

STEPHEN PAX LEONARD

**MAPPING RELATIONALITY:
WEBS OF INTERCESSION IN THE ORTHODOX MARKETPLACE**

Stephen Pax Leonard

Moscow State Linguistic University, Moscow, Russia.

Email: steph.p.leonard@gmail.com

Abstract: Relationality in an Orthodox context can be mapped using “webs of intercession” which act as social phenomena and aid in analysing complex, transactional prayer delegation. Russian Orthodox fill out prayer-slips called *zapiski* and pay priests to read out these prayers and intercede on their behalf. Intercession in this context can be perceived as triangular: the living can intercede for the living; the living can intercede for the dead and the dead can intercede for the living. An element of exchange is implicit in these “webs of intercession”: for many devout this sense of exchange is most acute after the death of a loved one where the penitent not only prays for the deceased, but also awaits in return the prayers of the one that has passed. On saints days and on days where the dead are remembered such as Meatfare Saturday (*subboty Myasopustnaya*), the intercession becomes multi-mediated. Orthodox Christians believe that they inherit sin from their dead parents and grandparents; they pray for the departed ones to be forgiven for these sins and in turn they hope that the departed ones will pray for them to be cleansed of the sins that they handed down. These complex “webs of intercession” create in terms of exchange something akin to a marketplace.

Key words: intercession; *zapiski*; Orthodoxy; relationality; exchange; mediation.

1. Background

Supplicants gather around the *panikhidnik* to light candles honouring the departed. A melodic soprano voice chants the Lord's Prayer. The warm voice with the bright, full timbre is hidden from view; there is music in her speech. A small huddle of elderly women forms in the ante-chapel; some worshippers place *koliva* in front of the icon of the Mother of God which shortly after are blessed with holy water. Holding lit candles that symbolise the soul, the congregation sing troparia for the departed and various hymns that focus on intercession for those that have passed. The constant swinging of the censer throughout the service feels symbolic – the Schopenhauerian pendulum of life perhaps. On this ninth day *panikhida* (a chanted memorial service on the ninth day after the death of an Orthodox Christian) representing the nine orders of angels, the congregation pray for angelic intercession as the soul passes the toll-houses.

The study of what I call “webs of intercession” is a means of mapping relationality in an Orthodox context, i.e. how believers interact and are interdependent on one another (Allen 2000; Carsten 2000). My focus here is not on the “social life of prayer” by which Bandak (2016) meant the reactions to prayer in the social worlds it is performed, but the effect of Orthodox Christians requesting that a prayer be interceded and the intricacies of social interaction that that involves (Kormina and Luehrmann 2018, 394-424; Orsi 2004). I am not so much concerned with the agency of prayer, but with the complex and transactional system of prayer delegation and the (multiple)-mediation that it presupposes (Meyer 2020, 1-15; Engelke 2007; Hovland 2018, 425-53). I agree with Meyer that conceptualising religion as mediation can be useful to unpack religious plurality, and Orthodoxy has been somewhat overlooked in respect of this argument. As we will see, these “webs of intercession” can themselves be treated as social phenomena. However, what matters here is not just the Maussian (2003 [1909]; Bandak 2017, 1-18; Giordan and Woodhead 2015) sociality of prayers themselves, i.e. how prayers reveal the hopes of communities (and not just individuals). In the case of liturgical diptychs, just a name is being read out after all. Instead, what matters here is the communities that are created through the *intercession* of these prayers.

