

# Religious practice among Finnish converts to Orthodox Christianity

Between ritual and sincerity

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In this study, I discuss the devotional lives of Finns who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland as adults. The analysis is based on interviews conducted with 29 converts to Orthodoxy. My specific focus is the interplay of interiority and exteriority in my interlocutors' religious practice. To conceptualise this dynamic, I turn to Adam Seligman's theorisation of ritual and sincerity as two modes of organising social action. For Seligman, ritual action relies on the outer form, whereas sincere action prioritises the inner form – intention and mindset – instead.

My interlocutors' religious trajectories challenge the standard conceptualisation of the modern subject as someone who is primarily concerned for the truthful expression of their internal states and therefore rejects any external restrictions placed on their actions. After all, they had voluntarily transferred to a religious group that emphasises compliance with an outer form. My analysis demonstrates that while the interviewees understood sincerity as the driving force of religious practice, they valued Orthodox ritual as a resource. Moreover, their engagement in ritual action helped them come to terms with the ambiguities of their daily lives, including their conflicting obligations and wavering commitment, and to experience their lives as imbued with religion nonetheless.

## Introduction

On the Protestant side, I felt trapped, because you cannot do anything, since it is all about faith. ... It's terribly disheartening, since we are living in the world and we are fragmented people,

broken people, for whom it is really hard to believe in a harmonious way. But we [Orthodox] can always do things and develop more integrity. Act. And in that process, our faith advances, too.<sup>1</sup>

I don't do anything specifically Orthodox like wear an Orthodox cross [round my neck] or practise Orthodox prayer in any conventional sense. I don't recite the Jesus Prayer like many do. Because I think that the form is not the point. Maybe Orthodoxy is more about your way of looking at the world.

In the above quotations, two Finnish converts to Orthodox Christianity, Olli and Simo (pseudonyms), reflect on the role of practice in Orthodox religiosity. They touch on themes such as the relationship between action and faith, the significance of forms, and the objectives of devotions. In so doing, they also raise topics familiar from scholarly discussions concerning religious practice and subjectivity. Olli evokes the common interpretation of the Protestant

1 All translations from Finnish are by the author.

subject as characterised by a concern for the moral and spiritual condition of the self and the abstraction of this interiority from any mediating practice (e.g. Keane 2002). Neither he nor Simo, however, comply with the equally common construction of the Orthodox subject as more oriented towards correct performance than pious dispositions (e.g. Bandak and Boylston 2014). In fact, both men seem to ultimately prioritise internal states over outward actions. According to Olli, Orthodox subjects are preoccupied with actions alongside faith, and can use practice as a means of self-development. Simo, for his part, explicitly questions the observance of formal devotions and suggests that Orthodoxy has more to do with one's outlook on life.

In this study, I discuss the devotional lives of Finns who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland as adults. As children, my interlocutors were socialised into Lutheranism, the Christian denomination that has historically dominated the Finnish religious landscape. At some point in their lives, they have chosen to seek membership in the Orthodox Church instead. That is to say, they have switched between two groups that envision the dynamics between interiority and exteriority somewhat differently. Here, I zoom in on this aspect of my interlocutors' processes of embracing Orthodoxy.

### **Interiority and exteriority in religious practice**

I tackle the relationship between interior and exterior dimensions of practice through Adam Seligman's theorisation on ritual and sincere action as two ideal typical modes of organising social thought and action (Seligman *et al.* 2008; Seligman 2010a, 2010b). Seligman (2010a: 9) understands ritual as an iterated performative that follows shared, pre-existing structures and conventions. Ritual action is about

the repetition of an exterior form. Sincere action, in contrast, emphasises interiority. It originates from and reflects the intentions and convictions of the individual, independent of external guidance (p. 15).

The ultimate objective of sincere action, Seligman states, is correspondence between the inner and outer worlds and a social reality that is fully transparent and unitary (Seligman 2010a: 22–3). Ritual action presupposes a world that is fundamentally broken instead. It produces a subjunctive world, a shared 'as if' world of order, harmony and community (p. 14). However, the effects of ritual are temporary: 'the ordered world of flawless repetition can never fully replace the broken world of experience' (Seligman *et al.* 2008: 30). According to Seligman (2010a: 14–15, 19), this dual conceptualisation of the world helps to manage experiences of ambiguity in a way that the sincere orientation does not. This is because ritual action depends only on outward performance, not on the integrity of internal states.

Both ritual and sincerity are ubiquitous in human culture (Seligman 2010a: 34–5). As ideal types, they never appear in pure form, but always combine in different ways. Nevertheless, Seligman (2010b: 76) argues that the so-called modern period is overwhelmingly biased in favour of the sincere mode. I find Seligman's contribution useful as it proceeds from a broad understanding of social action, postulates a necessary degree of overlap between ritual and sincerity, and contains illuminative insights concerning the wider vision of the world produced through action. Yet, his interpretations concerning both the modern condition as well as the sincere and ritualistic premises of different religious traditions can be excessively generalising.

