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Moulded Imaginaries: Icons, Idols and the Sensory Environments of Eastern Orthodox Christianity

Sonja Luehrmann

If there is one descendant of the Abrahamic traditions that does not suffer from a reputation of aniconism, it is Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Nothing evokes Orthodox religiosity more than an image of worshippers (often depicted as elderly women in headscarves) lighting candles before an icon, the light reflecting from their faces and the image. And yet, even this tradition must contend with the Mosaic commandment against the making and worshipping of graven images. The resulting self-reflexive ambivalence is most famously summarized in the decrees of the Second Council of Nicaea (787), which formally ended a century of iconoclastic controversies by asking Orthodox Christians to walk a middle path between deifying and rejecting images. In the flourishing liturgical use of two-dimensional images that followed, the line between image veneration and idol worship came to be seen as a boundary between canonically rooted depiction and unrestricted mental imagery. Orthodox Christians still confront this line today, in encounters with other religious traditions as well as with changing secular image practices in a visually saturated society, where a flood of mechanically reproducible images competes for a devotee's attention. In this chapter I look at the role of authoritative tradition and sensory environments as ways to manage image-anxiety in an iconophile faith, starting from well-known histories of Byzantine struggles over the pictorial imagination and moving to more specific cases of post-Soviet image creation. In dialogue with cognitivist approaches to religion, I argue that Orthodox Christian image practices, tell us much about the relationship between religious images and the human imagination, and the role of materiality for sustaining, shaping and restraining both.

The Nicaean legacy

During a debate between Orthodox and Pentecostal clergy that took place in the provincial Russian town of Ioshkar-Ola around 2002, some enduring contrasts of Orthodox image veneration came out in a polemic against Protestant iconoclasts.

Deflecting the question of whether icons contradict the repeated Old Testament warnings against making an image of God, the Orthodox priest Father Mikhail spoke about the danger of forming images in the mind: 'Why is there such a commandment? If we are going to, one might say, make images in our heads, try to imagine God, then, of course, that would be a big mistake. A great sin that would bring quite terrible results. Quite terrible – that would be true idolatry.' Icons, by contrast, followed God's own image-making activity in the world open to human perception: 'Who was the first author, the first creator of an image of God? The Lord himself created humans in His image and likeness.'¹ In this view, the danger of idolatry lies in mentally creating a human image of God, and the answer is a canonically grounded image making that starts from seeing the divine element in human bodies.

The difficult dance between image practices and accusations of idolatry goes back to the first millennium of Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Second Council of Nicaea reinstated long-standing practices of image veneration in Hellenistic Christianity while attempting to distance Christian image veneration from 'Greek' or 'pagan' practices. While anathematizing those who refused to salute images 'as standing for the Lord and his saints', the council also condemned those who accorded them full worship (*latreia*), which was reserved for the prototypes whose grace the images mediated, but who were not identical with their images: 'Indeed, the honour paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image' (quoted in Belting 1994: 506). To accept the decisions of Nicaea meant to follow the 'middle way' that Saint John of Damascus had written about in his defence of image veneration a few decades earlier. John argued that it was 'just as bad not to offer the honor due to those who are worthy, as it is to offer inappropriate glory to the worthless' (III, 1; 2003: 81). Treated as worthy of glory in their material substance, images became idols; seen as signs of a transcendent reality, they deserved honour.

In popular practice, image and prototype were united by the emotions they evoked. As Jaroslav Pelikan argues in his magisterial treatment of the development of Orthodox Christian doctrine, the anti-iconoclastic conclusions of the Council of Nicaea were as much a defence of the legitimacy of custom and unwritten tradition in the practice of the Christian Church as a dogmatic reconciliation between the Second Commandment and Hellenistic image practices. Images of the saints, Christ and Mary were used in private and public devotions as an extension of Eastern Mediterranean practices of commemoration. Since the conversion of Constantine and the end of the persecution of Christians in 313 CE, Byzantine public space became saturated with Christian imagery. Scriptural prohibitions against image making could coexist with pious practices that seemed to flaunt these prohibitions because both were part of a common 'melody of theology' (Pelikan 1974: 133), whose basic theme was the cultivation of human reverence and love for God, be it by insisting on God's ultimate unrepresentability or by saluting and revering objects associated with divine presence. Iconophiles and iconoclasts agreed that books of scripture, crosses and the Eucharistic gifts could be objects of reverence; the former argued that painted images of divine and saintly figures should have the same status. Made present through their images, saints, angels and members of the Holy Family became 'participants in the life and service, but