Religious practice at Russian Orthodox churches is “relational” in the sense that in order to participate fully in the church's sacraments, worshippers cannot be independent. And it might be frowned upon if a worshipper is not seen to be partaking in the sacraments. Unlike other Orthodox churches (such as Greece), *prikhozhane* (‘regular church goers’)

in Russia tend to confess on a very regular basis. Priests ‘witness’ confessions, read out prayers on behalf of the church-goer and the worshipper is dependent on a network of saints to pass on his or her prayers to God. What is more, fellow worshippers witness the priestly intercession when they read out the prayers during the service. Sacraments are fulfilled in relation to others and in the process of mourning this sense of relationality becomes particularly pronounced. Believers are self-conscious of this relationality for it is felt to have a theological underpinning: the Biblical *my sozdany po obrazu Bozh'yemu* (‘we are made in the image of God’) occurs frequently in Orthodox teaching and discussions. It is surprising that intercession has to some extent been overlooked in the anthropology of Orthodoxy for it helps us in conceptualising the enmeshed nature of liturgical communities and more generally the agency of multi-mediation (Haeri 2017, 123-38; Leonard 2023, 145-58). The findings for this article attempt to take recent literature on the anthropology of religion in a new direction (Luehrmann 2016, 6-22; Luehrmann 2017, 163-84; 2018; Kormina 2018, 163-90; Engelhardt 2015) by introducing the “intercessory Orthodox marketplace” to the discussion, and stem from years of ethnographic research with Orthodox Christians in the Moscow region. The results of these conversations have aided me greatly in addressing the question of what Orthodox prayer practice means for our understanding of how believers interact with one another, and the implications of these findings go perhaps beyond religious belief.

2. Methodology and field-sites

My ethnographic data comes from living and working with Russian Orthodox Christians in Moscow and Optina Monastery over the last six years. I started to visit Optina in the summer of 2024; my fieldwork in Moscow started in 2019 and focused on two parishes (Church of the Holy Martyr Antipas in Kolmazhny Courtyard and Church of St Nicholas the Wonderworker in Khamovniki). Optina was the most significant spiritual centre in Russia in the nineteenth century, and still today has a particular appeal for many Orthodox. Much of my data was collected through interviews with priests, monks, and parishioners for whom prayer and intercession is of course absolutely central to their religious experience. In Russian, I carried out 50 structured and unstructured interviews on a one-to-one basis and kept a field diary throughout my research. As a recent convert to Orthodoxy (I was anointed at the Church of the Holy Martyr Antipas in March of 2024), my prayer practice greatly facilitated making contact with prospective interlocutors for it was perceived as a kind of “intimate solidarity” (Herzfeld 2016, 265-72).

Many of the younger priests who I got to know came from “churched (*prikhozhnin*) families,” but that was not always the case. One of my most informative interlocutors was a former actor. The monks came from eclectic backgrounds – some had been leaning towards the monastic life long before they took the tonsure whereas others had joined the monastery after the occurrence of dramatic events in their personal lives. It is worth emphasizing that for those stemming from urban backgrounds, in particular, the Orthodoxy that they were practicing was largely reconstructed following the end of the Soviet period. Many went through a process of *votserkovlenie* which literally means “to bring someone into the church” and this served as an important part of the reconstruction of post-socialist Orthodoxy in Russia (Kormina 2018, 163-90). This sense of reconstruction plays into the notion of Orthodoxy being rightly described as a “community of deferral” (Bandak and Boylston 2014, 25-46) when parishioners talk about “learning the ropes” and the fact that only the clergy truly understand the intricacies of the Orthodox world. During the Soviet period, with the very odd exception such as Pskov-Pechory Monastery, all the monasteries were closed down and typically left to decay or sometimes turned into museums or even prison camps. Monks and priests were persecuted and occasionally killed. Many of the older priests that I got to know moved to the countryside and ran secret small parishes that were constantly under threat of closure.