Seligman (2010b: 72–3, 76) traces the rise of the modern sincere subject back to

the Reformation. In coupling Protestantism and modernity, he sides with certain anthropological discussions on subjectivity. According to these discussions, a key project within Protestantism has been to promote self-authored and self-governed individuals whose actions in the world reflect their moral condition (e.g. Keane 2002: 74). In due course, Protestant imaginaries came to feed ideas of modernity that spread across the globe (Keane 2002, 2007). This interpretation, however, has been criticised for ethnocentrism (e.g. Haeri 2017). Concern over the quality of the individual's relationship with the divine is not limited to Protestantism or Protestant influence, but is a part of many traditions (p. 124–5). In Orthodox Christianity, for example, exteriority in the form of correct performances and aesthetic formations plays an important role (Bandak and Boylston 2014; Luehrmann 2018a). However, interiority matters too, and not only in monastic asceticism but also for lay people (e.g. Luehrmann 2017; Pop 2018; Naumescu 2019).

One interesting context for examining assumptions related to interiority and exteriority is religious conversion. In contemporary North America and Western Europe, prevailing rhetoric surrounding religious change foregrounds free will and personal choice. In line with the modern 'ethics of authenticity' (Taylor 1992), converts to Orthodox Christianity also often describe their paths to Orthodoxy as processes through which they discovered 'their spiritual home' or 'their truest selves' (Winchester 2015: 454; see also Riccardi-Swartz 2019: 118). The correspondence between inner and outer worlds is a very sincere objective. Yet, existing research has also taken note of the central role of devotional practices in becoming Orthodox (Bringerud 2019; Riccardi-Swartz 2019; Slagle 2011; Winchester 2013, 2015, 2016).

My study proceeds from this starting point. I trace the interplay of ritual and sincere orientations in my interlocutors' accounts concerning devotional practice, using previous research and Orthodox teachings as a point of reference. To limit the scope of my discussion, I concentrate mainly on the practice of prayer. The analysis demonstrates that my interlocutors rejected the idea of a devotional life based on exterior rules instead of personal needs, and ultimately prioritised inner over outer form in practice. Yet, they valued Orthodox ritualistic practice as a resource, and used it to tap into the religious subjunctive. Their engagement with ritual action, moreover, helped them to experience their lives as imbued with religion through fluctuating levels of activity and commitment.

### **Studying the religiosity of Finnish converts to Orthodox Christianity**

The Orthodox Church of Finland (OCF) is an autonomous Eastern Orthodox archbishopric under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1918, after Finland had gained independence from Russia. In independent Finland, the OCF has always formed a small religious minority. In 2019, 68.7 per cent of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) and 1.1 to the OCF (Sohlberg and Ketola 2020: 50).

During the first fifty years of its existence, adults joining the OCF were rare. Around the turn of the 1970s, however, the number of new adult members started on a significant growth curve. The annual number of people joining the OCF grew markedly for several decades, before levelling off in the 2010s. Since the turn of the millennium, the church has welcomed between 800 and 1000 new members

every year (Kupari 2021). One important source of inflow has been immigrants from Eastern Europe. In 2019, 14.6 per cent of the circa 56,000 OCF members were foreign-born (Sohlberg and Ketola 2020: 52). As for the new members born in Finland, they consist of both people with some Orthodox family background and people who have embraced Orthodoxy after a process of religious seeking.

This study is based on interviews of 29 people, 15 men and 14 women, all native Finns. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees were between 30 and 80 years of age (average 59 years) and had been members of the OCF between 1½ and 40 years (average 18 years).<sup>2</sup> All but two had belonged to the ELCF as children and the majority had remained members of the ELCF up to joining the OCF. Furthermore, two-thirds of the interviewees were (or had been prior to retirement) employed in cultural domains such as performance, visual arts and crafts, books, audio-visual media and creative services. The rest worked as teachers, academics and entrepreneurs. The occupational profile of the interviewees is not the result of a coincidence, for the study is part of a wider research project focusing on cultural workers who have joined the OCF as adults (see also Kupari forthcoming). To locate potential interviewees, I browsed through Orthodox media sources and asked my colleagues in academia and contacts in the OCF for suggestions. In addition, I also interviewed people who volunteered to participate after learning about the project from social media.

I conducted the interviews face to face between November 2019 and February 2020. The interviews were on average 95

2 These numbers are approximate as not everyone provided their exact year of birth or year of joining the OCF.

minutes in length and semi-structured in nature, dealing with the interviewee's religious trajectory and present-day religiosity. They were recorded and later transcribed and coded with the help of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.TI. Prior to the interviews, I provided all participants with written information about the research project, data management, and the voluntary nature of participation. In the interview situation, we went through the information package and the participants signed a consent form regarding the use of their data. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, I have minimised any identifiable information presented in this study.

A final note on terminology. In scholarship, a switch between two communities within the same major tradition is often called conversion. For example, existing research commonly frames North Americans' and Western Europeans' paths to Orthodoxy as conversions, regardless of the Christian background of most research subjects (Bringerud 2019; Riccardi-Swartz 2019; Slagle 2011; Thorbjørnsrud 2015; Winchester 2013). In this study, I also refer to my interlocutors as converts. Discussion of etic and emic definitions of 'conversion' is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is worth mentioning that most of my interlocutors did not self-identify as 'converts', considering their transformation to have been less dramatic in nature.<sup>3</sup>

### Prayer practices among converts

My interlocutors' paths to the OCF reflect the interplay of many factors (Kupari forth-

3 Their stance seems to be connected to negative connotations associated with the terms 'conversion' and 'convert' both in Finnish society and the Finnish Orthodox community (see Kupari 2021; Kupari forthcoming).

coming). At the time of developing a fascination for Orthodoxy, most interviewees were either loosely affiliated or former members of the ELCF. Estranged from the Lutheran Church, they nevertheless had spiritual inclinations or an interest in ethical or existential questions. Commonly, they were exposed to Orthodoxy through either interpersonal networks or work, hobbies or travel. Furthermore, their pursuit of a more profound integration into the Orthodox community was often preceded by some sort of juncture, be it an acute life crisis or a transition to a new stage in life.

