



American Conversions to Eastern Orthodox Christianity

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ABSTRACT This paper explores conversions to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the United States. It discusses the analytic value of different categories used to describe American Orthodox Christians; examines theoretic models that best explain American conversions to Orthodoxy; and focuses on American conversions to Orthodoxy as resocialization into a new religious group, which implies the unlearning of certain ideas and practices. The paper is based on data collected by the author in Eastern Orthodox communities in the United States in 2018–2019 and 2024, as well as on the author’s previous cross-cultural observations that shed light on American conversions to Orthodoxy.

KEYWORDS Eastern Orthodox Christians, United States, models of religious conversion, converts, reverts, cradles, neophytes

Introduction

In August 1941, the Holy Trinity monastery in Jordanville, NY published a news piece with the heading *A Rare Solemnity in the Trinity Monastery* (Demidov 1941). What kind of rare solemnity happened in a Russian monastery in 1941? The article described the reception of 34-year-old Melvin Mansur into the Orthodox Church through the sacrament of chrismation under the name of Manuel, after the Persian martyr. He had first become seriously interested in Orthodoxy after a trip to Mount Athos as a graduate student. Mansur had been studying Russian at Jordanville during the summer months in an effort to get a better knowledge of Orthodoxy, since at that time there was very little available on the subject in the English language. The event was featured in a monastery newspaper simply because Mansur was an American. In the 1940s, conversions of Americans were such extraordinary events, due to small numbers of American converts, that they were even reported in local newspapers. The news piece also mentioned convert parishes in France and stated that “in the United States, there is not a single parish or community that is fully comprised of American converts, whereas in England [...] a community of Orthodox English has been organized not far from London” (Demidov 1941). [1]

Today, some eighty years later, there are numerous Orthodox parishes and even monasteries almost fully comprised of converts in the United States. The conversion of Americans to [2]

Orthodoxy is no longer a rare solemnity but an ordinary event that the newspapers do not cover, unless it is a VIP baptism of a celebrity, such as, for example, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, an American actor of Japanese origin who starred in *Mortal Kombat* and whose baptism in a Moscow church was widely discussed in Russian media (Mihailova 2015).

Unlike the Catholic Church, where the universal Earthly Head is the Pope, and Protestant churches, many of which are independent, the Orthodox Church is a family of 16 self-governing church organizations. They have the same beliefs (expressed in the Nicene Creed) and slight variations in practice. 'A family' means that the churches are in communion with each other and recognize each other's sacraments. For example, an Orthodox Serb can take communion and live a full liturgical life in a parish in Russia. 'Self-governing' means that each church has its own head (Patriarch, Metropolitan, or Archbishop), with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople being first among equals. [3]

While in countries like Russia, Romania, Greece, Serbia, and some others Orthodox Christianity is the religion of the majority of the population, in the United States, as of 2014, Orthodox Christians comprised less than 1 per cent of the population (Pew Research Center 2015). Although the Orthodox are a minority there, America is a unique place where one can find various ethnic Orthodox traditions in one country. Canonically, the existence of overlapping dioceses contradicts the church principle of "one bishop in one city." Sociologically, however, it puts believers in a situation of Orthodox pluralism: considering the consistency of Orthodox beliefs and (in part) religious practice, people in the United States can church-hop Orthodox communities, choosing churches and monasteries that fit their needs and preferences. [4]

This paper aims to answer the following research questions: a) what is the analytic value of the categories *cradles*, *converts*, *reverts*, and *neophytes* in explaining American journeys to Orthodoxy?; b) what theoretical models of conversion best explain religious conversion of Americans to Orthodox Christianity?; and c) how does conversion as resocialization into a new religious group happen? I highlight some realities of American conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity that are overlooked by existing research on conversion and point in several directions for further cross-cultural research on conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy which can contribute to the field of conversion studies. [5]

Methods

The data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and document research. The present article is based on my fieldwork in 2018–2019 and 2024 when I conducted 53 interviews with Orthodox believers of various ethnic background in the US, such as Americans, Greeks, Russians, Serbs, and others. The age range of research participants was from 20-year-olds to people in their 80s. Half of the interviewees were people in their 30s and 40s. As for gender composition, I interviewed 31 men and 22 women. Some 27 interviewees are monastics. Among my interviewees, 20 were raised in Orthodox families and/or an Orthodox cultural setting, 33 were not. They were recruited via convenience sample at 21 Orthodox monasteries and seven parishes where I conducted observation during four fieldtrips in the United States (TX, AZ, CA, NY, OH, IL, WI, WA). I did not focus on any specific geographical area, it was sociological rather than ethnographic research. I also draw on some cross-cultural observations during my previous fieldwork in Russia which I believe allows understanding American conversions better by comparing Orthodox-minority and majority contexts. Finally, I refer to secondary data, including [6]

Open Access online sources. For this article, I refer to the 53 interviews in the generalized form and quote nine of them.