3. Triangular intercession and multiple mediation in Orthodoxy

Intercession is central to Orthodox religious practice and is often invoked in conversations with priests and members of the congregation. Frequently throughout my research, I was told not to stop remembering *mertvyye dushi* (‘dead souls’) and to keep writing prayer-slips. With this thought in mind, we are reminded that Joseph, the Hesychast, a twentieth century Greek Orthodox monk, told us:

"I once saw the priest who baptized us all in my homeland. He was a holy man. He remained a virgin. He gave much alms. And in a dream, he said to me: 'In life,' he said, 'I thought that only liturgies free souls from hell, but now that I'm dead, I've seen with my own eyes that the prayers you offer also deliver tormented souls.' So, do not cease to pray for souls. For the merciful God seeks a reason and an excuse to save a soul" (from the book "Great Elders of the Twentieth Century," (*Velikiye startsy dvadtsatogo veka*) (Devyatova 2015, 632-633)

As we will come onto see, the value of prayer intercession in Russian Orthodoxy is often interwoven in the narrative of dreams which serves almost as a leitmotif. Intercession of this kind where saints are invoked to

aid the souls of the departed is an inherent part of the Orthodox life of prayer, and Russian Orthodox religiosity can be thought of as a kind of spiritual and intercessory marketplace. The Orthodox morning and evening prayers (known as 'The Prayer Rule') ask for Jesus' intercession as well as that of Theotokos and the saints; the communion of saints act as a *oblako svideteley* ('cloud of witnesses') and are able to intercede because of their close relationship with God. Intercession plays an important role in an eschatological context too, and could be perceived as triangular: the living can intercede for the living; the living can intercede for the dead and the dead can intercede for the living. As well as being triangular, multiple-mediation is to be found in Orthodoxy: many people can intercede and advocate on behalf of another and on saints' days such as that of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, believers will flock to churches and pray to the saintly intercessor. Another aspect of this mediation is the *akathists* which are hymns devoted to a certain saint, Christ or the Theotokos. These are also intercessory as they represent petitions for those who follow the apostolic tradition, receive Holy Communion joyously, worship in spirit and truth etc. Then, there are the visits to the shrines. Saint Xenia of St Petersburg who herself spent much of her life praying for her deceased husband is the intercessor that many Russian Orthodox turn to if they are having financial difficulties or problems in their marriage. On most days at the Smolensky Cemetery in St Petersburg, there is to be found a long queue of penitents who have come to her shrine to ask for specific things and even to leave letters for her.

This multiple-mediated intercession can be seen when Orthodox Christians pay for priests to read out prayers for loved ones, family members and friends – both dead and alive. Following the pandemic, it is even possible now to do this online. Despite the pandemic having finished, this kind of petition remains an aspect of Orthodox digital spirituality, but many priests will now only accept it in the case of the penitent not being able to physically attend church. Believers fill out prayer-slips called *zapiski*, and the amount paid depends on the kind of prayer and the duration of the prayer. For example, there are prayers where the person is remembered for the whole year (*paminanya v techeniya goda*) and this might cost a thousand roubles (US\$13). When people write prayer-slips for the living (*o zdravii*), they are asking that God grant them health, strength and spiritual peace. Health does not simply mean the absence of illness, but the integrity of soul and body.

There is a ritual correctness to the writing of prayer-slips in the Russian Orthodox Church, and it is important to note that these stipulations are often made and enforced. There is for many Russians a sense that they are 'rediscovering' (*otkryt' dlya sebya*) their religion after the end of the Soviet Period when they were 'dechurched' (Froese 2008).

The result of this is that there pervades a sense of delegation in all questions of faith and religious practice. It is not unusual to hear church-goers say that they read the morning and evening prayers, but they are not sure about the rest and let the *batoushka* ('priest/spiritual guide') handle it. This lack of certainty is often reflected in the church literature on sale. For example, at Russian Orthodox Churches, you can often find pamphlets explaining exactly what kind of conduct is expected on each day during Great Lent. On Russian Orthodox church websites, it is sometimes explained how to fill out prayer-slips. For example, one website reminds parishioners that if they wish to pray for clergy, then they must ensure that their names go at the top of the list and that their rank is included. The rank must be written before the name. The names of those who committed suicide cannot be written; patronyms are never written etc. Another church website instructs parishioners that in funereal *zapiski*, if the deceased were murdered, then this must be written after the deceased's name. If someone is travelling, it is also permitted to write before their name the word *puteshestvennik* ('traveller'). Travellers are also remembered in prayers through chanting of the psalms. Psalms are central to Orthodoxy, and one important aspect of intercession after the death of a loved one is the ordering of the twenty-four-hour reading (the 'unceasing Psalter' or *Neusypayemaya Psaltir* in Russian) of the Psalter at a monastery – a sixth century tradition.

