Routine and Authority

The Return of the Russian Orthodox Church to Komi Rural Communities

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is a comparative analysis of the post-Soviet reappearance of the Russian Orthodox Church in two rural Komi communities. We aimed to study local perceptions of restoring the Russian Orthodox Church’s presence in particular localities. We conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two communities and spoke to local clerics and the inhabitants of the villages under study. Our field research also involved participant observation and literature analysis. The collected evidence indicates that the community with more distinctive folk Orthodox traditions more or less plainly contested the priests’ authority. Still, people generally perceived the renewal of the Russian Orthodox Church’s presence positively. We argue that the Russian Orthodox institutions and priests did not necessarily replace folk Orthodox specialists’ authority, but rather diversified local religious scenes.

Keywords: authority, church, community, Komi, Orthodox, post-Soviet

In this article we analyze the restoration of the Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC) institutional presence in Kulömdin district in the Komi Republic, Russia. By the end of the 1980s, the whole region had had no functioning churches for fifty years. The post-Soviet return of the ROC to the area lasted more than twenty years, until the presence of Russian Orthodox institutions had become routinized. A routine enables the preserving of religious traditions and rituals in the shared memory of group members and the using of this stored knowledge in rituals without external stimulation (see Whitehouse 2008: 108).
There are now several operating churches in the Kulömdin district with regular services and small communities of active churchgoers. Villagers regard the presence and availability of Orthodox clerics as natural even if they do not necessarily feel the personal or regular need for their services. We aim to explore this process, concentrating mainly on Kulömdin, the center of the district, while also comparatively analyzing developments in Mys village community on the outskirts of the 26,600-square-kilometer administrative unit.

Overall trends in Russia characterizing the development of Russian Orthodoxy in the postsocialist era are encouraging for the ROC. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ROC quickly restored its position. The Church regained, renovated, or obtained buildings and institutions and now enjoys political assistance and media support, appearing in public as essentially a national church. Even when not personally particularly religious or active churchgoers, the majority of people in Russia have started to perceive Russian Orthodoxy as a monolithic, superior, and patriotic religion (Golovushkin 2004: 103; Krindatch 2004: 126; Mitrokhin 2006: 37–38). In addition to encouragement from the establishment, the ROC has also acquired the loyalty of local communities. One needs to consider that most of Russia’s population fundamentally lack an interest in religion, even those who identify themselves as Russian Orthodox (Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010: 312; Löfstedt 2012: 92–95; Panchenko 2012: 334; Lunkin and Zagrebina 2017: 5–6).

Although a hegemonic spiritual position seems guaranteed for the ROC in Russia, we decided to study post-Soviet religious change from local and individual perspectives. Taking some advice from Max Weber (1971: 1), we aim to comprehend Komi religious conduct “from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes.” Our focus on two local communities stems from Harvey Whitehouse’s notion of Christianity as a context-dependent phenomenon that occurs as “a vast array of fragments, uniquely shaped by local discourse and politics” (Whitehouse 2006: 295). On the example of her field studies among Russian Orthodox pilgrims visiting sacred objects in the countryside of Pskov province in northwest Russia, next to the Estonian–Russian border, Jeanne Kormina (2015: 38) even claims that in Russian rural areas, “different styles of religiosity, or different religious cultures” are adopted. Kormina (ibid.) considers a variety of understandings of Russian Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia resulting from the fragile power of the ROC over its followers’ actual religious practices. We explored the political and social settings that molded the restoration of churches and fashioned the relationship between local priests and com-
munities during the late- and post-Soviet return of the ROC to these localities. These cases appear to be somewhat different, and we intend to delve into the conditions of these distinctions.

Weber distinguished two different sets of religious dynamics through routinized and charismatic forms, which Whitehouse describes as a dialogue of doctrinal and imagistic modes (Weber 1958: 80–83, 178; Whitehouse 2004: 63). We demonstrate that different trajectories of religious dynamics appear simultaneously but are more characteristic of one or another religious agent. Whitehouse (2004: 65; 2008: 108) defines the doctrinal mode of religiosity as “highly routinized, facilitating the storage of elaborate and conceptually complex religious teachings in semantic memory.” The doctrinal mode is related to hierarchical institutionalization, frequent repetition, routinized transmission of religious teachings, and suppression of unauthorized innovation (Whitehouse 2004: 66–67, 97; 2008: 108–110). In the imagistic mode, rituals are rarely enacted but are strongly rooted in people’s memories. Imagistic religious representations are diverse, dynamic, and localized, nurturing limited, exclusive, and heterogeneous religious communities (Whitehouse 2008: 110–111). We believe that an understanding of traditionalistic and charismatic spiritual trends (cf. Weber 1958) helps with the development of a relevant approach to contemporary religious changes in the Komi countryside.

Regional peculiarities and development of Russian Orthodoxy in the Komi region have been a prominent topic of research among scholars. Ethnographers and folklorists have concentrated their attention on the institutional development of the ROC (e.g., Rogachev 2001; Vlasova 2014, 2018, 2020), folk Orthodox movements (e.g., Gagarin 1976; Chuvyurov and Smirnova 2003; Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2007; Koosa and Leete 2011), and the relationship between Russian Orthodox and animistic sentiments among the Komi (e.g., Limerov 2003; Sharapov 2006; Il’ina and Ulyashev 2009; Leete and Koosa 2022). However, the field lacks comparative analysis of contemporary cases of the ROC’s restoration of its position in Komi villages and people’s reactions to this institutional and spiritual reappearance.

