

# PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

Jeanne Kormina

## The One Who Understands: St Xenia the Blessed, Small Miracles, and Therapeutic Turn in Russian Orthodox Christianity<sup>1</sup>



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### Abstract

*The article discusses the veneration of St Xenia of St Petersburg in contemporary Russian vernacular Orthodoxy. Based on an analysis of such unorthodox forms of veneration of this saint as a sculpture and a lyrical song, the article shows that obtaining emotional comfort and the emotionalisation of communication with a saint are constitutive parts of 'lived' Russian Orthodoxy today. St Xenia is seen by believers as a 'peer counsellor' with experience of social suffering and therefore capable of empathy and consolation. The article shows that the 'small miracle' expected from addressing a saint or visiting a holy place is often a state of emotional comfort. The article suggests that all this happens as a result of the influence of the global therapeutic turn in Russian Orthodoxy.*

**Keywords:** Orthodox Christianity; therapeutic culture; lived religion; memorials; St Xenia of St Petersburg; small miracles

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## Introduction

The veneration of saints is an important, if not constitutive, part of Orthodoxy. The research literature observes that saints should serve as moral exemplars and role models for Christians,<sup>2</sup> while in popular religiosity they are perceived primarily as heavenly protectors and helpers.<sup>3</sup> In the imagination of believers the saint is always associated with the domain of the miraculous; the ability to perform miracles during life and after death is expected of a saint. Healing from illness, returning unharmed from war, giving birth to a child by a previously barren woman, or stopping a fire are classic miracles performed by saints in the devotional literature and ethnographic descriptions. A miracle is the happy resolution of a problem, restoring the right order of things through divine intervention. A miracle's content is at the same time culturally and historically specific and is determined by believers' everyday experience. This article argues that the concept of miracle is often associated with the sphere of emotional comfort in modern Orthodox religiosity: achieving harmony in social relationships, especially within the family, and harmonising one's own emotional state are believers' desired 'small miracles'. It seems the saint as a wise friend ready to listen to believers and capable of giving help has become more in demand in popular Orthodox Christianity today than the saint as a powerful figure, model, and holy protector.

I began to notice the language of therapeutic culture being used among Orthodox Christians at the beginning of 2000 when I was studying *avtobusniki* – pilgrims who came for a short weekend trip to a sacred place by rented bus. These pilgrimages were usually organised by female lay activists, who saw this work as their religious vocation and their way of missionising people.<sup>4</sup> In conversations with pilgrims and in the devotional literature they read, and which some of them authored, I could see that these people were looking for an individual religious experience of some sort, and when talking

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2 Brown 1983; Macklin 1988; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011; Rousselet 2011; Salmesvuori 2014; Bandak 2022.

3 See Kizenko 2000; Stahl 2014; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2012. For the saint as helper in the contemporary Catholic tradition see Orsi 1998.

4 Kormina 2019.

5 Lerner 2020, 3.

about a ‘small miracle’ they had during their journey, they would frequently describe it as a harmonisation of their emotional state, which resembles the ideology of wellbeing typical of therapeutic narratives.<sup>5</sup> When travelling to a holy place, the pilgrims did not expect to have their immediate problems solved (there are always some exceptions); rather, they felt their inner state was harmonised. As a doctor who was one of the regular visitors to the sacred site in the Pskov Oblast’ where I did my field research declared, every time he visited this holy place, ‘dozens of questions and problems were solved by themselves’, and his ‘mind and heart’ were purified.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary Orthodox Christians, just like other believers and non-believers, live in a world permeated with narratives of therapeutic discourse.<sup>7</sup> They find it in the self-help literature,<sup>8</sup> in TV and radio shows,<sup>9</sup> and in other segments of social reality, and they cannot avoid its influence on their own conception of the self and their emotional culture. In this article I will show how the popular Orthodox saint, Xenia the Blessed, becomes a primarily ‘therapeutic saint’. The article is based on field research that my colleague Sergei Shtyrkov and I have conducted since the early 2000s in St Petersburg. It included interviews with believers and priests, an analysis of the hagiographic and devotional literature, work with internet sources and social media materials, and participant observation. I argue that obtaining emotional comfort from and the emotionalisation of communication with a saint are today constitutive parts of ‘lived’, or vernacular, Russian Orthodoxy. That said, achieving a state of harmony occurs in the stories of believers not by working on their selves as therapeutic ideology teaches but by interacting with a saint or a holy place through prayer and proximity. In the following pages the article shows how this culture is revealed in the context of the popular veneration of St Xenia of St Petersburg. Starting with a discussion of the opening of her memorial at Smolenskoe cemetery in the summer of 2023 and then moving to an analysis of a popular song appealing to St Xenia, I show that *sostradanie* (compassion) is the main category of emotional work attributed by believers to their saint, whereas *uteshenie* (consolation) is its main desirable effect. The

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6 Ильюнина 2011, 203; Кормина 2019, 205.

