

Im/material objects: Relics, gestured signs, and the substance of the immaterial

Timothy Carroll

Dept. Anthropology, UCL

During the course of ethnographic research, anthropologists are often met with phenomena that do not easily fit into categories with which they are already acquainted. In fact the process of critically engaged anthropological research is often characterised by a radical realignment of analytical classification; a thing that one might think is like another is in fact most like something with which it shares little apparent similarity. This process of honing one's understanding of cultural artefacts and indigenous ways of knowing is a critical, and often dialogical, aspect of research in the field. This chapter unpacks one such example of a material thing—in fact a thing that can hardly be said to 'exist' as a material at all—and, by comparing it to a class of things apparently distinct, demonstrates a much richer sense of how an indigenous community understands the world.

During the summers of 2011 and 2012 I conducted research in the Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi, on Mt Athos, Greece. I was studying the devotional uses of fabric in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and, while I had originally gained access to the monastery in order to study items in their extensive collections, a series of unfortunate events prohibited access to these collections. Instead I spent my days praying, working, and speaking with the monks and pilgrims of the monastery. This simple method of participating alongside my informants opened up a wide range of insight into how Orthodox Christians understand and use different material objects in their daily devotion. Of particular relevance to this chapter, a considerable amount of my time was spent discussing and practicing the veneration of holy relics.

Relics

Relics are usually spoken of as objects, solid, but old and fragile. For the most part these include bones of dead saints, and sometimes, such as with the chains of St Peter, metal or other enduring materials. Art historian Cynthia Hahn identifies a relic as 'a physical object that is understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ, literally the virtue but more accurately the power of the holy person' (2010: 290). Much academic

discourse borrows a Roman Catholic classification of relics (Geisbusch 2008, Hooper 2014). This system makes a distinction between ‘primary relics,’ which are bodily remains of the holy person; ‘secondary relics,’ objects used by or touched by said person; and ‘tertiary relics,’ an object touched to one of the former, after the mortal repose of the saint. By the relics’ ‘contagious’ (Hahn 2010) quality, the tertiary relic is said to gain that *virtus* from this contact. While these categories are helpful analytically, I have seen no evidence that Orthodox Christians classify types of relics in any sort of hierarchical order. For my informants a relic is a relic; people spoke of bones, wood, and things blessed off of these items interchangeably as ‘relics of Christ’ or a given saint. However the terms can be useful to designate the kind of object spoken of, and so I do, at times, employ these terms.

Within Eastern Orthodox Christian practice, it is not uncommon to have the bodies of the incorruptible saint, wherein through a sort of accidental (read: miraculous) mummification process, the body of the dead saint is found not to decay. It is with this sort of relic that I will start my argument, but I will then move to ephemeral objects, such as clothing, before moving to an object so insubstantial as hardly to constitute an object at all: a gesture. By looking at objects along a continuum of materiality, I extrapolate some of the technical qualities of relics that are easy to observe in material relics toward the immaterial. Once at that side of the continuum, I then interpolate qualities of the gestured sign back to bones, allowing each to inform the other.

The monastery of Vatopedi, on Mt Athos in northeast Greece, was founded in the 10th century by three aristocratic brothers and has enjoyed imperial benefaction throughout its history. In 1979 a new brotherhood moved into the monastery, and under the guidance of the new abbot there has been a steady plan of growth and development (For a fuller history see Carroll 2014). At the time fieldwork was conducted during the summers of 2011 and 2012, there were about 115 monks, and each day they welcome between 100 and 150 pilgrims. This number grows for great feasts, to between 500 and 600 guests. Around the walls of the monastery, spilling down to the small bay, is a ‘fishing village’ populated by men who, though not monastic, live there at least part-time working for the monastery. All told, Vatopedi, set on the shores of a fertile valley against the Aegean, looks like a mediæval village teeming with between 200 and 700 men—they allow neither women nor children within the monastery grounds.