This article is based on our joint fieldwork in the Kulömdin region since 2006 (Art Leete started his individual ethnographic field studies there in 1996). We attempted to collect data about the contemporary religious situation in the district and about religious feelings among the local Komi population. We questioned the indigenous inhabitants in various villages in the area, but we also conducted an interview of several hours with an ROC priest in Kulömdin. For this research, we
participated in church services in both Kulömdin and Mys villages, as well as several Sunday school meetings in the district center. We have interviewed the more active churchgoers as well as people who attend church randomly or do not attend church services (but still have a more or less developed knowledge of Russian Orthodox traditions). Most of the interviews with the active believers were conducted in the presence of the priest, his wife, or both, in the Sunday school room or in the priest’s apartment. This was so partly because it was a natural situation for the believers, and we let them choose the location for the interviews. During these interviews, people tended to present us with a somewhat embellished version of their religious experiences, perhaps to please the priest. While the priest’s presence possibly prevented the sharing of experiences and thoughts potentially unfavorable to the Church or parish, it can also be interpreted as encouraging in the sense that people felt it validated their interactions with us as outsiders—when we attempted to arrange individual appointments with churchgoers, they declined our proposals, referring to disorder in their homes or using other mundane excuses. The churchgoers preferred to talk to us in the church premises. Interviews with less religiously active people were generally carried out at their homes. Many of these people were also our long-term friends, or people close to our friends. These circumstances must be considered, for it will be seen that the opinions of representatives of this group seem considerably more variable and revealing.

At the beginning of our joint field efforts in Kulömdin, the local people had only just started to build their relationship with the new priest. Both the priest and people had opinions about the proper faith roles that each side should perform and the strategies they should carry out. The perceptions of individuals and their views on others’ religious behavior are the foci of this article. We will explore the different religious agents’ attitudes toward each other during the short period of significant change, as well as the diverse understanding of the whole process of reopening the church to people.

It appears to us that the most significant key to understanding the modes of the ROC revival in remote localities is the comparative exploration of distinct cases. Most of Kulömdin district’s roughly twenty-two thousand inhabitants are distributed between the approximately sixty hamlets and villages of the district. The regional center is also called Kulömdin, and with a population of about 5,600, on a local scale it is a metropolis. These numbers were a bit higher at the time of our fieldwork, but proportions have remained similar. This means that everything happening with the ROC here is very significant for
the whole district. Mys is a much more marginal village, with 290 inhabitants (Otsenka 2023), and is such even in the local perception. It is situated almost at the end of a road (there is only one village, Timsher, a few kilometers further toward the Ural Mountains). While Kulömdin’s church has embodied the mainstream of Russian Orthodoxy in the area for centuries, Mys church has been at the center of the most distinctive Komi folk Orthodox movement since the late 1890s. We regard both examples as justified and significant for exploring the Komi style of restoration of Russian Orthodox institutions and practices in the post-Soviet era.

**Russian Orthodox Institutions and Practices in Kulömdin Region**

The Komis were baptized at the end of the fourteenth century by Stephan Hrap (St. Stephan of Perm). The Kulömdin region was inhabited by Komis from the middle of the seventeenth century. At the same time, in 1646, the first church (dedicated to St. Nicholas) was built in Kulömdin village (Rogachev 2001: 68). The stone church of St. Peter and St. Paul had been constructed in Kulömdin by 1799. Another stone church, dedicated to the Resurrection and Vladimir Mother of God, was built in 1857 (ibid.: 72; Savel'eva 2006: 22). In 1866, the monastery of the Holy Trinity and St. Stefan was established in Ul’ianovo, less than 30 kilometers from Kulömdin. Several churches were opened at the monastery between 1867 and 1886 (Rogachev 2001: 73, 75, 80; Taskaev 2001: 85–87). In Mys, the church of John the Baptist was built in 1807, although it was consecrated only in 1864 (Istoriia tserkvi). During the tsarist period, churches were also constructed in five other villages in the Kulömdin region (today, ROC churches function in eleven villages in the district, plus Ul’ianovo monastery; see Tserkvi i khramy 2022), but for our study, historical notes on two communities (Kulömdin and Mys) are most relevant.

Today, Russian Orthodoxy is habitually maintained by the population of Kulömdin district. However, ROC priests and lay believers practice and understand faith differently, and this variety has unique local features. Over the centuries Orthodox Christianity has become an integral part of the worldview and everyday life of the Kulömdin region’s Komi (Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2007: 311). This is most clearly indicated by the appearance of the *Burs’ylsy’ias* Komi religious movement (“singers of goodness” or “good singers” in Komi) at the end of
the nineteenth century in the village of Mys. Members of *Burs’yllys’ias* continued to visit the church and accepted all the sacraments provided by a Russian Orthodox priest, but they also held ecstatic home rituals with religious singing in the Komi language and discussions on religious topics (Gagarin 1976, 1978: 218–221; Chuv’iurov 2001b: 76–79; Chuvyurov and Smirnova 2003: 170–171; Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2003: 150; 2007: 314).

During the 1930s, official ROC infrastructure disappeared from the Komi region (see Rogachev 2001: 80; Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2007: 313) due to Soviet repressions. But in the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s, three churches were reopened, none of them in the Kulömdin region. The closest functioning church was situated in Yb village near Syktyvkar, 200 kilometers from Kulömdin and 300 kilometers from Mys by road (350 kilometers using the Ezhva River). Church visits were arranged once a year to baptize all the newborn children. Women’s enthusiasm was nurtured by the fact that the Yb church’s late-Soviet-era priest was himself born in Mys (Koosa and Leete 2011: 51–52).

Elderly women continued to organize gatherings for prayers, to baptize children, and to arrange funerals according to Orthodox religious traditions (see Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2007: 311–314; Il’ina and Ulyashev 2009: 162; Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 322; Vlasova 2018). Public religious manifestations were not accepted by the authorities, although older women had more freedom in the Soviet Union to practice their religion, as the communist authorities did not consider them much of a danger to the ruling ideology; rather, they were seen as just practicing “folk customs,” in addition to which state control over retired people was weaker (Dragadze 1993: 152; Keinänen 1999: 155; Vlasova 2020: 268). Informal and uncontrolled folk-religious practices were also targeted during anti-religious campaigns that caused reorganization of “religious consumption” in rural areas, including a strengthening of the role of local religious leaders (Panchenko 2012: 321–333, 336).