especially in the liturgy, of the worshipping community' (Pelikan 1974: 141), drawing on an understanding of the image as capable of making a person present that was common to the ancient Mediterranean (Belting 1994).

If representational images were more problematic than abstract symbols, this was because reverence for them had to be distinguished from adjacent image practices, such as the Roman cult of the statues of gods and emperors. The insistence on flat rather than three-dimensional images comes from this distinction, bringing with it a new set of bodily orientations to venerated objects: statues could be admired from below or carried around on pedestals; icons invited eye-level contact with the object of veneration. In the Catholic West, missionary efforts among sculpture-worshipping northern Europeans eventually led church hierarchs to abandon their condemnation of three-dimensional statues. But the preference for flat pictures was maintained in Byzantium and its mission territories, bringing with it distinct bodily stances in prayer that preceded the formal schism and continue to constitute a divide between the Orthodox East and the Catholic West today (Mahieu 2010).

In addition to the bodily stance of facing a picture rather than looking up to a statue, Orthodox art upholds distinctive limitations imposed on image creation by an authoritative tradition.² Since Byzantine times, icons have been organized into types that were copied from other icons or from illuminated drawings in patternbooks, such as Christ Pantocrator, Mary praying with uplifted arms as Oranta, or images representing the festival cycles of the church year (Evseeva 1998: 13). An icon's name is inscribed on it as the final act of finishing an image before it is blessed.

Following a pictorial tradition was important because critics pointed to two dangers of image veneration: either one might end up worshipping mere matter or one's own imagination. In the words of theologians at the court of Charlemagne who were critical of the Nicaean compromise, images existed only 'to commemorate past deeds and beautify the walls' (III, 16; in Bremer 2014: 199). Those who venerated them either 'pray to walls and boards' (ibid.) or may find that it is impossible to distinguish an image of Mary bearing Jesus from one of Sara holding Isaac or even that of a Greek goddess with child such as Venus (IV, 21; in Bremer 2014: 203–4). To follow W. J. T. Mitchell's terminology (1994), the problem is either that people mistake a material 'picture' (pigments on wood or canvas) for the underlying invisible reality, or that they use the 'image' evoked by the picture in their minds to make undesirable connections across religious traditions.

In the Byzantine tradition of iconography, both dangers are countered by protocols around the production of icons. Proper prayers, procedures of preparation, and blessings distance flat images from mere 'boards', while canonically sanctioned conventions prevent them from being products of an individual artist's imagination. Whereas the West increasingly allowed artists free rein in how to remind viewers of biblical stories or decorate church walls, Eastern Christianity regulated image practices by embedding their production and use in aesthetic and liturgical conventions. As iconographic motifs travelled, visual imaginaries in Slavic territories remained intimately tied to Byzantine exemplars.

In the history of Christianity in Russia, the twin dangers of deifying matter and deifying the imagination come up with varying emphasis. Peasants were often