During the regular daily schedule, the monks of Vatopedi spend roughly eight hours in communal, liturgical prayer. Of this, pilgrims are welcomed to join in about six hours that take place in the main church, the *katholikon*, or one of several chapels. The remaining two hours are spent in communal recitation of the hesychastic prayer¹ said in the monastic quarters. Each morning, starting from four a.m., *Orthros* (Matins) and the Divine Liturgy are sung. On most evenings, from about 4:30 p.m., *Vespers* is sung, and then toward night *Compline* is sung. Fitted into this regime of prayer are times of eating, working and rest. Two meals are served each day, the first directly after the end of Liturgy, the second directly after *Vespers*. Following the morning meal, the monks and pilgrims head out to work at their various assigned duties. After the evening meal, again the monks and pilgrims join in work; this time, however, it is communal work—often preparing vegetables for the kitchens or other ‘light’ work. In preparation for feasts, the evening services are replaced with a *Vigil*, which leads into *Orthros*. The lengths of these services vary with relation to the magnitude of the feast. For the feast of the Holy Cincture of Mary, for example, roughly seventeen hours of liturgical worship are conducted in preparation for the celebration of the feast.

It is not uncommon for these *Vigils* to correspond with feasts in honour of saints of whom the monastery has relics. On these occasions, a priest exits the Altar with the reliquary, blesses the congregation with it by making the sign of the cross over them with the box, and then places the box on a small table that is set up for it. With well over 200 relics in the monastery’s holdings, the presentation of relics in this manner is quite regular. There are more days of the year for which there is a relic corresponding to a saint that is remembered that day than those for which there is not.

Take for example St John the Forerunner. The monastery holds part of one of his fingers, and for the feast of his beheading a small table was arranged just to the south of the *ambon*.² As *Orthros* proceeds, the priest exits from the Altar and lifts the reliquary that holds the finger toward the congregation. While the choir chants the *troparia* (sg. *troparion*, a short triumphant hymn) of the saint, the priest blesses the congregation, then turns and sets the relic on the small table. He then crosses himself, performs a prostration (bowing, on all fours, touching his forehead to the ground)

¹ ‘Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy upon me.’

² The *ambon* is front and centre within the temple from where the priest addresses the congregation.

before the relic, then bends forward to kiss it. The brothers of the monastery follow suit, forming a queue according to their seniority within the brotherhood. Each comes forward, performs a prostration before the relic, rises and kisses it before moving on to venerate other ikons. On this occasion the abbot is also present for the feast, and they each go to venerate the abbot with a low bow, what is called a *metanoia*,³ asking his blessing. He makes the sign of the cross over them with his right hand, and they kiss the hand – much as they just did to the relic of St John and the ikons of the saints arranged throughout the *katholikon*. After the most junior of the novices, the pilgrims join the queue and likewise prostrate before the relic, venerate the ikons and seek the blessing of the abbot.

Such is the start of a fairly typical day in Vatopedi. It is so usual to have relics that visitors begin to lose track of which mornings they have been present. Monks likewise are not always even certain who a relic is. There is a book, the *Synaxarion* (trans. ‘bringing together’), that catalogues the saints according to the calendar, but many do not have the time to read it and so have to ask around in order to find out whom they are about to venerate. Pilgrims often have no idea. Sometimes they might be able to pick out the name from the *troparia*, but since these are sung in various periods of Ancient Greek, few could actually understand what is being said. Also, many names are common, like ‘John,’ and identifying *which* ‘John’ they are about to venerate may be impossible. The relative unknowing parallels the darkness within the *katholikon*, which, well before dawn, is lit by only a few candles.

Toward the end of the day, a second display of Holy Relics form a very different encounter. Directly after the evening meal, when the monks go to communal work, while the sun is casting long shadows through the doors into the *katholikon*, a long table is set up across the front of the *katholikon*. On the table are arranged five relics of particular note: the Holy Cincture of the Mother of God; a piece of the Cross; the reed used by the centurion to give Christ vinegar; the head of St John Chrysostomos; and another head, usually that of St Evdokimos (a monk of Vatopedi), though sometimes another apropos to the feast is brought out instead. Spaced along the long table, these relics are made available to pilgrims. Dozens of pilgrims, broken into groups according to language, are lead around the *katholikon* on tour by monks appointed the duty. In shifts they are brought to the relics, and the monk explains who

³ Pronounced me-**ta**-n’*a*, meaning ‘to turn’ or ‘to repent’.

each are for those who may not recognise them. Most push forward to kiss them, some do prostrations in front of each. Most men also pass handfuls of prayer ropes, crosses and other small trinkets to a guarding priest to have them blessed. Rubbing the handful of items over each relic, the priest blesses the trinkets, which in turn are taken home by the pilgrims as gifts, or to help heal a loved one who cannot come to the monastery themselves.

