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The Economy of the Temples of God in the Turmoil of Changing Russia

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Abstract

The liberalisation of religious practice after the fall of the Soviet regime and the support by the Russian state to the Russian Orthodox Church have contributed to the enormous growth of the church economy. Controversies within and without the Church interrogate commercial and gifting practices. The relationship between the expansion of church commerce and the operation of moral boundaries, underlined by critical stances, has been determined by culture and history, with the post-Soviet transformation having played a key role in shaping popular notions of selflessness and profit-seeking. Moreover, as people participate in the church economy they mobilise perceptions of the differential moral valence of gift and commerce in order to communicate concerning the power of the Church, its controversial image, Russia's social stratification, and to deploy ethics of equity and honesty. Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church; Religious economy; Gift; Commerce; Postsocialism.

Since the early 1990s the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC, Patriarchate of Moscow) has developed a complex economy at its basic level, that of the parishes (Agadjanian and Rousselet 2011). Commerce in goods and rituals is thriving, with churches displaying the list of prices that supplant older practices where fees for spiritual services were known to the community. TV channels and other media advertise requests for contributions to church (re-) construction and wealthy entrepreneurs make large donations with a political intent (Köllner 2011). Politics have played a prominent role in this process of resurgence (Agadjanian and Rousselet 2005; Bourdeaux 1995; Knox 2005), even though the agendas of the ROC and the state do not coincide entirely (Richters 2013) and, legally speaking, the Church has remained divided from the state since 1918. Presidents Putin (2000 -2008, 2012 – present) and Medvedev (2008 -2012) did much to facilitate what has been called “the rebirth of Orthodoxy”, not least regarding the church economy. A key aspect of state policy treats church money as a donation (pozhertvovanie) free from income tax, including all income from goods and rituals for religious use, which comprises virtually everything. In this context, the church economy has become one of the most controversial issues in Russia, spurring debate within and without the institution: Can the Church act as a profit-seeking enterprise? Is the sale of religious goods and rituals acceptable? Or should the Church rely on unsolicited, benevolent gifts alone? One of the aims of this article is to ask why these questions have become so central in post-Soviet society. Are they merely the revival of an old controversy? Or is there something specifically post-Soviet that can explain the emotional intensity with which they have appeared after the fall of the Soviet regime? These questions also resonate with Viviana Zelizer's influential historical study of the life insurance industry in 19th century United States (2009 [1979]). American society was then faced with the question: Is it morally acceptable to price and commercialise death? Zelizer traces a trajectory from a radical reluctance to monetize death, grounded in religious and moral dogmas, to an appreciated instrument for family protection and eventually to a family investment. As Zelizer argues, a “pure” economistic approach fails to grasp the reasons why, in areas considered sacred, commercialism is resisted or why at some point in history it nevertheless succeeds.

Similarly, I underline some pivotal historical, social, and cultural aspects that have shaped the church economy and the post-Soviet debates. Clearly, church money follows a specific, morally and socially distinct circuit and, as Zelizer writes elsewhere, this “earmarking of money is [...] a social process: money is attached to a variety of social relations rather than to individuals” (Zelizer 1997 [1994]: 25). Continuing the parallel with Zelizer’s study on life insurance, however, one may question the idea that the trajectory followed by the industry of life insurance can be generalised to other cases. Is the removal of moral and religious limits from sacred areas such as life, death, and religion, always a necessary precondition for the expansion of commerce in those areas? Or are other trajectories possible? I take inspiration from Zelizer’s approach and use my own case study to point to a different relationship between the expansion of commerce and the intensification of moral boundaries. Furthermore, I stress the impressive diversity of meanings and messages found within the church economy, which both draw on and go beyond notions of the marketable and the non-marketable. Anthropological studies of different Christian denominations show that religious economies depend on history, belief, cultural meaning, as well as the relevant framework in which religious economies operate: from small community level (e.g. Gregory 1980) to larger denominational (e.g. Kiernan 1988), to global levels (e.g. Coleman 2000, 2004, 2006). Strict reciprocity, famously phrased by Marcel Mauss as the “triple obligation” to give, to receive and to return (1950 [1924]), “pure gifts”, defined by Jonathan Parry (1986) as an expression of a quest for transcendence present in the world religions, ideally undertaken in secrecy and without expectation of a worldly return, and standard commerce, are three extreme types from a plethora of transactions within Christian economies. Instead of attempting a classification of the different transactions found in the ROC, I draw inspiration from the above studies to show that participation in the church economy aims to reach out to the wider frame of Russian society by creatively referring to ideas of self-interest and selflessness. Through the technicalities of price-setting, gifting, and bookkeeping people engage notions of gift and commerce, and mobilise visions of their differential moral valence, in order to address social stratification in Russian society, to communicate on the public image and power of the ROC, and to express ethics of equity and honesty. In other words, I claim that with the meteoric post-Soviet Orthodox resurgence the church economy has become a controversial arena for making statements about politics and morality in Russian society. I provide a brief overview of the economy of the ROC at the parish level and a short description of the field site. I claim that atheist Soviet and post-Soviet views have reassessed the ROC’s economy and have significantly shaped post-Soviet notions of religious sacrificial gifting and church commerce, increasing expectations towards the Church to act selflessly. Then I demonstrate that action and reflection within the parish economy address major themes with large political and moral resonance, such as perceptions of disrupted social equity and the ROC’s authority and image. In addition, the practicalities of parish life unsettle the commonsensical notion that sacrificial gifting is at any rate the home of a higher morality than commerce.

