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The ambiguous role of materiality in transitions to Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Finland

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ABSTRACT

According to the basic starting point of the study of material religion, religion is an inextricably material phenomenon. In theorizations of religious conversion, however, materiality is accorded little attention. This article presents a case study that investigates the role of materiality in individual religious change, as well as highlighting the dematerialized underpinnings of modern Western conceptualizations of conversion. It concerns transitions from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Finland. In this context, the sensory aspects of liturgical life are often identified as a central pull-factor of Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, partiality towards Orthodox aesthetics is not always considered a proper reason for switching churches. The article analyses interview material gathered from converts and is informed by the concept of semiotic ideology, which it applies to examine the different and sometimes conflicting assumptions regarding material expressions as mediators between humanity and divinity present in the data.

KEYWORDS

Conversion; material religion; semiotic ideology; aesthetics; liturgy

Introduction

Religion is a fundamentally material phenomenon (Chidester 2018; Meyer and Houtman 2012; Morgan 2021). Like all human culture and interaction, it happens through expressions that are available to human sensation. This embeddedness affects also dynamics of religious transformation. Thus, religious conversion characteristically entails subjection to new aesthetic environments as well as new assumptions about material forms and their capacities to mediate between humanity and divinity, or immanence and transcendence (see Keane 2002, 68–69; Meyer and Stordalen 2016, 5). In recent decades, empirical research has increasingly brought to the fore the implication of certain material forms and related practices in processes of conversion. These include, for example, discursive genres and verbal formulas such as conversion narratives, prayers, and the *shahada*, as well as physical objects such as the Muslim veil (Galonnier 2018; Harding 2000; Keane 2007; Oestergraard 2009; Robbins 2004; Stromberg 1993;

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Winchester 2008). Moreover, empirical research has also shown how an integral part of religious transformation may concern learning to decipher one's material and social surroundings, and bodily and mental states, in a new way, poised for signs only recognizable to the initiated (Coleman 2000; Hulkkonen 2021; Luhrmann 2012).

Theories of religious conversion, however, usually accord materiality little attention. Historically, social scientific conceptualizations of individual religious change invoked either psychological or social factors or their interplay, whereas religious content remained an undertheorized aspect of conversion (Snook, Williams, and Horgan 2019, 236). More recently, scholars have come to acknowledge that religious content figures prominently in conversion, crucially influencing the appeal of a particular tradition to particular people. Nevertheless, even when religious content is included as a distinct factor in conversion, the discussion does not necessarily mention its aesthetic or sensory dimensions. Rather, the focus is on doctrine and beliefs, organization and roles, rituals, norms, values, and ethics (see Gooren 2010, 51–52; Paloutzian et al. 2013, 402; Snook, Williams, and Horgan 2019, 236).

The disregard for materiality in most theories of conversion is not that surprising, given the conventional understanding of conversion in social scientific scholarship. 'What is perhaps most consistent across conversion research is that conversion involves a radical change to the individual's consciousness by way of the self and identity', write Daniel Snook, Michael Williams, and John Horgan (2019, 225) in their extensive review article on the state-of-the-art of conversion scholarship. This view of conversion as an affair of the mind easily leads scholars to overlook its material aspects. Alternatively, it has guided them to emphasize language over things and bodies as a privileged site for the study of conversion (e.g., Staples and Mauss 1987; Gooren 2010, 44–45). It is by no means a coincidence that the material form that has been subject to most extensive empirical and theoretical scrutiny within conversion research is the conversion narrative (e.g., Staples and Mauss 1987; Stromberg 1993).

The tendency to envision conversion as essentially 'immaterial' is connected to the antagonistic relation between spirituality and materiality that has characterized modern conceptualizations of religion in Western societies (Chidester 2018, 2–3; Meyer and Houtman 2012, 1; Morgan 2021, 44–45). According to Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012, 12), this antagonism is partly founded on a mistaken, or 'ideal and ahistorical', reading of Protestantism as a tradition that has managed to disentangle itself from material forms. In their discussion on how such Protestant legacies have influenced attitudes towards materiality in the study of religion, Meyer and Houtman (2012, 9–12) credit scholars studying colonial conversions to Protestantism for showing how interpretations and hierarchies of materiality and immateriality are not a given but take form in practice (e.g., Engelke 2007; Keane 2007). For example, in his research on conversion to Calvinism in Indonesia, Webb Keane (2007) demonstrates how in this context the project of conversion has involved nurturing the idea of an autonomous subject who does not rely on false material forms in his or her dealings with divinity. Simultaneously, the becoming of this subject is aided and assessed by the promotion of other material forms, such as the creed formula (Keane 2007, 67–76).

As of yet, the findings of empirical studies on material aspects of Protestant conversions other than the conversion narrative – or on materiality in relation to other religious traditions – have not made much of an impact on theories of conversion aiming for cross-cultural validity. While some critical contributions do exist (e.g., Hoffman

Reinhardt 2022; Swift 2012), the bulk of theoretical work on conversion remains in need of 'rematerialization' (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 8). Following Meyer and Houtman (2012, 7–8), this would involve systematic and critical inquiries into both how conversion happens materially and how conversion has been and is conceptualized in relation to materiality.

In this article, I take some modest steps in this direction by presenting a case study in which materiality plays an explicitly central role. I examine transitions from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Finland, analyzing interview material gathered from people who have joined the Orthodox Church of Finland (OCF) as adults. In the Finnish context, it is common for insiders and outsiders both to portray aesthetic and sensory elements as the central pull-factor of Orthodoxy. However, sometimes these portrayals can involve normative judgements about whether these elements actually constitute a proper motive for switching allegiances.

Several scholars studying Orthodox conversions in the United States have previously touched upon their material dimensions. Amy Slagle (2005) has discussed American converts' interpretations of the aesthetics of Orthodox liturgical life, Sarah Riccardi-Swartz (2019) their creative adoption of practices related to home altars, and Daniel Winchester (2015, 2017) their engagement with icons and narrating conversion stories. In addition, Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir (2017) has studied converts' experiences of Orthodox collective worship in Finland, Jeffers Engelhardt (2009) in Estonia, and Timothy Carroll (2018) in the United Kingdom. Most of these contributions, however, do not apply or discuss theorizations of conversion. Furthermore, the overall body of existing research on conversion to Orthodoxy is relatively meagre, and has yet to make a mark on comparative or theoretical discussions. The massive *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Rambo and Farhadian 2014), for example, contains only a single passing mention related to Orthodox Christianity.