suspected of mistaking matter for divinity in their excessive attachments to relics and local shrines (Greene 2010; Levin 2003). Concern with regulating religious imaginaries arose in relation to the eschatological expectations of religious non-conformers or disputed visionary experiences (Engelstein 2003; Shevzov 2004). In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia, as mass-produced images multiplied, concerns about unbridled religious imaginaries were sometimes framed as critiques of Catholic spiritual practices. These debates were part of efforts to purify a vision of authentic Eastern spirituality free from Catholic doctrinal and liturgical influence (Freeze 1983). They represent a particular Orthodox identity politics that insists on an essential difference between Eastern and Western Christendom, mirroring Western discourses familiar from the Enlightenment up to Samuel Huntington's claims about the 'clash of civilizations' (Wolff 1994; Huntington 1996). But they also pose a challenge to trends in the cognitive study of religion that identify religion per se with the realm of the human imagination. To understand what is at stake in Russian Orthodox debates on right and wrong uses of visuality, it is helpful to juxtapose them to academic discussions of religion and its relationship to the material and the imagination.

Images, imaginaries, religion

At stake in the iconoclastic debates was the question whether depictions of divine and saintly beings were illegitimate creations of human minds or instances of what historians Valery Kivelson and Joan Neuberger call 'seeing into being,' where 'the experience of viewing [becomes] an engine of historical or eschatological transformation' (2008: 6). This coexistence of scepticism about visual depiction with belief in the possibility of 'transcendent viewing experiences' (ibid.) speaks to a question at the heart of contemporary divisions in the study of religion: while 'lived religion' approaches privilege materiality and performance to the point of sometimes eclipsing inner worlds (Haeri 2017), the burgeoning field of cognitive studies of religion sees religion as a prime expression of the human imagination. The Nicaean 'middle way' allows us to draw on anthropologies of media and dreams to see that imaginaries and materials are not separate, but imagining the divine is intimately based in shared material practices, including those concerned with making and using religious images.

In cognitive approaches to religion, human religiosity is often equated with the exercise of individual, though genetically hardwired, imaginations. Some of the founding scholars of this field draw explicit parallels between ideas of divine agents held by modern adults and the assumed or documented mental worlds of children or prehistoric humans. Understanding religious ideas as a form of mental elaboration on perceptive clues, cognitivists trace these mental processes back to the evolutionary advantage of overdetecting agency in the environment (Guthrie 1993; Boyer 2001) or to an 'intuitive theism' which makes children attribute causes to hidden agents and form relationships with imaginary companions with unusual capacities (Kelemen 2004). Although methodologically there are big differences between the search for human evolutionary trajectories and studies of religious cognition in childhood, both fields have something in common. They treat the religious practices of modern adults as a

kind of survival of forms of cognition that are functional and natural at an earlier stage of phylogenetic or ontogenetic development. If, as Kelemen suggests, 'children may be innately attuned to "godlike" nonhuman agency but need to acquire an understanding of the limitations of human minds' (2004: 297), this can mean that religious experience grows out of the unbridled development of innate imaginative potentials which non-religious adults gradually learn to suppress. Religious imagery, in this view, is of interest to researchers as an externalization of this inner world, unconstrained by what modern adults eventually learn about the laws of animate and inanimate matter.

Few students of as historically complex and variable an artistic tradition as Orthodox Christian iconography would be content to see it as nothing but an expression of universal human cognition, hardwired in the brain. Against the mentalism of cognitive approaches, where religion is first and foremost a set of ideas or cognitive habits, we might set recent calls for anthropological studies of the imagination. Sociocultural anthropologists who focus on the human capacity 'to picture in front of the inner eye something that is not necessarily present outside of it' (Meyer 2015) take this as a starting point to investigate not so much the innate workings of the human brain but rather the interplay between a particular historical situation and the plans, dreams, fears and hopes with which people look to the future or at alternative realities. As Amira Mittermaier puts it in her study of dreams in Egypt in the period leading up to the Arab Spring, dreams are agentive because they cause people to act: to travel, make amends or renew existing relationships. In her words, 'the imagination [...] is not simply a sphere of human fantasies; rather, it is an actual realm that connects dreamers to multiple Others' (Mittermaier 2011: 233). When these others include spirits of the dead, sacred texts and the Prophet, this does not detach the imagination from the human social world, but, to the contrary, opens up mental imagery to sharing with others in the same religious tradition. In Egyptian dreams and Ghanaian Pentecostal videos, religious traditions furnish shared visual idioms that can engage dreamers/creators and audiences in common interpretive efforts. At the same time, adults who practice an institutionalized religion often engage in imaginative extensions of their natural and social surroundings that contemporary Western culture associates primarily with childhood (Boyer and Walker 2000; Luhmann 2012).