Inside church commerce

Each ROC parish is an economic unit, which increases the importance of commerce as a source of income. It hands over part of its income to the eparchy, which is directly accountable to the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, but receives no money from it. Each parish pays fees for water, electricity, local services, renovation and construction works, and buys merchandise for its shop from suppliers and producers belonging to the ROC. Sizable income disparities among the parishes are reflected in priests’ salaries. Although donations from the

business community and support from the local authorities are important sources of income, the sale of religious items and services is vital. In the town where I conducted fieldwork, the woman who worked as a bookkeeper for the main local parish told me that half of the income of the parish came from sales, while the other half came from donations collected during the services (*na kruzhu*) and from boxes placed in the church. In general, setting prices for rituals and goods is of utmost importance. Urban settings have been central places of the Orthodox revival since the fall of the Soviet regime (Benovska-Sabkova et al. 2010). I undertook research in one such locality, with three parishes that were attended by local residents with extremely variable degrees of commitment and knowledge. Church attendance grew rapidly in the 1990s. When I conducted most of my field research, committed churchgoers and less observant dropouts were no longer a deviant minority among urban Russians. The local churches were actively visited, especially on days of major religious celebrations. The parish priests of the two main parishes claimed that each had between 500 and 600 regular parishioners, counting those who came to church at least once every three weeks. The smaller parish had around 200 such regulars. All three parishes had staff working for them, with the largest one, centre of the deanery, employing more than fifteen people, including the priests. The higher the number of priests and church workers, the higher the expenditure and turnover of each parish. It is in the parish churches where most occasional visitors and active parishioners experience the church economy. Therefore, I focus on this level, particularly on parish clergy and church workers who are involved in this economy on a daily basis. Church workers belong to what can be defined in Russia's urban settings as a middle and lower middle class. In my field site they were predominantly middle-age former and current teaching staff (Patko 2008), factory workers, technical and medical staff (Rivkin-Fish 2005), administration employees, and pensioners (Caldwell 2004, 2007). The practices that I witnessed greatly differed from those in the early 1990s, I was told. Women who used to work in a church shop in the early 1990s recounted that no written prices of rituals were displayed in the shop. Occasional visitors needed to ask the price. In any case, only candles and a few crosses were sold. The phrase "*svechnoi iashchik*" (literally "candle box") designates this type of shop. In the beginning of the 2000s, the interior of many churches had to be changed as commerce expanded. The church shops, usually located inside the churches and increasingly called *lavka* (shop), now offer hundreds of objects, including books and pamphlets, candles in four or five different sizes, oils, DVDs, a large range of icons. Trade has become an essential part of the churches' activity. Many people decided to get baptised; religious funerals have become a norm; people commonly order prayers for their kin and acquaintances by writing their names on sheets of paper (*zapiski*). All these services have to be paid for. Trade in religious goods and services is not new in the ROC. In the past, the prices were known to the community. Recently, however, as a result of the expansion of trade and an increase in church attendance, prices have had to be displayed in order to save staff time. In an unprecedented way, in the early 2000s, church trade accomplished its own "bureaucratic revolution" (Hart 2000 : 204 -206), that of "fixed and open pricing" (Carrier 1995 : 80 -83). Significantly, this "revolution" has remained incomplete and "fixed and open pricing" often serves as a point of reference subverted in various ways in practice. The different levels of prices applied in each church have proven a major source of differentiation within the post-Soviet ROC. In everyday talk, people compare the churches by this criterion. For example, in the town of my fieldwork the local inhabitants ranked churches informally but quite consensually according to the prices they practise. The largest and central one was said to be "the most expensive". The second church, centre of the second largest parish, was considered "cheaper" by outsiders, by its own employees, and by active parishioners. For the third church, the smallest one, it was held for normal that prices for candles and rituals there were lower than elsewhere since it was located in a remote neighbourhood and offered only a