During one tour of the *katholikon*, a Catalonian father and son were also present. As nominal Catholics they understood generally the concept of relics, but the son expressed confusion as to how they worked. The monk guiding the tour explained that the human person is both body and soul, and one cannot be considered without the other. They work together, he said, and here he enmeshed his fingers trying to think of the right word. After flexing his interdigitated hands, he finally settled on the word ‘synergy.’ There is a synergy between the body and soul, he explained, and then glossed it as ‘cooperation.’ A man or woman leading a holy life, he continued, does something spiritual, but it cannot be spiritual alone. The body must also take part in the ascetic struggle, and so the body, too, becomes holy. Likened to the struggle of an athlete, such an ascetic struggle is routine and continuous. The god-like quality of saints makes their bodies holy *things* because the connection between the body and the soul works a lasting effect on the physical body, something which lasts even past death.

A ‘thing,’ as Tim Ingold points out, is ‘a place where several goings on become entwined’ (2010: 96), or as Heidegger argues, is ‘a gathering specifically for the purpose of dealing with a case or matter’ (1971: 173). In this light, the Orthodox relic can be seen as a place of coming-together, an aggregation of various qualities toward a specific purpose. As such the continual dedication to a holy way of life, coupled with a life of prayer, is seen to produce holy objects/things as a by-product of producing holy subjects.

In the examples of the two Sts John so far mentioned—St John the Forerunner’s finger and St John Chrysostomos’ head—two uses of relics can be seen. Presented in the context of the night Vigil, the Forerunner’s finger served as a point of liturgical focus; set on the table in the evening light, Chrysostomos’ head served as an aim of pilgrim’s devotion. As bodies of saints, they copresence – that is, allow ‘the conditions in which human individuals interact with one another face to face from body to body’ (Zhao 2003: 445) – the saint themselves. St John, as a living person, is

present via his remains of his dead body; this copresence with the saint via the relic's *virtus* allows for the formation of intersubjective communication in a highly sensual context.

The anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral, discussing Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's term 'participation' as akin to 'copresence,' observes how this phenomenon may exist 'with other persons, with collectives, with supernatural forces, and even with material aspects of their world (things)' (2013: 266). Similarly, geographer and historian David Lowenthal, points out that an object from the past as 'a tangible relic seems *ipso facto* real' (1985: 244), and as such allows 'participation', becoming conduits of prayer and devotion in the expression of religious devotion and supplicatory appeal. The copresence of and with the saint spiritually through the materiality of the relic and the role of liturgical and supplicatory prayer requires an expanded view of the relic as a participant in the liturgy of Orthodox prayer.

Hahn points out that relics need an audience, saying that 'An audience is essential. Its attention authenticates the relic' (2010: 291). It is in the often highly curated space of devotion, that, Hahn argues, a saint's cult is able to authenticate the *virtus* of the saint (Hahn 1997). In Hahn's understanding there is a kind of mutual constitution between the relic as a holy and powerful object and the supplicants as devotees.

What is seen in the monk's account of relics is a different sort of mutual constitution. For the Orthodox Christian the validity of the relic rests in its *virtus* – its life – being able to bring together the saint and the supplicant. The relic joins with the people and the clergy into an intersubjective 'together with,' like Ingold's (2010) notion of being caught up together in action. So while, analytically, we could simply agree with Hahn, doing so does little to explain *what* the presence of an audience actually does for the relic and for the audience. It is in this notion of copresence, or 'together with,' that the answer can be found. The production of relics, and the effective use of relics, rests on an understanding of bodies and persons as being porous. I have written elsewhere (Carroll 2014) concerning this ethnographically; here I offer a shorter formulation, working from the writings of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – 215 CE). A similar description of Orthodox understanding of persons could be gained from any number of sources, I choose Clement as I think his writing is particularly clear.

The Soul, the Body and External Things

Amongst his writings, there stand three works of instruction for the beginner, intermediate and advanced Christian. The first, a very direct work of practical theology, is called *The Instructor*. Clement uses Christ's instruction in Luke xii to devise a tripartite classification for what relates to the person. He argues that 'The Lord Himself [divided] His precepts into what relates to the body, the soul, and thirdly, external things' (Clement of Alexandria 2004 : 263). Much of Clement's teaching proceeds from this, focusing on the relationship between the soul, the body and external things. In so doing, Clement's category of 'external things' is seen to include things distant (e.g. household furniture) and close (e.g. unctions and ointments). Throughout *The Instructor* several qualities come to the fore. In discussing effeminate men, who like fine clothes, for instance, and put flowers in their hair, Clement sees direct correlation between the exterior of the person and their soul (*ibid.*: 255). The parallelism understood to lay between the exteriority and interiority in relation to the true quality of the person stands in contrast to many contemporary notions of fashion and identity; the typical stance in western societies places the weight of identity in the interior, typified by expressions such as 'it's what's on the inside that counts.'