Religious traditions can vary in how much freedom to modify received imaginaries they grant contemporary practitioners. One team of psychologists was surprised to find that conservative Christian parents were more concerned about their children's imaginary companions than non-religious Americans, interpreting them as demonic (Taylor and Carlson 2000). Mittermaier's Egyptian dreamers often reported receiving visits from the Prophet Muhammad, but also scrutinized these dreams for resemblance to canonical descriptions (2011: 166).

In contemporary Russian Orthodox practice, an elaborate ritual use of images goes along with similarly restrictive attitudes towards subjecting them to fantastic modifications. For example, Orthodox responses to Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of Christ' focused on the danger that its graphic representations of human suffering might replace the more restrained images offered by the Byzantine tradition (Dukhanin 2005: 99). In Orthodox Christology, the crucifixion is less a story of bodily suffering than one of triumph over death. Christ is shown with open rather than closed eyes and the

wounds on his body are very understated, quite in contrast to the increasingly fleshly depictions in Western Christian art (Kruse, this volume).

Orthodox critics of Western imaginaries also questioned the lack of humility that went with encouraging identification between Christ and a human actor. Practising a Christmas play in a rural Russian Orthodox parish, the priest pointed out that Russian tradition required that there be no children playing Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Instead, they would be represented by a Nativity icon. 'We don't want anyone to take on too big a role,' he noted. The presence of the icon here was meant to prevent the imaginary identification between actor and role, and channel it instead towards the familiar sensory environment of a church sanctuary around Christmas time, where the Nativity icon is displayed in front of the iconostasis, and people participate in the story not by imaginary immersion, but by the bodily acts of bowing before the icon, kissing and touching it.

Orthodox image practices in the shadow of the Second Commandment thus turn our attention to the ways in which images are not just products of the imagination, but embedded in particular material traditions of depiction. The picture is not just an expression of a mental image formed by an artist, but an outcome of an authoritative tradition whose aim is to shape and constrain a 'saintly imagination' (Heo 2012) as much as to stimulate it. If we accept that most people practice religion within an established environment of artefacts, bodily practices, sounds and other sensory stimuli, then the question is no longer why people resort to supernatural explanations in the absence of sensory evidence. Rather, it is how religiously saturated environments shape human imaginaries and interactions, so that their associated 'moods and motivations' become 'uniquely realistic' (Geertz 1973) or 'intuitively counterintuitive' (Boyer and Walker 2000: 134). Some image-environments may approximate features of mental imagery, as Lambert Wiesing (2005) argues for video and 'virtual realities', where things are possible that adult viewers know are impossible in everyday life. The style of iconography that is being revived in today's Russia after the Soviet hiatus militates against some of the habits of everyday perception, but overall tends to introduce constraints on the mental worlds of devotees. This promotes a particular kind of canonically mediated realism in art, an asceticism of the imagination. There are two ways in which this ascetic realism expresses itself: in the grounding of visual imagery in tradition and collective rather than individual discernment, and in the transformation of the indexical imagery of photography through iconic resemblance and stylized conventionalization.

As we will see, the reasons for ascetic realism lie both in Orthodox Christianity's attempts to define and maintain an identity against the Christian West and in reactions against a modern media world, which mobilize older ideas about the ethical implications of seeing.