few items for sale. There was no strong competition between the churches, as they catered to geographically and to some extent socially distinct groups. Yet, it was not unusual for occasional churchgoers to consider the prices and the location in order to decide to which church to go. The ROC has always sought income and the church economy has always been controversial. Before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 neither the parishes nor the monasteries lived from gifts alone. Their economy was shaped by fluctuating state support, donations, and a wide range of economic activities. These centred on farming and craft production (especially in the monasteries), as well as on trade in religious items and rituals, on emoluments, donations, and clerics' and believers' labour. Thyrt speaks of "monastic entrepreneurialism" in the 17th century (2010 : 499). The economic condition of the different parishes and monasteries varied widely (Bernshtam 2005 : 134 -147 ; Bogdanov 1995 : 66 -69 ; Freeze 1983 : 51 -101 ; Nazarov 2006 ; Rozov 2003 : 39 -40 *passim*; Shevzov 2004 : 54 -94). Bernshtam (2005 : 134 -147) shows for the 18th and 19th centuries that prices for rituals varied accordingly to the region and to the economic situation of the parishioners.¹⁵ Some prices were agreed upon by the priest and the community, others were fixed by the state (Bernshtam 2005 : 141). At times, the state intervened to limit the number of emoluments (i.e . sbory vo vremya obkhodov) in poor areas. Under Soviet rule, the churches, Orthodox and others, were confined to a modest and mostly silent existence. Their economies shrank dramatically. Unlike the Orthodox Churches of Balkan countries where clergymen became almost state employees (a privilege they retained in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia even during socialist and post-socialist times), the clergy of the ROC depended upon its own resources. Accusations of greed and unfair gain characterized Soviet anticlerical propaganda, although most of the clergy led miserable lives. Anticlerical voices, in particular those attacking church commerce, have remained strong in society after the fall of socialism, even as many Russians started engaging with Orthodoxy. Clerical self-criticism has also arisen. These moral evaluations of the church economy are deeply connected to Soviet popular morality and to encompassing post-Soviet circumstances.

The differential moral valence of gift and commerce

Patriarch Aleksii II, at the time head of the ROC, addressed the clergy in an official speech in January 2005. He appealed for the price lists (tsenniki) for rituals to be removed, including those containing prices for candles. He often expressed this position. The former Patriarch called the usage of price lists "a vicious practice" and "trade in grace" (torgovlia blagodat'iu). He urged the clergy "to reflect on this in order to rescue the Church from criticism". Public criticism has often emphasised the Church's commercial activities and anticlerical voices regularly demand for the Church to be recognised officially as a business corporation. In public debates the phrase "the sale of spirituality" (prodazha dukhovnosti) gained in popularity. During his meetings with representatives of the clergy the former Patriarch often stressed how harmful the use of prices was to the spiritual nature of the Church. His views were met with much sympathy among some clerics and lay faithful. For instance, during my fieldwork, a young priest expressed disagreement with the practice of determining prices for rituals: I personally don't agree with prices in the churches. I understand there should be donations, but fixing some fee for a mystery – this is highly suspicious, because nowhere in the Scriptures is it said that this should be fixed. To the contrary, the Lord cast out the merchants from the temple. [I say] yes to donations, but voluntary donations. He meant that the state-supported category of donation, under which standard payments resulting from open and fixed pricing are also subsumed, could not be considered as "voluntary". In one of our numerous conversations on the material situation of the parishes he told me: "Our system is very sick now", adding how in old times the Church lived only from donations, unlike present-day church commerce. For my interlocutor, commerce with rituals was now a