Among the pull-factors of Orthodoxy, my interlocutors included, for example, rich liturgical life, holistic lifestyle and positive anthropology (Kupari forthcoming). When describing both their initial attraction to Orthodoxy and the ways in which it had become a part of their lives since, many of them took up the theme of prayer. In the following, I outline the prayer practices of six of my interlocutors. These summaries, which I elaborate in the analysis, provide an idea of the range of approaches to prayer in the material.

### Olli

When I met Olli, he had been a member of the OCF for more than ten years. After disaffiliating from the ELCF as a young adult, he had familiarised himself with different religious and philosophical traditions. He had turned to Orthodox Christianity after the death of a loved one.

As we learned in the introduction, for Olli one important aspect of Orthodoxy was the possibility of personal growth through practice. In the interview, he repeatedly emphasised the slow deepening of his spiritual life. It had been important to him not to do anything 'by force', because that would have been 'pretending'. Therefore, he had introduced elements of Orthodoxy into

his life only gradually. 'When it is time, you will develop a need for them.' At the time of the interview, Olli's prayer practice was extensive. He read the Jesus Prayer service in the mornings. In addition, he recited the Jesus Prayer throughout the day.<sup>4</sup> He tried to integrate the prayer into ever more situations, finding the constantly enriching nature of the practice rewarding. 'More and more you notice that you are praying somewhere where you haven't done it before. Suddenly, it surfaces. It's really exciting.' Overall, Olli felt that his daily prayer practice had a markedly balancing effect on his whole being.

### Hanna

Hanna had been an active Christian all her adult life. She had come into contact with Orthodoxy when visiting a monastery. Afterwards, she had developed a keen interest in different aspects of Orthodoxy. She had joined the OCF over ten years prior to the interview.

At the time of the interview, health problems prevented Hanna from participating in liturgical life actively. Her domestic prayer practices, in contrast, were multi-form. She started and ended her days with a brief prayer. She might also pray at various occasions throughout the day. Nevertheless, she did not want to tie her practice to any rule, because that would make her 'focus more on the rule than on the substance'. She wanted to stay in a 'dynamic state' instead.

4 The Jesus Prayer refers to the short prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner'. The Jesus Prayer service is a prayer service centered around reciting the Jesus Prayer in repetition. According to OCF guidelines, it can be conducted in monasteries, in parish small groups, or in private homes, also without officiating clergy (Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko n.d.).

Therefore, Hanna could just as well pray while on a walk as before her icon corner. Sometimes she recited the lyrics of liturgical chants as a form of prayer. At other times, her prayers came closer to informal contemplation around a certain religious theme. Hanna considered interceding for those in need an important duty. In connection with prayer, she also asked saints for advice and help on issues that were troubling her. However, when she was tired, she condensed her prayer into a brief invocation. 'God does not actually need our varied rhymed sentences,' she reasoned. It is the 'attitude of the heart' that counts.

### Jutta

Baptised into Lutheranism as an infant, Jutta had nevertheless occasionally accompanied her relatives to Orthodox divine services in childhood. She had disaffiliated from the ELCF as a young adult and spent time in another religious community. After a period of non-affiliation, she had joined the OCF more than five years prior to our meeting.

Jutta described her present-day religious life as 'stable' and 'not very strict'. She tried to pause in front of her icon corner daily to 'establish a passing contact'. She might say a prayer using a brief formula, or not. During difficult times, she sometimes used a prayer book and read something 'with more concentration'. She went to church once or twice a month and described the liturgy as a balancing factor in her life. Overall, Jutta acknowledged the 'calming' and 'soothing' influences of active prayer life on the self. She noted that it would do her good to pray more, but stressed that she wanted to avoid 'performance' becoming an end in itself. She also admitted that adopting new religious practices as an adult could be challenging. 'Maybe some people rearrange their whole lives, but I haven't been able to

do that. And I haven't found it necessary, either.' Nevertheless, she was gradually coming to the realisation that prayer 'is not just one obligation among others. Upstairs doesn't actually need our prayers, but somehow they affect us humans positively.'

### Juhani

When I interviewed Juhani, he had been a member of the OCF for several decades. He had disaffiliated from the ELCF as a 'young radical', but after some time had nevertheless grown interested in theological questions. First, he had drawn closer to the ELCF, but had become disillusioned with 'the attempt to solve matters of faith through rationalisation'. What he liked about the Orthodox Church was that it 'did not speak about but pray to God'.