Ascetic realism as a polemical tradition

As Chris Hann (2003, 2014) has shown for liturgical music and the iconographic motif of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, attempting to inscribe civilizational divides into artistic practices is always an ideological endeavour that flares up at certain points in time

and is forgotten at others. In the history of Orthodox churches, times of heightened consciousness of the ascetic correspondence of form and content in prayer and liturgy alternated with times when this was not considered as important. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, for example, many icons were painted in the style of Western oil painting (some of them literally on canvas) using central perspective. This was also when choral music was influenced by the polyphony of Protestant chorales and Latin was an obligatory language at Russian Orthodox seminaries, because many of the texts used were Catholic catechisms and manuals (Chakovskaya 2014; Freeze 1983). In the second half of the nineteenth century, a search for more distinctively Orthodox ways of worshipping and exercising piety began, with effects that are still influential in Russia today, in part because for the first time the reform efforts extended to laypeople as well as to monastics. Influential clergy such as Feofan the Recluse (Govorov, 1815–91) and Ignatii (Brianchanninov, 1807–61) popularized a set of writings from the Hellenistic and Byzantine period known in Greek as the *Philokalia* (love of goodness), in Russian as *Dobrotoliubie*. A Church Slavonic translation, aimed mainly at members of the clerical estate, appeared in 1793, but the modern Russian translation of 1877 signalled the growing attention to the piety of lay people. Both Feofan and Ignatii combined counsels for their lay spiritual children with critiques of Catholic spirituality. Ignatii's critique focused especially on what he termed daydreaming (*mechtatel'nost'*), a vice he found represented by his near-namesake, Ignatius of Loyola, and Teresa of Avila. In Ignatian spiritual exercises, the Russian bishop criticized the wilful mental visualization of the Holy Trinity and events from Christ's life:

[Ignatius of Loyola] had such a heated and sensitized imagination that, as he affirmed, he only needed to wish for it and put in a bit of effort, and before his eyes appeared, by his choice, hell or paradise. [...] It is well known that the real saints of God receive visions only by the grace of God and through God's action, and not by human will and their own efforts; they [the visions] come unexpected and are rare. (quoted in Osipov 2001: 123, ellipses in that publication)

For these nineteenth-century critics, restricting one's imagination in prayer was an Orthodox way that signalled a return to teachings of the early church fathers and contradicted post-schismatic Catholic practice. This interest in distinctively 'Eastern' forms of prayer was also linked to a turn away from Western-style oil paintings to a desire to learn from the classical icons of Byzantium and fifteenth-century Russia (Yazykova 2010). For post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Christians living in a world of dramatically multiplied religious imagery, this ascesis of the imagination takes on a new meaning. Aleksei Osipov, a professor of the Moscow Spiritual Academy speaking to students in 1992, quotes Saint Nile of Sinai (fifth century) and Saint Simeon the New Theologian (eleventh century) both warning against the desire to see angels or Christ with one's eyes, lest one see demons instead or fall into the vice of self-delusion (*prelest'*) (2001: 121). The warning against making up images during prayer, though by no means shared by all Eastern church fathers (Noble 2005), was well known among Orthodox laypeople in early twenty-first-century Russia. I repeatedly heard it referred to by Russian Orthodox friends when I told them about fieldwork among Russian

Pentecostals, who, like the Californian evangelicals studied by anthropologist Tanya Luhmann (2012), were very free in their imagination of the divine.

In a world saturated by competing visual imaginaries, originating both from other confessions and from the secular world, Orthodox Christians mobilized older concerns about vision as an entry point for sinful ideas that had developed in constant interchange with Catholic ideas on the topic (Rolland 2017). A new, post-Soviet generation of literate and often self-educated Orthodox believers were suspicious of what they saw as a widespread use of visual media to promote human vanity or self-interested messages. They turned to Byzantine and classical Russian visual canons for a safer alternative, representing the spiritual merits of past generations and a different way of looking at the world.

Spiritualizing the contemporary: New icons

In contemporary Russian iconography, ascetic realism manifests in two ways: anchoring new iconographic motives to older visual styles through copying and collective discernment, and using modern media such as photography to restrain the imaginative components of icons and indexically link them back to material reality. New motives emerge when new saints are canonized – for example, the almost 2,000 new martyrs and confessors who have been canonized for persisting in their faith during the period of Soviet anti-religious repressions. They also come up with new ritual occasions as the Church responds to changing political and social concerns.