Where ritual correctness is concerned, the list of names must be written in the genitive case for grammatically they respond to the question "Remember, O Lord, whom?", and there is normally room for between ten and fourteen names on the list. The names that are given must be Orthodox names, and those being prayed for must be Orthodox Christians. There are two types of slips: the red ones are for the living (*o zdravii*, literally 'for the healthy') and the black slips for the dead (*o upokoe*, literally 'for the reposed'). And there are different types of black slips depending on the occasion of commemoration. For example, the *sorokoust* is a cycle of prayers said each day and lasting for forty days that is requested for the recently deceased. The purpose of this prayer or more correctly *pominoveniye litugicheskoye* ('liturgical commemoration') is to aid the soul's journey. These petitions are considered essential because when someone dies, they lose the ability to repent and the soul cannot intercede for itself. All that remains is the hope expressed through the prayers of the living. Prayer-slips mediate therefore divine grace between, the living, the departed and the sacred. Whilst filling out prayer-slips, I often heard worshippers say: *my dolzhny im pomoch'*. *My dolzhny prodolzhat' molit'sya, osobenno v techeniye etikh soroka dney* ('we have to help them (the dead). We have to keep praying, especially in the first forty days (after death).

With this in mind, the symbolic significance of the forty days of the *sorokoust* (the period before Christ appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection as well as referring to the length of time Jesus spent in the desert) keeps reoccurring in Orthodoxy. Orthodox believe that the soul travels for forty days after leaving the body. On this journey, the soul might be attacked by wicked spirits and the penitents are praying for the smooth journey of the soul to the Gates of Heaven. According to the Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom, there are twenty *mytarst'* ('aerial toll houses') that the soul passes through after death. The fortieth day after death is particularly significant for Orthodox because it marks the time when the soul receives its judgement and finds its place in the afterlife. Orthodoxy eschatology holds that the fate of the soul is not irrevocably fixed until this day of Last Judgement. On the third, ninth and fortieth days after death, there is a solemn memorial service called the *panikhida* where multi-mediated intercessory prayer is once again offered. There are *zapiski* that are dedicated to this service too, as well as the *litiya* which is a short version of the *panikhida* and can be read at home or at the graveside. All these services show how intercession can be mediated through multiple channels in Orthodoxy.

4. Exchange in the Orthodox marketplace

Aspects of Orthodox prayer intercession can be thought of as a marketplace as not only are believers paying for prayers, but there is a sense of exchange. I am using the word 'marketplace' in a metaphorical sense here, and only in relation to prayer and intercession. I am not proposing that Orthodoxy per se should be seen in economic terms (cf. Hochgeschwender and Löffler 2011; Finke and Stark 2005; Roof 2001). As an example of this exchange, when a close friend writes *zapiski*, she normally gives me a call and tells me that she has ordered a prayer for me and that she would appreciate it if I could do likewise for her. And, so an intercessory network is soon created where there are kinds of obligations of exchange. Parts of this exchange are votive offerings such as candles. Candles which are typically bought alongside *zapiski* are lit and placed before an icon. They come in various sizes and might cost anything from 10 to 200 roubles. This income is crucial for the maintenance of the church. Those attending the *panikhida* hold candles which represent the soul's journey and prayers for the departed. There are also special Orthodox services dedicated to all of the deceased such as *subboty Myasopustnaya* ('Meatfare Saturday') where large numbers of worshippers can be seen writing *zapiski* for those that have passed. This equates roughly to All Soul's Day in the Anglican Church. I recently attended this service at a small

village church outside Moscow. There were a couple of hundred worshippers in attendance, all busy writing *zapiski*. As the short *panikhida* service began, large wads of prayer-slips were handed out to worshippers to read. Penitents read slowly through the names, and intercession felt absolutely communal. Afterwards, parishioners told me how happy and touched they were to be asked by the priest to read through the names of the deceased. In Russian Orthodox Churches, prayers are not just delegated but shared. At times like this, this sense of relationality is cherished and feels fundamental to the faith.