In this article, I focus especially on my interlocutors' experiences and interpretations of the sensory world of Orthodox liturgical life. Collective worship provides an appropriate centerpiece for the analysis, since it constitutes a central manifestation of Orthodox materiality. Orthodox services acquired many of their characteristic features during the Byzantine era (McGuckin 2011, 193–194). Material forms present in the services include church architecture, icons, decorations, textiles and vestments, ritual objects and paraphernalia, sacred substances such as blessed oil and consecrated bread and wine, candles, incense, singing, recitation, and choreographies of embodied interaction performed by the clergy and other participants. Different services follow a fixed liturgy with some local and seasonal variation. In the OCF, similarly to the rest of the Eastern Orthodox world, the most commonly celebrated Eucharistic service is the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. The OCF uses mostly Finnish language in collective worship, although individual prayers or hymns can be performed in different languages.

Theoretically, the article is informed by Webb Keane's (2003, 2007, 2008, 2018) concept of semiotic ideology, which provides researchers with tools for investigating the signifying functions of material forms in particular contexts. In the analysis, I use it to pinpoint certain assumptions concerning materiality that underlie my interlocutors' narratives. I discuss the interviewees' descriptions regarding the material forms of Orthodox services as conduits of the sacred, their comparisons between the sensory worlds of Orthodox and Lutheran collective worship, and their statements about the significance of materiality

in their processes of religious change. Towards the end of the article, I come back to the question of the relation between materiality and conversion, identifying some avenues that my case study highlights with respect to this theme.

Religion, materiality, and semiotic ideology

'Religion is about human attempts to render the invisible as *somehow visible* and the elusive as *somehow tangible*', argue Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (2016, 4, emphasis in the original; see also Chidester 2018, 12–13). With this statement, they highlight a central feature of religion as a material phenomenon; namely, that it involves contact with beings, worlds, and forces that are understood as not being directly discernible by human senses.[1] To approach the invisible and elusive divine, religious communities promote special practices that are believed to establish a perceptible connection with it. These practices rely on and sustain distinctive 'sensational forms' that organize the material and experiential structures of the community (Meyer 2011, 29–30).

In Christianity, interpretations concerning the relationship between God and creation emphasize their fundamental difference (Engelke 2007, 12). Nevertheless, depending on the tradition and the context, God can appear more or less palpable. 'Indeed', observes Matthew Engelke (2007, 16), 'how God's presence is rightfully mediated through language and objects is an issue over which Christians have often disagreed'. Different Christian communities, that is to say, use different material forms – among which I count not only language and objects but also images, sounds, substances, scents, textures, movement, affect, all sensory stimuli – as vehicles for reaching the divine. Conflicting interpretations concerning materiality as an intermediary between humanity and divinity account for a great deal of the variation in sensory worlds between different Christian groups.

Participation in Orthodox services, for instance, involves immersion in a multidimensional sensory environment with distinctive characteristics (Luehrmann 2018, 16). The commitment to recognizable material forms is strong to the extent that, according to Sonja Luehrmann (2018, 16), for many believers the Orthodox tradition is most concretely apprehensible as a style, or 'an overall constellation of aesthetic expressions, attitudes, and ideas'.[2] However, the experience of the sensory world of Orthodox services as persuasive and real rests on its interpretation through a particular lens (Meyer 2011, 31). This lens is what Webb Keane calls semiotic ideology.

The concept of semiotic ideology draws attention to premises and presuppositions guiding human processes of signification in a particular social and historical context. It 'refers to people's underlying assumptions', be they tacitly approved or explicitly formulated, 'about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce' (Keane 2018, 65). What makes Keane's work on semiotic ideology relevant for the study of material religion is the starting point that the material properties of signs are inevitably involved in the signification process (Keane

[1]This starting point, it is important to note, is not founded on a normative claim about the existence (or non-existence) of any unseen reality (Meyer and Stordalen 2016, 5). It rather emphasizes a feature of religion crucial to those for whom this reality does, in one way or another, exist.

[2]For an illuminative analysis of how Orthodox Christian sensational forms saturate the public sphere in an Orthodox-dominated society (more specifically Serbia), all the while being differently received by differently religious segments of the population, see Lackenby (2022).

2007, 21, 2008, S114–115). Signs are perceptible, recognizable, and replicable only because of their material manifestation. Moreover, depending on the semiotic ideology in question, the same material properties are apprehended in different ways (Keane 2018, 68–70). The material form of the sign can be understood to point to a different object or convey a different kind of connection between the sign vehicle and the object of signification. It can also lose its signifying function altogether, in which case the sign ceases to exist as a sign.

Overall, the influence of semiotic ideologies on the lived reality of religious devotees is profound. Just consider the comment made by one elderly Finnish Orthodox woman, who I interviewed for a previous study (Kupari 2016), regarding Lutherans' attitudes toward Orthodox icons: 'To them, they are nothing but pieces of wood.' It conveys the woman's indignation over many Lutherans' failure to recognize the intermediary capacities of icons – a significant issue indeed, considering the overwhelming dominance of Lutheranism in the Finnish religious landscape.

Studying the religiosity of Finnish converts to Orthodox Christianity

The Orthodox Church of Finland is an autonomous Eastern Orthodox archbishopric under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1918, after Finland had gained independence from Russia. The societal status of the OCF is unique among Orthodox Churches. It is a native institution that has a legally privileged standing as a 'national church' alongside the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). Simultaneously, it is a small minority community. In 1920, 98.1% of the population of Finland belonged to the ELCF and 1.6% to the OCF. A century later, the percentages were 68.7 and 1.1 respectively (Sohlberg and Ketola 2020, 50).

