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Introduction. Marking Space: the Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion

Marquer l'espace : la politique orthodoxe russe d'affirmation de soi

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Introduction

Marking Space: the Russian Orthodox Politics of Self-Assertion

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by the patriarchate of Moscow, has undergone spectacular growth.¹ It has left the marginal cultural niche it once occupied and become a mainstream religious organisation. Orthodoxy has become a religion by default for everybody who has not claimed otherwise. The Church's pervasive material presence is one aspect of this development. The legitimacy of this presence, however, is often contested by secular publics and the representatives of other religious groups. As this special issue demonstrates, the christianisation of the landscape in Russia is not without conflict and is not a unidirectional, victorious movement for religious activists and officials, even though it may seem so. Ethnographic research about grass-root initiatives for creating and contesting religious markers in this landscape sheds light on the texture of this process and helps us see how secular Russian society actually is.

Within anthropology, but not only, “the spatial turn” in the study of Christianity has been almost entirely based on examples from Protestantism and Catholicism (e.g., BIELO, 2019; ENGELKE, 2012; HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2002; HOVLAND, 2016; KNOTT, 2005, 2010; O'NEILL, 2013; about religious architecture belonging to different religions, see VERKAAIK, 2013). These, along with other

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authors who have joined “the spatial turn” in the study of religion (for an overview see OBADIA, 2015), have largely drawn on Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *La production de l’espace* (2000) to grasp how religion produces space. Lefebvre analysed the ways in which *dominant forces* produced space throughout history in Western Europe, with the Roman Catholic Church being one such force for centuries. After the fall of the Soviet regime, in highly secular Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has tried to behave as the most powerful religious actor. But it scarcely determines the production of space in a country where power lies with major political and market actors. Instead, the Church has spread markers that almost never go uncontested, as demonstrated by the articles in this issue. This is simple evidence that invalidates the idea of the Orthodox Church as a major driving force in society and therefore as a *producer* of space in the Russian Federation in the original sense defined by Lefebvre. Yet, simultaneously, the Church’s self-awareness as a historically legitimate and politically supported player, and its aspiration to growth has propelled a specific politics of presence in physical space. Hence our focus on the dissemination of a variety of markers in different kinds of spaces: urban, rural and natural, from the very large to the very tiny. Here lies the specificity of our approach: we take inspiration from Lefebvre’s overarching concept of the production of space by dominant forces in society but depart from it by proposing a different, yet connected concept, *the religious marking of space by a non-dominant social force whose success depends on dominant political and market forces*. Notwithstanding its ubiquitous public presence after the fall of the Soviet regime, the Russian Orthodox Church is, we argue, a non-dominant force in Russian society. The concept of the religious marking of space allows for an exploration of the intersection between a religious organisation’s relative lack of power and its pervasive presence. We postulate that the continuing Orthodox marking of different spaces is neither an epiphenomenon nor a by-product of secondary importance in comparison to what is usually assumed to be the core component of religious growth, namely rising numbers of faithful whose adherence is typically measured through indicators of belief and practice. We argue that the process of marking space deserves greater scholarly attention in its own right. A major finding in the case studies presented here is that if the Orthodox marking of space can be described as hegemonic in a number of cases, it has always been faced with plurality, controversies and struggles. This finding can allow us to shed new light on the transformations of Russian Orthodoxy in specific local, cultural and geopolitical contexts and can, in turn, illuminate changes in these contexts.

Supportive policies from potent market and political actors, notably high-level politicians, have so far proven critical to the growing religious marking of space with Orthodox symbols in a country where citizens’ adherence to this process has remained continuously low since the early 1990s. Looking beyond the issue of the religious marking of space, we see that the apparent paradox of the growth