Siting the true locus of being in the interiority is something Daniel Miller, in his work on Trinidadian persons, terms a 'depth-ontology' (1994). He contrasts this interior essence of being with what he argues is true for Trinidadians, for whom the surface is the true site of the self—what he terms a 'surface-ontology.' For them, what lies beneath is simply shadows: not to be considered in social praxis (*ibid.*).

What emerges in Clement's writings and in wider Orthodox social practice today fits neither framework. Rather, Clement offers what might be called a 'depth-to-surface ontology,' wherein the diseased state of the soul is manifested in practices such as manscaping, perfumery and dainty dress. What is true about the essence of the self is in the interior, and seen in the exterior. Clement gives a number of other exteriorising causalities, such as the modesty of speech, manner of eating at a banquet, the governance of belching and other bodily perfusions, the mien and comport of individuals, which are all direct denotation of the modesty and harmony resident or absent in the soul. But these relationships of similitude from depth to surface also run causally from surface to depth.

In his teaching on ointments, for example, Clement warns that ‘The use of crowns [of flowers] and ointments is not necessary for us; for it impels to pleasures and indulgences, especially on the approach of night’; and argues that such smooth oil ‘is calculated to render noble manners effeminate’ (2004 : 253, 255). In this view, the human is something of a porous vessel, and as such certain things external may cause harm to the interior. Unsuitable external things, being applied to the body, create a disharmony in the person, and so Clement urges his reader to use external things as befits the person. Clement asserts that unguents are not to be completely done without, and the surface-to-depth ontology can be seen in the benefits of ointments, too. He recognises the medicinal qualities of ointments that ‘help in order to bring up the strength’ (*ibid.*: 255). These material resources, when applied rightly, are good and helpful to the health of the body. And while not an end in itself, Clement does link the health of the body with the wellbeing of the soul. On one hand the interior quality of the soul shows forth through the body into the external things. On the other, external things have an effect on the soul through the manipulation, either beneficial or harmful, of the body. As such, Soul, Body and External Things have a double-reciprocal relationship whereby each is bound to and affected by the other two.

With such an understanding, the monk’s explanation makes more sense. The synergy, or coaction, of soul and body means that even as the soul becomes holy—and the saint glorified—so too does the body become holy. The quality of the immaterial soul is the same quality of the material body.

Materials of Holiness

In this way the synergistic coaction of the material and immaterial connect the two extremes as continuations of each other. In fact, the coaction of material is not limited to the physical body. The first three relics on the table, as described above, are composed of non-human biomatter. Two are associated with the crucifixion of Christ, the other is a camelhair belt, which is understood to have been woven and worn by his mother throughout her life. As such, it was in cooperation with the Mother of God until her death and her subsequent translation into heaven. As she was taken up, Mary is said to have given St Thomas her belt. This camel hair belt is interpreted to be something that would have been given to her husband at the consummation of their marriage. This never happened, and instead it was given to the Church. As a great relic, this belt is brought out each evening for the veneration of the pilgrims, and bolts

of ribbon are blessed over the relic in order to produce items that, once given to the faithful, they may take home with them on their return.

These ribbons, which following the classification scheme outlined above can be called tertiary relics, are sought in order to secure various miracles. Through these ribbons, I was told, the Panagia Theotokos has healed numerous cases of cancer, brought child to countless barren women, and protected individuals from harm. One, I was told by a senior hieromonk, was in the breast pocket of a police officer, and had stopped a bullet to the heart.

In the same way that the finger of St John the Forerunner is sufficient to impart presence to the entirety of St John, the tertiary relic of blessed cotton ribbon is spoken of as the belt. It takes on a sort of holographic relationship, such that the whole is present in each part. The ribbon is a relic of the relic, but in no way is that considered to diminish the potential wonder-working capacity—as Victor Buchli (2010) points out in his work on prototypicality in the context of early Christian use of ikons, the distinction between original and copy is hard to make, and as such, one may venerate the cotton ribbon as one would the camel-hair original. The ephemerality of such objects does not inhibit the affective power; rather the flexible, soft, manipulability of the fabric heightens the effectiveness. Whereas solid relics require boxes or wall mountings, fabric can be wound, tied, folded around a body or into a pocket. Thus the indexical qualities of the material foster a more overt synergistic coaction of the small, mutable relic with the body.