Both for data collection and data analysis, I apply elements of the grounded theory approach [7] (Glaser and Strauss 2009) as an inductive form of qualitative research that involves deriving concepts directly from the data. I write “elements” because I do rely on my previous knowledge and my colleagues’ research, not solely on the collected data, but at the same time I apply grounded theory logic to approach my data. I conducted open coding of the interview transcripts and fieldnotes in *Atlas.ti* software. Eventually, I elicited the repeating concepts and gathered them under umbrella categories. One group included the following repeating codes: spiritual seeking and journeys to Orthodoxy, cradles, converts, reverts, reasons for conversion, recruitment methods, (im)patience, conversion difficulties, “conversion baggage,” authenticity, “unlearning,” etc. I operationalized these observations under the analytic category “conversion” which is the central category of analysis in this article.

As for my positioning in the field, I came there as a researcher. Being from Eastern Europe [8] and having the name of a very popular Russian saint, St Xenia of St Petersburg (and another, less popular Roman saint), I was often perceived as an Orthodox believer by default which probably reduced most of the questions about my background and personal interest in Eastern Orthodoxy. Many people expressed their enthusiasm for my research, gave recommendations about literature and topics to look at, and asked interesting questions. They also helped immensely with practical things such as accommodation and travel, and I am very grateful for their help. Still, skepticism is something I prepared for and faced it in the first monastery during my first fieldtrip to the USA. However, the occasional ‘cold reception’ relates to my study of monasticism rather than religious conversions, so that is not a topic of this publication.

“Journeys to Orthodoxy”

Talking with Orthodox Americans was an unusual experience for me during my fieldwork. As [9] someone who grew up in Eastern Europe, I was surprised to hear people speaking of how they “discovered” Orthodoxy, how they learned about it for the first time from books on church history, how they googled for the nearest Orthodox church and how uncomfortable they were about handling icons and candles. As one informant in her 60s said,

When I was a college student, I studied many different religions and never found [10] any to be satisfying or complete. I was reading Dostoevsky and it was him. I decided to visit an Orthodox service. I had found home and what I was looking for and began to read intensely. (abbess Lydia,¹ 2018)

The times of ‘Dostoyevsky conversions’ may be coming to an end—this year I participated in [11] an Orthodox youth summer camp and talked with very young converts, almost all of whom learned about Orthodoxy from YouTube videos.

For American converts, the journey to Orthodoxy is a thorny one; it is an uncomfortable, [12] demanding, difficult, and sometimes discouraging process. Informants told me that a strict elderly woman in church could ask, “Why did you come if you’re not Greek?” These situations can happen even today. In 2015, Metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral), then head of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, admitted that the problem still existed but added that “things

1 All informants’ names in this article are pseudonyms.

are improving in many parishes, because people have learned to be more welcoming to new visitors” (Reshetnikova 2015). What struck me is that despite prejudice, language difficulties, sometimes unwelcoming atmospheres, and long catechumenate (a period of training in doctrine and discipline before baptism or chrismation, sometimes taking the form of a Sunday class for adults), inquirers still want to be received in the church. Lazar, a young American convert in his 30s, said that he asked his priest to baptize him sooner but the priest denied by answering the young man was not ready. This is how Lazar explains the reluctance of the priest:

Well, just he wanted to make sure that I wasn’t– That I understood the seriousness of the faith, the sobriety of the faith. That it wasn’t something that I just– would leave everything behind, join and then go back to my non-Christian life. He understood that the slow patience of– he understood that I came from a place that needed a lot of baby steps [of removing] certain aspects of my life. Indeed, my life made a complete 180-turn. I had a lot of my friends, people that I was friends with, once I came into the faith wanting nothing to do with me. They left my life. A lot of things changed very dramatically. (Lazar, 2018)

[13]

Such a ‘discouraging’ recruitment model, sometimes with negative consequences like losing friends, stands in sharp contrast with much smoother journeys to Orthodoxy of inquirers in Orthodox-majority countries (although there, religiosity is tolerated by family members to a certain degree, and one’s decision to join a monastery can cause family conflicts). Still, while the catechumenate for Westerners is obligatory and can last for about half a year, in Eastern Europe newcomers can be received without it (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 75).

[14]

Another surprise was to learn that Orthodox Americans often referred to people from Orthodox-majority countries as cradles, i.e., someone raised in the Orthodox religious environment and familiar with the faith “from the cradle.” In the United States, I often heard the term cradle applied to Russians, whether baptized as children or not, who grew up in atheist or non-religious environments and went through religious socialization as adults (moreover, in many cases, their religious socialization happened after moving to the United States). Neither such Russians in the United States nor many Russians in Russia were raised in practicing Orthodox families: in 2005, 81 per cent of Russians reported having been baptized, while only 25 per cent of the total population said they received a religious upbringing (Kääriäinen and Furman 2007, 13). Berit Thorbjørnsrud (2015) argues that many Orthodox Russians, Serbians, and Romanians can be considered converts just as much as can Orthodox believers with a Western background because they did not receive an Orthodox upbringing.