*Burs’yllys’ias* were extraordinarily successful during the Soviet period. They broadened their geographical range, and groups of *Burs’yllys’ias* were established in several villages in the Kulömdin region (Smirnova and Chuv’iurov 2007: 314–315). But the movement never reached the regional center of Kulömdin. Their strict religiosity (but also the remote location, with its poor transport system) shielded them from Soviet reforms (Gagarin 1978: 251–255).

The Mys church was closed and vandalized in 1936. The municipal administration established a culture house for a local kolkhoz in the church building. Most of the village inhabitants openly objected to the
damaging of the church, and many peasants were arrested because of this unrest. People managed to hide the cross, thrown down from the church tower, and in the 1980s it was carried to Kochpon church near Syktyvkar (Istoriia tserkvi; Suvorov 1999; Koosa and Leete 2011: 49–50).

_Burs’yls’ias_ in Mys were the very first community in the Komi Republic that restored their church. In the late 1980s, a plan was introduced to reconstruct the former church as a sports hall using finances provided by the Komi Oblast Trade Union Committee and the Komi ASSR Ministry of Sport. But the local people applied to the municipality administration to restore the church. After painful negotiations with Kulömdin district executive committee, the allocated budget money was transferred for church renovation. The Mys church congregation was established in 1990 and people donated substantial sums for the reconstruction endeavor. People had hidden church icons at their homes in the 1930s, and these were brought back. On 7 July 1991, the first ceremony was carried out in the renovated Mys church by a priest named Trifon from Yb church. The new priest, Tikhon (Pavel Maiburov), who came from Ul’ianovo monastery, served in Mys from 1995 to 2009. Since then church services have been carried out by a priest named Tit (Bushenev) (Istoriia tserkvi; Suvorov 1999; Chuv’surov 2001a: 187; Smirnova and Chuv’surov 2007: 313; Sivkova 2007; Koosa and Leete 2011: 52–55; Tserkvi i khramy 2022).

In 1938, Kulömdin’s churches were closed and partly destroyed. In 1991, a group of local believers, headed by a Komi woman called Agaf’ia Egor’ievna Kiprusheva (1917–1995), registered the congregation, and the church buildings were given over to them by the local administration. Agaf’ia Kiprusheva initiated the restoration of the church of St. Peter and St. Paul and a campaign to collect donations for the church. Initially, church services were conducted by Agaf’ia herself (in Komi and Russian), then by priests traveling from Syktyvkar. The first long-term priest, Iona, started his service in 1992 (Sharapov 1995: 16; 2001: 163; Suvorov 1997; Saveleva 2006 Komiinform 2013; Tserkvi i khramy 2022).

For three years after the death of the first post-Soviet priest, Iona, in 2003, there was no permanent cleric in the district center. Church ceremonies were conducted by monks who arrived from Ul’ianovo Monastery (which was reopened in 1994). Social life around the church was almost nonexistent. Now, with a new priest, named Aleksandr Antonov, in place since 2006, church services are conducted regularly, Sunday school meetings are held weekly (for both children and adults), and the priest visits nearby settlements to hold liturgies in the villages where there are no churches.
An important issue is that the ROC is not the only religious structure present in the Kulömdin region, although the situation is very different in the settlements under study. In Kulömdin town, there were groups of Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses, and representatives of local Lutherans, Baptists, and Evangelical Christians. But in Mys, no alternative religious groups appeared until at least the late 2000s. Every religiously active person belonged to the ROC or the Burs’ylsys’as movement (or both). All alternative religious groups are rather marginal and generally valued quite poorly by most of the population. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church as a possible answer to people’s spiritual needs is not alone in the region, an issue that must be considered by Orthodox priests and enthusiastic ROC supporters.

Finding Common Ground

The people we interviewed in Kulömdin and the surrounding villages can roughly be divided into two categories. This kind of separation is conditional, as there is no strict borderline between these groups and their composition is heterogeneous. But we apply this labeling as an analytical tool. Whitehouse (2006: 300) claims that modes of religiosity depend, among other things, on “patterns of remembering, types of communal identity, and the scale and structure of religious communities.” This means that community plays a significant role in the creation and restoration of religious institutions, and official practices such as the interaction of clergy with their flock depend profoundly on local traditions of dealing with religious matters.

The first group comprises those who identified themselves simply as “ordinary people,” although in our view they represent a loose network of folk Orthodox believers. These people embody religious continuity in the region; they obtained their religious knowledge from their elders. Their faith was integrated into everyday life and not perceived as special or distinctive. The religiosity of these “ordinary people” was not defined through the practice of regular church attendance. They visited church no more than a couple of times per year, during the major Church holidays such as Christmas and Easter. On several occasions, these people insisted that they were not “real believers” or even declared themselves to be “nonbelievers,” for example on the following occasion: “The believers postpone all jobs and go to the church. We, the nonbelievers, always carry out something and if we have a free moment, we step into the church” (F 67, FMA 2007). Such
self-identification often came up in reference to people who were considered exemplarily devout or in comparison with regular churchgoers. At the same time, many of the “ordinary people” had elaborate knowledge of different folk Orthodox practices, which were also followed at least to some extent. Tatiana Voronina (1994: 68) describes religious practices among Russian peasants in the prerevolution period in a quite similar way. It could thus be argued that this low-intensity church attendance and the advanced ages of these churchgoers have historical roots.