Juhani prayed in the mornings and evenings. He placed his 'trust on tradition' and used a modification of the Jesus Prayer as the basis of his prayers. He also interceded on behalf of his loved ones on a daily basis. Furthermore, he always had a prayer book and wax candles at the ready, if the situation called for more intense prayer in front of the home altar. As for collective worship, he sometimes had a guilty conscience for not attending services owing to his work schedule. At the same time, he depicted himself as an 'anarchist creature'. He was in the habit of making up his own rules and mostly felt at peace in doing so, convinced that this did not 'count as a grave sin'. He nevertheless described Orthodoxy as deeply ingrained into his life: 'It is present in everything ... if not otherwise than as a demand and an incentive to make it more comprehensively true.'

### Simo

Simo had joined the OCF more than five years prior to the interview, switching directly from the ELCF. The decision

had been preceded by extensive study of Christian theology. For Simo, a central pull-factor of Orthodoxy had been its stress on growth and healing as central to spiritual life. He had found the more stagnant conceptualisation of humanity prevalent in Protestantism difficult to accept.

Simo's devotions had gradually evolved towards a more minimalistic and free-form expression. The function of forms, he reflected, is to act as 'starting points for deeper seeing and experience and understanding'. They need to support and serve the individual in his or her daily life. Otherwise, they will become a 'burden' and 'hindrance' to growth. As for prayer, Simo emphasised that it is ultimately about one's attitude towards fellow human beings and the whole of creation. He referred to the writings of church fathers and noted that when an individual develops a more prayerful outlook, he or she 'begins to see sacredness everywhere'. Simo himself turned to 'traditional prayer' only occasionally. He considered his creative work as a form of prayer. Otherwise, he prioritised dedicating himself to his family and cultivating a compassionate attitude towards others. After work and family life, he explained, he lacked the focus required for formal prayer.

### Antti

Antti had joined the OCF as a young adult. What had especially appealed to him in Orthodoxy was the prayerful nature of liturgical life, as well as the ideals of monastic asceticism. He described his younger self as harbouring a 'suspicion toward words', which was why he had felt drawn to the Orthodox focus on embodiment and experience: the Orthodox 'did not even try to use words to describe what people experience' in divine services.

Antti had spent the greater part of his life as Orthodox. Over the course of

decades, his commitment had varied. He had spent extended periods of time in Orthodox monasteries, but had also been in close contact with other religious and spiritual traditions. Overall, he emphasised that he had never viewed active devotional life as an obligation or a cause of stress. At the time of the interview, he prayed a few times a month, when he felt the need to ask for reassurance or to express thankfulness. His prayers were brief 'sighs' that could be uttered any time and anywhere. Furthermore, in recent years, he had visited the church mainly during the Easter night liturgy. He stayed for a while, lit wax candles and prayed for his loved ones. Attending Orthodox divine services, following the familiar progression of the service, transposed him to 'a sacred place or space that was always there and present' for him.

### Ritualistic prayer as a resource but not a rule

According to a common description, Orthodox Christianity is a liturgical religion (Ware 1964: 271). Collective worship is prioritised above anything else. Orthodox divine services, furthermore, have a pronouncedly ritualistic flavour. Stability of form, proper execution and non-discursive sensory experience are all greatly valued. The focus on correct performance is a way to defer to the tradition of the church. According to Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014: 27, 29), this emphasis can be traced back to the Orthodox understanding of the nature of divine truth. In this understanding, divine truth has not yet been revealed to humanity in full. Therefore, it cannot be pinned down to any singular authoritative source. However, while incapable of comprehending God's truth, humanity can still experience it through the liturgical life of the church (pp. 29–30).

My interlocutors greatly valued Orthodox divine services. A recurring feature of the interviews was an evaluation of Orthodox and Lutheran services in which the former were praised and the latter disparaged. What is important for the present discussion is that the interviewees often made note of the 'prayerfulness' of Orthodox services as well as the Lutheran focus on 'preaching'. They were attached to the texts of Orthodox liturgical prayers and songs. Another important element was repetition. While the prayers themselves included a lot of repetition, the entire formula of the service also remained the same from one occasion to the next.

These ritualistic aspects were contrasted with the more fluid nature and 'informative' and 'personal' tone of Lutheran services. Juhani and Antti commended Orthodox services for lack of explanation (something I noted in the previous section). Antti was attracted to Orthodox liturgical life for its 'meditative prayer' and the absence of 'rationalisation', whereas according to Juhani, Orthodox worship emphasised prayer instead of 'words spoken by humans to humans'. Olli, moreover, criticised the banality of Lutheran sermons and the modernisation of Lutheran hymns, and praised Orthodox services for 'always being delightfully the same'. Through such descriptions, the interlocutors conveyed their appreciation of the Orthodox ritualistic use of language compared to the Lutheran pursuit of sincere speech in the form of clarity, simplicity, directness and truthfulness (see also Keane 2002: 74; Naumescu 2019: 411).<sup>5</sup>

5 The ELCF supplement to the Orders of Worship states, for example, that the sermon should communicate the Christian message in a form that is instructive, topical and relevant to the people of today, and that represents the preacher (Kirkkohallitus 2009: 92–3).

When it came to domestic devotions, however, their predisposition towards ritual was not so clear-cut.