[15]

Previously, I lived in Russia and conducted extensive research among Orthodox believers there. However, neither I nor my colleagues applied the terms cradles or converts to Orthodox Christians in Russia—there is not even an adequate translation of them in the Russian language. While the latter term is widely used in research on conversions to a minority religion, such as conversions of Belarusians or Russians to Buddhism (Shatrauski 2018; Isaeva 2010), the conversion lens is rarely applied to study individuals joining the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet countries. One of the few scholars to do so was Liana Ipatova, who distinguished eight models of religious conversion to Orthodox Christianity in post-Soviet Russia (Ipatova 2006). Instead of using the categories of cradles and converts, scholars of Orthodoxy in Russia usually distinguish between different degrees of religious participation and practice, as discussed, for example, in the classification of five groups of Orthodox believers by Valentina Chesnokova

[16]

(2005), from least involved (“very poorly churched”) to most engaged, (“in-churched” or “church folk”).

When I started my research in the United States, I suddenly faced a different religious narrative with two seemingly clear-cut groups of Orthodox believers: converts and cradles, and a different sociological reflection on this topic (Slagle 2011). Initially, I followed the purely emic logic of my data, i.e., the perspective of the informants themselves, and discussed the strict division into cradles and converts as well as stereotypes attached to them. For example, American converts are often said to have more zeal which expresses itself through frequent church attendance, thorough religious practice, etc. Empirical evidence sometimes does not support the idea of converts being more zealous than cradles (Beider 2021), and more empirical research is required to check this thesis with regard to the religiosity of Orthodox cradles and converts in the minority context of the United States. Still, new members of a religious group can indeed be more meticulous about their religious practice. The “convert-disease” (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 87), also called “convertitis,” is diagnosed among “overzealous recent converts” and “can be observed in almost all religions” (Rimestad 2021, 64).

[17]

I want to pay attention to the adjective “recent” from the quotation above: inquirers and recent converts indeed may send signals of what is sometimes considered to be “spiritual immaturity,” for example impatience. During my fieldwork, I met inquirers into Orthodoxy who were looking for a church with a shorter catechumenate period to get baptized sooner. I argue, however, that if newcomers differ or deviate from community expectations, it is not because of their conversion experience per se, but rather due to the quality of catechumenate, of religious education which they received, and the duration and quality of their religious socialization in an Orthodox community. An important term that needs to be introduced here is neophytes—a word I barely heard during my fieldwork in the United States but ‘inherited’ from my research in Russia. While converts and cradles seem to be lifelong labels in the narratives of Orthodox Americans, a neophyte denotes a person newly received in the church and literally means “newly illuminated.” In the 1990s in Russia, thousands of people made their first steps in Orthodoxy. In those times, Kääriäinen and Furman began to conduct sociological research on various aspects of post-Soviet realities, including religion and called those people “new believers” (Kääriäinen and Furman 2007, 2000). Recent American converts reminded me of Russian “new believers” of the 1990s–2000s because both groups are neophytes and make up a considerable part of the church membership. Even though not all of them are highly observant, they have similar zeal, scrupulous practice, and often express the need for spiritual guidance.

[18]

Frequently labeling Americans as converts puts forward the following question: is a convert someone who switched religion as an adult or someone belonging to a non-Orthodox culture? Although the Orthodox “tend to reserve the term convert for Westerners only” (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 72), it is important to note that not only Westerners are called converts. During my fieldwork in the United States, I met Orthodox converts of Puerto Rican and Chinese background. The term convert is rather applied to representatives of non-Orthodox cultures or people from Orthodox-minority countries. In the Orthodox narratives I collected in the United States, the difference between cradles and converts is not so much about those raised Orthodox vs. those who converted as adults (despite the names of the two groups) but rather the distinction between those coming from Orthodox cultures vs. those from non-Orthodox cultures. It is about the perspective of Orthodox-majority vs. Orthodox-minority contexts.

[19]

As of today, few Americans were raised in practicing Orthodox families. How can the term

[20]

‘American cradle’ be used in a meaningful way then?

There are no American cradles—if by cradle we understand someone who received religious socialization in an Orthodox-majority society and grew up with Orthodoxy in the air: Orthodox icons in almost every private car, ringing the bells on major church holidays, days off on the most important Orthodox festivals, the basics of Orthodox faith as part of the school curriculum, and Orthodox churches operating on a daily basis where one can just drop by to get some holy water. This all exists in countries such as Romania, Serbia, Greece, and Russia, where religion impacts even those who grew up in non-practicing families—they still have Orthodox *eidos*, an ideal form for the concept of ‘Orthodoxy,’ the idealized understanding of its fundamental nature. [21]

However, if by cradle we understand someone who grew up in a practicing Orthodox family, American cradles do exist, and the first generation of American cradles is growing up right now, being raised by American parents who are converts themselves. [22]

What is the analytic value of the terms converts, cradles, neophytes, and reverts (i.e. Orthodox who distanced themselves from the church for some time to return later)? In the American context we see that behind these terms there are individuals with different ethno-geographic backgrounds and religious biographies, coming from Orthodox majority and minority social contexts. All this matters for their current religious identity and affects the way they make choices and decisions about faith, such as what the ‘right’ religion is and how to choose the ‘right’ religion for themselves. [23]