shameful necessity. This priest, who had graduated from the seminary some years earlier, endlessly recounted how pious and assiduous in prayer pre-Revolutionary peasants were. An important aspect of their piety was, for him, their gifting practices. The idea of a high morality and various romantic views about pre-Revolutionary Orthodoxy are typically found in the thriving popular post-Soviet Orthodox literature. Representations of donations that alone sustained the Church pertain to such views. They tend to exacerbate a dichotomy between commerce on the one side, exemplified by the posted prices of rituals and goods, that I call standard commerce, and “voluntary donations” on the other. One can trace a parallel between this firm distinction between things that can be priced and others that cannot, and the moral limits that hindered the development of life insurance in 19th century United States (Zelizer 2009 [1979]). Zelizer argues that pricing death, once considered as a moral and religious outrage, progressively became a widespread practice, accepted as morally and economically desirable. In variance with this case, the unprecedented magnitude of church commerce in the post-Soviet era is not the consequence of the effacement of moral boundaries. Neither is commerce in religious goods and services a new practice—even though open and fixed pricing is a technical innovation. Thus, on the one hand, I draw on Zelizer’s insight that the cultural limits of commercialism shift through history. But, on the other hand, a linear transformation, similar to that of life insurance, of things considered sacred from non-marketable and incommensurable towards their overt pricing and selling is not found in the Russian case. Instead, we find a resilient and yet fluctuating ideology of self-interest and selflessness that has varied in time, with the political and economic transformations in post-Soviet Russia having had a major impact on its prominence and intensity. Therefore, we need to focus on what has prompted the strength of a moral expectation of disinterestedness towards the Church in the post-Soviet era as encapsulated in the anti-commerce discourse. An ideology of self-denial and renouncement for the sake of spiritual elevation is considered a cornerstone on the path towards salvation in Orthodoxy, with selfless and anonymous almsgiving being among the highest religious acts (e.g. Fedotov 1966 : 80). Orthodox theologians trace this ascetic pattern back to the early Church fathers. The same ideology underpins the perception of a differential moral valence of gift and commerce. The idea that gift is morally and spiritually superior to commerce is obvious in the Patriarch’s and the young priest’s words (see also Gregory 1982 ; Carrier 1995 ; Parry 1986). But the wide sympathy for such positions in highly secular Russia, where many firmly adhere to their atheist education, can hardly be explained as the resurgence of old religious morals. Clerical self-criticism and lay disapproval of the search for profit has occurred in a situation of systemic transformation from planned to market economy. The economic and social conditions were attained for this critical discourse to find a poignant resonance among the wide masses of those who painfully experienced the new conditions. The Soviet regime succeeded in dramatically reducing religious knowledge among its citizens; most Russians hardly knew anything about Orthodox theology. Yet, Soviet moral teachings assiduously insisted on selflessness and, for various purposes, mobilised harsh criticism of profit-seeking commerce. Thus, partly, the vibrancy of the gift/commerce dichotomy in the frame of the Church economy derives from the religious notion of a pure, unreciprocated giving as the higher expression of selflessness and a way to transcendence (Parry 1986). But this dichotomy owes its popularity to the fact that the religious pattern meets a popular ideology of disinterestedness. Patriarch Aleksii II criticised trade in rituals and candles not because it could hinder spiritual efficacy, but “to rescue the Church from criticism” meaning criticism within Russian society. Studies on late Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia show that popular thought was infused with the idea that selfless action is an expression of higher morality. Authors researching late Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia have noted that, while informal activities aiming at making profit were far from unusual, they were simultaneously

accompanied by resentment, an example of which is the state-promoted notion of *spekuliatsia*, an extreme form of illegality and self-interest (Humphrey 2002 : 58 -61 ; Humphrey and Mandel 2002). In post-Soviet Russia, Orthodox priests still refer to this Soviet notion to condemn businesses that consist of buying at a lower price and selling at a higher price (Köllner 2013 : 47 -48). Widespread relationships of trust that provided access to scarce goods and generally inaccessible services, called *blat* , conveyed a plethora of thoughts and deliberations about the balance and tensions between freely offered favours and reciprocal ones: “Small favours, altruistically given and received as ‘help’ or ‘friendly support’ are inherent in *blat* ”, writes Ledeneva (1998 : 61). People saw these acts of altruism as mutually beneficial (ibid .:142). Pesmen (2000) demonstrates that the beginnings of the Russian market economy in the early 1990 s simultaneously exacerbated and reconciled notions of altruistic gift and profit. Enrichment and profit were culturally framed in opposition to the cultural notion of *soul* (*dusha*). Illegal transactions were followed by “soulful” socialisation, such as drinking together, in order to protect relationships from the threat of selfishness (Pesmen 1995 : 74 ; 2000 : 170 -171). The gap between, on one side, the dichotomy of self-interest versus “gratuitous giving” and, on the other, the bewildering diversity of practices reflected, according to Pesmen, “different moments of consciousness” (2000 : 135). The medical system provides another good example of the clash of values in this period of transformation. For instance, in the 1990 s, physicians were barely able to survive on their tiny state salaries. Nonetheless, those trained in the Soviet system “treated the exchange of money as ‘dirty’, as a sign that one’s professional commitment to helping all patients was compromised” (Rivkin-Fish 2005 : 182). Taking money directly from the patients in addition to one’s salary was still “morally wrong” (ibid .: 189). Slowly, however, economic success and wealth came to represent a fair reward for one’s work and skills (Patino 2005 , 2009). Among medical doctors, “taking money for services gradually gained legitimacy”, first, as a “necessary evil”, later as an appropriate monetary compensation for medical services, and eventually under the form of displayed price lists in hospitals and clinics (Rivkin-Fish 2005 : 182 -206). Paying for medical services started to be interpreted as a commitment of the patient to care for his/her health (Rivkin-Fish 2005 , 2009). While religious practice was not extensively researched in the early 1990 s, sociologist Natalia Dinello (1998) interviewed 61 bankers trying to assess if they were closer to an ideal-typical Western money-making *Homo Economicus* , or to an equally ideal-typical *Homo Orthodox* . She defined the characteristics of the latter drawing on Russian literary and theological works mostly from the late 19th and early 20th century. The primary importance of collective over individual interests, anti-commercialism, anti-materialism, and affectivity were among the qualities attributed to *Homo Orthodox* . Surprisingly enough, only one of her informants, a woman with long-term experience in the Soviet banking world, supported these values. The overwhelming majority of the others, young motivated bankers, clearly endorsed the values of profit-seeking and individualism of *Homo Economicus* . Dinello reports on the woman with the Soviet background: “Her vision of success did not include money as a component: ‘Money satisfies certain needs, but success is when one is needed by other people.’ She also stated that moral incentives superseded monetary ones as a means of motivation for work” (Dinello 1998 : 55). Dinello’s study is entirely based on interviews and thus does not consider actual practice. However, it clearly highlights a late-Soviet mind-set and its progressive transformation, as documented by the above scholars as well. A vivid rhetoric with a Soviet background against self-interest and money-making pointed to moral tensions exacerbated by experiences of profound upheavals. If early Christianity provided an ideology of unsolicited and unreciprocated gifting, and specific economic and political conditions allowed it to flourish in later periods, as Parry (1986) argues, then the post-Soviet example shows that the transmission of this ideology has also gone in the opposite direction, from the secular to the