In Orthodoxy, private prayer derives its legitimacy from its connection to liturgical prayer (Ware 1964: 311; see also Luehrmann 2018b: 120–1). In their domestic devotions, people are encouraged to position themselves in front of their icon corner and make use of a prayer book (Paavali 1978: 79; Ware 1964: 311). Ritualistic elements in Orthodox prayer include the emphasis on regulation and repetition; the use of fixed prayer texts and formulas; embodiment in the form of rhythm, postures and gestures; and the mediating role of icons and candles. My interlocutors' prayer practices exhibited these features in different degrees. As the previous section made clear, Olli and Juhani observed a more or less extensive personal prayer rule, which included reading fixed prayers on a daily basis. Hanna, Jutta and Antti also relied on prayer texts or verbal formulas, either regularly or occasionally. Overall, my interlocutors found it a comfort and relief to be able to turn to tradition when reaching out to the divine. Some declared that they liked having recourse to words sanctioned by the church instead of having to come up with words of their own. Others described their embodied and habitual performance of familiar gestures or invocations, which surfaced more or less automatically when the situation called for them. Prayer could take the form of making the sign of the cross or lighting a candle in front of the home icon corner. It could also boil down to a moment of conscious stillness.

Orthodox prayer is not only about standardisation. There is also room for personal adaptation and spontaneity. In an educational text on Christian prayer, Archbishop Paavali (1978: 97) of the OCF counsels: 'Adopt a prayer rule that suits

you, hold on to it like a dear friend, but do not let it enslave you.' In this vein, some of my interlocutors had indeed come up with a personalised prayer rule – and possibly replaced authorised prayer texts with a text of their own. Many, however, explicitly shunned any kind of rule, even a self-made one. Jutta wanted to avoid 'performance' and Simo deemed rules a 'burden'. Hanna, who prayed extensively, stated: 'I have consciously decided that I won't tie my prayer to any specific situation, because then ... it will easily become a cause of stress and I will begin to focus more on the rule than on the substance. I keep myself in a dynamic state with respect to prayer.' Overall, the interlocutors had fundamental issues with the notion that one's prayer practices should be moulded after external structures. This attitude was the most pronounced with interviewees who only prayed when struck by the right mood, like Antti. However, even Olli emphasised that devotional practices should be internally rather than externally motivated.

All of the above interpretations convey a sincere orientation towards religious practice. They proceed from the premise that to be successful actions have to originate from within. According to Seligman (2010b: 75), a pervasive aspect of the hegemony of sincerity in modern societies is the tendency to 'read ritual as an authoritarian, unquestionable, irrational set of constraints on the individual'. My interlocutors' statements concerning prayer rules also reflect this tendency. Even interviewees with active prayer lives harboured negative attitudes towards regulation. Some, for their part, consciously struggled to apply a fresh perspective to authoritative guidelines. Jutta, for example, described how she was only beginning to understand that the purpose of the church's recommendations is not 'to spite or burden people', but to make a

positive impact on their lives.

Scholars studying so-called cradle Orthodox Christians describe Orthodox formation as life-long immersion in a taken-for-granted religious world (Bandak and Boylston 2014; Kupari 2016; Naumescu 2018, 2019). The principles of correct practice are instilled in individuals from early on, starting with children being taught how to relate to people, objects, events and spaces charged with religious significance in their surroundings (Bandak and Boylston 2014: 33; Naumescu 2018: 36–7; Naumescu 2019: 394–6). The outcome of such learning is the capacity to draw on one's embodied knowledge to behave properly in different situations, with no need for conscious deliberations (Naumescu 2018: 35–6; see also Kupari 2016). In the case of North American and Western European converts to Orthodoxy, however, the process is unavoidably different. For most of them, the Orthodox religious world is not a world of familiarity and self-evidence. Initially, they therefore need to rely on discursive representations to guide their actions (Slagle 2011: 109–11).

For the most part, existing studies have portrayed converts to Orthodoxy as relatively strict in terms of religious observance (see, however, Riccardi-Swartz 2019; Thorbjørnsrud 2015). Converts take rules and regulations seriously and are concerned about theological correctness (Bringerud 2019: 151–3; Slagle 2011: 109–11, 114–21; Winchester 2016: 593). My analysis shows that discursive representations of devotional life can also cause resistance among converts who hold a negative attitude towards external authoritative structures. Among my interlocutors, this opposition was especially pronounced regarding private devotions. In the context of collective worship, submission to the ritual order came more easily and even provided

a welcome relief from the Lutheran emphasis on sincerity.

### **Sincerity, spiritual development and prayer**

Archbishop Paavali's (1978: 97) advice on personal prayer rules does not exhaust his concern with sincerity. In his discussion of Christian prayer, he also instructs devotees to pray attentively and strive towards a disposition of remorse and humility (pp. 95–6). For Paavali, that is to say, successful prayer performance calls for the proper interior state. According to Sonja Luehrmann (2017: 173), whether the objective of aligning the inner with the outer form in prayer extends beyond monastics to lay people is subject to some debate in the Orthodox world. Yet, modern spiritual literature often draws on the context of monastic asceticism when advising lay readers on how to lead a spiritual life (pp. 173–4). Archbishop Paavali's text, a modern classic in the Finnish Orthodox community, is an example of such literature.