7 Tiaynen-Qadir and Salmenniemi 2017.

8 Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014.

9 Matza 2009; Lerner 2011.

monument and the lyrical song are vernacular forms of veneration of this saint. I also show that 'crying out one's troubles' is a grassroots therapeutic practice in popular Orthodoxy in Russia.

## **Orthodox and post-Soviet adaptations of global therapeutic discourse**

Researchers who study contemporary mass culture write about a powerful therapeutic turn that includes a particular language concerning the self and society, and self-care practices. As the authors of the volume 'Assembling Therapeutics: Cultures, Politics and Materiality' argue, this huge industry, which has developed in the global north, is adapting like any global phenomenon to local realities and taking locally specific forms.<sup>10</sup> In another collaborative study two of the authors of that essay collection propose the use of the concept of glocalisation to analyse local forms of adapted therapeutic discourse.<sup>11</sup> I follow a similar path in this article: I analyse the local adaptation of global therapeutic culture, examining it at the level of grassroots practices, with the post-Soviet situation and Russian Orthodox religious culture as its refracting lenses.

The therapeutic narrative initially grows, according to American anthropologist Eva Illouz, 'from the fact that the individual has become embedded in a culture saturated with the notion of rights' and 'conceives of the self as in need of development and/or reparation'.<sup>12</sup> Local adaptations of therapeutic discourse produce culturally specific formations of the self, and how it can be healed and improved. Anthropologist Inna Leykin has studied the Russian '*Rodologia*' therapeutic groups, whose coaches train people to find the causes of all their problems in their family past – namely, in how their ancestors experienced state violence during the Soviet era. Exploring the family's past and identifying historical trauma is part of the therapy process in these groups. Unlike American therapeutic ideology, which understands the self as unique and autonomous, these people think of their own self as deeply embedded in unbreakable relations with their ancestors and the state, as a collectivist rather than an individualistic self.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Salmenniemi et al. 2020, 12.

11 Tiaynen-Qadir 2020; Lerner 2020; see also Salmenniemi and Qadir 2017.

12 Illouz 2008, 185–187.

13 Leykin 2015.

When discussing the post-Soviet self in her research into the adaptation of the therapeutic turn in Russian TV shows, Yulia Lerner, a specialist in Russian popular culture, concludes that ‘therapeutic logic and its interpretative modes of self and emotions are imitated in post-Soviet popular Russian culture’ rather than truly acquired. She argues that alongside ‘emotional capitalism’, with its idea of the rationalisation of emotions and the management of emotions, there is a culturally embedded alternative system of ‘emotional socialism’ in Russia – a ‘historically constituted, normative cultural style of thinking and talking about an individual, her inner world and her emotional style’.<sup>14</sup> Lerner does not develop her notion of ‘emotional socialism’, but one can assume that the reduced individualism Leikin mentions is part of it. In other words adaptations of the therapeutic turn to the post-Soviet Russian reality have exposed culturally rooted differences in the perception of how the self is organised, how to work with it, and for what purpose.

These differences are intensified when the ideas of the therapeutic turn originating in an individualistic ‘culture saturated with the notion of rights’ are translated to the Orthodox language with its focus on discipline and obedience (*poslushanie*) embedded in its soteriology, or theology of salvation. Yet modern Orthodoxy incorporates some of these ideas –albeit in its own way. Since the 2000s Orthodox theologians and psychotherapists in Russia have published theoretical works and self-help literature that discuss the problem of the healthy Orthodox self and its management. Many of these ideas were first outlined in Russian in books by the Orthodox celebrity, publicist, and theologian, Greek Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlakhos). His *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers* was first published in Greek in 1985 and translated to Russian in 2004 and was later published in several editions and on the internet.<sup>15</sup> These works are a result of the global therapeutic turn, and their popularity among the Russian Orthodox suggests that their readers have also included themselves in this culture. This book draws on the teachings of the Church Fathers, inviting readers to a more careful study of their writings that will help develop, through ‘spiritual healing’, their Orthodox Christian self.

My main goal is to help modern man experience healing in the bosom of the Orthodox Church... I recognize that we are all sick and in need of a Physician.

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<sup>14</sup> Lerner 2015, 350–351.

<sup>15</sup> Vlakhos 2004. The book was published in Russian in several online Orthodox libraries. including Azbuka very (ABC of faith) and predanie.ru.