During the first 50 years of its existence, adult affiliation in the OCF was rare. Around the turn of the 1970s, however, the number of recruits started on a significant growth curve, which levelled off only in the 2010s. Since the turn of the millennium, the Church has welcomed between 800 and 1000 new members every year (Kupari 2021). The interest that Finns have showed towards Orthodoxy in the past 50 years is connected to wider trends such as the weakening of the homogeneous national culture and increasing religious pluralism, individualism, and secularization (Kupari forthcoming). The Finland-born new members include both people with some Orthodox family background and people who have embraced Orthodoxy after a process of seeking. A great majority have been socialized to Lutheranism as children (Kupari 2021). In addition, an important source of inflow have been immigrants from Eastern Europe (Sohlberg and Ketola 2020, 52).

In this study, I analyse interview material gathered from 29 people, 15 men and 14 women, all Finnish nationals. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees were between 30 and 80 years of age (average 59 years) and had been members of the OCF between 1.5 and 40 years (average 18 years). All but two had belonged to the ELCF as children and the majority had remained members of the ELCF up to joining the OCF. Of the interviewees, 22 are (or were prior to retirement) employed in cultural domains such as performance, visual arts and crafts, books, audio-visual media, and creative services. They include visual artists, writers, musicians, actors, journalists, and

communications professionals. Five are humanities academics or teachers and two are entrepreneurs in complementary and alternative medicine. 20 interviewees have a master's degree or higher, commonly in the arts, humanities, or social sciences.

The study is part of a wider research project focusing on cultural workers who have joined the OCF as adults. To zoom in on this group of people, I made use of tailored methods. To create a list of potential interviewees, I browsed through Orthodox media sources and asked my colleagues in academia and contacts in the OCF for suggestions. From this list, I then handpicked people whom to contact directly, aiming for variance in profession, age, and gender. Using this approach, I enlisted 23 of the 29 interviewees. The remaining six volunteered to participate after learning about my project on social media. As part of the research project, I have also gathered religious and secular media features, biographies, and other texts written by or about Finnish converts, and conducted fieldwork in a catechumen class for potential new members organized by one OCF parish. While I do not analyse this auxiliary material in this study, it has helped me gain a deeper understanding of transitions to the Orthodox Church in Finland.

I conducted the interviews face-to-face between November 2019 and February 2020. The interviews were on average 95 min in length and semi-structured in nature, dealing with the interviewee's religious trajectory and present-day religiosity. They were recorded and later transcribed and coded with the help of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.TI. Prior to the interviews, I provided all participants with written information about the research project, data management, and the voluntary nature of participation. In the interview situation, we went through the information package and the participants signed a consent form regarding the use of their data. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, I have minimized or modified any identifiable information presented in this article.

The research complies with all the ethical principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK. Based on the Board's guidelines for ethical review in human sciences, the research design did not involve elements requiring ethical review from an independent ethics committee.[3]

Ambivalent attitudes towards religious materiality

> [Orthodoxy] penetrates so very many layers in me. Like when I went to an Orthodox service for the first time in Valamo … The first thing that one encounters is the scent, which is just wonderful. And then there is the visual side. Even a perfectly ordinary Sunday service always feels like a celebration, because it is very beautiful there. The icons are very beautiful, there are flowers everywhere in front of the icons, and it has been made beautiful like that. And then I fell in love with the music … They don't use instruments but only human voice, so everything sounds very beautiful and wonderful and harmonious … It [Orthodoxy] offers something for every sense, although that is obviously not the foundation, but in any case, I thought that it was wonderful that there is always a festive atmosphere at church.

In this excerpt, my interlocutor Maarit, an artist, depicts Orthodox collective worship as a sensory experience. The account is an answer to my question on why she became interested in Orthodoxy. It combines Maarit's memories of her very first Orthodox service, in

[3]See *The Ethical Principles of Research* (2019), especially section 4.2, for research design elements requiring ethical review.

which she participated in the New Valamo monastery, with more general description. Maarit's motives for visiting the monastery had not been primarily religious; rather, she had attended a course at the folk institute located on the premises. Nevertheless, services held at the monastery church made such an impression on her that, after travelling back to her hometown, she started participating in the Divine Liturgy at the local Orthodox chapel.

Virtually every one of my interlocutors identified collective worship as a particularly cherished aspect of Orthodoxy (Kupari forthcoming). Like Maarit, many of them recounted how liturgical life had functioned as their gateway to the Orthodox Church. The material forms of the services the interviewees recurrently described as 'wonderful' and 'beautiful'. At the same time, they also downplayed the role of materiality in their transitions to Orthodoxy. In her account, Maarit notes in passing that the sensory abundance of Orthodox services 'is obviously not the foundation'. Apparently, even though she revelled in the sensory world of Orthodoxy, she thought that this should not decide anyone's choice of religious community.

Some interviewees expressed this ambivalence towards materiality in more explicit terms. Elias, a media professional, 'admitted' that he was attracted to the 'splendor' of Orthodox liturgical life, but emphasized that '[f]iner services should never be the only reason for switching churches'. Similarly, Kari, another media professional, acknowledged his appreciation for the material forms of Orthodox services, but was careful to distinguish them from other, more substantial motivations for becoming Orthodox:

> Art is close to my heart, so naturally all these elements of Orthodox worship are important to me, because they are aesthetically beautiful. But that is not the reason why … I have not joined the Orthodox Church because there is such a nice atmosphere and because it smells so nice there. It is not a sufficient reason.

All these comments convey a certain tension surrounding materiality. One the one hand, Maarit, Elias, and Kari acknowledge that sensory aspects significantly contribute to their experience of Orthodox services and Orthodoxy generally. On the other, they express very normative views as to the proper role of materiality in religion. According to them, aesthetics should not matter too much. Why is that?