The Orthodox understanding of humanity emphasises the potential inherent in every human to grow closer to God (Ware 1964: 236–7). Methods for seeking spiritual development include participation in the liturgical life of the church, ascetic disciplines such as prayer and fasting, and the exercise of Christian ethics (Paavali 1978: 22–3; Ware 1964: 240–2). Previous scholarship has identified this elaboration on maturing through disciplined and mindful practice as an important pull-factor of Orthodoxy (Bringerud 2019: 212; Slagle 2011: 85, 106, 113). Based on existing research, North American and Western European converts consider self-transformation to be an important religious goal. They engage in Orthodox devotions with the explicit objective of change and view compliance with an outward form as a means to cultivate certain interior

states (Bringerud 2019: 212–7; Slagle 2011: 98–100; Winchester 2016).

Many of my interlocutors had also been attracted to the Orthodox conceptualisation of humanity centred on the possibility of growth. Simo, for example, stressed how Orthodoxy provides you with means to try rising out of the 'mud puddle' where you have been wallowing, rather than considering you unable to do anything to improve your condition. Furthermore, the interviewees also acknowledged that active engagement in devotions such as formal prayer fosters spiritual development. Some described the 'calming', 'nurturing' or 'empowering' effects of prayer on themselves. Yet, the majority did not admit to any steadfast pursuit of change.

One exception was Olli. He used prayer systematically as a 'technology of the self' (see Luehrmann 2018a: 9). The centre of Olli's prayer life, the Jesus Prayer, is a formal prayer of particular status in Orthodox Christianity. Introductory texts commonly emphasise that it can be practised anywhere and at any time, by anyone (Paavali 1978: 89; Ware 1964: 313). However, the ultimate goal is to internalise the prayer to the extent that it becomes a constant companion to one's thoughts and actions. Olli's situation in life made it possible for him to dedicate a substantial amount of time to prayer. He experimented with different techniques and enjoyed observing the gradual evolution of the practice as well as the flashes of self-discovery that came with it. Moreover, he felt that the Jesus Prayer was actually gaining ground in his life, becoming part of more and more situations.

Most of the interviewees, however, did not emphasise form and discipline to the same extent as Olli. With prayer as well as with Orthodox devotions in general, intention and disposition were seen to trump observance and performance. As

Hanna stated, 'the attitude of the heart' is what counts. Of all my interlocutors, Simo pushed this line of argument furthest. He did not practise 'traditional prayer' regularly. Quoting church fathers, he argued that 'prayer is ultimately about serving your neighbour' and that the 'path of prayer' ideally helps the individual to see that sacredness 'is not limited to forms'. Simo's interpretation of prayer is an extreme example of how the interlocutors used their knowledge of Orthodox theology to justify their approach on devotional practice.

In the Orthodox understanding, the ultimate objective of spiritual development is *theosis* or union with divine energies (Ware 1964: 236–7). Through the practice of virtues, imperfect human beings can reach a deeper understanding of God's presence and influence in the world (Chryssavgis 2008: 162). The notion of spiritual development as a different way of experiencing the world is present in both Olli's and Simo's accounts. Yet, each of them had different takes on the role of devotional practice in the process of self-transformation. Whereas Olli emphasised the integration of formal prayer into ever more situations, a process that transforms one's experience of these situations, Simo advocated assuming a 'prayerful' outlook on one's ordinary, informal interactions with the world. Most of the interlocutors fell somewhere in between these two positions. They were not as suspicious of outer forms as Simo, but considered the inner form as the overriding one.

### **The Orthodox subjunctive and everyday life**

A central feature of Seligman's theorisation is his understanding of ritual action as world-creating action. Ritual produces an 'as if' world of perfection that stands in conscious tension with the flawed world of the everyday (Seligman 2010a: 14).

Orthodox parlance concerning religious devotions and rituals acknowledges this feature of ritual action. For example, the liturgy is often described as heaven or God's kingdom on earth (e.g. Chryssavgis 2012: 84–5; Ware 1964: 270). Similarly, in his preface to the 2001 edition of the prayer book used by the OCF, Bishop Panteleimon (2001: 8–9) writes how 'prayer provides us with the possibility of rising from daily life to God's kingdom of hope, love, and brilliance'. It is noteworthy that both examples depict a dichotomy between the ritual and the non-ritual world. The two worlds do not fuse together. Sooner or later, return to the non-ritual world is inevitable.

Because of its dual conceptualisation of the world, ritual action can tolerate ambivalence and uncertainty more easily than sincere action, which stands in fundamental opposition to these qualities (Seligman 2010a: 22). It 'provides a critical way of dealing with ... the eternal contradiction and ambiguity of human existence' (p. 36). Here, it is worth reverting to Olli's citation at the very beginning of this article. In it, Olli describes finding the Protestant emphasis on faith alone disheartening, since humans are 'broken people, for whom it is really hard to believe in a harmonious way'. In other words, he implies that human brokenness poses problems for sincerity. He does not think the same about ritual, however. Even broken people can still act within and upon the world (see also p. 15).

The capacity of ritual to mediate and manage ambiguity was also present in my material in less direct ways. In the interviews, my interlocutors conveyed an acceptance of their lives and selves as governed by various influences. In their daily lives, they juggled different obligations and flexibly adjusted their devotions to fit changing circumstances. Hanna struggled with health problems, Juhani with the demands

of work, and Simo with the responsibilities that came with being a spouse and a father. The interviewees worked in secular environments and had irreligious and differently religious loved ones. They themselves also had other passions besides religion. Many of them admitted that most of their daily doings were not geared towards religious goals. This was not something they sought to permanently overcome. The existence of conflicting motivations, however, did not threaten their Orthodox identity in any fundamental way. Between their mundane chores and undertakings, my interlocutors made use of Orthodox devotions to briefly evoke, experience, and remind themselves of the world of religion. Their domestic prayer practices, in which they used the ritualistic features of Orthodox prayer as a resource, constituted one important way of tapping into the Orthodox subjunctive. Generally speaking, they cherished the rich array of Orthodox discursive, embodied and material practices to integrate religion into their lives.