We are weak and seek healing. The Orthodox Church is a common refuge and hospital where everyone who is sick and suffering can be healed.<sup>16</sup>

This and similar books 'translate' therapeutic discourse in the Orthodox Christian language, adding many nuances to this picture. Unlike therapeutic culture, they do not teach how one should live in the world, but how one can become a better Christian and concentrate on the task of salvation. The believer's work on improving her self should be realised through prayer:

... I am convinced that the so-called psychological problems are problems of thoughts, darkness of mind and an impure heart. It is the impure heart, as the holy fathers describe it, the darkened and cattle-like mind and impure thoughts that create these so-called problems. But if a person heals himself inwardly, opens his heart, cleanses the mental part of his soul and frees the rational part of his soul, he will not have psychological problems either.<sup>17</sup>

According to Orthodox teachings the human being is subject to the passions (*strasti*), which become sins if they are 'repeated often and [lurk] in the soul for a long time' (*ibid*). If one's self is to be healthy, one must continue to strive to eliminate stress through practices of spiritual sobriety and special techniques, including the constant uttering of the Jesus prayer.<sup>18</sup> Orthodox 'psychotherapy' differs from the therapeutic culture in its original version and in many respects contradicts it, yet it is a reaction to its spread and to the problems it addresses.

In this article I focus primarily on 'ordinary believers' and their ways of being Orthodox, which at other times were commonly referred to as popular, vernacular, or folk religion.<sup>19</sup> These terms now seem irrelevant, as the educational and social distance between the modern layperson and the clergy, the basis for distinguishing between 'folk' and 'right' religion, is much shorter than in the nineteenth century, for example. Many Orthodox people in Russia are familiar, if only superficially, with the sacramental literature on which the doctrine of *strasti* is built and are aware of its concept's application

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<sup>16</sup> I am referring to the online version of the book, as I currently do not have access to the paper version. Влахов 2004, <https://psylib.org.ua/books/vlaho01/txt00.htm#p3>.

<sup>17</sup> Влахов 2004, <https://psylib.org.ua/books/vlaho01/txt00.htm#p4>.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Поп 2018.

<sup>19</sup> See Levin 1993; Панченко 1998; Rock 2001; Штырков 2006; Bowman and Valk 2012.

in the system of religious discipline through reading books and from many internet sources.<sup>20</sup> In their religious life these members of the ‘church of the unchurched’ (*tserkov’ nevotserkovlennykh*), people ‘without strong religious commitment, but with casual loyalty to tradition’, manage to ‘construct their effective attachment to and ability to derive agency from an established religious institution’.<sup>21</sup> These believers are prone to both the ‘proper’ Orthodox theology of the self, based on the teachings of the Holy Fathers and transmitted through various sorts of media, and to the ideas of a therapeutic culture, with its orientation to achieving worldly wellbeing, which, as Finnish sociologist Tiaynen-Qadir correctly points out, can be traced back to Protestant ethics.<sup>22</sup> In her research of the Finnish Orthodox Church Tiaynen-Qadir uses the concept of ‘assemblage’ to show that Orthodox *therapeia* ‘based on patristic tradition and texts’<sup>23</sup> and global therapeutics are combined but not synthesised. There are probably similar trends in Russian Orthodoxy, but this article suggests an examination of this process from a different angle: the impact of the therapeutic turn on believers’ practices of the veneration of saints.

## Emotionalisation of popular religiosity: memorial to a saint

On 6 June 2023 a monument to St Xenia the Blessed was unveiled at Smolenskoe cemetery on Vassilievskii Island in St Petersburg, close to the chapel with her tomb. The monument was erected in connection with the celebration of the 35th anniversary of her canonisation by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>24</sup> The sculpture presented Xenia as she is usually depicted in icons: a modestly dressed frail woman in a long skirt, jacket, and shawl, with her left hand on a stick. The sculpture was human-sized and placed on a low pedestal so that Xenia was slightly taller than a woman of average height. This made the sculpture look very human, an equal of the crowd coming to the chapel.

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20 For the transformation of the self through the realisation of the concept of obedience in an Orthodox convent, see Dubovka 2020.

21 Kormina and Luehrmann 2018, 397.

22 Tiaynen-Qadir 2020, 58.

23 *Ibid.*, 61.

24 На Смоленском кладбище открыли памятник блаженной Ксении Петербургской 2023. St Xenia was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1988. She was the only female saint of the nine canonised on that day, and the only one who had already been canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (1978).

An observer could tell the believers were unsure of what to do with this new artefact in a holy place where they would usually come to see Xenia's tomb and place their message (*zapiska*) to the saint in the cracks in the chapel's walls.<sup>25</sup> Some visitors looked long into Xenia's face, tried to lean their heads against her shoulder, or simply hugged the sculpture. Xenia made a gesture of blessing with her right hand, inviting believers to communicate with her. Many responded enthusiastically, either kissing her right hand as they would a priest's, bowed under her blessing hand, or simply took her bronze hand in theirs and held it for some time as they would a dear friend's in a gesture of respect and trust during an intimate conversation.