Those coming from Orthodox-majority contexts may embrace Orthodoxy as part of their cultural identity or distance themselves from the church but are less interested in new religious options. This happened to Maria who was born in the United States in the 1950s in an Orthodox family and “grew up with all of the traditions, with the prayers and everything like that” but then distanced herself from the church as a young adult. She explained, [24]

I just didn’t want it. I wanted to have fun in the world, I didn’t want any restraints of religion or of— and I just thought, because my saint was Saint Mary of Egypt,² so I thought “Well, I’ll just have fun in the world, and when I’m 40 I’ll think seriously about God”. (Maria, 2018) [25]

Maria started traveling and living in hippie communities, until after several years she decided to return to Orthodoxy (see also [Karpathakis 2020](#)). [26]

For those coming from Orthodox minority contexts, the journey to Orthodoxy is more challenging and can involve a series of conversions on the way (with Orthodoxy not always the final stop). While cradles may have “support systems” ([Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 77](#)) of practicing friends or relatives and language skills that give access to wider literature on the topic, converts usually carry heavy “conversion baggage” (i.e., beliefs and practices that they acquired in former communities) and experience of Christian and/or non-religious traditions which influence the socialization into a religious group—as will become clear later in the text. [27]

In my interviews, I observed that ‘cultural Orthodox’ have more difficulties verbalizing their religious biography, while American converts have a better-structured narrative when speaking about their journey to Orthodoxy, as they often call the period of their religious seeking. Once I was sitting in a room at a Greek monastery with several pilgrims who were waiting for confession. Among them was Evangelia, an elderly Greek lady who was my [28]

2 Mary of Egypt was a fifth-century hermit who lived a life of severe asceticism in the desert after repenting from her former life of sin, which included a long period as a prostitute.

roommate at the monastery's guesthouse. She had lived in the U.S. for many years and was a regular visitor at that monastery. While waiting for confession, she chatted with a young American guy sitting next to her. Evangelia exclaimed, "Ah, you're a catechumen! I was born Orthodox. She too was born Orthodox [pointing at me]. We have it here [pointing at her chest]. That's why we don't talk about faith. We should talk! People don't know!" (Fieldnotes, 2019). Thorbjørnsrud explains that "converts are often challenged and interrogated by family and friends, and therefore have to learn how to rationalize and justify their choices," while "the Eastern Europeans [...] are not so much asked why they have chosen the Orthodox Church" (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 86).

Converts, cradles, and neophytes are useful analytic terms and relevant for Orthodoxy, but not for all religions. For example, according to Tova Makhani-Belkin, in the Bahá'í Faith believers insist they did not convert (2024). For them, it is not conversion but progression, when one just adds another layer to the previous religious experience. In the Bahá'í Faith, people do not renounce their religious past but can continue going to a church or a mosque. [29]

On the contrary, "Orthodoxy is so different from how the Americans think—that it's almost like saying, 'I don't know anything anymore and I need to rebuild my understanding of the whole world'" (Anthony, 2018). While the "non-conversion" of Bahá'ís is about adding new layers, Orthodox conversion requires a lot of renouncing and change. It implies discontinuity and rupture with one's previous religious experience, 'unlearning' of previous religious habits, a change in ideas and practices which I discuss in detail below. "You have to unlearn" was a common trope in my interviews with American converts who often introduced themselves with their new baptismal Orthodox names. [30]

These categories are especially relevant in the American context where religious converts are a common phenomenon. As of 2014, almost a third of American adults switched from one faith to another or to no faith at least once (Pew Research Center 2015, 33). [31]

Among those raised Orthodox Christians, nearly half (47 per cent) no longer identify with their childhood religion: 9 per cent switched to Evangelical Protestant tradition, 6 per cent to Mainline Protestantism, 4 per cent to the Roman Catholic Church, 4 per cent to other faiths, and 24 per cent chose no religion (Pew Research Center 2015, 39). [32]

Among those who currently identify as Orthodox Christians, 73 per cent were raised in the current religious group, i.e., they are cradles, and the remaining 27 per cent were raised in a religious group (including 'nones') different from the current group, i.e., they are converts. Among American converts to Orthodox Christianity, 11 per cent have an Evangelical background, 6 per cent were raised Catholic, 5 per cent were unaffiliated, 4 per cent were raised in Mainline churches, and 1 per cent held other faiths (Pew Research Center 2015, 43). Although there are no statistics across different jurisdictions, the biggest numbers of American converts are apparently found in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) and in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese in North America due to historical reasons and their missionary activities. According to priests' accounts in personal communication and internal church research (Namee et al. 2024, 2), since COVID-19, many parishes have experienced an unusual number of new American inquirers. [33]

These numbers show that in the rapidly changing American religious landscape, individuals church-hop communities within their denomination as well as switch to other religions, sometimes several times in their religious biography. They are 'serial' converts pursuing their "conversion careers" (Richardson 1978). However, since most American Orthodox converts come from other Christian denominations, it might be more appropriate to talk about "reaffili- [34]

ation”—“shifts within a religious tradition”—rather than ‘conversion’ as a “long-distance” shift “across religious traditions” (Stark and Finke 2000, 114), and, thus, to talk about reaffiliates rather than converts. Still, I use the terms ‘converts’ and ‘conversion’ as more conventional and emic terms used by the Orthodox themselves but discuss their meanings and usage critically in this article.