For example, when asked about the presence of Orthodoxy in her daily life, Marja, a middle-aged interlocutor who had joined the OCF over thirty years ago, first emphasised how work occupied a big part of her thoughts and time, and then added that Orthodoxy is nevertheless 'present somehow, or hopefully is, every day'. Marja tried to hold on to a routine of reading morning prayers. Alternatively, she prayed with her non-Orthodox husband, 'either in the morning or in the evening, sometimes both, sometimes neither, for human reasons'. She wore an Orthodox cross round her neck, kept icons at her workplace, and took a travel icon with her when she travelled, using these to fleetingly evoke the world of religion. In the interview, she emphasised both the habitual and the voluntary nature of Orthodox prayer. On the

one hand, she noted how Orthodox practices 'are just a part of my life. They have become a custom'. On the other, she stressed how she was under no obligation to pray if she did not feel up to it, because Orthodoxy 'is not oppressive or compulsive like that'.

In their discussion of the organising principles of Orthodox religious worlds, Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014: 34) argue that for Orthodox Christians, the bottom line is not to break off connection with the church. Involvement in Orthodox religious worlds, they explain, positions individuals in webs of relationships characterised by deference (p. 35). Orthodox Christians are called to submit to the authority of the church and follow the guidance of those with special expertise or access to divine grace (p. 34; Luehrmann 2018a: 10–6). In this way, Orthodoxy comes to prioritise obedience and interdependence over dedication and personal responsibility (Bandak and Boylston 2014: 30, 32). Participation in the mystical community that provides access to the divine comes first – and it is secured through sufficient compliance with the ritual order. It does not call for all-encompassing commitment but action (p. 34; see also Seligman 2010a: 12–13).

My interlocutors considered Orthodox devotions more an option than an obligation. Yet, they definitely used devotional practice as a means to reinforce their togetherness with the Orthodox community and access to the Orthodox subjunctive. Furthermore, even though they recognised spiritual development as an important religious goal in theory, in practice many of them were mostly concerned about sustaining their connection 'upstairs'. Jutta, for instance, explained how she went to church once or twice a month 'to calibrate' herself 'into some kind of order' and to counter the confusion of her everyday life. When asked

what contributes to this sensation of stabilisation, she mentioned the fixed, repetitive and rich nature of the service, thus emphasising its ritualistic aspects. She explained that in the liturgy, 'you become part of not only the parish community present, but the eternal community as well'. Moreover, she had the feeling that this was 'enough', that no greater commitment was expected of her.

In a similar manner, Antti felt that his relative passivity in terms of devotional life did not make him 'less of an Orthodox' in any way. At the time of the interview, he did not participate in collective worship regularly. Yet, in the interview he repeatedly took up the topic of Orthodox divine services. He described them as a unique experience of and encounter with the sacred and emphasised that the opportunity to take part in this encounter – in the Orthodox subjunctive – was immensely important to him. For Antti, that is to say, even rather minimalistic practice and participation was sufficient to nurture 'a root of belonging' in the church (see Bandak and Boylston 2014: 34).

The Orthodox vision of spiritual development and *theosis* can also be compared to Seligman's depiction of ritual orders. On the one hand, it emphasises imperfection as fundamental to the human condition, thus supporting a dual conceptualisation of the world (Chryssavgis 2008: 154; Ware 1964: 240). In a common Orthodox saying, spiritual development is about 'falling down and getting back up' (Chryssavgis 2008: 154). It is not possible for humans to root out their vices, which makes them perpetually dependent on devotional practices. On the other hand, it nevertheless proposes a certain expansion of the ritual frame, the possibility to perceive 'the ordinary experience of everyday life ... in the extraordinary light of the eternal kingdom' (p. 162).

According to Seligman, this is precisely the goal of ritual action: to hone participants' sensibilities to the extent that they can creatively apply the ritual framework even outside the ritual context and sustain the subjunctive world longer (Seligman *et al.* 2008: 35–6).

The influence of Orthodox teaching was clearly discernible in my interlocutors' accounts concerning their spiritual development. When speaking of their moral and spiritual condition, even interviewees with active devotional lives foregrounded deficiencies and failures. Several employed the metaphor of falling down and getting back up mentioned before. The interlocutors' modest tones correspond with right Orthodox parlance on the topic of interior states. Nevertheless, I argue that their accounts also convey another facet of their experience of Orthodoxy.

At least for my interlocutors, the conceptualisation of humanity as incurably flawed yet able to approach the divine translated into a conviction that religion can be deeply imbued in one's life even when lacking full dedication. Juhani, for example, emphasised that religion was constantly present in his life, 'but not in any impeccable or unblemished way'. He stressed that one of the things that particularly appeals to him in Orthodoxy is the mindset that 'it is better to drink blessed rather than unblessed vodka'. Since having full control over one's interiority is not possible, outward actions of compliance gain in value. Overall, the interviewees often mentioned their increasingly accepting attitude towards human imperfection and 'brokenness' – as reflected in themselves and other people – as a central effect of embracing Orthodoxy.

