion of her birthday—which fell during the first week of Great Lent—she took a cream cake into work to share. Five of her colleagues declined to eat it, stating that they were fasting. Her reaction was of hurt, but also of genuine surprise.

The ethnographic examples I have given may appear to be relatively minor, perhaps even non-noteworthy tensions. But what is at stake are actually people’s strongly held (and differing) views on what constitutes sincerity, purity, and good manners. And, in offering these examples, my aim has not been to evaluate any of these claims in normative terms. Rather, I wanted to identify the “edges” of liturgical Orthodoxy, the point where ideas about committed fasting collide with more prevalent societal expectations (see also Mitrofanova 2018 on comparable tensions in the Russian context). In a society where ethnic and confessional belonging is deeply interwoven—and where there are widespread ideas about the “traditional” place and role of that Orthodox tradition (see Radosavljević-Ćiparizović 2006)—emergent acts of embodied piety stand out, provoke, and irritate. At the point at which people use their bodies differently to express particular ideas, aesthetics can divide just as they unite.

Conclusion

In a postsocialist context with an overarching, historically-rooted faith tradition, new forms of pious practice can appear which are undeniably emergent from—and yet also in tension with—that same tradition. How to make sense of these divergent forms? In Serbia, scholars have long analyzed and categorized different

expressions of Orthodoxy, producing various typologies. Based on research from the 1980s, the Serbian ethnologist Dušan Bandić (2010) spoke about “Folk Orthodoxy” (*narodno pravoslavlje*), whereby villagers appropriated aspects of Orthodox symbolism. Later, Slaviša Raković and Mirko Blagojević identified “Popular Orthodoxy” (the symbolic Orthodoxy of the Serbian public sphere) and “Political Orthodoxy” (the “invented Orthodox narrative” of some party-political programs) and “Doctrinal Orthodoxy,” characterized by an “eschatological identity” forged by networks of “dedicated believers” (2014, 150; see also Simić 2005; Todorović 2008). Such typologies can undoubtedly be insightful.

However, drawing on the idea of “esthetic formations” this article has suggested another way of thinking about intra-Orthodox difference in a postsocialist context. Meyer’s thinking is generative for analyzing the ways in which religious ideas and images have reappeared both in the public sphere and at the level of individual devotion. And, drawing on her ideas, overall, I made two closely interrelated reflections.

First, I suggested that esthetic formations are not always internally rigid. Within a broad esthetically-bound group other formations (which are at once connected and yet distinct) can take shape. Esthetic formations can “nest,” so to speak. This is not so straightforward as to say that esthetics are no longer “shared”—they are, and precisely because of their wider, collective significance various apparently new embodiments and appropriations come in for scrutiny.

This led to a second reflection: In a context where Orthodox imagery is widespread, how people choose to express Orthodoxy with their bodies—what they chose to eat (or not) and where they chose to go (or not) and when—is of particular significance because different people can make that embodiment speak of either sincere witnessing, or zealous excess. Put otherwise, at the point when such an esthetic comes to be consistently expressed through the body various actors can make rival claims about what such embodied expressions mean. Just as they are “binding and bonding” (Meyer 2009, 17), embodied esthetics can also provide the grounds for fragmentation and differentiation. An Orthodox “esthetic” thus gathers people living in central Serbia, and allows them to make distinctions.

Unfortunately, there has not been space to consider the people who have distanced completely themselves from the Church, people who are assertively atheist, or indeed Serbia’s sizeable non-Orthodox minorities. I have primarily focused instead on those for whom an Orthodox esthetic still matters in some way. For practicing Orthodox Christians, a liturgical life represents the path to salvation, a beautiful, Christocentric approach to this world. Other people find such committed churchgoing disproportionate. Thus, whilst Meyer rejects Zygmunt Bauman’s analytical contrast between “esthetic” and

“ethic” communities in terms of “superficial versus true” (2009, 18), I wonder whether this is actually a distinction that many of Kraljevo’s citizens would happily apply. It cuts both ways: Just as self-identifying believers judge people’s “*pro forma*” non-substantive faith, so others accuse them of pompous, even disingenuous, piety.

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notes and references

¹Hilandar is the Serbian monastery on Mount Athos in Greece, a holy site of profound significance on the Serbian Orthodox spiritual landscape.

²I am basing my arguments on central Serbia, where the population overwhelmingly identifies as Orthodox. Looked at in its entirety, Serbia is characterised by religious diversity, especially in the northern Vojvodina region. In Kraljevo there are a few Protestant denominations and even a Catholic church, but these minorities hardly shape the overarching Orthodox Christian feel of the place.

³Whilst my research is focussed on post-Yugoslav Serbia, the processes I describe are not unique to this context. We can speculate that, broadly speaking, they are true of other postsocialist Orthodox countries. See Mitrofanova (2018) and Benovska (2021) on Russia, for instance.

⁴<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (accessed 26 May 2020).

⁵The data is available on the site of The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in the document “Population by religion, by municipalities and cities”: <http://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/popis/popis-2011/popisni-podaci-eksel-tabele> (accessed 18 November 2018).

⁶<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-commitment-and-practices/> (accessed 26 May 2020).

⁷Although one should not assume that prior to Yugoslav socialism Serbs were especially active churchgoers. In the nineteenth century the Russian Slavophiles noted the laxity of Serbian practice, and its difference from Russian and Greek Orthodoxy. Serb religious practice had a patriarchal emphasis, concerned with preserving customs in the home and was less directly affected by Church dogma. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point.

⁸*Vernici* is plural (“believers”), whilst *vernik* is singular (“believer”). The term is not exclusivist or bounded: people who rarely attend church (and who can even be critical of the SOC) may also feel that “*vernik*” nevertheless best describes their religious identity. However, practising Orthodox would *consistently* describe themselves using this term.

⁹Whilst the official script of Serbia is Cyrillic, Latin script is very widely understood, used and encountered in everyday life. Seeing itself as the preserver of national traditions, Church texts are always written in Cyrillic.

¹⁰All names are pseudonyms.

¹¹The Serbian Orthodox Church retains use of the Julian Calendar, which is

- behind the Gregorian version by 13 days.
- ¹²The evaluation of other people's religiosity continues within the networks of people attending church more regularly. In churchgoing circles one encounters cutting terms such as "professional Orthodox" (*profesionalini pravoslava*) directed at people who are perceived as living their Orthodoxy at the level of performative ritual but without sincere conviction. One man also spoke mockingly of "so-called believers" (*tako-zvani vernici*).
- ¹³https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2017&mm=04&dd=14&nav_category=12&nav_id=1250498 (accessed 29 November 2018).
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