The Orthodox canon does not support the veneration of sculptures, so it is all the more surprising that in recent years the erection of monuments to saints has become widespread throughout Russia. This new form of the



Venerating the sculpture of St Xenia at the Smolenskoe cemetery in St Petersburg.

eneration of saints requires a separate study; here, I will only observe that such monuments become partly icons, partly historical monuments, and partly park sculptures, depending on their sponsors' goals and tastes and where they are erected. St Alexander Nevsky is therefore praised as a historical personality, military leader, and statesman, and his monumental sculptures are erected on city squares,<sup>26</sup> while the semi-folklore saints, Peter and Fevronia,

<sup>25</sup> Kormina and Shtyrkov 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Сукина 2022.



who have become the patrons of family, love, and fidelity in the new Russian state calendar, are represented more lyrically and are usually features of city parks.<sup>27</sup> Several sculptures of St Nicholas of Myra, known as a wonderworker and miraculous helper, have been erected on the Russian Federation's borders as markers of the frontiers of the state.<sup>28</sup>

Memorials to the saints cause theological bewilderment among believers and criticism from some theologically sophisticated observers, yet many welcome them as an effective means of spreading Orthodoxy. The famous theologian and art historian Irina Yazykova identifies familiar Soviet monumental propaganda in this wave of installation of monuments to saints. She agrees that it is helpful to educate and missionise believers – 'our barbarian people' as she puts it – even in this dubious way, but warns that it should be done in moderation. In particular, she condemns the consecration of such monuments by priests – a typical element of the unveiling of sculptures.<sup>29</sup>

To my knowledge, such sculptures are neither conceived of nor perceived as proper icons – holy images that reveal their agency by bleeding, crying and making other sorts of miracles. Yet, in the eyes of believers, sponsors, and the artists who make them they should have some of the visual characteristics of holy images to distinguish them from historical monuments or banal urban sculptures. The artistic problem that any sculptor of a monument to a saint must address is how to designate their sainthood. There are simple and direct solutions, among them engraving the saint's name and the miracles they performed on the monument, placing a prayer to the saint on the monument's base, or surrounding the saint's head with a halo. Yet sainthood is indicated differently in the case of Xenia. The realistic depiction of her age and emotion (hands with distinct veins and a wrinkled face) have become signs of her sainthood in accordance with the image of this popular saint in Russian Orthodox religious culture.

The artistically unpretentious but emotionally effective monument of St Xenia in Smolenskoe cemetery was not developed immediately. The first

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27 Духанова 2018.

28 A website devoted to the project to install monuments to St Nicholas of Myra says, 'Monuments to St Nicholas the Wonderworker are to be installed on the four borders of Russia. The campaign to install the monuments is called "From Kaliningrad to Chukotka". According to the initiators' plan, the bronze sculptures of Russia's heavenly patron saint should protect our country's spiritual and geographical space from external and internal threats.' Памятники Николаю Чудотворцу в России. See also Vaté 2024.

29 Языкова 2012.

attempt to erect a sculpture of the saint in St Petersburg took place several years earlier in Matveevskii Square on the Petrograd side, on the site of the destroyed church of which Blessed Xenia was a parishioner according to her hagiography.<sup>30</sup> In 2014 a competition for Xenia's monument was held, and more than 30 projects were submitted. The commission liked none of them, however, declaring the competition invalid. As Alexander Petrov, deputy chair of the Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture, told journalists, although there were formal signs of sainthood in the works, no integral image of the saint was created. 'We cannot erect a monument on a formal basis; it must be worthy of St Petersburg and the memory of its heavenly patroness,' he said in an interview with a journalist.<sup>31</sup> Another member of the jury, the sculptor Jan Neiman, commented that all the monuments were narrative-oriented and therefore weak in terms of sculptural art: 'The sculptors speak the language of literature, not sculpture. It's an inappropriate form (for conveying the idea of sanctity).'<sup>32</sup> In other words the artists' sculptures illustrated hagiographical stories instead of creating an independent image and conveying some kind of emotion. In Neiman's words, 'there is too much pain in St Petersburg's inhabitants, too much historical memory. And pain requires consolation. That's why there is a pilgrimage to the chapel of Xenia the Blessed; many consider her a heavenly protector. It is difficult to materialise such a phenomenon.'

The projects submitted to the unsuccessful competition were displayed in 2016 in a temporary exhibition at the Museum of the History of Religion in St Petersburg, which I attended. They offered different artistic solutions for the image of St Xenia, many with undoubted artistic merit. Yet the members of the competition committee were correct to note that the project's sculptors portrayed the saint as detached from her devotees and spectators. She was either embraced by her own emotions and withdrawn from herself or turned towards God.

