

Not being a Pharisee: thoughts on rule-following in Serbian Orthodoxy

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Abstract. *This article considers the rich Serbian Orthodox discourse about rules. Using ethnographic data from the central Serbian town of Kraljevo, it argues that – at the level of everyday religious practice – people find ideas about rules and right practice incredibly generative for evoking the abstract concepts of sincerity, repentance, and belief. Orthodox faith is elusive, and people frequently evoke in terms of that which it is not.*

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In their seminal essay on the anthropological study of Eastern Christianity, Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (2010) consider the relationship between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘orthopraxis’ in the Orthodox Tradition.¹ Historically, a common analytical approach has been to understand that relationship in dichotomic terms – the split between what the official Church teaches and what people ‘actually do’, between ‘scriptural’ and ‘popular’, between ‘doctrine’ and ‘lived religion’. Hann and Goltz caution against such a binary model, advising us to consider the ‘complex combinations’ between belief and practice.²

In this short paper I consider the interplay between belief and practice in ethnographic terms. In particular, I speculate about how the rich Orthodox discourse about rules and right practice actually generates a discourse about sincere belief. The Orthodox liturgical world is replete with ideas about rules: about how to behave in church, how to bow and cross oneself, how and when to fast, and how to venerate icons. Church bookshops are packed with literature offering spiritual guidance. At the same time, there is a counter-discourse which critiques any insistence on rule following. This stance claims that what matters is not pro-forma performative piety, but the depth of faith behind it. What really matters, people claim, is the *essence*, not the form. I argue that – at the level of everyday religious practice – ideas about rules are incredibly generative for thinking about what ‘Orthodox faith’ actually is. Orthodox faith is elusive, and frequently evoked in terms of that which it is not.

I make this argument by drawing on ethnographic data from fieldwork in and around the central Serbian town of Kraljevo. It has been

¹ C. Hann, & H. Goltz. 2010. „Introduction: the other Christianity?,” in C. Hann & H. Goltz (eds.), *Eastern Christians in anthropological perspective*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, p. 1-29.

² *Ibidem*, p. 16.

widely noted that whilst the majority of the Serbian population identify nominally as ‘Orthodox’, only a very slim minority attend church on a regular basis. This paper considers the latter group, the demographically-diverse network of people who strive to live ‘liturgically’. That is, beyond asserting a nominal Orthodox identity they seek to live a life ‘in the faith’, focussed around taking regular divine communion, confession and praying. Many of these people – especially the older generation – grew up during Yugoslav socialism, and received no religious training during their childhood. They came to Orthodoxy only later, during the 1990s, as socialist Yugoslavia collapsed and the Church offered compelling answers to a moment of social turmoil.

What one encounters in such circles is not only people practising their faith (physically going to Liturgies, taking Divine Communion) but also people thinking openly and self-reflexively about what it means to be ‘Orthodox’. Thus, as much as it is characterised by churchgoing, Kraljevo’s liturgical world is also shaped by discussion about what it is to be a good ‘believer’, as well as well as gossip about – and praise and criticism of – other churchgoers and their piety. In such a context, ideas about ‘rules’ have an important social function. My interlocutors are well aware of all the practices that they ought to engage with as Orthodox Christians: following the Liturgical cycle, fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays and for each of the four main fasts, as well as taking Divine Communion. At the same time, there is an awareness that simply blindly following such activities in themselves is not enough. As others have noted, in the Orthodox Tradition, what matters is the *meaning*, following the ‘spirit’ and not the ‘letter’ of the rule.³ But that ‘sincere’ faith is slippery, famously hard to define and gauge.

Let me begin by introducing Miroslav,⁴ a retired man in his early sixties. Growing up in socialist Yugoslavia, Miroslav did not have an Orthodox upbringing. It was only later in life that he engaged deeply in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church, studying its tradition of praying, fasting, and liturgics. Today, he is very active in church circles. Once, after the Liturgy, he spoke to those of us who were sitting around, drinking coffee. Miroslav wanted to impress on those assembled that simply going to church was not enough to achieve salvation. He spoke in a parodic fashion, mimicking other churchgoers:

³ A. Forbess, A. 2010. „The spirit and the letter: monastic education in a Romanian Orthodox convent,” in C. Hann & H. Goltz (eds.), *Eastern Christians in anthropological perspective*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, University of California Press, 2010, p. 147.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms. Some biographical details have been changed.

“I go to church, maybe I go to Vespers on a Wednesday, I go to the Saint Sava temple – especially when the Bishop is serving. I go to Holy Trinity church on Sundays!” [Beats his chest with his fist three times, imitating a highly self-contained person]. But basically we’re just like Pharisees. You can’t have salvation without repentance. You need to be repentant from the moment you leave the house.”