The image of the second group (“proper believers”) is often connected with the formal side of religious behavior—weekly visits to church and regular celebration of Church holidays. Active church attendants made up the core of parishioners and were confident that they represented genuine Orthodox believers. They had generally been converted or had become active believers since the 1990s. This group of churchgoers consisted mainly of middle-aged and elderly women (colloquially referred to as babushki, i.e., “grannies”) who actively attended church ceremonies, various church-related social events, and Sunday school, and sang in the church choir. For them, regular visits to the church constituted an important part of their religious identity, as expressed by one of the ladies: “At first, my husband was upset because I was hanging around. I told [him] that listen, darling, I give to you, to the family six days, but give me just one day. But now I leave one day at home. I attend the church almost every day” (F 55, FMA 2007). Churchgoers in Kulömdin were very active, dedicating much of their time to the church and seeing special value in this energetic pattern of spiritual and social behavior (on typical Russian Orthodox “ecclesial believers,” see Mitrokhin 2006: 43–44).

Although their modes of religious practice are different, both churchgoers and “nonbelievers” recognized that some strategic choices had been made by Kulömdin’s new priest, Aleksandr. People appreciated his avoidance of aggressive missionary work. Everybody also agreed that it is essential for the Orthodox faith that people come to the church voluntarily, that active missionary work should not be a priority, and that people can attend if they have free time, as expressed by Father Aleksandr: “Naturally, less people will attend the church as . . . a planting of potatoes [is going on]. Later there will be a potato-digging, but in winter they’ll come, again” (FMA 2007).

People also appreciated Aleksandr’s tolerance toward moderate violations of church etiquette. They expected that the priest would be patient since he needed to increase the number of attendants and could not be too demanding about details. In Mys, religious matters were
treated much more passionately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During our field studies, we recognized more and less devoted believers, although even those who did not attend church services or did so randomly still stressed that faith was special and strong in the village. Everybody in Mys has grown up in intensely spiritual surroundings, and even in contemporary times, the Burs’yls’iás faith creates a habitual religious framework there. Father Tikhon did not push anybody to attend church services and people were fine with this (see Koosa and Leete 2011: 53–57).

The Kulömdin priest was ready to tolerate minor misbehavior (such as inappropriate clothing in church) to maintain peace in his congregation, to establish a balanced relationship with the local community, and to increase the number of churchgoers. The social strategy of the Russian Orthodox Church includes nurturing good relationships between priests and the people attending the church. A priest is supposed to accept some of the local community’s traditions and allow people to follow their customs, even if those customs seem somewhat “pagan” or are slightly inappropriate. This attitude enables the priest to obtain and maintain status and power. If a priest cannot establish a peaceful relationship with his congregation, it may lead eventually to his bishop retiring him9 (cf. Stark 2002: 28–29; Mitrokhin 2006: 65–66).

At least in the beginning, churchgoers in Kulömdin did not question any of the spiritual doctrines presented by their new priest. They agreed with the priest’s interpretations of religious matters. However, some minor issues appeared over the following years (for example, which part of the Bible it is advisable to read or how to treat magic) that slightly confused this spiritual harmony. The priest’s general attitude toward the locals was that, in principle, people are eager for faith. Even if they did not follow the Russian Orthodox faith entirely correctly, the priest saw no lack of enthusiasm:

They arrive [at the church] even on foot [3 km from another village]. Maybe you have seen how the whole family walks. We have here this kind of people, who, you see, somehow are drawn to the church by their souls and hearts. (FMA 2007)

Both the priest and villagers agree that they must follow religious customs at home. The Kulömdin priest mentioned several times that a certain spiritual vacuum10 existed in the region. It was caused, according to the priest, by the lack of priests and churches in the Kulömdin district. Additionally, the situation was influenced by the absence of public transportation at weekends. Many people had no possibility to
reach the churches. But Father Aleksandr felt that people must also demonstrate a certain passion and dedication to faith even in situations where no active church was available nearby. Home prayers do not serve only as a substitute for churchgoing, although many people today prefer them to public services (Inglehart et al. 2014). Soviet policy of restricting public church life facilitated the popularity of home prayer (Freeze 2017: 2–3). Home prayers are a traditional Orthodox spiritual practice sanctioned by the ROC and promoted by Father Aleksandr, and are thus another component of Russian Orthodox religiosity. As our field studies revealed, elderly ladies in Kulömdin conduct home prayers even without knowing much about the priest’s opinion (Leete and Koosa 2022: 521).

During a more private conversation at his home in 2007, the priest introduced another way that this spiritual vacuum was alleviated. In the village of Don, located 15 kilometers from Kulömdin, there is a community of Evangelical Christians. Father Aleksandr said that they tried to coordinate with each other on spiritual services, saying that it was better if people attended at least some sort of spiritual service. During church ceremonies and Sunday school meetings, he still acted according to the official ROC line and interpreted the activities of the “sects” (a colloquial notion referring to most non-Orthodox religious traditions) as wrong and dangerous. Thus, Aleksandr’s approach to these “sects” and people’s religious behavior was ambivalent. During the following years, Father Aleksandr became less tolerant of the Don Evangelicals and treated them as part of the spiritual vacuum, not as a conditional solution to it.

Furthermore, the ROC bishop and Kulömdin’s priest and congregation all believed that people were supposed to help renovate the church. Mitrokhin (2006: 141), writing about the general situation in Russian Orthodox communities, asserts that especially for village churches, an important resource for support is the unpaid labor of the congregation. Priests can use parishioners’ help to renovate the churches and to carry out other tasks. Father Aleksandr took for granted that the people should supply him and his family with some foodstuffs (potatoes, meat, jam, etc.): “People take care of the priest because here, in countryside, they like the priest very much” (FMA 2007). At the same time, it seemed that in Mys, Father Tikhon did not rely habitually on his parishioners’ food supplies (FMA 2008).