religious sphere, as Soviet values came to reassess the church economy. This trajectory also confirms that moral and religious limitations do not need to fade away in order for commerce with sacred things to thrive. Religious and moral barriers may intensify or decline as historical circumstances change. They may mobilise different ideological frames of reference, namely an Orthodox and a Soviet one in the case of the ROC's economy. In brief, Zelizer's finding of a linear trajectory from the sacredness of death expressed as the refusal to price it towards a morally and economically desirable instrument appears as just one among many possible trajectories. In the ROC, trade in sacred things has characterized the history of the Church, with resilient but variably strong ideological barriers from different origins coming to reassess the commercial practices. Moreover, the vibrancy of controversial views about the ROC's economy serves as a nexus that links this economy to Russian society and politics at large. Below I depict how people acting in the church economy draw on the ideological partitioning of selflessness and self-interest. They use the markers of standard commerce and gifting to communicate on a large range of issues that matter beyond the church walls.

Malleable pricing and the ethics of equity

Church commerce is sometimes transformed into an instrument of equity. For church workers, rhetorical and practical manipulations of pricing become ethical instruments used to express who one is, to act in favour of social equity, to acknowledge social relationships, hence addressing central concerns in Russian society. There has been an enduring aggravation of poverty and social exclusion since the reforms launched in the 1990s (Manning and Tikhonova 2004). Its acuteness has spurred criticism of social stratification and debasement. These are Russia's social disruptions that parish staff members have in mind when they use pricing as an ethical instrument. Sometimes they offer church visitors the possibility of giving less than the usual price, or not paying at all. In a tiny church located on the ground floor of the local hospital, there was an inscription announcing "candles for the poor" (*svechi dlia maloimushcheikh*) placed in front of a box without a price label containing small thin candles. One could take a candle for free, or give as much money as one wished, as the woman who worked in the church shop explained. She had set up the boxes in agreement with the priest. In her understanding, the visitors who considered themselves able to pay the requested amount could buy candles from the box with a price label. Those who considered themselves not well off could take small candles and decide whether and how much money they wanted to leave. The box with "candles for the poor" was a charitable opportunity for visitors with modest incomes. Thus, to choose a "candle for the poor", or to pay the displayed price for a bigger candle, depended on the visitors' own assessment of their financial circumstances, or on their subjective view of class membership (Rivkin-Fish 2009). The priest and the shop seller had transformed the church into a donor of candles. This new device was mainly appreciated by elderly parishioners living on meagre pensions (Caldwell 2007). The desire to act in a socially fair way was also the underlying motivation behind the local priests' flexible attitude towards payments for rituals. The price lists for rituals in all local churches had a sober but authoritative aspect; they were very readable and easily noticeable, usually placed near the church shop. Generally the authoritative status of the displayed prices means that they are definitive and thus preclude any liberty to negotiate by leaving only one option: to pay as much as the label says (Hart 2000 : 204 -206). Yet, the price lists did not have the ultimate authority in the local churches. All the priests with whom I discussed the issue of prices stressed that none of them would ever refuse to perform a baptism or a funeral (*otpevanie*) for free if requested to do so. I witnessed a funeral carried out for free on the initiative of the priests. Two siblings, a teenage girl and her younger brother, regularly begged in one of the churches. Their elder brother got drunk one evening in the middle of the winter, fell on the street and froze to death. Although most church workers and priests disapproved of