From the perspective of semiotic ideology, the interviewees' accounts hinge on two important starting points. One of them is the devaluation of the role of materiality in processes of communication. According to this understanding of signification, the material expression of the sign ideally constitutes an empty vehicle to which different meanings can be attached. In this hypothetical scenario, the properties of the sign vehicle in no way influence the object of signification. Rather, the link between the two follows convention, which makes material forms replaceable with each other. The attributes 'ideal' and 'hypothetical' are important here, since Keane's (2003, 411–414) understanding of semiotic ideology builds on the tenet that material expression is always implicated in signification. The second premise is the privileging of language over other semiotic forms. According to this starting point, words are best equipped among all material forms to convey meaning in such unadulterated and transparent form (see Keane 2007, 59–67).

These presuppositions correspond with the so-called referential understanding of language and communication, emphasizing the denotative function of signs (Blommaert 2006, 511–512; Keane 2007, 67). It has been recognized as a particularly powerful

semiotic ideology in modern Western societies (e.g., Blommaert 2006, 517–518). Its roots lie partly in the Protestant Reformation, which promoted the ideal of an autonomous subject, whose agency in the world and connection with God is only minimally dependent on the mediation of materiality. From the perspective of Protestant reformers, reliance on conventional material forms – particularly those central to Catholicism – effectively saps the agency of God and human subjects, falsely administering it to non-human objects instead (Keane 2007, 5–7, 54–55, 61–67). The Protestant subject, in contrast, should be 'at its core independent of, and superordinate to, the world of mere dead matter' (Keane 2003, 411).[4]

In downplaying the role of materiality in their processes of religious change, my interlocutors seemed to subscribe to some form referential semiotic ideology. Alternatively, they strategically abided by it, perhaps to shield themselves against potential criticism – a possibility to which I return later. The interviewees' accounts convey that, while they greatly enjoyed Orthodox materiality, they also considered attachment to particular material forms a somewhat trivial matter. What should count more is the object of signification and not the material form through which it is mediated. Nevertheless, as was exemplified especially by Maarit's quotation in the beginning of this section, my interlocutors did not completely disregard the significance of material forms either. Next, I examine their positive interpretations of Orthodox collective worship more closely, by analyzing their comparisons between the sensory worlds of Orthodox and Lutheran collective worship.

Comparisons between the material forms of Orthodoxy and Lutheranism

> The liturgical life is very important. And, well, I am myself a type of performer. And our services are based on recitation. It is just incredibly beautiful that everyone is singing. … The priests, and then there is the choir and everything. It is somehow so breathtakingly beautiful. The bare music just touches you. For me, the melodies alone are religious experience enough. … And the scent of incense. And then there are the vestments. And then the icons, and the idea that they are not art, they are teaching.

Topias, an artist, considered collective worship 'the brightest star' of Orthodoxy. In his interview, he enthused at length over the sensorium of Orthodox services, describing how it offered participants 'a full aesthetic experience' and captivated especially newcomers with 'sensory profusion'. Like Topias, many of my interlocutors commented approvingly on the material abundance of Orthodox collective worship. However, another key characteristic of Orthodox liturgical life in their opinion was the stability and compatibility of its elements. The material expressions were not haphazard or changing, but followed distinct styles and predictable patterns. Thus, while the interviewees often described the sensory world of Orthodox services using adjectives connoting richness and intensity, it was equally important for them to emphasize how the different elements created a holistic and harmonious totality, a 'gesamtkunstwerk' or a 'divine drama'.

Furthermore, many interlocutors were also certain to point out that the function of material forms in collective worship was not merely to please the senses. Icons 'are

[4]For a more extensive discussion on the modern 'skepticism concerning the sign' (Yelle 2013, 80) and how it has been influenced by Protestant thought, see Yelle (2013), especially chapters four and five.

not art, they are teaching', stated Topias, and went on to speak of how they facilitated an intimate connection with saints. Kari, for his part, noted that while outsiders and newcomers may be affected by surfaces alone, 'every detail actually has profound significance; even a bishop's cufflinks have some theological meaning'. Nevertheless, the interviews did not include much sophisticated analysis of the theological import of individual elements. The format did not encourage such reflection. More importantly, what mattered most to the interviewees was the knowledge that the material forms of Orthodox services all had theological substance. It was not even considered possible for a layperson to be aware of all the chains of signification involved.

Prior experiences of Lutheran services often provided the background against which my interlocutors appraised Orthodox liturgical life. A central critique that the interviewees voiced against Lutheran collective worship was that contrary to the stability and reliability of the Orthodox sensory world, Lutheran services were characterized by more variability, unpredictability, fragmentation, and discrepancy. 'One never knows what to expect' was a common way to describe the experience of going to the Lutheran Communion Service. The heterogeneity of Lutheran material forms showed, for example, in the musical dimension of the services, including modernized hymns and the use of electronic instruments and popular music styles. In this vein, Kari stated: 'I don't have anything against rock music, but when I go to church, I do not want to hear rock, I want to hear music that, for me, brings a release from the everyday.'

The single most disparaged element of Lutheran collective worship was language. My interlocutors greatly valued the age and stability of Orthodox liturgical texts and verbal formulas. They were attracted to the idea of words and prayers being repeated in similar form again and again, supposedly in all corresponding services celebrated throughout the Eastern Orthodox world. Moreover, they also valued the performative aspects of Orthodox liturgical language, including the prominence of repetition, recitative, and fixed melodies.[5] Establishing these highly formalized elements as a point of comparison, they commented negatively on the more liberal use of language in Lutheran services. Topias, for instance, found it moving that Orthodox services are comprised of prayers that seem 'eternal compared to the human lifespan', and noted how Orthodox priests 'are not allowed to babble in their own words' like Lutheran pastors. And Kristiina, an artist and a teacher, criticized Lutheran sermons and hymns for trivializing the Christian message through continuous efforts to spell out its relevance in the contemporary world. According to her, Lutheran sermons often comprise of 'stories about everyday life' and come off as 'spiritual baby-talk', whereas in the Orthodox Church, the verbal content 'tells less about people and more about the message of the Church. And it feels eternal.'