We have already mentioned the synergy of body and soul toward the production of relics. Now two other synergistic relations have subsequently emerged. The first is that of external things produced as relics. The Holy Cincture, for example, is a relic of the Virgin Mary because, though she is understood to have died, no body remained on earth, as she was raised on the third day. Her items of clothing, however, she gave to the Church. These are holy through their association to her holy life. To put it another way, in Orthodox Christianity, things (as places of goings-on), as well as people, may become holy, if the social life of those things is a holy one. The next synergistic relation flows from this. Through cooperation in the Virgin's ascetic struggle, the belt was made holy. And while the Panagia was materially removed from the world in her person, her belt (as well as her tunic) remained. These, being given to the Church, are used within the liturgical and pilgrimatic ascesis of Orthodox faithful. By aligning the flow (in Ingold's use) of the body and soul to the Holy Cincture, a

synergetic cooperation is understood to function between the sacred materiality of the Virgin's belt and the aspiring (im)materiality of the penitent's soul and body.

The affective cooperation of things and the coactive affect of holy things toward Orthodox persons in their effort to be holy are something I have come to think of in terms of holy contagion. Earlier I described how pilgrims pass mundane trinkets to the priest to render them holy objects, through touching and tracing the sign of the cross over something that is sacred. Likewise, ikons can be blessed by turning them face to face with older ones and making the sign of the cross – something pilgrims do regularly over the many miracle-working ikons in Vatopedi. In this way the contagious qualities of the sacred contaminate the mundane and make it likewise something that can bestow blessedness.

Jan Geisbusch, in his discussion of Roman Catholic relics, makes space for a fourth category of relics – ‘the paraphernalia of Catholic devotionism such as images, prayer cards, statues, books, or rosaries’ (2008: 60). In an Orthodox setting these are much more appropriately called *eulogia* or ‘blessings.’ *Eulogia* are regularly given and come in a multitude of forms, though they are usually consumable (e.g. bread blessed at the altar) or a trinket (e.g. a vial of oil, or a paper ikon given to a traveller). Giving an *eulogia*—that is, giving a blessing—imparts grace upon the recipient. By using the idiom of contagion in order to understand this kind of transaction, I bring to mind something which cannot be seen with the naked eye, but nonetheless is still something. If a person is contagious, it is not always through a material embrace that a disease passes from one to another; it can pass through the air—particle moisture is sufficient to carry microbials. These we know about, however, by the ocular magic of microscopes. From the perspective of the naked eye, contagion moves from substance to substance through insubstantial mediation. In the same way that the soul, the body and external things enjoy a permeability through which each may affect the other, substances of blessing may confer blessing from a distance. The priest, before placing St John's finger on the table, holds it aloft and blesses the congregation making the sign of the cross over them.

As such, the affective cooperation of and coactive production of holy things in relation to Orthodox persons is markedly similar to Ingold's idea of the textility of making, the joining in of what he calls the flow in the making of art. He says:

A work of art, I insist, is not an object but a thing and, as [Paul] Klee argued, the role of the artist—as that of any skilled practitioner—is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being. (2010: 97)

It is this, being ‘swept up in the generative currents of the world’, which Ingold identifies as the productive mechanism of making art (*ibid.*: 95). Ingold’s main point, that artefacts are things with their own generative flow, is helpful in considering the productive cooperation of Orthodox relics and people. However, there is one significant departure and one curious alteration presented by the ethnography of relics detailed above.

The first is the issue that Orthodox people do hold something of a preconceived idea in their mind when engaging with relics. For some it is very clear: one man passed a white onesie to the priest to have it blessed over the relics; he took it home to heal his sick daughter. For some it is slightly less clear, but still a preconceived idea: one young man came regularly to the Holy Mountain, to visit the monks and pray before the miracle working ikons and relics. He told me he was doing so to be close to the Theotokos and learn how to be holy—something he expressed as ‘becoming Orthodox’ and ‘becoming human.’ While this may not be the preconceived design model Ingold (2010: 92) tries to dismiss, it is nonetheless purposeful, and modelled after specific ends in mind.