## Conclusions

This study has discussed interiority and exteriority in the devotional lives of Finns who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland as adults. Religious conversion is a fascinating context for inquiring into assumptions related to interiority and exteriority, because it characteristically involves changes in these assumptions (Keane 2002: 69). What makes my case study particularly interesting is that the religiosity of my interlocutors has evolved in a contrary motion compared to the standard narrative of modernity. While Protestant and post-Protestant North American and Western European societies have been seen as dominated by a focus on interiority (Seligman 2010a: 28; Seligman 2010b: 72–3), Orthodoxy is stereotypically conceived of as ‘dwelling on surfaces’ (Luehrmann 2017: 166).

In the analysis, I have investigated my interlocutors’ descriptions concerning the role of prayer practices and other devotions in their religiosity, paying attention to dynamics between interiority and exteriority. I have accompanied my empirical observations with remarks related to Orthodox teachings on practice and spiritual development. As a theoretical framework, I have used Seligman’s theorisation of ritual and sincerity. For Seligman, ritual action hangs on the outer form, whereas sincere action prioritises interiority.

My interlocutors’ prayer practices showed extensive variation, ranging from regular engagement in formal prayer to occasional reliance on more spontaneous prayer. Most interviewees appreciated and employed Orthodox ritualistic prayer as a resource in their everyday lives. However, they were not at all fastidious in their observation of regulations and guidelines related to prayer. In fact, they were explicitly against the notion that devotional practice follow external standards rather

than internal motivations. In this sense, they prioritised interiority over exteriority. Moreover, while they recognised the possibility of spiritual development through disciplined practice – the possibility of influencing one’s internal states through compliance with an external form – most of them did not admit to a systematic project of cultivating piety. Their goal was often more modest: to balance different religious and non-religious commitments and to maintain a connection to the divine.

In existing research on conversion to Orthodox Christianity, converts have often been found to adopt a rigorous attitude towards regulations and to immerse themselves in devotional practices with the explicit objective of self-exploration and self-transformation (Bringerud 2019; Slagle 2011; Winchester 2013). In comparison, my interlocutors appeared more relaxed and less serious about their devotional lives. It is possible that this finding reflects societal differences. Maybe the average recruit to the OCF differs in some way from the typical convert to Orthodoxy in North America. Alternatively, it can also result from methodological choices. My method of conducting single interviews with hand-picked people may have had specific advantages and disadvantages compared to that of recruiting interviewees during fieldwork in a parish used in previous studies. For one thing, with the method I used, I was also able to reach people who were not particularly active churchgoers. Another thing to take into account is that my interlocutors were not recent converts. At the time of the interviews, they had been members of the OCF for almost twenty years on average, having had plenty of time to settle into their lives as Orthodox Christians.

However, the finding can also be connected to a certain difference in research focus. Social scientific scholarship has

conventionally started from the premise that conversion constitutes an inner change. According to Daniel Snook and colleagues (2019: 225), ‘what is perhaps most consistent across conversion research is that conversion involves a radical change to the individual’s consciousness by way of the self and identity’. As scholars have taken an interest in the concrete processes through which conversion takes place, they have turned their attention to the role of practices in constructing and consolidating religious interiorities. Daniel Winchester’s (2013, 2016) research into the mechanisms by which sustained engagement in practices such as fasting facilitates the incorporation of Orthodox interpretative frameworks into one’s subjective experiences is one insightful elaboration on this important theme.

However, the function of practices as tools of more or less conscious self-formation does not exhaust their role in religion-as-lived. As Bandak and Boylston (2014: 30, 32) have convincingly argued, another organising principle for individual religious practice with respect to authorising structures is correctness: deference and adherence to a shared normative framework. Correctness is more about exteriority than interiority and does not strive towards a perfect alignment between the two. Rather, properly executed formalised action renders the quality of practitioners’ internal states secondary and ‘subordinate to the order of the sacred practices they undertake’ (p. 39).

Seligman (2010b: 76 and 2010a: 36) suggests that in contemporary sincerity-infused societies, even ritual is often approached within the frames of sincerity. When this happens, it becomes difficult to discern and accord value to the formal features of ritual action and the unique work it does in managing ambiguity. This

tendency, he claims, extends also to academia (Seligman 2010a: 36).

My interlocutors placed a great deal of emphasis on sincerity as the driving force of religious practice. Interior states – intentions and dispositions – mattered also in connection with formal devotions. In the analysis, I have nevertheless paid attention also to the external qualities of their devotional practice. I have demonstrated that the capacity of ritual to construct a temporary subjunctive world alongside the world of everyday experience and use it to cope with the ambiguities of everyday existence was significant to my interlocutors’ religiosity. Tapping into the Orthodox subjunctive facilitated their experience of the profound integration of religion in their lives, even when it actually constituted only one frame of reference among many. Moreover, the Orthodox understanding of the human condition liberated them from the pressure of aiming for total harmony between interiority and exteriority, and encouraged them to accept themselves as imperfect people, for whom the most important thing is to nurture a connection to the divine. For many of my interlocutors, these qualities of Orthodoxy crucially contributed to its attraction in contemporary Finland. ■

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