Orthodox semiotic ideology can be seen to proceed from the premise that certain material forms have a privileged role in mediating between worldly and divine realms. According to Orthodox teaching, Christ taking up physical form in the Incarnation made the consecration and transfiguration of material creation possible (Ware 2015, 228–229). Therefore, material forms are not treated as inherently susceptible of corrupting the relationship between humanity and divinity. However, they are subjected to manifold institutional control (Luehrmann 2018, 10). The function of an icon as

[5]Stephen Pax Leonard's (2020) study of Russian Orthodox devotees' experiences regarding the use of Church Slavonic in collective worship constitutes an interesting point of comparison to these observations.

divine mediator is in theory dependent on it having been painted following canonical conventions and blessed by a priest. In its theological discourse and liturgical practice both, the Church ceaselessly promotes its teaching concerning icons (Luehrmann 2010, 58–62, 2018, 11). Furthermore, the connection between aesthetics and authority extends even to material forms of less doctrinal importance. All the wax candles used in the OCF, for example, are produced in the convent of Lintula.

In collective worship, icons, wax candles, and a myriad of other material forms authorized by the Church work together to create a multilayered sensory experience. Interpreted through an Orthodox lens, all these forms call forth chains of signification that reinforce, intersect, and wrap around each other, ultimately pointing toward divinity.[6] The result is a semiotic event that is in a sense simultaneously overdetermined yet inexhaustible: countless sign vehicles point towards the same object, bringing up countless possible connections with it.

Lutheran services, for their part, enact a somewhat different understanding of meaning production; one that is more in tune with the referential ideology mentioned in the previous section. Generally speaking, a central characteristic of Protestant approaches to signification is the ideal of direct connection between the human subject and the divine. Conventional material forms easily appear as impediments to such connection. In some Protestant traditions, a strict attitude towards the mediation of materiality defines all aspects of religious life (e.g., Engelke 2007; Keane 2007). Lutheranism, however, is not among these variants of Protestantism. Luther was not against liturgical formulas, church music, or even all forms of church art *per se*. Nevertheless, he seems to have placed little weight on the notion that particular, strictly delineated material forms constitute privileged conduits towards the sacred (Bertoglio 2017, 204–206; Koerner 2004, 28–30).

Following Luther's lead, present-day Lutheranism is characterized by a certain disinterest towards form. For example, while the liturgical schemes outlined by Luther did not radically depart from Catholic models, they introduced a degree of flexibility in the structure and conduct of Mass, encouraging local variation (Bertoglio 2017, 241–242). This mandate for fluidity provides a road map even for contemporary liturgical practices of the ELCF (e.g., *Jumalanpalvelusten kirja* 2000, 7). There is room for adaptation and interpretation, which shows among other things in thematic Masses that cater to different musical tastes. Overall, Lutheranism subjects the material forms of collective worship to less institutional control and coordination compared to Orthodoxy due to their relative unimportance in mediating between humanity and divinity. Over the course of time, different aspects of the sensory world of Lutheranism have thus been able to evolve in different directions, allowing for a range of styles and combinations.

The interviewees' comparisons between the material dimensions of Orthodox and Lutheran collective worship evoke and assess these basic presuppositions. In my interlocutors' accounts, the immersive, stable, and coherent sensory world of Orthodox liturgical life is raised above that of Lutheran services. The material forms of Lutheran collective worship, for their part, are deemed subject to the vagaries of fashion and individual preference. In challenging the notion that material expressions can be modified liberally

[6]This process is illustrated in Timothy Carroll's (2018) insightful ethnography on the role of materiality in Orthodox worship (e.g. 117–132).

without this having a bearing on how they convey divine truths, my interlocutors relied on the starting points of Orthodox semiotic ideology.

According to Meyer and Stordalen (2016, 5–6), religion consists of practices of mediation through which humans attempt to establish a connection with entities who do not reveal themselves to them directly. As the discussion in this section has made evident, my interlocutors preferred Orthodox practices of mediation to Lutheran ones, at least in connection to collective worship. In the next section, I continue my analysis of the interviewees' descriptions of Orthodox liturgical life and their underlying assumptions concerning materiality. I focus specifically on two features of Orthodox semiotic ideology that I have already touched upon – the highly formalized or ritualized iteration of different material forms and the collaboration and synergy between them – and examine how these features contributed to the interlocutors' experience of the presence of the sacred in Orthodox services.

Orthodox material forms as mediators between humanity and divinity

> I would like to stress the mysticism. And then I think that the aesthetic experience is very powerful. It obviously includes things like icons and incense, and in a way the entire sensory world present in the Divine Liturgy. But it is not simply a sensory experience; rather, the aesthetic experience encompasses the whole essence of the Church, which lies beyond the sensory world and perceptible reality.

In this quotation, Suvi, an academic, describes what for her is one of the central pull-factors of Orthodoxy. According to her, the Orthodox Church recognizes 'holistic aesthetic experience' as a legitimate way to evoke something that is in fact beyond sensory perception: the transcendent. Using different expressions, many of my interlocutors similarly depicted Orthodox services as a place where they could approach the sacred. Kristiina, for example, spoke of 'the touch of the sacred' at services and Topias of church music as 'a religious experience'. Maarit noted that Orthodox services 'elevate' you to a place 'where you forget about mundane things'. Harri, another artist among my interlocutors, for his part compared Orthodox collective worship to a 'stirring artistic experience', with the important difference that it is a 'window' to and 'reminder' of the 'invisible'. In his interview, Harri described himself as an aesthetician, for whom 'orientating one's mind upward through the multisensory beauty [of Orthodox services] comes naturally'.

Altogether, these expressions convey that through Orthodox collective worship, the interviewees' could experience the presence of or a connection with something that outside the liturgical context often remained undetectable. Following Keane (2008, S120), this effect results from particular properties of Orthodox material forms, which differ from those used in more ordinary communication. Here, I identify two such elements in my interlocutors' descriptions.