This sense of exchange that I mentioned can be explicit as in the above example, but it can also be implicit. For instance, in some cases where the departed was very devout, it is believed that the deceased prays for the living. One of my interlocutors who recently lost her grandmother told me how she could ‘feel the prayers’ (*chuvstvovala yeye molitvy*) of her grandmother in the days after her death. Her grandmother was a devout, holy woman and Nadezhda (my interlocutor) had been with her at the time of her passing. On the other hand, it is believed that deceased sinners have no contact with the dead. Another aspect of this perceived exchange is the role of the saints. Worshippers pray to the saints as intercessors, and these church-goers believe that the saints pray for the living as they are *kak prebyvayut s Bogom* (‘with God’). What is more, many like to inform the ethnographer how the saints decided the fate of Russia with their prayers. Stories abound of Monk Abel who not only predicted the day of Empress Catherine the Great’s death, but also the future of the entire Romanov dynasty and then prophesied that Russia would “bloom like a heavenly lily”.

Another elderly interlocutor (Ilya) told me that he had been praying for a deceased friend every day immediately after his death. He stopped praying and then the friend appeared in a dream, very distraught, wanting to know why Ilya hadn’t been praying for him the last few days. Such accounts explain why Orthodox testify to the benefit the departed can receive from the prayers of living, spiritual people. Orthodox are encouraged to pray not just for the recently departed one, but also for all those that have not long since passed. Just recently, I was talking to a parishioner who some time ago lost her mother. Both the mother and the daughter were devout. After her death and every day at home, Elena (the daughter) read one *kathisma* and canon for the deceased mother. About twenty days later, the mother appeared in Elena’s dreams asking her daughter to help her. Elena became rather distressed. She kept reading the *kathisma* and canon up until the fortieth day after her mother’s death. Her mother had been very ill for a long time and was unable to go to church for the last two years of her life. Elena became convinced that the problem was that her mother had not confessed for a long time prior to death and

had not taken communion prior to death. Over the years, I have heard interlocutors speak about any number of such dreams. It seems that it is not so unusual for believers in Russia to experience these kinds of visions. Recently, I heard an account of a devout woman whose son was an atheist. The son died suddenly. The mother prayed and prayed for the soul of her son. One night, he appeared in a dream saying: "Thank you, Mum for praying for me. I am being transferred" (*tvoimi molitvami perevodyat menya*). It was such ethnographic observations and comments that prompted the writing of this article.

Orthodox penitence is not a marketplace in the sense that God's grace can be bought, but in the sense that these webs of intercession are to some degree monetised through the payment of prayer-slips. The Orthodox Church is unambiguous about the fact that God's grace cannot be bought. However, in Orthodoxy there is a sense of exchange and once this exchange commences webs of intercession begin to form: people ask friends and family to pray for them and that will mean filling out a *zapiska* ('a tangible note for intercession') and paying. Orthodox pray for others (the living and the dead); Orthodox believe the dead (in certain cases) pray for the living and Orthodox ask the saints (and of course Theotokos) to pray for them and others. Penitents forge relationships of intercession *through* the saints for they do not pray *to* the saints, but *through* the saints. However, this is a subtle distinction which is often lost on believers. Theotokos plays a special role as intercessor of Russia. She is seen as being the protector of the Russian land from enemies and crop failures, and is associated with various important visions. The Theotokos' divine protection is celebrated at the Feast of the Intercession established in the twelfth century and marking the tenth century miracle when St Andrew the Fool-for-Christ witnessed the Mother of God spreading her veil (*pokrov*) over worshippers.