of the Russian Orthodox Church in the context of a lack of strong popular support has been approached analytically from different angles. A great number of scholars have pointed out that the close relationship between Russia's top political officials and the church hierarchy has facilitated the erection of churches, chapels and monumental crosses, while also encouraging the organisation of Orthodox rituals during public events (e.g., GARRARD and GARRARD, 2008): however, much depends on specific local configurations (KÖLLNER, 2013, 2018, 2021; KORMINA, 2019, 2020; TOCHEVA, 2017, 2022). It has also been demonstrated that Russia's church-state nexus plays a role in the international arena (CURANOVIĆ, 2012, 2019). The Church has become a key partner in global conservative alliances whose main ideas have been integrated into the state's political agenda (STOECKL and UZLANER, 2022; see also ROUSSELET, 2020). A large body of literature explores the ways in which the state has used Orthodoxy to its own ends. Since Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000, state policies have made use of Orthodox symbols to craft religion-connected patriotic slogans. In fact, state support for the Church has always been occasional and uneven; when it was put in place, it has been designed to achieve the goals of the state rather than those of the Church (ROUSSELET, 2022; VATÉ, this issue). Another line of analysis underscores the fact that a large number of Russian citizens are attracted to patriotic slogans that hint to religious motifs and to the aspiration to restore what is viewed as Russia's glorious past under the auspices of Orthodoxy (MITROFANOVA, 2005; PANKOVA, 2011), but that believers' and the state's views of patriotism often diverge (ROUSSELET, 2015). Yet other analyses stress the discrepancy between, on one hand, the conspicuous public presence of the Orthodox Church and the high level of declared identification with the Orthodox faith and, on the other, continuously low levels of clerically sanctioned forms of observance and the overall difficulty in bringing the teachings of the Church into social life (DUBIN, 2005; FILATOV and LUNKIN, 2006; MITROKHIN, 2004; RICHTERS, 2013; ROUSSELET, 2013). Statistical surveys conducted since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army on February 24, 2022 have pointed to a continuing decline in church attendance in the Russian Federation ("Dannye..." 2024). This process has taken place in the context of an aggressive "weaponization" of Orthodox symbols and top-level clerical participation in state propaganda.

The visibility of the markers of Russian Orthodoxy raises the issue of their "readability" by the different groups that compose Russian society. Indeed, marking spaces implies not just putting in place certain material objects and actions; it is also a semiotic process that involves ascribing meanings to these erected markers and the work of reading these signs. As Lucine Endelstein shows, this work can be unsuccessful if these signs are not recognized as such or if passerbys and observers do not know how to read them. Religious minorities, when they want to be less visible in the space of a city, may use blurred signs that only devotees can read: this is why a Jewish yarmulke replaced by a baseball cap can

be understood as a religious marker only by the group's insiders (ENDELSTEIN, 2005). When a religious community wants to be noticeable, however, it makes its markers super visible and easily identifiable. For example, the most elementary and widespread marker of space for Orthodoxy in Russia is a cross placed by the roadside at the entrance and exit of towns and villages. In Russia, no official permits or approvals are needed to erect such crosses. A cross cannot be confused with anything else; it has indisputable confessional characteristics (unlike the Catholic or Protestant cross, it has two crossbars, the lower of which is oblique). Such crosses are also installed, often at the initiative of local religious activists, in places where the altars of destroyed temples were located. A passerby may not know what exactly the crosses commemorate, but he or she undoubtedly realizes that this is a religious symbol marking the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The universal ability to read these signs in the right way is the result of the successful spread of Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia. We venture to suggest that the straightforward, frequent and large-scale labeling of space testifies, on the one hand, to the claim that Orthodoxy is a dominant religion in Russia and, on the other, to uncertainty about the signifier—the Orthodoxy of the people inhabiting this territory. Indeed, the presence of Orthodox markers leaves unanswered the question of the religious identity of the people who inhabit the territory and can be seen as *pokazukha*, an emic concept that “refers to putting on a false show to cover up the actual state of affairs” (SÁNTHA and SAFONOVA, 2011: 75).

We study the religious marking of space by the Russian Orthodox Church as a relational process in which a great variety of actors participate, contribute, and contest. As Kathy Rousselet has demonstrated, in the city of Ekaterinburg and in its surroundings, the proliferation of cross processions and public events headed by the Russian Orthodox Church in order to commemorate the death of the last tsar Nicholas II and his family has in fact opened the way for a plethora of differently motivated participations, a great variety of interpretations and moral lessons, some of which are in poignant resonance with Soviet moral teachings (ROUSSELET, 2011). We also pay attention to religious co-participation involving Orthodox and other actors, thus taking into account cases of the competitive occupation of specific spaces, in which different Orthodox believers and other publics partake. In our approach, space is embedded in relations among different actors. It is differentiated and already meaningful from the point of view of those who inhabit it or move through it, be they religious persons or not; it is not an abstract concept, a void to be filled with meaning (TWEED, 2011). The Russian Orthodox Church spreads its markers in spaces that have already been made meaningful by multiple actors and often are saturated with meaning, religious or otherwise. This is this plurality of relations and views that this special issue aims to analyse through a focus on various religious markers.