Vadim Sazonov and Nikolai Ivanov, the sculptors of the monument installed near the chapel in June 2023, did not participate in this competition.

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30 To be precise, the first sculptural representation of St Xenia appeared even earlier. It is a small bronze bas-relief measuring 30x36 cm in the courtyard of the Philological Faculty of St Petersburg State University on Vassilievskii island, which appeared in 2000. The bas-relief was the work of the sculptor Vyacheslav Chebotar in 1991.

31 Конкурс на проект памятника святой Ксении Петербургской пока не выявил победителя 2015.

32 Ibid.

Artistically, their work loses significantly to many of the competition's projects. Yet they have apparently succeeded where the competition's sculptures failed: their realistic Xenia, with her hands and the face of an elderly and simple woman who endured much, expresses compassion and invites people to enter communication with her. One journalist wrote in a short report about the memorial, 'The sculpture epitomises the image of an elderly woman whose face captures humility and compassion, while the countenance remains luminous'.<sup>33</sup> Suffering makes one wiser and stronger – this is how to become a better Christian and a path to salvation.

### The art of suffering: a saint in a popular song

Different times need different saints. The veneration of St Xenia of St Petersburg at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was formed in an environment of urbanisation and modernisation in which the ordinary woman's life differed from the village routine.<sup>34</sup> Not only do the functionality and images of the saints change, but the emotional culture associated with the veneration of the saint differs with the passage of time: her image becomes less frightening and alien and more human and intimate. Xenia the Blessed was canonised in 1988 as a Holy Fool, someone with paradoxical and strange behavior. Her *vita* depicts her as a homeless person wearing rugs and roaming the streets of the eighteenth-century Empire's capital city barefoot in all seasons and causing anxiety to people with her strange words and behaviour.<sup>35</sup> These antisocial and frightening features are shown in her early pictorial images: in a cheap popular print (*lubok*) of the end of nineteenth century she is a stern old woman;<sup>36</sup> a picture from the popular illustrated magazine 'Niva' of the 1890s shows a face lacking in emotions; and in a portrait recently discovered in the Hermitage she is a rough-faced person of uncertain gender.<sup>37</sup> The latter corresponds to an episode in her *vita*: when her husband

33 Смирение и сострадание на лице: как выглядит памятник Ксении Петербургской на Смоленском кладбище 2023.

34 Kizenko 2003; Kahla 2007; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011.

35 Shtyrkov 2011. For holy fools see Ivanov 2006.

36 Кутейникова и Николаева 2018, 88.

37 Гусев 2017. The artist Alexander Prostev, the painter of a cycle of pictorial representations of Xenia, which depict her as a youthful and feminine city dweller set in St Petersburg landscapes, wrote an article in which he challenged the identification of the Hermitage portrait, as it contradicts the image he created (see Простев 2017; see also Загадка портрета юродивой ради Христа Марфы Соचीной (Ксении)).

died, she asked to be called by his name, Andrei Fëdorovich, and began to wear his clothes, symbolically changing her gender.

The adaptation of the image of the yurodivaia to the tastes of modern Orthodox Christians meant that a homeless vagrant with an unclear social status has become the model of a suffering woman whose life experience enables her to understand the problems of others. Among the testimonies of miraculous help provided by the ‘promoters’ and ‘guardians of the shrine’ of St Xenia through various media, there are cases of the saving of a soldier on the battlefield in response to his mother’s prayers to her<sup>38</sup>, of traditional cures of illness or infertility, and solving other problems ‘with which many Russians, especially women, struggle’<sup>39</sup> – such as adapting to changing socioeconomic situations and myriad injustices and bad luck. Yet as my co-author and I have written elsewhere, many accounts of her help suggest that people come to the chapel first to be comforted, to feel her love for them, and to restore peace to their social world.<sup>40</sup> In a short documentary made by the parish of the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God for their *Vkontakte* page, subscribed to by more than 28 thousand people, during the commemoration of St Xenia on 6 February 2024, the makers asked visitors why they turned to Xenia. A woman named Xenia answered:

I came up with the thought that Xeniuska would grant us all an increase in love – between us, between my relatives and friends, and within my soul. I don’t have enough. And to our whole world, our country, people who are in a difficult situation: love, peace, understanding, forgiveness, humility, and meekness. I wish we had more of that.<sup>41</sup>

Another visitor, a recent widow, replies:

I had my husband’s ninth day yesterday.<sup>42</sup> Now I’m alone. I want to ask Xenia to give me strength to cope with my pain. I have cancer. I want her to help me overcome my misfortune, grief, and loss. She always helps, I always go to her, ask her. Xenia is my dear one.<sup>43</sup>

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38 Kormina and Luehrman 2018, 406–407.