In the interviews, my interlocutors linked the presence of the sacred in Orthodox services to an experience of the inexplicable. They applauded the Orthodox tradition for acknowledging that not everything can be known or articulated: for not 'explaining things to pieces' or 'ripping open the fundamental mystery'. According to the interviewees, this shows among other things in how the services give a prominent role to other forms of communication besides discourse. Orthodox collective worship harnesses

the whole of the human sensorium to carry chains of signification pointing to the transcendent. For the interviewees, this overlap and synergy between material forms worked to produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is illustrated, for example, by Suvi's and Harri's previous comments on how the aesthetic dimensions of Orthodox liturgical life encompass also that what lies beyond the sensory world. Simultaneously, the presence of different material forms gives the mysterious a certain concreteness. In this vein, my interlocutor Irja, an academic, noted: 'Orthodox services are easier for me to grasp [than Lutheran ones], because … the sacraments are somehow, could I say more concrete. … Orthodoxy is more physical, more tangible, more easy to grasp.'

In producing these kinds of comments, my interlocutors invoked one important starting point of Orthodox semiotic ideology, namely the notion that divinity cannot be encompassed by human reflection. Rather, it remains shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, while incapable of knowing divine truths, human beings can still experience them through the sacraments and liturgical life of the Church (Bandak and Boylston 2014, 29–30).[7] This understanding of humanity's abilities displaces language – especially its referential and denotative aspects – from a privileged position among forms of communication. In Orthodox services, language rather cooperates with other institutionally authorized material forms in producing multimodal connections to the transcendent.

Here we come to another important distinction that my interlocutors made between Orthodoxy and Lutheranism, for a central criticism that they raised against Lutheran services concerned the emphasis on language and, more specifically, on 'preaching', 'rationalization', and 'explanation'. The interviewees disapproved of the way in which Lutheran language use positions the pastor as the translator and interpreter of divine truths. In their opinion, moreover, the Lutheran preference for clear and plain expression inevitably erodes the sense of mystery. Petri, an artist, for example noted that he was irritated by the 'endless explication' and 'excessive simplification' of divine truths in Lutheran services. He himself was 'more interested in the inexplicable', because 'it leaves more space for one's own thoughts'. And Kristiina stated that the Orthodox Church 'trusts in the eternal and timeless nature of the message, and that it touches people without excessive explanation'.

In the interviews, my interlocutors also connected the presence of the sacred to an experience of participating in an age-old community. According to Kristiina, in Orthodox services, participants are exposed to an 'eternal and timeless' message. Similarly, many of my interlocutors took up the temporal perspective opened up in Orthodox collective worship, describing how it made one feel affinity with a community that expands well beyond the present time and place.[8] Topias, for example, praised Orthodox liturgical formulas for producing a 'startling' contrast to the ever-evolving contemporary world: 'The Divine Liturgy has been like it is for ages. It remains the same, generations go by but the Divine Liturgy continues, prayer continues, the Eucharist is as before.' And Milla, an academic, reflected on the same topic:

[7]See Naumescu (2019) for an analysis of the 'mystery-centred' (395) ritual pedagogy prevalent in Orthodox Christianity.
[8]Experiences of communality that spans across generations and centuries are a recurring feature of ethnographic accounts of Orthodox worship; see, for example, Maija Penttilä's (2021) analysis of prayer practices of Russian immigrants in Finland.

> When you asked me what it is about Orthodoxy that feels right to me, well, one thing connected to that is this feeling of groundedness. When you know that the Divine Liturgy, for example, has been largely the same for centuries, you somehow achieve a connection [not only] with the current congregation, but also with the community that has been there throughout the ages. It makes you feel safe when certain things are repeated the same way, it [the Liturgy] always contains certain elements, it proceeds in a certain way. And there are these … well, like fire, live flame, wine, bread. You are somehow dealing with these very earthy things that nevertheless, in their very rootedness, represent the sacred.

Milla's description of a connection with the full body of Orthodox faithful follows Orthodox teaching on the Divine Liturgy and the sacrament of the Eucharist (Ware 2015, 258). Nevertheless, from the perspective of semiotic ideology, the experience of a temporal continuum depicted by Milla, Topias, and Kristiina relies on the context-independent properties of and processes of decontextualization related to Orthodox material forms (Keane 2008, S120–S122).[9] In Orthodox collective worship, different material forms are engaged with in a way that underlines their independence with respect to the situation at hand. The services are about correct reiteration of self-contained expressions authorized by the Church. Deference to fixed manifestations in principle surpasses individual preference and autonomy. This downplays the role of individual participants, and points towards the tradition of the Church as the prime agent through which divinity is realized in the world. Priests and other Orthodox faithful only animate this tradition; they are not its authors.

In the material, the opposite is the case with Lutheran services. As I described in the previous section, Lutheran collective worship allows for and even encourages adaptation to the immediate context. My interlocutors, however, did not appreciate the adoption of material forms from contemporary culture, such as the use of modern musical instruments or idiom, into liturgical life. It made Lutheran services appear too commonplace and bound to space and time. Kari, for example, lamented on the integration of popular music into some services, and stated: 'I didn't experience them [these services] as sacred or devout. It's difficult to say what was missing. Maybe they are somehow ordinary.' Furthermore, the higher level of context-dependency of Lutheran material forms was also perceived as accentuating the agency of the pastor, and other specialists and performers, as mediators between humanity and divinity. In this vein, many of the interviewees experienced the tone of Lutheran services to be, in the words of Suvi, 'alienatingly personal'.

Between Orthodox and Lutheran (or secular) interpretations of materiality

In the two previous sections, I have analysed my interlocutors' descriptions of Orthodox liturgical life and comparisons between Orthodox and Lutheran services from the perspective of semiotic ideology. The discussion established the interviewees' preference for the sensory world of Orthodox collective worship. It demonstrated how, for the interviewees, Orthodox material forms act as media that produce a discernible contact with the transcendent. They do this by emphasizing the multisensory, inexhaustible and

[9]Keane's discussion concerns religious language, but I suggest that it can be expanded to concern all semiotic forms within the context of religion.

hence 'inexplicable', and stable, self-contained and hence 'timeless', nature of this communication. The sensory world of Lutheran services failed, in the case of my interlocutors, to evoke the sacred in a similar way.