Let us now turn to the markers and their signification. The growth of the Russian Orthodox Church has taken place through the creation, transformation

and (re-)use of classical Orthodox markers, such as religious paintings, icons (LUEHRMANN, 2010), architecture and monumental crosses that bespeak a connection to the patriarchate of Moscow. The early post-Soviet period was a time of the reconstruction of old churches, some almost in ruins, by local enthusiasts (KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2015; TOCHEVA, 2010). In a large number of cases, generous donations from politically motivated businessmen greatly contributed to church (re)construction (KÖLLNER, 2012). From the 2010s, however, a major shift has occurred. The renovation and erection of churches has become a central part of official church policies everywhere in the Russian Federation (see MELNIKOVA, this issue). In 2010, the Russian Orthodox Church launched a controversial “200 churches” programme that aims to build “churches within walking distance” in Moscow’s suburbs. The Church sponsored the creation of the social movement Forty Times Forty in support of this initiative. The idiom “forty times forty” (*sorok sorokov*) means plenty, an uncountable amount of something, and refers to the number of churches to be built in Moscow and everywhere in Russia, as well as to the very idea of the Orthodox people as the majority in the country. Following this logic, to include churches, crosses and other religious symbols in public space is a way to missionize what the Church defines as the Russian land and people. In fact, the country’s geographical, ethnic and religious complexity itself complicates the idea of an Orthodox marking of space. In reviewing major contributions to the so-called spatial turn in the study of religion, Lionel Obadia (2015) argued that it is important to think of the geography of religion beyond the boundaries of geography as a discipline.

We apply this approach to ask what is at stake in different parts of the Russian Federation with the proliferation of Orthodox markers. The variety of case studies allows to analyse different modes of religious marking of the space by the patriarchate of Moscow in different local contexts: in a central square of the capital city (Nadezhda Rychkova), in a national republic within the Russian Federation (Sergei Shtyrkov), in a big industrial city in the Urals (Jeanne Kormina and Kathy Rousselet), in a borderland zone between Russia and Finland (Ekaterina Melnikova) and in the Arctic region facing the United States (Virginie Vaté). Moving the scale of analysis continuously from micro-interactions in specific small places (Rychkova’s contribution) to the macro-level of Russia’s regions (Shtyrkov’s article) and to the international level (Vaté’s article), this special issue approaches the Orthodox marking of space as a process unfolding constantly at the intersection of different scales. The articles bring together analyses of actors’ intimate experience with a broader understanding of a range of historical, educational, environmental, political and geopolitical challenges. We look at Orthodox constructions and material symbols, but also at ephemeral manifestations of faith, such as cross processions, flash mob events and collective prayers. Such markers also indicate how establishing an authoritative memory of real or imagined past events is constitutive to the making of the Orthodox tradition in a specific

territory. Maurice Halbwachs, in *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte* (2008 [1941]), demonstrated that putting in place religious symbols and performative actions, such as pilgrimage, effectively makes a religious tradition and anchors it in a given space. Danièle Hervieu-Léger argued in her preface to the 2008 edition of Halbwachs' study that such spatialized action partakes in the making of a religious tradition defined as an "authoritative memory." Approaching religion in this way means adopting a heuristic "point of view" (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2008: 40) whence one can empirically approach religion's complexity. Overall, ethnographically informed analyses of the specific ways in which the Orthodox marking of space has been taking place in recent years in Russia contribute to the spatial turn in the study of religion by offering insights into a highly complex, multi-layered process, involving a variety of actors, religious, political and otherwise, with different views and ways of doing. They also contribute to the new, yet growing literature analysing contemporary transformations of Eastern Orthodoxy from the vantage point of how it transforms space (e.g., SERRANO, 2018; TATEO, 2020; WANNER, 2020).

The articles

Religious marking serves as one of the strategies for transforming space into a political territory. Following social geographers, we understand territories as "political and geographic entities that have emerged out of particular ways of conceiving geographic space" (STOREY, 2020: 20). As the same author argues, territory is "intimately bound up with identity and can be used to instill and reproduce a sense of loyalty and affiliation" (ibid.: 2). In Shtyrkov's and Vaté's case studies, the main meaning of space marking is to label a territory as one's own. It is no coincidence that huge roadside crosses have been erected along the federal highway in southern Russia and neighboring Muslim republics in the North Caucasus, while the largest monument to Saint Nicholas stands in Chukotka: in both cases, the size of the material embodiment of the marker correlates to its political importance. As Vaté shows in her article, such objects are designed to be visible from afar and make it clear to all who owns the area. In other words, they are part of a "key element of territorial practice: border" (STOREY, 2020: 2).