The other aspect to each of these accounts outlined so far is that the end result is not the production of the thing—in this case the relic—but the production of the people. In the passing of the white onesie, the man passes an object and asks the priest to make it an index of the relic. The priest blesses it over each relic, making the cotton clothing item an index of the sacred (a tertiary relic), and a conduit of the blessing to be conferred onto the man’s daughter. For the young man, and many like him, who came to the mountain to venerate the holy ikons and relics, to visit a renown spiritual father, or to learn how to pray, the various techniques of joining into the generative flow of Mt Athos and the sacred objects therein contained was an explicit making (becoming) of the self as Orthodox and human. This iterative transformation of the self is most visible in those who come as pilgrims and stay as monks, as their whole way of life is crafted into the production of themselves as saints. But the same modes of life (characterised by humility, repentance, self-denial) can be seen in others, too.

The practice of joining the productive flow of material in order to produce the self raises the issue of human materiality. The Orthodox person is seen to be an ikon of God (a relation taken to be innate of all human beings) and of Christ (a relation cultivated through ritual practice, particularly baptism). Here, in the monk's explication of how relics come into being, it can be seen that the art-like formation of the human subject (Ugolnik 1989: 188) in the likeness of Christ works on the premise of inter-permeability of people and things – the coaction of soul, body, and external things – along lines of flow which produce the likeness of Christ are seen to produce saints and, concomitantly, relics.

Thinking through the tripartite distinction from Clement's writing to the novice Christian, and thinking through the celebration and use of relics in Vatopedi, it can be seen that the material ecology of the person (body and external thing) are inalienably linked with the immaterial ecology of the person (soul, spirit and, I would add, mind). The dividing line, however, between im/materiality is difficult to identify. This next section addresses one final relic, the sign of the cross, in order to trouble this distinction further. The distinction may, in fact, not exist; im/materiality is, then, best understood as a continuum.

The Sign of the Cross

In the same way that the soul, the body, and external things enjoy an inter-permeability through which each may affect the other, substances of blessing may confer blessing from a distance. As mentioned above, the priest, before placing the relic on the small table for veneration, holds it aloft and blesses the congregation using the reliquary to make the sign of the cross over the people.

At the far end of the spectrum, now, is the sign of the cross. Already in this chapter I have mentioned this to be made with relics over people, with trinkets over relics, with ikons over ikons, with the abbot's hand over those greeting him. Within the compound of Vatopedi the sign of the cross is made in more ways than I can enumerate here. The sign of the cross is a thing that is deployed everywhere at Vatopedi. Upon entering, upon leaving, if something is broken, if something is working, when one yawns, when one goes to sleep, when one wakes, when one eats. There are different ways to hold the fingers of the hands depending on if the person is episcopal, clerical, or lay, but all Orthodox Christians are expected to make the sign of the cross over themselves as well as any number of other people and things.

Analytically, I would not be inclined to speak of the sign of the cross in a chapter on relics. Above I mentioned a piece of the Sacred Cross – this certainly is a relic, but I was assured by informants that the sign of the cross, too, is a relic and must be thought of as one. The gestured motion, with the first three fingers pinched together, and the last two flush against the pad of one's palm, makes a relic. It is not that the layperson's hand is a relic. A bishop's or priest's hand may be considered a relic, as it is the material remains of the incarnational act of consecrating the Eucharist. But this is not true of the layperson's hand, although this hand, tracing in the air an entirely insubstantial gesture, makes a relic. By participating in the formal quality of the crucified Christ, the gestured cross is understood to make presence and endow the blessing of the crucifixion within the situation. As in the production of other *eulogia*, the contagion with the holy object produces something that can be taken away with the pilgrim. Here, however, it is apparently an immaterial object and the *eulogia* is likewise immaterial.

Having worked as a tailor before returning to academia, I received a blessing (given with the sign of the cross) from the abbot to work with the tailors while at Vatopedi. The Romanian monk under whose guidance I was to work showed me the various machines and their temperaments. Pulling up the chair, he gathered his skirts and sat down, flicked on the power switch, and then with his right hand he made a small cross over the space of the sewing needle. Throughout the weeks working alongside him, this was routine. Each time he or the other tailors sat down at a sewing machine, or turned on the iron, a sign of the cross was made over the mechanism. Each time a bobbin needed re-threading, the sign of the cross. These were not large motions, no attention was drawn to the making of such a sign, but as routine as turning on the power, so was the making of the sign of the cross.