Priests then aren't the only intercessors and certainly not the most important ones. Orthodox venerate icons, invoking the intercessions of the saints in their prayers. For Orthodox, saints are mediators between the heavenly and earthly world as well as being intercessors for prayers. If a family member is ill, they might for example venerate the icon of Saint Panteleimon, asking him to intercede and ask God to help with the health of the person afflicted. If a couple are having trouble conceiving, then they might turn to the icon of Saints Joachim and Anne; students may pray to Saint Tatiana for help with their forthcoming exams and so on. There are a number of saints whose intercession is channeled along certain themes.

Another reason Orthodox pray for the dead is that most people depart this world without having confessed their sins. Perhaps they were unable to because of a sudden death. Once they have departed, they can no longer pray for themselves. They place their hope in the living

remaining on earth. Orthodox believe that in the forty days after death, the prayers of the living can change the direction of the departed soul for the better. A number of my interlocutors spoke of how the soul of the deceased *chuvstvuyet* ('feels') the prayers offered to it. Some of them told me that prayers for the dead can *vyzolit* ('save') someone and they can enter heaven. This can even occur if the penitent did not know this person. In Orthodoxy, there is a sense of cycles of penitence and forgiving. The priest asks a church member to write a *zapiska* for a man who died a violent death, a man who had committed sins in his youth but did not have the time to repent. She did not know the man, but by ordering a prayer she is doing a good deed. By writing a *zapiska*, she may be able to help his soul enter heaven and by doing a good deed will in turn help her chances of entering heaven. Orthodox believe it is pleasing to the Lord that they do good in this way to those who cannot help themselves. *Molyas' za usopshikh, my dayem Bogu «pravo» na vmeshatel'stvo* ('By praying for the departed, we give God the right to intervene'), said one interlocutor. She meant that these prayers can help God redirect the departed soul to heaven.

These cycles of penitence can become more complex still. Elder Seraphim of Vyritsa (1866-1949) said that the Lord gave us the soul, but our body is from our parents and grandparents, and therefore some of their sins are passed on to us. Therefore, Orthodox must pray for our parents and grandparents and repent for them at confession. They await our prayers and rejoice so much when we pray for them; and those who are already in the Kingdom of Heaven help us. If you take all this into consideration, the intercessory cycle goes something like this: we inherit sin; we pray for the departed ones to be forgiven for these sins and in turn we hope that the departed ones will pray for us to be cleansed of the sins that they handed down to us. All this takes place in an environment that ensures the Dumontian (1966) hierarchical principle of complementarity among unequals.

In turn, when the priest prays for the deceased there is a sense that the priest takes on the sins of the dead person. So, intercession is a serious commitment. For this reason, a priest might refuse in certain cases to read out the name of that deceased person. Well known cases are if the person was a heretic, blasphemous or died of suicide, but there are other cases too. If for example, the deceased person was an alcoholic that did not repent, the priest might refuse to read out the prayer. The priest could also refuse if the deceased was an atheist who denied the belief in God – an unredeemable sin in Orthodoxy and thus a sin that the priest *could not* take on himself. Intercession can be denied. In such instances, the Orthodox marketplace of prayers is open to corruption (Kormina and Luehrmann 2018, 399): a priest might be persuaded to read out the prayer

for the right payment. The transactional nature of prayer-slips can genuinely create a marketplace of gifting and reciprocity (Mauks 1966; Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992).