Sergei Shtyrkov's article concentrates on North Ossetia-Alania, a republic located in the North Caucasus. The local diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church was entrusted with the renovation of medieval Christian frescoes in a chapel in Nuzal village. In the process, an unknown burial ground was found, which local nativist movements started defending as a place of the so-called Ossetian ethnic religion. These traditionalists claimed this burial ground so decidedly through both social media and direct action that it came to be considered as theirs by the

broader public. The renovation, instead of supporting the argument of the very old roots of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia, ended up questioning the legitimacy of the Orthodox Church in this region and provoked postcolonial reflections among those involved in this discussion. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the stakes were high; by drawing public attention to the restoration of the frescoes in Nuzal, the authorities hoped to demonstrate that the origins of Christianity in Russia were older than Kievan Rus, usually identified as the source of Russian Christianity. Shtyrkov demonstrates how the Orthodox marking of the chapel eventually served to promote nativist identities in the republic.

Virginie Vaté analyses processes of marking in the Siberian Arctic region of Chukotka. Here, newly erected Orthodox churches and monumental crosses face the border between Russia and the United States, thus responding to strategic challenges. Despite the effervescent process of erection of Orthodox markers, the indigenous population, coming from a Shamanic background, is more attracted to forms of evangelical Protestantism, whereas the Russian-speaking population consists mostly of temporary labour migrants, leading to high fluidity among parishioners and semi-empty churches. The Orthodox markers, even though particularly prominent, have a geopolitical function and do not seem to elicit expressions of faith and devotion. Some are installed in totally unpopulated land and serve to mark the presence of the Russian state by using the language of Orthodox symbols.

The post-Soviet marking of space as Orthodox can also result in transforming its previous form into a phantom space for its former occupants. In her contribution, Ekaterina Melnikova focuses on northwestern Russia. In this region, the current proliferation of Orthodox buildings and symbols is usually considered as self-evident, since these lands are defined as “pristinely” Russian in official discourse thanks to the protracted workings of Soviet policies of heritage making, including policies of the re-conceptualisation of Orthodox religious buildings and objects as ancient Russian cultural heritage (DONOVAN, 2019; KELLY, 2016; about the Soviet Union more generally, see CANTOU, 1961; KROPOTKINE, 2006). Yet, Melnikova’s case study shows that the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church does not go unquestioned. The author focuses on one of the most prominent Orthodox monasteries in Russia, situated on Valaam Island in Lake Ladoga, close to the Russo-Finnish border. Often presented as one of the cradles of Russian Orthodox monasticism, at present the island of Valaam is a hybrid space used for recreational tourism amidst a picturesque natural environment and a major pilgrimage destination. Ironically, the most determined restorers of this “ancient Russian heritage” established themselves on Valaam in the late Soviet period while the monastery was closed. They were inspired by heterogeneous versions of New Age spirituality and united by a desire to build a better future. After their eviction by the recreated monastery in the post-Soviet period, Melnikova argues, the Valaam of the restorers has become a phantom space, sealed in their

memory and diametrically opposed to the post-Soviet, monastery-dominated Valaam.

The very expression *marking space* refers to drawing boundaries and securing the constant presence of a collective actor through the establishment of an unmovable material object like a cross or a church. But our ethnographic research shows that marking can be pulsating and more ephemeral, implemented through collective performances. These actions are linked to a vision of a utopian world located in an imagined past or a heavenly present. In her article, Jeanne Kormina addresses the ongoing Orthodox marking of public space in Ekaterinburg, a large and wealthy industrial city in the Urals, focusing on cross processions. The tsar cross processions in Ekaterinburg commemorate a tragic historical event—the killing of Nicholas II and his family in this city in 1918—which has become part of the local identity, especially since the canonization of the royal family in 2000. The procession takes place at a particular time of the year, changing the city’s topography during the commemorations. The ephemeral character of this procession allows the participants to draw a complex, yet evanescent map of sacredness. Nonetheless, the utopian space they claim remains engraved in the memory of past cross processions and in the active planning of processions yet to come. The article develops Certeau’s notion of utopian space and focuses on the “intimate solidarities” (HERZFELD, 2016) of its participants (*krestokhodtsy*).