In general, both villagers and clerics see the ROC’s presence in the post-Soviet context as self-evident and necessary, mostly considering it a return to the normal order of things. Orthodoxy is thought of as the
“proper” religion and valued as part of local heritage. However, when it comes to specific practices and interpretations of what “properly Orthodox” means, a variety of views emerge. And even the villagers who approve of, or expect, a functioning church and a socially engaged priest in their village are not necessarily ready to support actively or have an engaged role in the development of this presumably mutual endeavor.

Maintaining Differences

Although in large part, the Komi people approved of the restoration of the ROC’s position in society, disagreements between the representatives of the Church and rural inhabitants of Komi have still been rather common in the post-Soviet period. Differences in understanding of the ROC’s role enable us to analyze dissimilarities in the modes of religiosity in distinct social groups. Some of these points of mutual critique appear typical to the whole postsocialist space in Russia, while others reflect local peculiarities in contemporary development, as well as historical spiritual traditions.

People usually agreed that restoring churches and reestablishing church services were the right things to do, although some individuals and groups retained doubts about the priests’ agenda. In places where the Church is absent or present only nominally, people have a more ambiguous opinion because of their particular relationship with the Russian Orthodox faith, or because the clerics have judged their religiosity too fervent or as differing from ROC teaching. Some religious knowledge (e.g., commemorating the dead, protecting close ones, magic healing) appears to people as natural, not acquired (cf. Whitehouse 2006: 302–303), and thus not connected to institutional faith. The priests encourage people to attend church services regularly and conduct home prayers. The congregants should avoid searching for practical gain from the faith, but need to save their souls. These conceptual and practical disparities also vary in intensity and mode.

People with loose connections to institutional faith sometimes stressed their lack of knowledge about “how to believe” and how to behave in church, in a similar vein to one of our Komi friends:

I come to the church and I’m afraid to do anything, because I don’t know what must be done there, how to behave. You see? What kind of a believer am I? Once I attended that church. I arrived with good
intentions. I lit a candle . . . Immediately, old grannies started to whisper—shshsh! It appeared that I had placed the candle incorrectly. I was still young. (M 46, FMA 2007)

Being ignorant of church etiquette was repeatedly pointed out as a reason for not attending church. People used this explanation routinely, although in practice the regular churchgoers did not always follow the supposed etiquette either (for example, women wore pants instead of a skirt or dress) and the “ordinary people” seemed to be quite aware of the basic behavioral rules.

People commonly presumed that the priests ought to follow the Orthodox Church’s principles and behave properly, but as several of our interlocutors reasoned from their experiences and observations, this did not always seem to be the case. For example, the clergy’s religious commitment (perhaps keeping in mind Father Aleksandr) was under doubt, with a reference to priests’ corpulence, which did not seem to be in correspondence with regular fasting (M 46, FMA 2007). At the same time, the Mys priest, Tikhon (quite a slim man), was accused by his parishioners of eating too little and following the fasting rules too closely (FM 2008).

At least in the early stage of the ROC comeback, the Komi people were hesitant about the priests (Vlasova 2014: 27), regardless of who they were and what they did. A priest was considered a necessary but quite passive element of the village environment. This attitude was in part nurtured by the fact that both churches (in Kulömdin and Mys) were renovated, and the congregation officially reestablished, on the initiative of the local women, not the ROC (this was common practice in other Komi regions; see ibid.: 25–26). This issue was stressed in Kulömdin by an elderly lady who participated in collecting donations for the church in the early 1990s, but in subsequent years became distanced from active participation in the life of the congregation:

Our church was not functioning, but one woman initiated the restoration. She visited every household and collected 10 rubles from everybody. With this money they renovated the floor, painted shelves, and put windows in. And afterward a priest appeared. (F 68, FMA 2006)

Quite a similar comment was made in Mys:

At first, our grannies conducted their prayers here by themselves. They were the managers. They performed everything. The old ladies brought icons from their homes, they restored everything with their
own hands. Later the priest arrived and started renovation, again. The priest lived in the house of the granny who initiated the revolt [against reconstructing the former church as a sports hall]. They started to organize everything together. (F 58, FMA 2008)

In Mys, people were somewhat bitter about the history of demolishing and rebuilding the church. This critique involved financial issues (the way that the authorities first destroyed the church building and, after decades, expected people to donate money to restore it) as well as the human factor (in the early 1990s, and again late in the first decade of the 2000s, the head of Mys municipality was a grandson of the main enthusiast for and organizer of church destruction in the 1930s): “Everything was destroyed and later they needed some money. And again, people had to provide it. They turned to people and said let’s renovate the church. It seems that it was not a good idea to destroy it” (F 73, FMA 2008).

The Kulömdin priest, Aleksandr, was very concerned about his authority among the local community. He felt that elderly women should be more accepting of this authority, but in general, he was satisfied with the honors he and his wife enjoyed:

A custom exists among the people that if a priest arrives they give some food to him. The priest is the last one who will die in hunger. People take care. You see, my wife coughed a bit in the autumn and they brought jam. People take care of the priest because here, in countryside, they like the priest very much. (FMA 2007)

At the same time, the older women of Mys were very critical of some aspects of their priest’s competence. One of them even had the courage to judge their priest publicly during church ceremonies. In turn, the priest criticized the same lady for singing too loudly during ceremonies (Koosa and Leete 2011: 56). This rivalry was probably caused not only by the priests’ young age, but also by the fact that the appointed priests were not native inhabitants of the Komi Republic.

During the Soviet period, elderly women attained a special position in folk Orthodox ritual practices. In the absence of priests, religiously knowledgeable older women became the most competent religious specialists in many communities all over Russia (cf. Mitrokhin 2006: 45–46; Il’ina and Ulyashev 2009: 162). The same process has also been documented in the Kulömdin community (Sharapov 2001). According to Whitehouse (2004: 68), a certain level of routinization accumulates the potential of survival. The pre-Soviet routine of faith among the
Komi was effective enough to guarantee the preservation of conceptualized religiosity without institutional support over the course of many decades.