the behaviour of the young beggars who were often drunk and impolite, the priests offered to hold a ritual for free for the deceased brother. Hence, they gifted the beggars' family an unsolicited ritual moved by religious and social concerns, and thus overtly acknowledged their social relationship to this marginal family. Yet, this gesture was not self-evident, for parish priests are rarely sympathetic to this sort of beggars (Tocheva 2011). Transactions in churches are often impersonal, as is usually the case in consumer markets. Nonetheless, church pricing is far from having achieved "the institutionalization of impersonality" characteristic of retail sales that first took root in 19th century Britain and the United States (Carrier 1995 : 13). Different practices on the ground rather remind of what Janet Roitman writes about Cameroon: "price, as a practice, is a way of discussing a social relation" (Roitman 2003 : 221). The impersonal, discretionary status of authoritatively displayed prices is sometimes subverted through inventive manipulations of pricing. Transactions become negotiable in relation to social status and commitment to equity, as exemplified by the "candles for the poor", or a way to acknowledge a relationship as shown by the gifted funeral service. In this case, church workers and clergy do not endorse the idea of legitimate search for profit, which would have been in accordance with the prevalent spirit of market capitalism in Russia. Neither do they sidestep commerce to protect the sacredness of religious items and rituals. By playing on the multiple avatars of the gift-commerce complex some church workers transform pricing into an ethical tool.

Institutional image and power

The ROC's institutional image and power are encoded in the subtext of parish economic life. In particular, insiders of parish life communicate over the institutional power and image of the Church. The public image of the Church between a calculating entrepreneur and a spiritual recipient of donations has been among the most controversial issues in Russia since the 1990s (Mitrokhin 2004). The actors of the parish economy participate in this debate by using inventive techniques as ways of reinforcing, blurring, or breaking down the distinction between standard commerce and gift. Through rhetoric and tricks of price display clergymen and church workers use their power to set up a price, but also to disguise it, in order eventually to make a public statement about their institution. Not less than the moral underpinning of the ROC's institutional power and prestige are at stake. The legal category of church donation upheld by the state plays a key role. Its state-promoted official meaning dwells on the view that church income is homogenous, unified. But in practice people conflate and distance notions of gifting and commerce, including in reference to the legal category of church donation. The assumption of the high legitimacy of the ROC becomes instrumental for instance when in larger cities or monasteries street sellers of candles compete with the church; lighting a candle is considered part of appropriate behaviour in a church. Announcements incite visitors to buy candles only from the churches. One announcement I saw on the door of a church yard in Saint Petersburg justified material contributions to the church in terms of sacrifice:

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
NO BLESSING IS GIVEN (IT IS NOT ALLOWED) to bring and to light candles acquired outside our parish! Always remember that the candle symbolises not only an ardent prayer, but the candle, above all, represents your Christian sacrifice for the maintenance of the temples of God.

The text was signed by the two priests of the parish. Here, the encouragement to contribute to church income is justified in terms of need—"for the maintenance of the temples of God". Religious sacrifice and standard payment are not separate categories; the payment for candles is, from the point of view of these priests, a sacrifice which "above all" helps the church to live. Much like in fair trade, standard commerce supports a higher purpose (Carrier and Luetchford 2012). The ideological vitality of sacrificial gifting is deeply intertwined with pragmatic economic concerns. Moreover, by displaying the announcement at the entrance to the church yard, where all passers-by could read it, the priests publicly claimed higher authority for their powerful institution over street vendors. Thus, while articulating a message merging together "Christian sacrifice" and retail sale of candles, the priests asserted the ROC's institutional power in the subtext, restating and taking advantage of the institutional potency of the ROC. Multiple techniques of pricing indicate that freely decided gifts stand as an ideal while commerce is a practical norm. For example, behind the veiling of fixed pricing lurks a commitment to show the public that the ROC is an institution of high spirituality. Such techniques mobilise the widely shared idea of the differential moral valence of commerce and gift. They attest to the fact that interested and disinterested actions do not aim simply at, say, profit and spirituality, but convey messages about image and power. In 2008, I came across a creative way of disguising posted prices by making them look like something else. The former Patriarch Aleksii II overtly opposed the use of price lists for rituals and candles. Most parish priests thought that taking down the price lists would result in their parish's bankruptcy, but some sympathised with the Patriarch's view. While Aleksii II was still alive, the recently rebuilt high-rank Moscow cathedral of Christ the Saviour, the head of which is the Patriarch himself, used an arrangement that allowed the standard trade in candles to continue. Candles in different sizes were presented in separate boxes and each box was given a number—N. 10 , N. 25 , N. 35 , the bigger the candles, the higher the number on the box containing them. These numbers indicated in fact the price in roubles. In itself, this trick aimed at concealing the fact that all those who wished to acquire a candle were expected to pay a predetermined price. People patiently waited their turn, without wondering what these numbers meant. All those queuing seemed to understand that these were prices; they kindly handed out their money to obtain a candle. To each person who had selected candles, the shop worker announced the total sum to be paid. By visually disguising the prices as if they were indications of size, this church was paying respect to the Patriarch's will to eliminate standard trade in candles. The message was that ideally there should not be open fixed pricing. The same applied to the price of rituals. There was no list of prices displayed, contrary to the usual practice. When my Russian friend inquired at the church shop: "How much do you charge for baptism?", the shop worker readily replied: "One thousand roubles". This was the common price in middle-range urban churches. For whom the visual trick of the absent price list was staged remained unclear to me. I cannot speculate whether the Patriarch knew about it. Yet, it clearly attested to a feeling of unease within this particular church in respect to displayed price commerce. At stake was an attempt to polish the public image of the Church by exhibiting a non-commercial façade to the visitors' gaze. Internal persuasion also leads to seeing gift where outsiders would see commerce. Several of my informants claimed that payment or gift was a matter of interpretation. In the town where I worked, devout churchgoers discussed prices in a way that allowed them to bridge what others saw as a gap between compulsory prices and voluntary gifts. Devout churchgoers claimed that the prices simply specified the amount of the donation; abiding by the usual rules of the transaction was not an obligation but a matter of free consent. Churchgoers were expected to derive the meaning of religiously motivated gift and commercial profit from the institutional context. Adults undergoing a process of conversion are taught this. I attended a talk given in a poorly furnished room which constituted a parish school for adults. That particular evening the