39 Tocheva 2021, 76.

40 Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2012.

41 Short documentary *День святой Ксении* (The Day of St Xenia) 6.02.2024, published on the ‘Smolenskiy temple and the Chapel of St Xenia the Blessed’ group VKontakte page.

42 The ninth day after death is one of the important dates in the posthumous commemoration cycle, along with the fortieth day and the anniversary of death.

43 *День святой Ксении*.

The documentary's makers note that people come to St Xenia as if she were alive, and they talk to her as if she were a dear (*rodnoi*) and understanding person. The rector of the Church of the Smolensk icon of the Mother of God confirms this image of the saint as a source of love and harmony, saying that visitors to the chapel are 'all... comforted by this love', urging the film's intended audience: 'Come to worship, to weep, to give thanks to Blessed Xenia too!'<sup>44</sup> The priest also accepts and even promotes the transformation of a frightening holy fool into a dear and loving saint.

We do not know exactly when empathy began to be attributed to this saint as her core characteristic, but it seems that one of the devices that helped the spread of this image was a popular lyrical song that appeared around the end of the 1990s or the beginning of the 2000s.<sup>45</sup> The song '*Ksenia blazhennaia, pomogi, rodnaia*' ('Xenia the Blessed, help me, my dear') is in the repertoire of many Orthodox singers. It can be found on YouTube and other internet platforms in many versions, performed solo, in ensembles, and choirs by women, men, and children. Believers also perform the song a capella on various informal occasions, from birthday parties to parish dinners and even in church after the liturgy.

The song has become a piece of folklore like many of late Soviet times, which it resembles in terms of its poetic sensibility, music, and 'social life'. Similar to a Soviet lyric song, it uses the principle of parallelism to describe the emotional state of the song's character, though instead of juxtaposing the emotions of a heroine and the state of nature as was typical of Soviet popular lyric songs, it compares St Xenia's life story and suffering with the suffering of the song's female character.

Ксения Блаженная, как же ты молилась,	Xenia the Blessed, how you prayed!
Ты за всех молилась в поле по ночам.	You prayed for everybody at night in the fields.
Ты услышь моление, матушка Ксения,	You hear my prayers, Mother Xenia,
Помоги мне выплакать горе и печаль.	Help me weep out my sorrow and grief.

The song's lyrical heroine appeals to Xenia as a spiritual adviser, someone who can give spiritual counsel and even a blessing – like the sculptural Xenia in Smolenskoe cemetery.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> In Russian Orthodox Christianity there is no other saint to whom lyrical songs are addressed.

Ксения Блаженная, помоги, родная.	Blessed Xenia, help me, my dear.
Я тебе молитву в сердце возношу.	I offer you a prayer in my heart.
Под благословение, матушка Ксения,	For your blessing, Mother Xenia,
Я к Твоей часовне снова поспешу.	I will hasten to your chapel again.

Composed in the poetic and musical form of a lyrical song, it exemplifies a modern religious folklore that probably originates in a post-Soviet monastic environment. The song's last stanza suggests that St Xenia's main assistance is with bearing the hardships of life on the believer's way to salvation:

Ксения Блаженная, вразуми, родная,	Xenia the Blessed, give me guidance, my dear,
Видишь как опасно предстоит идти.	See how dangerous it is to walk.
На путях сомнения, матушка Ксения,	On the paths of doubt, Mother Xenia,
Помоги спасения Крест перенести	Help me bear the Cross of salvation. <sup>46</sup>

The shared experience of suffering and pain makes Xenia a 'peer counselor', understanding, and empathic. In modern religious folklore and in the accounts of believers Xenia appears a less miraculous helper, but in a more down-to-earth capacity: as a saint who shows a pattern of suffering and helps one find the strength to cope with life's difficulties. Her area of expertise is social suffering, and her way of helping is compassion.

### **(So)stradanie and uteshenie: empathy as a virtue**

The anthropologist Thomas Matza, who researched the adaptation of therapeutic culture in St Petersburg between 2005 and 2013, has argued that 'what was at stake for both men and women caught up in the psychotherapeutic turn, was not so much the construction of the deep psychological self, that scholars term *neoliberal subjectivity*, but a search for modes of truth-telling about experience, emotional harm, or violence, and a pursuit of sociality in the privatized space of postsocialism'.<sup>47</sup> Another anthropologist, Nancy Ries, has documented this search for ways 'to tell the truth' and the 'pursuit of sociality' in a society where familiar social ties are rapidly being reorganised. She notes that all her Russian friends endlessly lamented to her about their lives in the 1990s, suggesting these speech events be called a genre of lamen-

<sup>46</sup> See the full song, 'Ксения блаженная, помоги, родная' 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Matza 2018, 8.