The Kulömdin priest also criticized people’s religious commitment on several occasions. Aleksandr complained that the people expected him to approve and even carry out what he considered “pagan rituals,” and that the villagers were too keen on the potential practical gain that religion bought, attending church rarely (although he was tolerant of his flock being reduced seasonally for practical reasons; see above). Both the Kulömdin and Mys priests aimed to keep people away from “paganism” as well as “heretical” teachings and teach them to “believe properly.” But for vernacular believers the practical aspects of faith were much more important (FMA 2007). By the time of our fieldwork, the Mys priest enjoyed a “sect-free” social environment; however, as he did not wish to find common ground with the Burs’yls’ias, there were nevertheless discordant views in the village.

In 2007, the Kulömdin priest was very much concerned that the local municipality did not provide him enough opportunities to present the Church’s views publicly, and neither was the administration’s financial support sufficient. He aimed to make the ROC’s presence in the region conspicuous and regarded engagement in (semi)public institutions and events an essential means to achieve this. At the time, the priest regularly visited an orphanage in the nearby village of Kebanyol. Also in 2007, the Kulömdin district administration invited him to participate in a public celebration of Victory Day (9 May) for the first time. By 2008, the priest’s cooperation with the district administration had developed successfully in various directions (he delivered special lectures at the school and his wife published a regular column in the local newspaper).

A couple of years earlier, the previous Kulömdin priest, Iona, had committed suicide. This incident shocked the villagers and as a result churchgoers tried to avoid this topic during our interviews. They only alluded in a vague manner to some recent tragic events. The “ordinary people” were more talkative in this respect. For some of them, the priest’s suicide had damaged the reputation of Kulömdin church. As one woman explained:

I think then [after the priest’s suicide] confidence in the local church diminished and people mainly started to go to the Ul’ianovo monastery. They think that if they get baptized there, it will be more of a real baptism than in the church here. (F 37, FMA 2007)
However, this church scandal might not be the only reason that people preferred to attend the monastery church, as monasteries have a special position in the consciousness of Orthodox people. These institutions represent for them a higher, purer, and more ideal version of a church (Stark 2002: 158; Mitrokhin 2006: 115; Hann and Goltz 2010: 13).

Another tragic event counterbalanced Iona’s premature death. As we learned during our field studies, Agaf’ia Kiprusheva died in sad circumstances as well. One night, robbers broke into Agaf’ia’s house and, knowing that she was raising funds for the church, demanded money. She did not give them any of the church’s funds and was murdered. Churchgoers used the story to generate uplifting enthusiasm for their faith and invited people to visit the church, renovated at the cost of a martyr’s life.

Overall, misunderstandings or disputes between the priests and local communities involved doubts about the priests’ agenda and performance, problems with their social reach and public image, and the mutual contesting of authority. Problems with the monolithic intentions of the ROC and the spiritual agency of folk-religious leaders induced various tensions between the priests and their flocks, as well as different approaches to popular Orthodoxy. Distinction between the institutional and the vernacular was sharper in Mys, displaying local variations of religious transformation that need to be assessed in more detail.

Kulömdin versus Mys

In the previous sections we have focused on local peculiarities and specific examples in the context of more general developments in the Russian post-Soviet religious field. We will now try to sketch some of the similarities and disparities between the two localities, Kulömdin and Mys, and in the views of different parties.

In the late 2000s, the Kulömdin priest Aleksandr was at the beginning of his career and had a very elaborate set of expectations toward the local community. These expectations were partly normative and followed the rules of institutional discourse. The priest derived his conceptions from the general social strategy of the ROC (the renovation of the church, the application of certain spiritual and social rules). At the same time, the priest accepted that in the social situation in which he found himself, overly strict requests might threaten his fragile achievements in both spiritual and secular domains. This tolerance was grounded in the social approach of the ROC and also related to
Aleksandr’s character. His somewhat soft and ambivalent approach at the beginning of his work in the village was facilitated by the fragmentary nature of the network of believers connected to the church.

The situation in Mys was quite different during the return of the ROC to the local social scene. Similarly to in Kulömdin, people managed to renovate the church building before the priest was appointed and the women who led village religious life were very influential. This resulted in strong opposition to the priest, who did not care about local religious expression and aimed to uproot the whole *Burs’ylys’ias* movement. At the same time, Mys church was the first among the ROC churches in the Komi Republic to use Komi for church services (Vlasova 2014: 27). This might have been inspired by the fact that *Burs’ylys’ias* practices are all conducted in Komi. By the time of our field studies (2008), the Mys priest Tikhon had had mediocre success in eliminating the local folk Orthodox movement, despite serving there for many years (and being about to start his final year as the local priest). *Burs’ylys’ias* continued their meetings and executed some funeral customs without the priest’s knowledge, although the overall intensity and reach of the movement had reduced compared to previous decades (Koosa and Leete 2011: 55–56).

In general, dialogue between the Kulömdin priest Aleksandr and the local community was almost nonexistent. The priest had real influence only on a small group of ecclesial believers. This lack of communication also explains the relative indifference of most local people toward the priest. In Mys, some people even accused their priest of concentrating only on the spiritual sphere and avoiding communication with them outside the church walls.

According to the viewpoint of ecclesial believers in Kulömdin, there was no place for seriously criticizing dogmatic interpretations of religious issues, or the priest’s personality and behavior. The only critical remarks came from “nonbelievers,” although even these were vague, indicating primarily a lack of interest in matters of the priest’s personality. In Mys, the situation appeared more complex to us. What had formerly been a nucleus of the *Burs’ylys’ias* movement was split as to their relationship with the priest. If one of the *Burs’ylys’ias* leaders sided with the priest, another left the church after discovering that the priest performed services differently from *Burs’ylys’ias* standards. But for most of the local inhabitants, contact with Father Tikhon was indirect.