An example of anchoring a new motive to traditional visual styles is the creation of the icon of the Holy Innocent Infants of Bethlehem, used since the 1990s by a new kind of religious actor: family values activists looking for symbols of aborted fetuses. Prior to the 1990s, the scene of Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem's children in search of the new messiah existed as a *kleimo*, a small square image in a frame around an icon of the Nativity of Christ. In an interview, the iconographer Nataliia Maslova explained that the idea to use the Infants of Bethlehem came from one of the priests in the movement, who asked her to work with her teacher, the well-known iconographer Irina Vatagina, to turn the *kleimo* into a prayer icon.³ This meant changing the composition so that the central figures faced outward towards the viewer, inviting a bodily pose of eye-level contemplation that had been the Eastern Christian preference since Byzantine times (Luehrmann 2016). It also involved moving the depictions of slaughter to the background, foregrounding a group of children clad in white, whose only sign of suffering is that some of them appear to be weeping, drying their eyes with their robes. As Nataliia pointed out, the red background remains a sign of martyrdom:

When I was looking for materials on how they were killed, especially in later icons there are simply terrible scenes – they hack them, they pierce them, terrible. We chose a calm scene. Although the fact that it is on a red background – I certainly like the cinnabar background. I like cinnabar colour just by itself, but cinnabar

background in iconography is reserved for either prophets or martyrs. So as martyrs we decided to give them a red background.

Instead of the graphic depiction of suffering that would have been characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian icons and even more so of contemporary Western representations of abortion (Luehrmann 2018b), Nataliia's icon offers a constraint that is achieved through convention. It hints at suffering through colour and posture, while aiming for an overall effect she described as 'calm' (*spokoino*) and 'respectable' (*blagorodno*). In recalling the collaborative endeavour that led to the new icon, Nataliia minimized her own creative or emotional input in favour of the effort to be faithful to the past through learning from books and theological consultation:

Irina Vasil'evna [Vatagina] said supply yourself with books, nothing should come from your head, look and compose. And I probably made not quite fifty, but thirty sketches, small fragments with the composition of the icon. And Father [Dimitrii] looked at them all carefully and chose one. And said now work out this fragment for a large format, in consultation with Irina Vasil'evna. This means, in our Orthodox, how do you call it, denomination, there is such a rule: that a newly created icon has to be created collectively. A member of the clergy has to participate and an artist and, of course, a consultant, so it has to be a collective creation.

The term I translate here as 'collectively', *soborno*, can also be understood as 'conciliar'. It invokes the idea of dogmatic authority in the Orthodox Church as flowing from the council of clergy and believers, but also nineteenth-century Slavophile notions of the contrast between Russian collectivism and Western individualism. In reflecting on this practice in an interview with a Western visitor, Nataliia seemed to find it important to stress the denominational characteristics of the Orthodox Church, as if searching for a specifically 'Orthodox' way of creating something new. Whereas artistic originality is downplayed, the scope of the problem of abortion is magnified by evoking a biblical story that, at various times in Church history, has stood for the persecution of Christians or the eternal battle between good and evil.

The twentieth century not only created new ritual causes, but also new saints, priests and laypeople who were martyred under Soviet rule. In many regions of Russia, Orthodox clergy and laypeople research local faithful who died or were imprisoned under Lenin and Stalin, and present their records to a central canonization commission in the Moscow Patriarchate. If archival evidence shows that a person was arrested for reasons of Orthodox faith and did not name or accuse others during interrogations, that person can be included among the new martyrs and confessors (Christensen 2018). In creating icons of these new saints, directly copying older models is not possible. Instead, ascetic realism becomes a matter of ensuring physical resemblance through archival research and photographic evidence, and then transforming the portrait into an icon by following rules of stylization.