When a priest reads out the prayer-slips during the service, he might be commemorating a couple of dozen or so individuals. He is interceding for a plurality of sin, so complex that it is surely difficult to navigate and conceptualise. This is a social landscape populated with a multiplicity of intentions – penitents form a community of salvation that are delegating prayers with different wishes in mind. They may have in mind prayers for health, well-being, bereavement, safe travels etc. This is obviously a routinised activity and if there is a long list of names, the priest will often read them out at great speed. This does not synchronise collective and individual in perhaps the ways Luehrmann (2015, 6-22) imagined when discussing the politics of recited prayers. Only the first names are read out and the universe of Christian names in Russia is relatively small: the average recitation of *zapiski* might include a dozen Olgi for instance, so it is not possible for a worshipper to work out who their fellow parishioners have asked to be interceded for on their behalf. What is more, given the large number of prayer-slips and the relatively small universe of names, there can be no sense of smugness or complacency for having remembered a loved one. The penitent cannot even be sure that his or her prayer has been read out. In Orthodoxy, evidenced intercession is thus a grey area. Intercession of this kind obviously blunts the sense of immediacy. Immediacy in Orthodox worship is qualified: believers pray through icons, and priests and saints intercede their prayers to God. This lack of immediacy is reflected in church-goers' frequent questions to priests about whether their prayers have been received (and thus interceded).

The act of prayer delegation is multi-faceted: on the one hand, it can be seen just as a convention, but in more problematic prayers it could be seen as a means of delegating a prayer that the penitent feels obliged to make, but is happy to outsource it. In the case of a mother whose relationship with her son is seriously strained because of his alcoholism, she might feel the need to pray for him but due to the sense of shame is equally happy for the priest to do it on her behalf. The intercessory infrastructure of Orthodoxy can diminish the sense of individual piety and thus cloud the notion of "sincerity" (Keane 2002, 65-92). As in the above example, this is sometimes perceived to be a welcome convenience.

The fact of the matter is the majority of parishioners are very happy to delegate to the priest prayers for family members. As one might imagine, these actions can easily feed into the cycle of gossip that you can find in most provincial churches. If you spend any amount of time in the church, you can soon become caught up in the gossip or just overhear it from the church wardens. There is often gossip about *zakhozhanin* ('someone who goes very seldom to church, perhaps just at Christmas

and Easter') who come to the church, fill out the prayer-slip, buy a candle and then brag about how much 'they' paid for a big candle and prayed for so-and-so. The church wardens often subconsciously monitor this kind of activity. Delegation can of course be a means of avoiding pious commitment, and this might create a strain with some of the *postoyannyye prikhozhane* ('regular church goers') who see the delegation as an act of insincerity.

When I started to work with Orthodox Christians some years ago, I remember talking to a parishioner about prayer and intercession. I asked her a deliberately naïve question which went along the lines of: "why should we pray to the Mother of God if we can just pray directly to God?", "Oh, she said, Theotokos is much better at talking to God than we are. We get distracted and bogged down with the sins of the world". Implicit in these complex exchanges is a certain relationship that worshippers have with icons and saints. Interlocutors often speak of a troubled relationship with certain saints. One interlocutor talked to me at length about her frustration and guilt at not being able to form a meaningful relationship with Theotokos, for example no matter how sincerely she tried. In Russia, there are a number of radio and television programmes (Radio Vera, Spass TV etc) where priests answer such questions such as 'how to form a relationship with a saint?' Perhaps one of the most frequently asked questions on these programmes is why parishioners feel during these exchanges with the saints that they do not get a response from their intercessory prayers. I am always tempted to ask, who should feel that they have received a response? The penitent or the one the penitent is interceding for? And how would a response manifest itself? The response could be mediated in different ways (to the penitent or the recipient) or it could be perhaps a direct oracle of salvation such as healing. After all, the exchange can manifest itself in different ways and all these exchanges feed into our understanding of relationality.