In this gesture we have a case of what appears to be an entirely immaterial relic. While fragile materials may last only a short time, the gestured thing is fleeting. It is not just ephemeral; it is fugacious, gone even as it is made. It is even less durable than fabric and ribbon relics; as such it is also even more deployable. It may be used everywhere to bless everything. With normal relics, it is the very material of the saint through which the contact is made. With the sign of the cross, the representational form is enough to make the same contact through which grace is conferred. In both cases, and indeed also with ikons, the coaction of grace, efficacious toward the

holiness of the supplicant, is because of ‘the truth of the person’, revealed through personal relationship (Yannaras 1975), present in the relic.

It is tempting to say that the gestured object—not the embodied gesture, but that thing produced out of the gesture—is immaterial, and simply leave it at that. The idea of an immaterial object, however, troubles some analytical gazing pools. Earlier I suggested that the saint’s holy life renders their body a ‘thing’ which is produced by a subject, a bundle of ‘goings-on’ in Ingold’s sense. But it is also ‘real’ following Alfred Gell’s use of ‘object’ and ‘objectification’ (1998: 13). Gell, in his use of ‘objectification’, identifies it as a process of ‘externalizing’ the mind, emotion or social relations in an index (*ibid.*: 236, 31, 62). Contrast this to Foucault, whose use of ‘objectification’ is predicated on the making of distinction – between the self and others, within the self, and between others (1982). Whereas Gell’s use is concerned with the concretisation of abstract or immaterial things into objects (or, better, indices), Foucault’s use concerns the making of objects – out of anything. Within the process of making a distinction is the making of an object and a subject. People, for Foucault (1977; 1982), are objects of other people’s (and their own) subjectivity. For purposes here, Gellian objectification will be followed, calling it the concretisation of the prototypic relations into the art index; however as the index is the body of the saint, it is fruitfully compared to Foucault’s objectification of the self (Foucault 1988). The critical difference, however, between a Gellian and Foucauldian stance regarding the objectification of the self-as-relic is that Foucault’s subjects are such because of self-division, not because of achievement (Warnier 2007: 23). In the Orthodox context, there is a strong emphasis on achievement—more aptly called ‘becoming’.

As such, the Gellian process of intentional externalisation of the mind into something physical bears a certain marked resemblance to Orthodox usage of the sign of the cross—save that there is no physical substance to it. Yet throughout my research I saw evidence to suggest it must be considered as a material object and indication from interviewees that they thought of it as somehow material, too. People described it as something *made, given and received*; it comes with a blessing that is always worth *having*, and is something *sought and gained*. This expanded materiality allows us to consider bone, cloth and the unseen fugacious simulacra of gestured prayer all within the same panorama of material substances. And while on one hand it expands material out to the insubstantial, it also suggests that our current

understanding of materiality, in its hard durable substantial form is likewise only half the picture. In the space between spiritual religion and material religion, there may need to be made room for continua of immaterial substances and insubstantial materials.

In examining the fugacious material at this far end of the spectrum, it can be seen, as mentioned above, that *eulogia* is understood to be imparted to the Orthodox Christian even in settings where there is no *physical* object being conveyed. Taking this distilled quality back into the context of the relics of bone and wood and the blessings gained from them, there is the certain implication that *eulogia* such as bread may be best understood as primarily an insubstantial material. While these objects are ‘real’ and ‘physical’ in Gell’s sense, they are also ‘things’ in Ingold’s sense: sites of ‘goings-on.’ Such material seems to have immaterial qualities that must be examined in order to understand the social uses of these object/things.

The argument here is that the affective qualities of material properties within things, as sites of ‘goings-on,’ offer an analytic model to understand the formation and coactive abilities of such sacred objects. As I argue elsewhere (Carroll 2014), the materiality of fabric facilitates the production of sacred space. Fabric is a pliable material that can fold and open, hide and reveal – even at the same time; it can take on colour and odour, can flutter and – if in the right material and the right light – shimmer. All of these qualities are highlighted by informants as they seek language to describe the action they perceive the fabric to facilitate. The sign of the cross (as a thing) has fewer constraints, and is thus even more versatile.

In many studies within material culture that touch on religious subjects, the investigation is one of how the material engages the mind and body toward the creation or negotiation of imagined worlds and religious cosmologies. What I would like to do now is turn that question back on the material. That is to say, what happens to the material when it is engaged with the mind in the creation of such imagined worlds?