For iconographers engaged in the task of creating such new icons, maintaining the distinctive features a saint had during life was very important, and thought to confront the devotee with an image of what a saint actually looked like in a spiritual sense.

Figure 11.1 Icon of the Hieromartyr Nikolai Riurikov. Tsarevokokshaisk workshop, 2007. Courtesy of Stanislav Popov.

In the icon workshop of the diocese of Ioshkar-Ola and Marii El, the first step for creating new icons of recently canonized saints was to locate photographs. Once found, iconographers did not copy them exactly, but tried to find an image of the spiritual state of the person as a saint. This usually meant depicting the person as neither very old nor very young (occasionally at around the age of death), and without any signs of torture or suffering – only the cross in the hands of martyrs references their violent death. Although they provided the name for Charles Saunders Peirce’s idea of iconicity, icons in the neoclassical style are a mix of ‘icon’ and ‘symbol’ in a similar way as is a topographic map: they have strongly iconic features in that they aim to reproduce the proportions and physical characteristics of a prototype. But they also use conventional symbolism of dress, attributes and colour to produce the effect of an encounter with a person’s spiritual essence. Just as modern mapmakers often work from satellite imagery and GPS measurements, iconographers of contemporary saints work from the indexical medium of a photograph (cf. Hanganu 2010).

Its grounding in historical research notwithstanding, there is a mystical side to ascetic realism. Elena, who paints icons in the workshop, recalled Father Nikolai Riurikov (1884–1943), a canonized priest of whom there was only an early photograph

Figure 11.2a, b Father Riurikov, early (a) and late (b) photo. Courtesy of the archive of the canonization commission of the diocese of Ioshkar-Ola, Russian Orthodox Church.

of a still beardless youth before ordination, although he died at almost sixty years of age. She painted the icon depicting him as a more mature priest, using her imagination to alter the youth's appearance. Later, a relative brought another photograph, and it turned out that she had been very close to what he looked like. Elena related this story without special commentary, but, together with others like it, it seemed to confirm the reality of the Orthodox faith by showing how God guided the imaginations of the faithful. These new icons were neither just paint on wood nor figments of an individual imagination, but images whose truth was grounded in their ability to bring together visible reality and invisible essences.

Media of restraint

While outsiders may see iconography as the height of Orthodox imagination, for its contemporary creators and defenders these images are emphatically non-imaginary. Iconography in its neoclassical understanding attempts to bind mental images to constraints of a similar strength as those that govern perception of the natural world, in order to save worshippers from the idolatry of worshipping their own imagination, or from being taken over by imaginaries produced by the media and by other religious denominations. To safeguard its role as arbiter of Orthodox visual heritage, the Russian Orthodox Church has even gone to court against contemporary artists, as in the much-publicized 'Caution, Religion' trial against a Moscow art exhibition held

in 2003. The exhibit at the Sakharov Center included what many considered to be caricatures of traditional icons, and a group of Orthodox activists sued it for ‘inciting religious hatred’ (Bernstein 2014). Controlling the development of Orthodox visual imaginaries is a way in which the Church affirms its identity vis-à-vis the plethora of other confessions and world views vying for followers in contemporary Russia, while offering its own mediascape as an alternative to secular viewing practices.

How do laypeople take up these messages of restraint? From conversations with engaged Orthodox laypeople in various Russian cities, my impression is that people do use Orthodox media as inspiration for imaginary encounters with divine forces – they recognize saints from icons in the faces of unknown passers-by and see Jesus or Mary in their dreams. While thus disregarding some of the warnings against individualized imaginaries, what these interlocutors valued about Orthodox media in contrast to secular and religious alternatives was the aesthetic restraint in taking over their imaginations. ‘Not overwhelming’, ‘not forcing itself on you’ and ‘not distracting’ were phrases I often heard about Orthodox iconography, music and liturgy (see also Engelhardt 2018). This contrasted both to the violence and pace of television and the louder and more in-your-face forms of Protestant worship and proselytizing. Paradoxically, these same interlocutors often expressed surprise how I could spend so much time in Orthodox services and not become Orthodox: they expected the sensorium of Orthodox worship to respect the inner boundaries of believers, but overwhelm the defences of a visitor.