Although there was no strict dividing line between different groups of believers, sometimes they admitted the existence of certain
distinctions or even a conceptual opposition. These estimations of dissimilarity were made in more abstract discussion when people were not talking about somebody in particular, at least not explicitly so. This tendency was detected in both “camps.” As a rule, direct comments or hints about specific social relationships made assessments more ambivalent and time-consuming. In Kulömdin, churchgoers were not an age-specific group, as even the grannies of the 2000s were not the same women who perpetuated Russian Orthodox rituals during the Soviet period or initiated restoration of the church building and consolidation of the congregation. But in Mys the folk-religious leaders of the late socialist period were still alive at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and this made the folk-religious authority clearly age-specific. These elderly folk Orthodox specialists were very much honored within the Mys community and even the churchgoers in Kulömdin recalled the Mys grannies as exemplary believers: “In Mys, the real faith has been preserved” (F 55, FMA 2007). This is not just a random comment, as the Mys people are famous in the neighboring areas as the genuine Orthodox people (Suvorov 1999).

An important question concerns the mutual influence of these two groups on each other’s religious behavior. The Kulömdin ecclesial believers liked to stress that they followed the proper faith publicly, in contrast to those who preferred to keep their religious actions private. The view that proper faith must be publicly manifested in several ways was supported by the Kulömdin priest, Aleksandr. In Mys, the situation appeared to be different. The authority of the Burs’lys’ias grannies was strong inside the community and when they advocated different approaches compared to those of the priest, community members were confronted with a confusing and awkward situation in which they had to choose sides.

In Kulömdin, the “ordinary people” with a folk Orthodox background seemed to feel a certain disdain from the churchgoers, who had assumed the leading role in the local religious field. Local folk Orthodox traditions were ignored by churchgoers, most of whom were new converts. And in some cases, churchgoers even attempted to fight against folk-religious traditions. In Sunday school in 2008, the priest and the most active churchgoers discussed how to deal with what they saw as chaotic and “pagan” funeral customs. They decided that there was a need to organize a “team of grannies” to monitor the situation, provide relevant help, and check the correctness of funeral customs in the region. This vision of a spiritual combat unit of grannies reflects the Kulömdin priest’s controversial approach to folk religion, that is, his
search for balance between a harmonious relationship with the community and pursuing correctness of faith in the institutional sense. In Mys, this controversy was more straightforward as the priest did not look for such a balance and preferred a strict institutional line. At the same time, the community’s sympathy was clearly with the Burs’ylis’ias, although traces of the movement depended predominantly on the interpretations and practices of just a couple of grannies.

This opposition between institutional and folk styles of faith was not always so sharp. Sometimes exclusion from the churchgoers’ group was circumstantial, for example, the church was far from somebody’s home (both Kulömdin and Mys are ribbon settlements of several kilometers, making it potentially difficult for grannies to walk to church). In addition, people who were personally acquainted with somebody in the churchgoers’ group would usually withdraw accusations that the churchgoers had weak or merely formal faith.

Although Weber admits the influence of the laity in social religious dialogue, he ascribes a dominant role to priests, whom the laity might be able to manipulate but not control. In the Kulömdin case, Father Aleksandr, as the representative of the institution of religious authority (in the Weberian sense), was not the unconditional leader during his initial years. The Mys priest, Tikhon, executed a stricter strategy toward his congregation that resulted in a years-long rivalry between him and the Burs’ylis’ias grannies. Several people (mostly elderly women) in the Kulömdin community, and especially in the Mys community, were recognized agents of folk-religious authority. Their influence was rooted in a centuries-long tradition of folk religiosity and contextualized by the circumstances in which, for decades, there were no priests in the region and people got used to practicing Orthodoxy without official religious agents.

According to Weber, a religious community forms the more passive side of ideological and ritual negotiations with a priest. Our ethnographic analysis reveals that representatives of a local community may play a more prominent role in the religious scene. There is a diversity of authentic religious authorities in the Kulömdin region. Kulömdin church represented a more common, mainstream case of balanced or shared religious authority between the representatives of the ROC and folk Orthodox agents. But Mys reveals the potential of regional peculiarities to play a prominent role in shaping the mode of local religiosity, despite strict and strong institutional pressure from the ROC.
Kulömdin and Mys demonstrate different functions or modes of religious routine and authority. The course of restoring the ROC’s institutional presence in particular localities depended on the historical legacy of the ROC, religious ideas and practices among local communities prior to the reappearance of official agents of the Church, and the individual characteristics and spiritual approaches of the priests. In Mys, Father Tikhon met a smaller, although strongly and specifically committed, folk Orthodox community. But in Kulömdin, the community was bigger, fragmented, its collective religious devotion weaker, and there was emerging knowledge of urban ideologies and beliefs (cf. Panchenko 2012: 334). The Mys priest’s mode of action appeared strict, suppressing folk Orthodox practices, while the Kulömdin priest’s approach was more ambiguous, at least during the initial stage of his work.

If we adopt Whitehouse’s notion concerning pressure from official social structures on the standardization of identity components, one must admit that, in principle, every participant in the Kulömdin region’s Orthodox religious practice had a personal view on the faith. This is more obvious in the case of the “ordinary people,” as their ideas were not influenced by the priest. But churchgoers also made statements that hardly harmonized with the discourse provided by the priest. Contestation of religious authority was explicit in Mys and vague in Kulömdin. Some degree of “individualized religiosity” and critical attitudes toward priests has been characteristic of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy in general (Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010: 312, 316). Regarding this trend, one can note that a diversity of understanding characterizes the remote Russian Orthodox communities in the Komi countryside.