public consisted of two women in their late thirties, two elderly women, and one man in his forties. All belonged to what can be defined as low and lower middle class in Russia. The man leading the course was considered a particularly knowledgeable Orthodox. After the usual prayer and a short reading of the Gospel, he announced the topic of this meeting: What does it mean to give money in a church? He explained that the candles in the church were not there for commerce (torgovlia) but to allow the visitors to make a donation (pozhtertvovanie). It is written “5 roubles” there, he explained, while the real price of the candle is 50 kopeks. So when one gives money, it is a donation. But one can also give 50 roubles, though “5 roubles” is the written price. That’s what a donation is.

The public nodded. The speaker expressed a usual position defended by parish workers: to give money for a ritual purpose (here in order to acquire a candle) means that one is making a donation to the church. That evening, the lecturer justified this in two ways. Firstly, the difference between the production cost of the candle and the written price must be seen as the amount of the donation. Secondly, the money given is not bound by the written price; one is free to give more. “The state understands this. Of course, one cannot put a cash register in a church”, he added, alluding to the state-enforced category of donation to emphasise the perception of a differential moral valence of gift and commerce. This man’s interpretation drew a firm line between trade and donation; for him they belong to different worlds: that of profit bureaucratically recorded by cash registers, and that of spiritually elevated church donation that cannot be captured by futile bookkeeping devices. For him, the donation instilled spirituality into the institution and, in a circular way, the religious framework meant that the transactions were donations and not commercial payments. His interpretation and the actual politics of pricing and disguise of price stress the higher value of gifting over commerce. Yet, some practices may turn this differential moral valence of gift and commerce upside down.

When gifts undermine honesty

Throughout the past two decades of profound political and economic transformation, and promotion of the ROC, the notion of honesty (chestnost’) has concentrated much of the lively debates about conflicting values, not least in relation to church donations and trade. The notion of honesty is indexed by the ROC’s economy, as well as an ethics of equity and a struggle for the ROC’s image and power. Since the 1990s, there has been a widespread view of the Church as a “mafia” living from the contributions of “poor people” (e.g. Ries 2002 : 308 -309). This view was part of a wider discourse; Russians bemoaned the pervasiveness of dishonesty and moral corruption, expressing a bitter sense of being part of a country of “ubiquitous cynicism” (ibid. : 277). Insiders of the parish economy echo this criticism to some extent. When they are faced with some vernacular parish usages of gifts and commerce, honesty becomes an issue. Common wisdom tends to place higher morality in gift rather than in commerce. However, church staff may question this hierarchy. Parish bookkeeping turns on its head the usual differential moral valence of gift and commerce. In particular, in some cases, unsolicited, “voluntary” donations seemed to undermine honesty, while money earned through sales allowed for true accounts. When I inquired how the eparchy defined the amount that every parish had to pay, it emerged that this largely depended on the parish quarterly reports. A priest told me that this fee was relatively low and it was no burden for his parish. Still, all parishes have to contribute and this is where bookkeeping comes into play. I met bookkeepers whose commitment to fairness in their bureaucratic duties clashed with occasional opaque uses of money gifts in their parish. Usually in Orthodox parishes the amounts of money earned through commerce and donations, or any indication of their turnover, are never publicly announced. The overwhelming majority of churchgoers are given