Miroslav then proceeded to explain calmly and didactically how repentance is a constant *state* in which Christians should strive to live. Overall, his overall point is clear: Zealous churchgoing effectively amounts to nothing if it is not coupled with an ongoing penitent state of mind. Performative pious practice without substance is no better than the activities of the Pharisees, the sect so roundly criticised by Jesus in the Gospels. What is interesting, however, is that Miroslav’s ideas about abstract concepts such as ‘repentance’ and ‘salvation’ are scaffolded on a caricature about more everyday aspects of Orthodox life: going to the Liturgy, going to Vespers. He tried to define Orthodoxy against the more practical piety he assumed those present would recognise.

However, Miroslav’s assertive stance on churchgoing is not necessarily appreciated.

On another occasion, Miroslav criticised the increasingly common practice of celebrating saints’ days (*slava*) over a period of several days. For Miroslav, the saint should be celebrated solely on the day marked in the calendar, *without* a ‘second’ or ‘third’ day to accommodate all the friends and family who could not make it on the first. However, when I asked Ivan (a man in his early fifties) about Miroslav’s position he responded brusquely and dismissively, with a sharp sweep of his hand: ‘Leave Miroslav! He’s a professional Orthodox’. Ivan liked to talk about the centrality of ‘love’ in Orthodoxy, and was concerned that I might take Miroslav as a good model.

One has to appreciate the extent to which other people in these churchgoing circles were both irritated (and sometimes amused) by Miroslav’s peremptory nature. People joked about what they saw as his pride and arrogance. And, paradoxically, many accused him of the very self-righteousness that he saw himself as cautioning against. Note, too, Ivan’s use of the term ‘professional Orthodox’. This is an insult used to describe somebody who is seen as engaging in Orthodox ritual life unreflectingly, as if it were a professional task, without any sincere feeling for their acts.

At one level, this is a disagreement between two self-identifying believers – something which is not at all uncommon. However, whilst Ivan and Miroslav have seemingly different stances, ideas about good practice and rules are fulfilling the same function for both men. Both implicitly

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critique an idea of rule-following so as to evoke deeper truths about Orthodoxy. One could say that ideas about rules do two things simultaneously: they produce deep feelings of rightness amongst some people, but also heartfelt accusations of self-righteousness from others. Rules are generative, allowing different people to make claims about what it is to be a real Orthodox.

To develop this idea further, let me turn to Marija, a secondary school teacher in her late twenties. She did not grow up in a very religious family, and it was whilst she was studying in Belgrade that she became more interested in Orthodox life. During one of our conversations we spoke about the practice of wearing headscarves at church. Whilst some older women certainly observe this practice in Kraljevo, it is very common to see women at the Liturgy not wearing a headscarf. Marija is well aware of the logic behind why some women cover their head, but this is something which she does not feel currently drawn to do: ‘I still don’t have that feeling (*osećaj*) to wear a headscarf’. She then expanded further on her ideas about rules:

„Each person does what he feels – and that’s a characteristic (*odlika*) of Christianity. It’s not written anywhere that you have to do something. You are offered the possibility to choose. You follow your feeling.”

I am not sure that everybody would have endorsed her open-minded approach. However, what is noteworthy is that she uses ideas about rules as a means to describe Christianity in terms of the values of personal feeling and freedom. It is not ‘written’ anywhere – one has to follow one’s own feeling. Similarly, in Serbian churchgoing circles one sometimes hears Orthodox Christianity being contrasted to ‘Islam’. In such examples people use a straw man idea of what Islam is about (blind, subservient rule-following) and pit it against the inherent freedom supposedly found within Orthodoxy. Again, ideas about rules are used to summon up a sense of what Orthodoxy is really about.

Thinking about the history of Eastern Christianity, the anthropologist Vlad Naumescu has identified ‘the ethical, theological and political load placed on ritual orthopraxy’.⁵ He argues that, at certain moments, orthopraxy (right practice) can turn into orthodoxy (right belief). I have been less concerned with ‘right belief’ in a doctrinal sense. Rather, I

⁵ V. Naumescu, „Becoming Orthodox: the mystery and mastery of a Christian tradition,” in S. Luehrmann (eds.), *Praying with the senses: contemporary Orthodox Christian spirituality in practice* (ed.) Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018, p. 33.

have started to explore how orthopraxy generates a discourse about the more elusive questions of sincerity, repentance, and belief. Orthodox Christians would generally insist that Orthodoxy cannot be reduced to rules. However, rules are extremely useful for thinking about what Orthodox faith is.

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