In America, sociologist Kyriacos C. Markides writes, “religion is a preference rather than a fate” (Markides 2002). In the religious market of the United States, everyone can choose, remain, switch, return to Orthodoxy, or leave it. Moreover, individuals can choose between various types of Orthodoxy presented there, such as Russian, Antiochian, or Greek. Believers can fashion their Orthodox identity by choosing a church to get baptized as well as one’s patron saint and baptismal name. They can choose which parish to attend—according to its geographic location, language of service, jurisdictional affiliation, the personal qualities of the priest, or the socio-demographic and ethnic composition of the community. Some of these elements are harder to choose in countries like Russia, for example, where infant baptism is common. Thus, Americans are on the move switching religious groups, and so are Orthodox believers: constantly receiving and losing members, switching between parishes and jurisdictions, constructing their Orthodox identity in the United States. [35]

Models of Conversion

The prototype of a classic conversion is the conversion of Saul (Saint Paul) on the road to Damascus—it was sudden, blinding, emotional. Saul’s conversion was a single event followed by the negation of the old self and the affirmation of the new self, a change of behavior, and a change from one static state to another static state (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). [36]

Did Saul convert? Some scholars argue that it was not a conversion but a calling: Paul did not convert but was called to mission, to the specific task of apostleship (Stendahl 1976, 7). Besides that, we call it conversion today because we see it through “a Western, especially American Protestant, lens” (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, 23). [37]

Either way, contemporary American conversions to Orthodoxy are usually not like that and barely have “a ‘Damascus Road’ experience” (Cavalcanti and Chalfant 1994). They are not a single event but rather a process that takes from a minimum of half a year of a standard catechumen course to several years. For Paul, an American in his 60s at the time we met, it took fourteen years to enter the Church. Even though he was married to an Orthodox Romanian woman, his conversion was an intellectual decision: [38]

I was always appreciative of all of the Orthodox people that I met, they all seemed very genuine and loving, not like ‘nice-nice’ love, they weren’t like, ‘Oh hiiii dear!’ They’re just real genuine, ‘and if you don’t listen to me, I’ll hit you on the head’ loving. That kept me going, anyway, after fourteen years and some discussions and some research, I decided that the holy tradition was real, and 2,000 years of verification and saints and study is better than my friend that reads the Bible and tells me this is what it means. There’s so much of that. Suddenly after fourteen years, I was chrismated, and that was twenty years ago. (Paul, 2018) [39]

Thus, it took fourteen years of study and practice for what Paul says happened “suddenly.” [40]

Americans choose to become Orthodox, therefore their conversions to Orthodoxy are better explained through a paradigm of active agency (not passivism or determinism) (Lofland and [41]

Stark 1965; Richardson 1985). They are seekers, active agents who “make plans, choices, decisions” (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989, 2) and ask a lot of questions. Kilbourne and Richardson describe seekers as autonomous actors in their search for meaning who have the experience of multiple conversions (conversion careers), rationally interpret their experiences, convert gradually, and change beliefs and behavior while learning the role of a new convert. All these characteristics fit contemporary American converts to Orthodoxy except for autonomy, which eventually smoothly transitions into group religious experience.

Some American converts start their journeys autonomously. If we apply an individualist perspective to conversions to Orthodoxy, we can study one’s personal reasons for choosing Orthodoxy. However, if we do so, we may overlook thousands of people who joined Orthodox churches as a group and as a family. While most scholars focus on individual choices and motivations of converts, Orthodoxy provides rich material to study group (collective) conversions. Among them are conversions of Native Alaskans starting from the eighteenth century (Kan 2015), Eastern Rite Catholics in the nineteenth century (Brady 2014; Herbel 2014), New Age and Protestant groups at the end of the twentieth century, such as Holy Order of MANS (Lucas 2003, 1995), and the Evangelical Orthodox Church (Lucas 2003; Gallaher 2022; Gillquist 1989, 1992). Apart from group conversions of New Age and Protestant groups, during my fieldwork, I came across many Protestant or Catholic families (sometimes consisting of several generations) who converted together. However, academic reflection on such cases is scarce. Rambo points out that “‘group’ conversion or conversions of entire families are deemed less worthy of respect than conversions of individuals who confront intellectual and religious issues in a rational manner” (Rambo 1999, 263–64). He calls to applying cross-cultural theories of conversion as opposed to Western perspectives on the topic. Group conversion is not a mere sum of individuals’ choices, there are group dynamics at play there, and in order to capture that, a researcher needs to adjust their research methods. Family conversions of Americans to Orthodoxy should become a separate topic of research which will greatly contribute to the study of group conversions.

Apart from active vs. passive converts, Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) distinguish conversion at inter- and intraindividual levels, i.e., whether conversion is caused by factors within the individual (such as personal predispositions or biology) or by the social environment (such as group influences, social networks, societal stress, cultural milieu). Based on these parameters, the authors discuss four types of conversion: 1) active-intraindividual (an intellectual, privatized, and individualized ‘self-conversion’), 2) passive-intraindividual (mystical, affectional), 3) active-interindividual (experimental, seeking conversion career), 4) passive-interindividual (revivalist conversion in an emotionally charged crowd or as a result of religious oversocialization when childhood religion persists into adulthood).