tations.<sup>48</sup> She believed people complained to her about life (which they had every reason to do) because they saw her as a foreigner from a wealthy country in a position to help. It can be assumed, however, that they were thus establishing or testing a friendship because a friend in Russia is among other things someone to whom one can sincerely lament about life (*plakat'sia v zhi-letku*, literally: to cry in the vest).<sup>49</sup> A popular song about Xenia the Blessed is written in a similar vein. Its lyrical personage comes to the chapel to 'weep out her troubles' (*vyplakat' bedu*) to the saint and thus 'relieve her soul' (*oblegchit' dushu*), but at the same time 'to pursue sociality'. In the last section of the article I discuss 'crying out one's troubles' as a grassroots therapeutic practice in popular Orthodoxy in Russia.

In their ordinary lives people in Russia count on emotional support from a friend – that is, a socially equal person with whom we share a common experience based on age, gender, where we live or come from, or hobbies, whom we trust and who have time and other 'resources' to listen. Theoretically, they can obtain such help from a specialist during psychotherapy, which has become a more usual practice among middle-class Russians, as Matza shows in his book. The professionalisation of emotional help in Russia is gradually becoming a more common way to solve problems, though the high degree of social distrust and the cost of therapy services significantly limit its spread.<sup>50</sup> There is a third option, however: to search for emotional support in religion, which according to many observations is the most typical reason for joining the Church. A priest explained in an interview with the widely read website pravoslavie.ru:

There are people who cross the threshold of an Orthodox church in search of the Truth, the meaning of their lives, and find this meaning in Christianity. But frankly, there are far fewer of these people than those who come out of trouble and want the Church to make some kind of fundamental change in their lives, to make their lives easier, to make them feel good at last.<sup>51</sup>

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48 Ries 1997.

49 Kharkhordin 2016.

50 Matza 2018.

51 Нектарий 2019.

One of many proofs of the therapeutic power ascribed to St Xenia came from my conversation with Maria, a 20-year-old student of the law department at one of St Petersburg's universities. She had come to study in St Petersburg from her hometown in Siberia. She had lost her mother in infancy and was raised by her paternal grandmother, whom she loved dearly and after moving to St Petersburg missed greatly. Her student dormitory was close to Smolenskoe cemetery, and she regularly visited the chapel of St Xenia there. She first came to the chapel on a weekday. The number of worshippers struck her, as did the sense of order, peace, and cosiness. 'When I came in, the atmosphere, the feelings – they were inexpressible: it was as if I had come to my own home. I felt as if she (Xenia) was my dear relative (*rodnoi chelovek*): it was like visiting my grandmother.'<sup>52</sup> Maria's need of the warmth and care she had enjoyed in her hometown and what she missed in her new student life were a light version of 'weeping out' the pain. Because she was young, Maria saw Xenia as a loving grandmother rather than a friend; but she sought the same atmosphere of trust and intimacy from the saint as other believers, expressed in her case through the notion of home. For both young Maria and the older devotees of St Xenia of St Petersburg, the 'small miracle' they experienced during their pilgrimage to the chapel in the Smolenskoe cemetery was getting emotional balance and comfort, a state that in their Orthodox language they referred to as consolation.

Whereas therapeutic culture primarily teaches one to live in interaction with other people as equal partners with equal rights, Orthodoxy teaches the ideal of obedience and humility within the deliberately hierarchical relationships between husband and wife, believer and priest, novice and abbess, saint and earthly human.<sup>53</sup> This hierarchy is broken with St Xenia. She is a 'peer counsellor' who can help precisely because she herself has similar experiences – of leaving her home like Maria, of being lonely and unhappy. If she can serve as an example, it is, as the song says, of how to endure 'sorrow and want' in earthly life.

According to her vita Xenia herself had an overwhelming experience of social suffering. As a young girl, she married a man she was soon to lose, at the age of 26. After his death the young widow left her husband's house and started living on the street, begging for food. Some lay versions of her vita, such as the play 'Xenia: The Love Story', staged in the Alexandrinskii theater

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Maria, born in 1996, St Petersburg, February 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Dubovka 2015.



since 2009, develop a story of her husband's marital infidelity, whereas some pious variants say that he died suddenly at a festival and therefore could not receive communion and make his confession before his death. In both cases her beloved made her unhappy and mad – a Fool for Christ (*iurodivaia*), either because she felt betrayed or had to pray hard for his salvation after his unchristian death.<sup>54</sup>