Imageless prayer may be difficult to achieve, but by pointing to the persuasiveness of Orthodox aesthetics, my interlocutors showed awareness of something cognitivist scholars on religion often forget: people come to religious practice not just with the evolutionarily conditioned affordances of the human mind and its developmental stages, but through the experience of a sensory environment that is both outcome and congelation of centuries of debate over right doctrine and right ways of doing things. These environments are no more imaginary than the cityscapes people live in. Rather than seeing religious imagery as flowing from a uniquely imagination-rich sphere of human life, the contemporary pathways of Orthodox iconography help us understand how religious media provide both stimulation and guidance for imaginative elaboration.

Conclusion: Icons and idols

As the Eastern Orthodox tradition shows, use of devotional images can coexist with, and indeed encourage, restrictive ideas and doubts about what makes an image fit for sacred use. Where idolatry is associated with unauthorized flights of fancy rather with image use per se, material images can function to restrict the religious imagination as well as encourage it.

Many ethnographies of modern religious life seem to suggest an opposite dynamic, where being involved in a religion means transgressing the limits to normal sensory experience. Tanya Luhrmann (2012) tells us about evangelical Christians in the United States who are encouraged to literally treat God as an imaginary companion: pour ‘him’ a cup of coffee and sit down for a chat. Charles Hirschkind (2006) transcribes Egyptian

sermons in which Muslims are invited to picture the tortures of hell in 'television style'. Birgit Meyer's Ghanaian Pentecostal film-makers eagerly use the capacity of video to make visible forms of action that beings can perform in the imagination, but not in everyday perception – disappear, pass through walls and windows, and so on (2015). The followers of a Sufi shaykh in Amira Mittermaier's ethnography expect to see him in their dreams and receive messages from him after his death (2011).

However, when reading these ethnographies carefully, none of these groups simply encourages believers to follow all imaginative inclinations. US evangelicals parse their thoughts for those that are 'from God' and those that are not; collective interpretive sessions in Egypt distinguish dreams that process personal experiences from externally inspired 'dream visions'; vivid reminders of the torments of hell distract listeners from more sinful flights of fancy; and Ghanaian video, while depicting actions that contradict the laws of Newtonian physics, draws on African and European demonologies that already predetermine how evil may be depicted and what evil entities do. Like Orthodox iconographers, these groups draw boundaries between permissible and impermissible imaginaries, but the importance and relative permeability of such boundaries may vary between different contexts.

For a comparative study of the legacies of the Second Commandment in the Abrahamic traditions, the Orthodox Christian case reminds us to distinguish the meanings attached to 'idols' from those of 'images': depending on what perceived dangers they are set against, idols may be bad (or badly used) pictures or not pictures at all, but imaginary creations of the human mind. As Ann Taves points out in her study of religious innovation that seeks to bring together cognitivist and historical methodologies, collective discernment in small groups is often where followers of a particular spiritual path differentiate between divine revelation and human flights of fancy. What will enable a group to 'tune in' (Taves 2016: 230) on an emerging consensus is often the resonance of new creations with prior religious media in which divinity is known to manifest. For example, the stone plates seen by Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, were reminiscent of the plates on which the biblical Moses received the Ten Commandments (Taves 2016: 38). By contrast, accusations of idolatry may adhere to ways of picturing the divine that lie outside of or deviate from the mediatic canon of a religious tradition.

In the secularized and religiously diverse environment of post-Soviet Russia, the charge of 'idolatry' serves to draw a boundary between the sensory environment created by the traditional media of the Church and a visually saturated modern mediascape. By associating the former with emotional restraint and the latter with boundless excess, contemporary iconographers both affirm the possibility of picturing divine persons and the impossibility of doing so through the medium of an individual mind.