The trajectory of cradle Orthodox falls under the category of passive-interindividual conversion, when people’s beliefs and practices are shaped by social environmental forces, in particular by the socialization process. Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) link passive-interindividual conversion and socialization to childhood religious upbringing, which explains why adults often affiliate with religious views first learned in childhood. However, I would expand socialization further into adulthood because socialization continues throughout one’s life and can affect religious choices at later stages. Individuals can convert (or reaffiliate) ‘passively’ as adults in societies with a dominant religion, such as Orthodox-majority (Russia, Romania) or Catholic-majority (Italy, Poland) countries. I think passive-interindividual conversion can be applied to thousands of Russians who have joined the Orthodox Church on the wave of

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religious revival since the 1990s (Chesnokova 2005; Kääriäinen and Furman 2007). Their religious choice was as a sign of sharing certain values commonly accepted in their society despite their non-religious family upbringing.

All four models can be found among Orthodox Christians in the United States. A common way for American converts is to start their journeys to Orthodoxy autonomously: the first step can be an intra-individual, privatized process of intellectual thinking, reading, watching videos on YouTube, and asking numerous questions in safe, non-demanding online forums. [45]

However, Orthodoxy is a collective religion and requires participation in the sacraments; one cannot convert to Orthodoxy “on one’s own.” On the journey to Orthodoxy, American converts soon enter the community and the stage of active inter-individual conversion. In this phase, they experiment with Orthodoxy, attend liturgies (even without being allowed to receive communion if they have not been baptized or chrismated yet), visit monasteries, fast, pray with Orthodox prayers from the prayer books, in other words—they ‘try it out.’ [46]

By joining the community to try it out, inquirers meet the need to observe the social standards of their reference group. Paraphrasing Kilbourne and Richardson (1989), converts learn how to talk like an Orthodox, behave like an Orthodox, and look like an Orthodox. They can be guided by their priest or other members of the parish. During the inter-individual process of their conversion (which starts at the stage of catechumenate and continues after their official reception in the church), converts learn the norms and values of the group, their beliefs and worldview, and acquire a new social identity based on group affiliation. [47]

Thus, the best way to conceptualize American conversions to Orthodoxy is through socialization, where learning is a key element. Conversion implies “learning of a new role in a religious setting” similar to learning a new social role (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). In the American case, simultaneously with learning, the unlearning of the “conversion baggage” is happening. [48]

Switching churches can be emotionally charged. Based on her research among Americans switching from conservative to non-denominational megachurch Churchome, Ariane Kovac (2024) writes of “deconversion” as a conversion that de- and re-constructs converts’ belief systems. It is a therapeutic, healing conversion that helps people ‘traumatised’ by the shortcomings of their former churches to recover. American conversions to Orthodoxy are sometimes associated with fundamentalist right-wing groups (Riccardi-Swartz 2022), countercultural ‘conversion from Western values,’ and liberation from the constraints of unwanted aspects of American culture (such as consumerism, individualism, and materialism). [49]

Religious Conversion as Resocialization

A former Vineyard pastor, now an Orthodox priest, Charles Bell, converted to Orthodoxy in the early 1990s together with his parish (the loss of members during the conversion was about one third). In his book about their transition (Bell 1994), he discusses the questions that he and his congregation struggled with and the misconceptions about Orthodoxy they had. Among the challenges they faced was the idea of Orthodoxy as “the True Church,” the veneration of Virgin Mary and saints that is practiced among the Orthodox, the ritualistic style of worship, the Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist, Scripture and “Tradition” (i.e., the history of the church), etc. “For many evangelicals, icons are just plain scary,” he admitted (1994, 56). Apart from that, the “Protestant baggage” that converts carry includes belief in the Rapture, for example, which must be abandoned as a non-Orthodox idea. My research participants [50]

talked about unlearning Western culture, which “does not have this mystery,” challenging the legalistic attitude characterized by strict adherence to legal rules, regulations, the idea of rights. Others specify that unlearning is required not of the “Western” but of the “secular” way of life, which can be found in Eastern contexts, too.

Another perspective to unlearn is the role of the Bible which occupies a central place in the Protestant tradition but is somewhat less instrumental in the Orthodox Church. In Orthodox (and Catholic) traditions people rather ask what the church (not the Bible) teaches on a certain topic and what saints say. Here is how a former Catholic, then Orthodox (now again Catholic) monk, Adam, explained it: [51]

A: Protestant Evangelicals [...] grew up with the Bible giving them answers to questions. What does the Bible say about this matter or the other. Most people who grew up Orthodox and Roman Catholic don't think that way. My friend Bill, [chuckles] the Orthodox priest I'm telling you about, sometimes just— he was just surprised, he didn't know how to respond to people who're trying to become Orthodox. “Father, what does the Bible say about birth control?” “What does the Bible say about—” “What does the Bible say?” is not the kind of question that someone who grew up in the Orthodox Church or Catholic Church would ask, we wouldn't really ask that question. [52]