The ecclesial believers have molded their views and practices following the priests’ guidance and so represent exemplary believers from their viewpoint. But some others became more critical of the official practices of the ROC, as they did not feel comfortable with formalized religious propaganda. “Ordinary people’s” religious practices may wane in future as we lose the grannies who preserved know-how through the Soviet period and there is no compelling need to reproduce new folk experts in Orthodox knowledge (because the priests have taken over this function) (cf. Whitehouse 2004: 87; Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010: 313). The post-Soviet routinization of faith, directed by the priests and followed by ecclesial believers, is different and contradicts folk experts’ knowledge in many respects.
Both women and priests functioned as custodians of ritual, but the character of these enterprises was different. The priests’ approach to routinization was targeted to avoiding, or at least to minimizing, innovation and independent reflection. “Ordinary people’s” relationship to faith was more dialogical, complex, and reflexive (cf. Whitehouse 2004: 100, 104); many people feel that the grannies’ religious discourse is more relevant for everyday settings.

This double authority can be interpreted using the discourse of deference, emphasizing “reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done” (Bloch 2004: 69). According to Maurice Bloch (ibid.), deference enables a person to hold something to be true not through understanding but by repeating and quoting it often enough. Deference supported the preservation of folk Orthodox practices represented by elderly women in the absence of priests, although in the postsocialist period this expertise does not have the same critical importance for the faith.

The restoration of the ROC’s institutions in the Komi countryside involved a “negotiation of meaning” accompanied by a “conflict of authority” (cf. Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010: 312–313), as well as “microhistorical processes of accommodation, contestation, and discursive innovation” (cf. Whitehouse 2006: 306). In the initial phase of the return of the ROC, the grannies’ authority dominated over the priests’ competence. Grannies represented a traditionalist power that supported people’s conservative desires to live as they were accustomed to living (cf. Weber 1958: 60; Whitehouse 2006: 303), enabling a localization of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox faith (cf. Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010: 323–324). Kormina (2015: 36) notes that closeness to the church may appear estranging for a local community in postsocialist conditions. After the priests disappeared (when Soviet power established itself in the Komi countryside during the 1930s), the grannies embodied a spiritual continuation, and when after decades the priests returned, they ironically came to represent discontinuity.

Despite some spiritual confrontation, the overall process of religious transformation was smooth in the Kulömdin region. The folk-religious leaders had no aspiration to stay in constant conflict with ROC priests. In fact, people had been waiting for the return of the Church for a long time. However, restoration of the ROC’s presence was still accompanied by some spiritual twitching of a heterogeneous kind. Alternative understandings could not suddenly disappear or smoothly blend into institutional religiosity, people were reading random spiritual literature that happened to come their way, and the emergence of different
churches and missions complicated people’s orientation in religious matters. All this was conveyed by tensions between people’s wish to appreciate established religiosity and their desire to maintain religious routines that sometimes did not harmonize with the ROC’s doctrines.

In the early 1990s, ROC infrastructure and priests were almost absent in the Komi Republic. The challenge of restoration of the Church’s positions was more significant than in most parts of European Russia. The development of the ROC in the region depended a lot on just a few priests, enabling different local social dynamics. Unique spiritual dialogues appeared between the Church’s teaching and folk Orthodox ideas and practices. The gap between the institutional and folk Orthodox faith obstructed the success of the Church in the Komi Republic, and its effect on people’s lives is more modest than on average in Russia.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council, grant PRG1584.

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Notes

1. While we continued fieldwork in the region until 2018, in this article we concentrate on interviews and observations conducted in 2006–2009 (later, our focus shifted from the Orthodox to the Protestant community). Interviews were carried out with approximately fifteen people.


3. Although a community of Old Believers also inhabits Kulömdin region, it is becoming marginalized fast, and we have left them out of our current research agenda. Although the Old Believers’ customs have had an impact on local folk Orthodoxy, estimating how significant a factor it is for our discussion is complicated and beyond the scope of this article.

4. Agaf’ia Kiprusheva was born in an Old Believer family, and local Old Believers participated in the restoration of Kulömdin church (Suvorov 1997; Kominform 2013). Our field data indicates that the folk ritual practices of the Old Believers and the Russian Orthodox population are somewhat mixed in the Kulömdin area.

5. Aleksandr Antonov graduated from technical school and completed his service in the army. He became a believer as an adult and passed his studies in the Russian Orthodox Church’s courses for priests at an elementary level. During our field trips he was a student in an ROC seminar. Before Kulömdin, he served as a priest in Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic.

6. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (2010: 17) propose a more diverse classification of Eastern Orthodox believers. As well as church officials, Hann and Goltz distinguish “ordinary believers,” who belong formally to a congregation, those who make some commitment but remain “outside the walls” of the church, and the “rigorists or fundamentalists,” who are critical of the official church and of popular practices. Our classification is more general but is based on the way that Kulömdin people see the situation. They make a distinction between those who attend the church regularly (i.e., “ecclesial believers” in this article) and those who visit church services occasionally (“ordinary people”). Fundamentalist arguments can sometimes be heard from both camps, but in general, this layer is absent from the local social scene.

7. In references to fieldwork materials, F = female, M = male; the number following this is the person’s age.

8. Sunday school at Kulömdin church had a class for children, but was meant predominantly for adult members of the local congregation. Meetings were held in the form of group tea drinking. Participants brought various sweets to the meetings (biscuits, candies, jam, and white bread). Most participants were middle-aged and elderly women. A few men visited Sunday school occasionally. Meetings began with a collective prayer; the priest would
then read a chapter from a catechism. Group discussion on an introduced topic would follow. The priest also encouraged people to ask him all kinds of questions concerning spiritual matters.

9. Such a case is documented in the history of Kulömdin church. In 1842, a priest lost his job for denying a local clairvoyant’s vision of St. Nicholas (Listova 2004: 738–739; see also Leete and Koosa 2022: 523).

10. Public discourse about the “spiritual vacuum” in post-Soviet Russia is richly reflected in scholarly literature (see for example Voronina 1994; Panchenko 2004; Davie 2007).

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