The articles by Kormina and Rychkova show ways “of conceiving geographical space” (STOREY, 2020: 20) from below, in pious marches and collective prayers. In both cases, the religious imagination of believers adds an additional dimension to geographical space—the world of Holy Russia, inhabited by saints, built up with churches and monasteries, and possessing a special mode of temporality, the temporality of a myth that was, is and will be unchanging and right. As for many other believers (see O’NEILL, 2010), for the Orthodox “citizenship” in their Heavenly City can complement, reinforce and challenge their earthly national loyalty. Imagined Holy Russia is the main referent of their spatial practices; it is the world as it once was and as it ideally should be. Through their spatial practices, Orthodox believers formulate their belonging to the utopian world of Holy Russia, and this loyalty does not necessarily coincide with national identity and may even conflict with it. This double loyalty might make religious activists seem suspicious, dangerous or bizarre to outsiders, ranging from secular publics to state and church authorities.

Nadezhda Rychkova invites the reader to see how one initiative related to the religious marking of space is realized, in which the reference to the mythological time of Holy Russia takes a central place. Rychkova’s article brings the reader to downtown Moscow in her study of Pushkin Square, where an Orthodox community has been trying to revive a religious presence since 2006. By using ephemeral Orthodox markers, such as public prayer and cross processions, and by installing material symbols, the community is hoping to instil Orthodox presence

into this public space and to eventually restore the pre-Soviet Strastnoy monastery. However, even though tolerated by the police and local authorities, their initiative of creating “a religious hotspot” (FIBIGER, 2023) is either unnoticed or often disliked by other users of the square. Rychkova engages with the academic discussion on shared sacred sites and analyses Pushkin Square as a mixed place where different groups of citizens come to implement their “right to the city.” The latter ethnographic account illustrates well the ambivalent position of the Church in contemporary Russia. On one hand, the Church upholds its self-awareness as the most legitimate and powerful religious player in the country, ready to defy secular opponents. On the other, its freedom to act in public space is entirely contingent on the sympathy of representatives of the political authorities. On the ground, it is faced with citizens irritated by pervasive Orthodox symbols with whom the religious activists have to negotiate. The activists have ended up opting for the publicly audible old Soviet argument that Orthodoxy deserves visibility as Russian cultural heritage (KORMINA and SHTYRKOV, 2015).

For our understanding of the spatial presence of the Church, failed attempts at marking space as Orthodox matter as much as those that succeed. Kathy Rousselet’s study of the intricacies around the erection of St Catherine’s cathedral in Ekaterinburg meticulously examines the positions and struggles between pro- and anti-construction actors. The latter have defended citizens’ right to use public space and have not advanced anti-clerical arguments. As Rousselet argues, Orthodox believers could be found on both sides. But over the years, with the rejection of several projects, positions became more radical, ending up completely polarising the public debates, now divided between anti-construction liberals and pro-construction ultra-nationalists. Whether the construction will start one day, in what place and how the cathedral will look like have remained open questions. This failed attempt at marking space as Orthodox perfectly illustrates the ambivalent place of the Church; its behaviour as a hegemonic actor, confident about the support of political and business leaders, attracted disapproval from most locals when they felt that their space, which they see as their common good, was threatened. By choosing to place Rousselet’s article as the closing study in this thematic issue, we wish to deliver a specific message that goes against the bulk of deterministic interpretations that pervade academic discourse at the current moment, namely those that see a symbiotic relation between the Church and the state, defining the Church as a powerful and hegemonic organisation. The role of Russian Orthodoxy in Russian society is deeply connected to the challenges of the spatial presence of the Church. A close examination of these challenges, one that attends to nuance, the diversity of actors and the plurality of ideas they defend, points to a far more complex and undoubtedly open-ended analysis.

Altogether, the authors demonstrate how Russian Orthodox markers impact on spaces and their usages, and how, alternatively, the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious and non-religious organisations and actors change as they

experience the spread of markers in different spaces. They also show that this process, unfolding in a highly secular society, is riddled with tension and can in some cases end up reinforcing contestation and alternative claims. In advancing the concept of the religious marking of space by a non-dominant social force, and by drawing empirically on the largely understudied yet particularly dynamic strand of Russian Orthodoxy, the purpose of this special issue is to open up new comparative perspectives and to contribute to widening theoretical discussion in anthropology and beyond.

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