Q: But how would an Orthodox— [53]

A: You go to your spiritual father. You say, “I'm thinking of using birth control, I want to talk to you about that. What do you think?” Right? But not, “What does the Bible say?” [chuckles] Because they grew up in a Christian culture where the Bible was all there was. That's where you went for answers and all the answers were there, but we don't think that way in the Catholic tradition, right? We think about the Holy fathers, the mysteries, what your spiritual father says. (Adam, 2018) [54]

In my interviews, I did not encounter any discussion of, for example, the belief that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (and not also from the Son, as Catholic theology states)—none of my informants saw this part of the Orthodox Creed hard to accept (which is, nevertheless, an unpopular belief even among the Orthodox in Russia, 69 per cent of whom believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, contrary to the Orthodox doctrine, which confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, see [Bagrina 2016](#)). Thus, the change in beliefs becomes an issue only when it requires further action, as is the case with the role of the Bible or the veneration of saints, but not with mere theological arguments. [55]

Apart from beliefs, converts unlearn certain religious practices. Socialization into Orthodoxy includes new bodily experiences such as crossing oneself (making the sign of the cross), making prostrations, venerating icons and holy relics of saints, standing during long church services (though some Orthodox churches have pews), etc. Here is what Daniel, a middle-aged convert, former Presbyterian, said about his experience of (un)learning these practices and how he felt about it: [56]

When I went to the Greek Church, the first thing I encountered was there's candles. Well, candles— I didn't know of any specific reason particularly from the Bible where I'm told pick up a candle and light it in church. I felt uncomfortable. So they're offering me a candle, and I'm like “no, no, no. I'm not going to do it.” [57]

They're pointing out the icon of St. George and I'm like— I sort of like it because he's slaying the dragon, but I can't kiss it. They're like showing me how to make the sign of the cross but I won't do it because I'm scared, because the Reformed Presbyterian side of me had been so inoculated with the ideology that you can't show these kinds of reverence, that that would be a bad thing. (Daniel, 2018)

This example reveals a physical, material dimension of conversion to Orthodoxy where rituals and rich material culture of the Orthodox Church play an important role. Orthodoxy thus appears as a sensual religion where one worships with all senses. As one abbot explained to me, at the church service, people pray with their eyes—they look at icons, ears—they hear the chanting, they smell the incense, taste the consecrated bread and wine during communion, kiss the cross and the hand of a priest at the end of the service—thus, all senses participate in the liturgy (abbot Simeon, 2018). British anthropologist Timothy Carroll (2018) explored how the material culture of the Orthodox Church is employed to achieve the transformation of the religious subject, including substances, relics, fabrics, and vestments. Indeed, the aesthetics of Orthodoxy and its physical dimension facilitate the conversion process when converts order their first prayer rope and icons on Etsy and start carefully observing the external, visible side of their new faith. [58]

As I wrote earlier, “reading into Orthodoxy” is a characteristic feature of American conversions. Paradoxically, book culture and a rational (intellectual) approach are seen by some as something to unlearn, too. The proponents of such an approach stress that Orthodoxy is a “religion of the heart,” not a “religion of the mind.” To them, Orthodoxy is practice, not theory. The already mentioned interviewee Paul, who was chrismated after 14 years of exploring the faith, said: “Most of my friends that are converts learn Orthodoxy in the mind. But it takes a long time to feel it, to experience it, to know it in your heart, in your *nous* versus in your head” (Paul, 2018). Interestingly, even in this tiny quotation Paul uses the term *vous* (*nous*), which in Greek means “understanding.” Such a word choice points to the high reading culture of American Orthodoxy. It is hard for me to imagine a *babushka* talking about *vous*—in the vernacular Russian Orthodox culture, it is more common to read popular religious literature intended for a broad audience rather than complex theological texts. [59]

In academic literature, conversions are analyzed as (1) rupture (discontinuity), (2) continuity (between the religious past of a convert and their new religion, see Rambo and Farhadian 2014) or (3) both (congruity, see Sealy 2021). [60]

Based on her fieldwork among the Orthodox of Western and Eastern background in Norway, Berit Thorbjørnsrud observes that “Westerners” were usually raised in religious families, have a Christian background, and their transition to Orthodoxy happened smoothly. Among Eastern Europeans who convert to Orthodoxy, religious background and upbringing is less common, and they “emphasize their transformation from atheism to Orthodoxy” (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 84), i.e., they stress discontinuity with their previous non-religious lifestyle. “Western converts” tended to describe their conversions as part of a process, “as involving a development of their Christian faith, rather than a break with their past or a radical transformation,” while the Eastern Europeans, on the contrary, “tended to emphasize an abrupt change, making the before and after vastly different” (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, 86). [61]

Similar views are expressed in the research of Orthodox converts in America by Daniel Winchester, who notes that narratives of rupture certainly exist in his interviews with Orthodox converts, although they are relatively rare. He argues for “conversion to continuity, a narrative schema in which the convert progressively discovers, reclaims, and cultivates a latent Orthodox [62]

self that is retrospectively viewed as part of his or her life all along” (Winchester 2015, 439). Winchester draws some differences between Orthodox and Protestant conversion narratives. The Protestant narrative of rupture stresses the division between past and present selves, forging a new born-again self. On the contrary, Orthodox conversion narratives, Winchester states, describe the ongoing “discovery” of Orthodoxy, “the revelation of a kind of Orthodox unconscious that had been guiding the quest for a previously unknown Orthodox Church all along” (2015, 455–56), which is somewhat reminiscent of *fitrah*, the Islamic idea that all humans are born with an inherent inclination towards Islamic beliefs (Sealy 2021, 430).