Suffering can be social capital, an art, and a virtue. In their letters to St Xenia, which are sent to the chapel and published as collections in special books, on the website, and in the parish's social media, believers constantly represent themselves as poor people who experience the deprivation of things that are indispensable for normal human existence, such as family relationships, money to survive, or health. As we have argued elsewhere, a person's humility is a special quality that increases their opportunities to be heard by their saintly interlocutor, who achieved sanctity through suffering.<sup>55</sup> From the perspective of therapeutic ideology such a self-representation would be considered a demonstration of a damaged self, with 'pathologies' like low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and a lack of assertiveness requiring work on the self.<sup>56</sup> Eva Ilouz would probably call this rhetoric of self-humiliation the problems of 'the "size" of the self, how big or how small one defines oneself'.<sup>57</sup> Yet in the Orthodox culture humility has a profoundly different meaning. It is a virtue that is the opposite of the passion of pride (*gordynia*). Following this logic, the more miserable you are, the more opportunities you have to be heard by the saint and God. Hence, self-humiliation in letters to St Xenia is a rhetoric that starts the narrative of lamentation, similar to that observed by Ries. Although its therapeutic result is a harmonisation of the self, this state of wellbeing is achieved by emotionalising religiosity while weeping and getting consolation rather than changing one's self.

## Conclusion: a therapeutic saint

Xenia the Blessed is not the only therapeutic saint in Russian Orthodox Christianity. People can turn for consolation to other recently canonised saints like St Seraphim of Sarov, the uncanonised *staretz* Nikolay Gurianov, and St

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54 For more detail see Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011.

55 Kormina and Shtyrkov 2012.

56 Ilouz 2008, 157.

57 Ibid.

Matrona of Moscow. All are seen as earthly saints who know the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, or whose own life experiences make them perceptive of others' suffering. However, with her experience of social suffering and image of a simple urban dweller, Xenia is the most ordinary of the saints and arguably the most popular among believers. St Xenia becomes a junction for various secular and religious discourses about the self, the emotions, and self-help strategies, where modern believers come with their pain and hope in the quest for compassion and consolation. One can say that Xenia the Blessed becomes a kind of imaginary therapist in modern popular religiosity.

Orthodox cultures create distinct versions of the self, which are immersed in specific emotional regimes, and suggest some strategies for working with it. The Orthodox vision and management of the self in its Russian variant can be seen as one of the domesticated versions of the global therapeutic discourse Eva Ilouz and others discuss, a culturally specific contribution to the 'glocalized therapeutic assemblage'.<sup>58</sup> The therapeutic narrative involves the identification of a person's condition as deviating from the norm, detecting the reasons for this deviation, and describing the treatment of the unhealthy condition, which consists of revising and changing one's self. Orthodox culture defines suffering as the norm and illness as a blessing in preparation for the transition to eternal life. At the same time, in her daily life, an Orthodox person seeks to avoid suffering. He, or more often she, comes to Xenia and other saints in search not of a model of exemplary Christian behaviour (how can one imitate a holy fool!) but a source of emotional comfort and consolation. 'Weeping out grief' as a specific therapeutic practice involves the creation of a space of social intimacy. A lyrical song that can be sung with friends around the table, a monument that can be embraced, and the very space of the chapel in the midst of a quiet old forested cemetery all contribute to the creation of such a space.

The concept of a miracle changes accordingly. In the modern Russian 'church of the unchurched' everyone, not only religious virtuosos, can count on receiving the personal experience of a small miracle. This small miracle often concerns the harmonisation of an emotional state – consolation – and this is one of the results of Russian Orthodox Christians' appropriation of a global therapeutic culture.

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<sup>58</sup> Tiaynen-Qadir and Salmenniemi 2017, 382.

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## Abstrakti

*Jeanne Kormina, Hän, joka ymmärtää: Autuas Ksenia, pienet ihmeet ja terapeutin käänne venäläisessä ortodoksisuudessa*

Artikkeli käsittelee pyhän Ksenia Pietarilaisen kunnioitusta tämän hetken venäläisessä vernakulaarissa ortodoksisuudessa. Analysoimalla ortodoksiselle perinteelle tuntemattomia pyhän kunnioittamisen muotoja, kuten patsasta ja hengellistä laulua artikkelissa osoitetaan, että emotionaalisen lohdun saaminen ja pyhän kanssa kommunikoinnin emotionalisaatio ovat perustavanlaatuisia elementtejä venäläisortodoksisessa eletyssä uskonnossa. Uskovat näkevät autuaan Ksenian eräänlaisena "vertaisneuvojana", jolta saadut empatia ja lohdutus perustuvat hänen omaan kokemukseensa sosiaalisesta kärsimyksestä. Artikkelin osoittaa, että pyhän lähestymisen tai pyhässä paikassa vierailun odotetaan tuovan "pienen ihmeen" emotionaalisen lohdun muodossa. Siinä esitetään, että kyse on globaalien terapeutin käänne vaikutuksesta venäläiseen ortodoksisuuteen.