The analysis should have left no doubt as to my interlocutors' profound attachment to Orthodox liturgical life and its various material components. For many of the interviewees, collective worship had been the main pull-factor of Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, as I established in the very first analysis section, they simultaneously downplayed the role of materiality in their processes of religious change. Several informants expressed reservations regarding the idea that material expressions, especially non-verbal ones, could or should constitute the driving force behind a switch from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy. One of these people was Kari, who in the following quotation bluntly rejects 'outward forms' as a sufficient reason for becoming Orthodox. In the excerpt, Kari reflects on whether the sensory dimensions of Orthodoxy make it particularly attractive to culturally oriented people. This was a recurring theme in the material, as the interviewees consisted mostly of cultural workers.[10]

> One cannot deny that so-called cultural and art people are particularly sensitive to all the outward forms of Orthodoxy. To how it smells nice there and how wax candles are pretty when they burn in a dark church. But I don't think that anyone joins the Church because of that. … Or if they do, it [their faith] remains fairly dead. They move on quickly or stop going to church. For the light of wax candles does not carry that far, across many years, in my opinion. If one only goes to church for vibes.

What lies behind the ambivalent comments that my interlocutors produced about the role of materiality in processes of religious transformation? Kari's statement, in its purposeful banality, hints at one potential answer. In present-day Finland, the public image of Orthodoxy is positive. Well into the second half of the twentieth century, however, Orthodoxy was considered very much a second-rate tradition in relation to Lutheranism (Kupari 2016). Arguments for the superiority of Lutheranism commonly hinged, in one way or another, on the notion that Orthodoxy harbours a wrongful attachment to material forms. The interlocutor from my earlier study, who claimed that Lutherans consider icons mere 'pieces of wood', was commenting on this discourse. Her tactic was to exaggerate the Lutheran argument to make it appear in questionable light. Similarly, in reducing Orthodox materiality to 'nice' smells and 'pretty' candlelight, Kari ridicules the idea that someone of a serious mindset would turn to Orthodoxy for such empty forms. In this way, he defends himself and his peers against potential criticism concerning Orthodoxy as their tradition of choice.

In his account, Kari implicitly suggests that lasting religious change cannot be founded on material forms, if these forms are exploited only for their surfaces, and not interpreted within the Orthodox framework. The same emphasis on right interpretation is reflected in the interviewees' statements regarding materiality even more generally. For example, when narrating their own religious trajectories, it was common for my interlocutors to describe a gradual progress from a superficial enjoyment to a deeper understanding of

[10] As to my interlocutors' views on this issue, some of them readily admitted that culturally and artistically oriented people are more often attracted to Orthodoxy, while others reacted with mild offence to any such suggestion. Maarit, for instance, emphatically stressed that 'all people have an eye for beauty'.

Orthodox collective worship.[11] Kristiina, for example, noted how everything at Orthodox services originally felt 'just so exotic, special, fancy, and different', and continued: 'But after I had gone a few times and the novelty value had worn off, I started to hear what they were saying there.' And Suvi recalled how, even though she had experienced the Orthodox church space as somehow charged from early on, it had taken her a long time to gain even a rudimentary idea of what that could be about. According to her, this had partly to do with the need to 'unlearn' Lutheran concepts first, before she could grasp Orthodox interpretations of different phenomena.

These accounts remind us that, hailing from a Lutheran background, my interlocutors had firsthand knowledge of how the material forms of Orthodox collective worship may appear from a non-Orthodox standpoint. Approached through a referential understanding of communication, Orthodox materiality comes off as mere embellishment, the source of 'vibes'. As such, it does not constitute sufficient grounds for becoming Orthodox. In their descriptions of their own religious trajectories, the interviewees therefore underlined the importance of learning to engage with Orthodox material forms using the proper semiotic ideology. Even Kari was ready to acknowledge that simply finding icons important to your prayer life – experiencing them as mediators between humanity and divinity – 'is a good enough reason for joining the church'.[12]

Simultaneously as my interlocutors' accounts convey an acute concern for correct interpretation of Orthodox material forms, they nevertheless also illustrate the continuing influence of other presuppositions. One discordant note in the data concerns, applying the term used by Elias, the 'splendor' of liturgical life. While many interviewees enjoyed the sumptuous style of Orthodox church décor, textiles, vestments, and icons, others stressed their preference for 'modesty'. Petri, for example, stated that even though 'it is great that our faith does not have a negative attitude towards outward things', he does not appreciate 'liturgical pretentiousness', in this way distinguishing between proper and excessively grandiose use of material forms. Moreover, another cause of reservations was the role of tactility in collective worship. Thus, some interlocutors recounted how it had taken them time to get used to kissing icons, relics, or the hand of a priest, and a few admitted that they still had difficulties with this kind of physical engagement. Several interviewees pondered whether it was even possible for them to achieve complete ease in their relationship with sacred matter, since they had not been socialized to Orthodoxy as children.

These kinds of comments illustrate the interviewees' navigation between conflicting presuppositions related to materiality. They betray the challenges of adapting from a semiotic ideology that does not acknowledge the intermediary capacities of specific material forms in relation to divinity to one with a more approving attitude towards matter. They also reveal my interlocutors' keen awareness of the differences between

[11] In her study of American converts, Amy Slagle (2005) discusses how it is quite possible for people to develop an appreciation of Orthodox aesthetics only gradually, after originally experiencing the sensory world of the services as strange and even off-putting. Such strong reactions against Orthodox materiality were not common among my interviewees, however.

[12] The interviewees focus on learning to engage with Orthodox materiality the right way as central to embracing Orthodox Christianity resonates with the views expressed by some of Timothy Carroll's (2017, 2018) interlocutors. For example, the priest of the parish where Carroll conducted fieldwork emphasized this very aspect in assessing potential new members' maturity and readiness to enter the Church (Carroll 2018, 88–91), and another key informant described material forms as 'keys' to the door to God, as means to gain access to something greater (Carroll 2017).

the two approaches and the foundations of their own dispositions. When brining up their reservations, they often ended with the remark: 'Maybe I am just too Lutheran in this respect.' The interviewees tackled their misgivings by studying the theological premises behind Orthodox assumptions. However, what was often most important to them was finding a sufficiently satisfactory solution to the problem. As the previous statement shows, this could mean admitting the influence of Lutheranism on one's attitudes towards materiality.