Discussion

Working from accounts like that mentioned above about Mary’s Cincture, Orthodox Christianity has, over the centuries, come to understand a succession of productive images of Mary’s closeness to the Church, her chastity, monastic virginity, betrothal and marriage, childbirth, the giving of wanted growth, and ending of unwanted

growth, the healing of cancer. In Mary's translation into heaven, her belt took on an affective quality linked to her and all with which she is associated. The Holy Cincture is a material thing linked, by its folk narrative and the indexical qualities of its material, to the body and spirit of the Virgin Mary. As such, it carries the coactive subjectivities of Mary in the material indexicalities of fabric.

Relics, such as the finger of St John and the belt of Mary, have, then, the *virtus* of the saint because of their association with that saint. But what that *virtus* is and how the *virtus* may be enacted relies to a great degree on the material qualities of that relic. In some cases, such as with skulls and fingers, the relational link between the subject and the object is quite clear, and the Orthodox understanding of the synergistic coaction of body and soul allows for the body to become a thing of great potency and a site of intersubjectivity. For other objects, such as the belt, the sensuous proximity of the item to the body of the saint does similarly.

The thing-like qualities of these objects—that is, understanding the material objects as places of goings-on with a purpose, and understanding those goings-on and purposes—becomes clearer when looking at the increasingly non-material relics. For the tertiary relics, such as the ribbon blessed over the belt, the flexibility of the cotton threads to wrap and coil about anyone or within anything enables the Orthodox Christian to have, as it were, Mary (via her *virtus*) in their pocket protecting them. At times this protection may be counted through her blessing—in the begetting of children, for example. But, as mentioned above in the account of the police officer, her protection may also be experienced clearly through the material presence of the relic.

Conclusion

Thinking about the impact on the material within the production of religious subjects allows us to consider objects as diverse as skulls, belts, ikons and gestured signs as things, each of the same class. These are things produced in inalienable relation to specific saints such that even when *which* John is not known, he can nonetheless be participated with through the copresencing of his self within his remains. The porosity of persons, such that souls, bodies and external things all are part of the true self, render objects – because of their thingness – subjects.

Acknowledgements:

I want to thank the Abbot, Geronda Ephraim, for granting me access to live and conduct research at Vatopedi, and the monks for making research truly pleasurable. I also thank Alex Pillen and Alexandra Antohin for their helpful comments and critiques on this chapter. Funding for the research on Mt Athos was provided by the Pasold Fund and the Paleologos Graduate Scholarship. All errors are my own.

Bibliography:

- Buchli, Victor. 2010. 'The prototype: Presenting the immaterial'. *Visual Communication* 9 (3): 273–286.
- Carroll, Timothy. 2014. *Becoming Orthodox: Of people and things in the making of religious subjects*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University College London.
- Clement of Alexandria. 2004[1885]. The Instructor, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol 2*, trans. Philip Schaff, 207–99. Christian Classics Ethereal Library.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1982. 'The subject and power'. *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4): 777–795.
- . 1988. 'Technologies of the self'. In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin *et al*, 16–49. London: Tavistock.
- Geisbusch, Jan. 2008. *Awkward objects: Relics, the making of religious meaning, and the limits of control in the information age*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University College London.
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hahn, Cynthia. 1997. 'Seeing and believing: The construction of sanctity in early-medieval saints' shrines'. *Speculum* 72 (4): 1079–1106.
- . 2010. 'What do reliquaries do for relics?'. *Numen* 57 (3-4): 284–316.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. 'The thing'. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, 163 – 180. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hooper, Steven. 2014. 'A cross-cultural theory of relics: on understanding religion, bodies, artefacts, images and art'. *World Art* 4 (2): 175–207.
- Ingold, Tim. 2010. 'The Textility of Making'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (1): 91–102.
- Lowenthal, David. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press.

- Miller, Daniel. 1994. 'Style and ontology'. In *Consumption and Identity*, ed. Jonathan Friedman, 71–96. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers. [Original publication lists author as 'David'].
- Pina-Cabral, João. 2013. 'The two faces of mutuality: Contemporary themes in Anthropology'. *Anthropological Quarterly* 86 (1): 257–75.
- Ugolnik, Anthony. 1989. *The Illuminating Icon*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Warnier, Jean-Pierre. 2007. *The Pot-King*. Leiden: Brill.
- Yannaras, Christos. 1975. 'The distinction between essence and energies and its importance for theology'. *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 19 (4): 232–45.
- Zhao, Shanyang. 2003. 'Toward a taxonomy of copresence'. *Presence* 12 (5): 445–55.