As I mentioned before, the conversion narratives presented here stress discontinuity over continuity. To illustrate, I will quote Marina, a young American mom of three and a former yoga teacher whose life changed after she first encountered Orthodoxy in a summer camp where she participated with her Orthodox boyfriend. There, Marina confessed for the first time ever (perhaps without the prayer of absolution, since she was not baptized back then). This is how she describes her first confession: [63]

That was second to last day [of camp] because the next day, they were doing liturgy and so, [the priest] is like, ‘I’m doing confessions.’ I’m like, ‘Never even–’ Of course, I’ve heard of confessions because my grandma was Catholic. I have an idea of what it is, but I’ve never done confession. Never seen confession done [...] I walked up there. He didn’t tell me I couldn’t have a confession. He knows I’m not Christian. He didn’t say anything to me. When I was asking him, ‘What do I say?’ He was just silent the whole time standing there in front of an icon of Christ and wouldn’t tell me anything. I’m like, ‘So, do I–?’ [...] He wouldn’t say anything. Then I was like, ‘All right. Well–’ and I just started. I did my whole entire life. [...] Every single thing that I have ever done that I could think of. (Marina, 2018) [64]

After her first confession, Marina “felt so convicted” that she emailed her business partner to say she would quit the yoga studio which they ran together and leave without asking for any pay. After that, it took Marina several years “to reform” herself: [65]

A: At that point, [...] I didn’t even grasp what I was really doing. I wasn’t even fully Christian. It took me probably two years of even being Orthodox to even have a relationship with Christ, if that makes sense. I remember [...] coming to father Dorotheus and be like, ‘I still feel uncomfortable saying Jesus name.’ Just because it’s so hard to re– [pauses] -form yourself sort of, especially if you’re raised with it being so unfamiliar and the only time you ever use his name was, like I said, in a negative blasphemous way. [66]

Q: What do you mean by ‘reform yourself’? You ‘had to reform yourself’, you said. [67]

A: I was saying like, if you’re raised in American secular– it’s like everything’s okay. It’s okay to sleep around. It’s okay to do whatever you want to self-satisfy and please yourself for your own better gain. Do you know what I mean? It’s a whole different mentality. Whereas Christ was like, ‘Sacrifice yourself. Sell everything you have and follow me.’ (Marina, 2018) [68]

The new beginning and the discontinuity I presented here is not as sharp as that presented in the narratives of born-again Evangelicals, but it is not Bahá’í “non-conversion” either (Makhani-Belkin 2024). Orthodox conversions imply a lot of adjustments and changes in [69]

both ideas and practices and require long-term efforts to get used to them, including the material culture of the church, a new understanding of holiness and holy matter, new bodily experiences (fasting, kneeling, prostrations, crossing oneself), a new sensual, emotional culture, etc. More research is required to answer the question why some individuals and institutions are “liable to address their pasts through a logic of discontinuity and self-transformation and others [are] more liable to address them through a logic of continuity and self-discovery” (Winchester 2015, 455). Drawing on narratives of different groups of converts can shed some light. A possible hypothesis could be that narratives of former ‘low church’ members who are used to less orderly services follow the logic of discontinuity while narratives of former liturgically-oriented ‘high church’ attendees who are more familiar with the ritualistic side of Christianity stay within continuity logic.

Conclusion

Although Orthodox Christianity in the United States is a minority religion, it offers plenty of insights for conversion scholars. Following the first goal of the article, I discussed the analytic value of the categories which denote various groups of American Orthodox Christians (converts, cradles, reverts, and neophytes). A brief cross-cultural comparison between Orthodox Christians in the United States and in post-Soviet Orthodox majority contexts shows the difference in their journeys to Orthodoxy, challenges the common definitions of cradles and converts, and highlights the variables behind them such as different ethno-geographic backgrounds, religious biographies, previous religious experience, and socio-cultural backgrounds, i.e., coming from a social context of Orthodox majority vs. minority. Further, I explored the theoretical models of conversion which best explain religious conversion of Americans to Orthodox Christianity. I also pointed at the need to study group and especially family conversions to Orthodoxy, a topic that can be overlooked by existing approaches to conversion which are focused on individual choices, and can contribute to cross-cultural theories of conversion. [70]

Finally, I analyzed how American conversion as resocialization into a new religious group happens. While learning how to be Orthodox, converts unlearn their old ways, drop off conversion baggage, and learn the new beliefs and practices to successfully socialize in a new religious group. Thus, ‘unlearning’ is a part of resocialization process which implies unlearning the old beliefs and practices and learning the new ones expected by the peer group. [71]

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