A final perspective I want to raise here concerns my interlocutors' conceptualizations of conversion. In this article, I have refrained, with few exceptions, from calling the interviewees 'converts'. I have done this in part because many of them did not self-identify as having gone through conversion. Their objection towards this definition had various roots. For one thing, the term 'convert' has historically been used in a pejorative sense in the Finnish Orthodox community, and this still influences people's willingness to embrace it as an identity category (see Kupari 2021). However, the root that I take up here concerns the common association of conversion in Finland with dramatic born-again experiences. Such experiences are thought to characterize charismatic Christianity and some forms of revivalist Protestantism, but to be foreign to mainstream Lutheranism (as well as Orthodoxy). Therefore, they are often viewed with suspicion.

What is important for the present argument is that the perceived role of materiality in this conceptualization of conversion differs from Orthodox understandings. According to the theoretical starting point of this article, even dramatic born-again experiences always turn on certain material forms. Nevertheless, in Protestant and secular Finnish discourse both, they are interpreted largely through a dematerialized notion of conversion as a newfound and direct connection between the individual and Jesus Christ – whether this connection be judged as true or imaginary. This understanding of conversion, however, does not correspond with the experience of finding new materially mediated avenues towards divinity common among the interviewees.

My interlocutor Topias, for example, started pursuing membership in the Orthodox Church after he had visited an Orthodox church as a tourist and had a powerful emotional reaction to the church space. He called this experience 'an aesthetic fit'. Nevertheless, he was careful to differentiate it from the instant 'coming-to-faith experiences of Pentecostalists and free churchpersons', and rather emphasized the gradual development of his faith. He admitted originally having been 'mesmerized' by the sensory world of Orthodoxy, but repeatedly stressed how naïve this starting point had been: 'It was definitely a light and superficial start.' Based on accounts like Topias', I suggest that one reason for my interlocutors' rejection of the term 'conversion' as descriptive of their processes of religious change was that the conceptualization of conversion they proceeded from did not allow for gradually developing and intensifying engagement with materiality as a legitimate element in and catalyst of religious transformation. Even their 'aesthetic fits' the interviewees did not want to read as conversions, because they were informed by other than Orthodox interpretative frameworks.

Conclusion

Religious conversion characteristically involves subjection to new aesthetic environments, sensory worlds, and material forms. It also entails learning new assumptions

regarding the capacities of various material expressions to evoke the transcendent. In contemporary Finns' transitions from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity, the material underpinnings of conversion are well in evidence. As the previous analysis has demonstrated, many Finns experience the role of material forms in Orthodox worship as an important impetus for embracing Orthodoxy. In many other aspects of religious content, the differences between the two Christian groups – which both have the status of national churches in Finland – are relatively moderate. This further accentuates their diverging presuppositions regarding materiality as a factor in processes of religious change.

At the same time, my analysis has suggested that the adoption of Orthodox frameworks for interacting with sacred matter is a time-consuming process. Many of my interlocutors thus actually straddled several semiotic ideologies, alternating between them over the course of the interview. All of the interviewees, furthermore, were skilled at boundary work between Orthodox and non-Orthodox positions. Because the assumptions of Orthodox semiotic ideology constitute a significant departure from the referential emphasis dominant in contemporary Finland, this was a skill they had to master – if only for defending their community of choice against potential criticism.

My interlocutors are full and relatively well-off members of a highly advanced society, who have turned to a religious tradition that outspokenly emphasizes the mediating role of institutionally authorized material forms between humanity and divinity. For them, the appeal of Orthodoxy rested in an important sense on the ability of a stable and holistic sensory world to weave plausible connections to an 'age-old' mystery and community. The interviewees felt that, in recognizing the potency of multimodal sensory experience as vehicle for approaching a deeper reality, Orthodoxy resembles art. They felt, moreover, that Orthodox materiality stands at a sufficient distance from the disposable, arbitrary, and detached material forms of contemporary culture for it to open a refreshingly different perspective on the world. Both of these features were something that they found lacking in Lutheranism and Finnish culture more generally. It is important to acknowledge that the interviewees' accounts do not constitute objective interpretations on the differences between Orthodox and Lutheran approaches to materiality. Rather, they pinpoint variations of degree and emphasis that are significant in the Finnish context. In so doing, they also contain clues as to the role of materiality as a pull-factor of Orthodoxy in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Finland.

It is of course possible to debate, whether the interviewees had actually gone through conversions. In the scholarly literature, switches between two Christian communities are often considered potential conversions in the least. To determine their actual status, they are judged by the condition of whether they demonstrate a sufficient 'degree of breakdown of old identity and reformulation of new identity' (Snook, Williams, and Horgan 2019, 225). My interlocutors themselves were often opposed to defining their transitions as conversions. Their aversion towards this label was connected partly to an understanding of conversion as a sudden, dramatic, and materially unmediated encounter with divinity – all elements that did not coincide with their experiences.

Despite my interlocutors' oppositions, I am unwilling to write their transformations off as 'not conversions' too hastily. Rather, I am intrigued by what their accounts can teach us about the 'dematerialized' underpinnings of the concept of conversion (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 8). To have social existence – to be present, observable,

and recognizable – conversion must always involve some material expression or manifestation (Keane 2008, S114; Swift 2012, 274). In theorizations of conversion and everyday parlance both, the standard method to assess identity transformations has been to focus on language, for example on the degree of 'biographical reconstruction' in life stories (e.g., Gooren 2010, 44, 47; Snook, Williams, and Horgan 2019, 237). My case study suggests that assumptions regarding non-linguistic communication and practices related to various sensational forms can also signal changes in subjectivity. Overall, it is widely accepted today that theorizations of conversion have historically owed too much to certain Protestant self-representations of the phenomenon (e.g., Gooren 2010, 48; Swift 2012, 283). The tension and ambivalence characterizing my interlocutors' attitudes towards materiality seems to pinpoint one aspect of this Protestant legacy that has not been subjected to sufficient critical scrutiny as of yet.

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