5. Conclusion

This research has shown us how intercession produces relational communities and how (in Russian Orthodoxy at least) asymmetrical interdependence is shaped by structured contingency, i.e. the power relations between priests/intercessors and penitents are conditioned in specific ways. My argument is that liturgical Orthodox communities can be thought of as marketplaces of petitionary exchange, and that the quasi-transactional aspect to intercession in Russian Orthodox churches helps us map relationality. Delegated prayer is a multi-mediated social practice. Meyer's (2020, 1-15) plea to approach religion from the point of mediation is a sound one, but we can go much further than that. Payment for prayer creates not a commercial market of grace, but a morally charged economy

of memory, obligation and salvation.

Furthermore, the complexity of so-called webs of intercession in Russian Orthodoxy reveal how prayer delegation can serve different functions depending on the penitent's faith, relationship to the church and to the person on whose behalf a prayer is being interceded. There are for instance cases where prayer intercession can act as a convenient mechanism of obfuscation, where the entanglement amounts to an indirect fulfilment of what is considered some kind of 'obligation'. Subsequent scholarship might explore further this aspect of petitionary obfuscation.

References:

- Allen, Nicholas Justin. 2000. *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Bandak, Andreas. 2016. "The Social Life of Prayers: Introduction". *Religion* 47 (1): 1-18.
- Bandak, Andreas and Tom Boylston. 2014. "The 'orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy: On Moral Imperfections, Correctness, and Deferral in Religious Worlds". *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (1): 25-46.
- Carsten, Janet. (ed.). 2000. *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Devyatova, S. S. 2015. *Velikiye startsy dvadtsatogo veka*. Moscow: Teiriam.
- Dumont, Louis. 1966. *Homo hiérarchicus: Essai sur le système des castes*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Engelhardt, Jeffers. 2015. *Singing the Right Way: Orthodox Christians and secular Enchantment in Estonia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2007. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Finke, Roger and Stark, Rodney. 2005. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick: Rutgers.
- Froese, Paul. 2008. *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Giordan, Guiseppe and Woodhead Linda. (eds). 2015. *A Sociology of Prayer*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Godelier, Maurice. 1999. *The Enigma of the Gift*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Haeri, Niloofar. 2017. "The sincere subject Mediation and interiority among a group of Muslim women in Iran". *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 123-38.

Herzfeld, Michael. 2016. "The Intimate Solidarities of Religion in the City". *History and Anthropology* 27: 265-272.

Hochgeschwender, Michael and Löffler, Bernhard. 2011. *Religion, Moral und liberaler Markt: Politische Ökonomie und Ethikdebatten vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*. Bielefeld: Transcript Print.

Hovland, Ingie. 2018. "Beyond Mediation: An Anthropological Understanding of the Relationship between Humans, Materiality and Transcendence in Protestant Christianity". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (2): 425-53.

Keane, Webb. 2002. "Sincerity, Modernity and the Protestants". *Cultural Anthropology* 17(1): 65-92.

Kormina, Jeanne. 2018. "Inhabiting Orthodox Russia: Religious Nomadism and the Puzzle of Belonging". In *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Spirituality in Practice*, 163-90. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Kormina, Jeanne and Luehrmann, Sonja. 2018. "The Social Nature of Prayer in a Church of the Unchurched: Russian Orthodox Christianity from its Edges". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (2): 394-424.

Leonard, Stephen Pax. 2023. "Words to Things: Religious Cosmologies in the Context of the (Russian) Orthodox Philosophy of Language". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 22, 65: 145-58.

Luehrmann, Sonja. 2017. "God values intentions: Abortion, expiation and moments of sincerity in Russian Orthodox pilgrimage". *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (1): 163-84.

Luehrmann, Sonja. 2016. "The Politics of Prayer Books: Delegated Intercession, Names and Community Boundaries in the Russian Orthodox Church". *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2: 6-22.

Mauss, Marcel. 1966. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. Cohen & West: London.

Meyer, Birgit. 2020. "Religion as Mediation". *Entangled Religions* 11.3: 1-15.

Orsi, Robert. 2004. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Roof, Wade Clark. 2001. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: J. Princeton.

Weiner, Annette. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: the Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press.