neither figures nor approximations. This practice stands in sharp contrast with the public announcements of collected money in charismatic churches (Coleman 2004 : 431 , 2006 : 178 ; Kiernan 1988). However, informants gave me some hints. A priest whom I knew well enough to feel free to raise with him the issue of money gifts, responded in an interesting way to my guessing that there was probably not much money in the two wooden boxes designed to collect money gifts. "Don't believe that", he told me. "Sometimes there is lots of money inside. I don't know who donated it. Some people don't want anyone to know that they gave." He did not mention any numbers. I could never get the slightest approximation about how much money was represented by the type of Russian Orthodox gift that most closely reproduces the ideal "pure" religious gift: unsolicited, unreciprocated and done in secrecy (Parry 1986). My attempts to come up with figures about the daily or monthly income of the studied churches proved equally unsuccessful, despite the fact that among my close acquaintances there were parish bookkeepers and shop workers. Partly, the difficulty stems from the bookkeepers' and priests' very limited openness to discuss this matter, an unvoiced norm of behaviour in the parishes. Partly, it derives from the fact that in parishes with several priests it is difficult for bookkeepers to trace donations made directly to the priests, or to keep track of the money put in boxes typically placed in every church. Bookkeepers collect figures about the income from the cash desk of the shop, usually kept by female church employees, and from the priests. But not all the income is reflected in their reports. I came to know four women working as parish bookkeepers, all in their forties and active members of the parish for which they worked. All of them also had another professional occupation, within the parish or elsewhere. All were devout believers with solid knowledge of the canon. All of them emphasised in our conversations that they tried to do their work correctly. The periods during which they had to prepare the quarterly reports for the eparchy were the most stressful time for them, as they wanted to deliver true accounts. One of them, a pious lady in her mid-forties, was considered by her fellow parishioners as kind, observant of the rules, and very fair. She wrote quarterly reports to the eparchy on the basis of which the eparchy could determine the taxes to request from this parish. There was no percentage or amount specified in advance by the hierarchy; it was left to the appreciation of the relevant eparchy to decide how much each parish should contribute, based on the parish reports. Incidentally, I discovered that the bookkeeper had no way of knowing how much money the church had really received. I had made a donation of 10,000 roubles (approximately 260 euros in 2007) that I had given to the parish priest. A couple of months later, I decided to ask the bookkeeper to deliver a certificate for this donation which I could show later to my academic employer. She was indeed responsible for issuing certificates for monetary donations made to the church. Very surprised, she told me: "I didn't know that there was such donation". Then I asked her how precisely she was informed about the income of the church. It emerged that the shop workers reported to her regularly with great accuracy on the income from goods and rituals sold on fixed prices. "But whatever is given to the priests, I cannot know. What I write in the quarterly report is what they report to me." Another bookkeeper, also a pious woman in her mid-forties, confided a similar experience to me. These devout Orthodox women would generally avoid being judgmental, especially about priests. Expressing disagreement publicly is unthinkable. Rather, in friendly, empathic company, they would laconically utter their tormenting thoughts, their moral suffering caught between the conflicting obligation to obey the priest and to behave honestly. What matters here is that gifts were more likely to infringe transparency and thus encroach on accurate bookkeeping. Those monetary donations that stayed unreported by omission or on purpose were an obstacle to honest accounts. In contrast, trade with displayed prices allowed for clear accounts thanks to the records kept at the church shop. Unease stemmed not from standard trade practice where turnover was easy to trace through the cash desk, but from a lack of information engendered by unrecorded gifts.

The disciplining power of fixed, posted prices was exercised not only upon customers, but also upon the shop staff who reported on the sales. Conversely, money gifts were sometimes an open door to misconduct that troubled the sense of honesty that these women bookkeepers cherished so deeply. “Voluntary” donations were problematic for them because their practical management conflicted with these bookkeepers’ moral standards. If money gifts seem to follow the high ideal of religious sacrifice, for some strictly observant faithful, vicious practicalities of parish life inflect the moral balance in favour of standard commerce which they see as a device guaranteeing honest behaviour. The deep transformation of Russia’s political and economic order since 1991 and the simultaneous promotion of the ROC resulted in swelling both commerce and gifting practices within the Orthodox churches. If criticism of the ROC’s economy has always been present, the post-Soviet circumstances have given it a new impulse. Concentrated on the moral legitimacy of profit-oriented action, the debates have mobilised notions of self-interest and selflessness. Ideological and practical fluctuations have characterised the church economy, rather than a linear movement from sacralisation and incommensurability towards pricing and marketing. Commerce and harsh criticism of it have thrived simultaneously, within the Church and outside of it. Russians’ painful experience of an overall systemic transformation since 1991 has intensified some critical discourses regarding the economy of the Orthodox churches. Being aware of the pervasive criticism and, more widely, of popular notions of interested and selfless action, parish priests and workers apply multiple practical arrangements in their everyday economic practice. In particular, they creatively use the markers of trade and gifting to point to national policies and society-wide processes: the strong institutional power and controversial image of the Church, social stratification, notions of equity and honesty. This noneconomic use of the church economy means not only that cultural and social factors can have a decisive impact on a specific economy, but also that practice and thought in this economy can reach out far beyond its institutional boundaries aiming to spread messages in society.

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