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Loving Objects:

Icons as Witnesses and Cataloguers of Orthodox Women's Memories

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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Abstract:

In this M.A. report, I try to understand how modern day women in the United States, who have converted to Orthodoxy, could claim to love an icon. For this purpose, I investigated on-line sources about Orthodoxy, interviewed Orthodox women, and conducted participant observation. Examination of these sources revealed that the internet interconnected congregational, domestic, and other social spaces. It allowed for a complex set of power-shifting relationships – among the converts, the clergy, and other Orthodox women – that shaped the ritual of icon veneration. Relying on interpretive frames provided by the scholars of material culture and lived religion and incorporating my own analysis, I suggest that icons function as witnesses and cataloguers of these women memories. This terminology helps to emphasize that icons allow these female devotees to remember and reinterpret their particular bodily sensations and private emotions and, thereby, produce relatively distinct experiences of the Divine with each specific ritual object. This helps explain, I argue, why some of the converts claimed to love their icons.

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Introduction

Trudy,¹ a contemporary American convert to Orthodoxy who responded to my electronic inquiry, reported that when she first started visiting an Orthodox parish, a handpainted icon of Christ would “look at [her] directly.” The icon, for her, “became alive.” Trudy reported that it was not just a painting technique that allowed her to feel noticed, “but Christ's facial expressions also changed for [her] in response to how [her] week with him had gone.” She reported that sometimes Jesus looked at her sternly, and she “would whither and repent, clearly aware of why he was upset with [her] (usually, because [she] had been in a fight with [her] husband, and treated him poorly and meanly.)” Most of the time, however, God looked at Trudy “so lovingly, and forgiving[ly] and kind[ly],” that “it made [her] weep with joy and gratitude.” Because she received so “much comfort and reassurance of God's love and personal interest in [her]... via this icon,” when this object was relocated from the parish to the home of the priest who owned it, Trudy “would periodically stop in to visit with God.” When the priest had to move out of the area and took the icon with him, she “mourned the moving away of ‘[HER]’ icon as one would mourn the loss of a very good friend.” Trudy suggested that “no other icon has affected [her] in the same way in the last 25 years, and may never again.”²

¹ To protect identity of the interlocutors who contributed to this study, all participants in in-person and electronic interviews, female bloggers and clergy serving in the churches, where I did participant observation, were given pseudonyms.

² Electronic communication with Trudy, March 16, 2014, capital letters in the original.

For Trudy and other Orthodox Christians, icons come to be special. Icons are loved and mourned. It is common for Orthodox believers to declare affection for and display attachment to these objects. While attending Orthodox churches and doing ten-month long field work, I have frequently heard Orthodox Christians talk fondly about the icons of the Mother of God and even seen them get visibly upset about losing a paper copy of an icon, in spite of having the means to replace it with an identical one. Other scholars have reported cases of Orthodox Christians praying only in front of particular icons in church,³ or refusing to replace worn-out domestic icons even when the saints' images became difficult or impossible to see.⁴ Scholars studying icon veneration have noted that Orthodox believers tend to treat certain icons differently, even though all icons in the Orthodox tradition are believed to do the same thing: to convey and make sensible the presence of the Divine⁵ to which they refer.⁶ Driven by the desire to understand how a contemporary Orthodox believer in the United States might come to claim to love an icon,⁷ and wishing to contribute to the scarce literature addressing every-day devotional practices of Orthodox Christians in America,⁸ I initially turned to the blogs of Protestant

³ Kotkavaara Kari, Progeny of the Icon: Emigre Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image (Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 1999), 90.

⁴ Tsechanskaja K. V., Icon Veneration in Russian Traditional Culture (Ikonopochitanie v Russkoj Traditcionnoj Kulture) (Moscow: Russian Academy of Science, N. N. Miklycho-Maklaja University of Ethnology and Anthropology, 2004), 143.

⁵ Orthodox Christians refer to saints, God, Jesus, Mary, Kingdom of God, Truth, and Divine World as accessible through icons. Throughout this paper, for the purpose of brevity, I use the term Divine to account for all these things and to approximate the language that is meaningful to Orthodox Christians.

⁶ Shevzov Vera, "Icons, Miracles, and the Ecclesial Identity of Laity in the Imperial Russian Orthodoxy," Church History (Sept. 2000), 616.

⁷ For example *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog; electronic communication with Lora, January 29, 2014; conversation with Sophia, March, 2011.

⁸ Even though there is a plethora of publications about Orthodoxy, the focus of these publications tends to be Orthodox theology. Exceptions to this rule are two recent historical studies: Erickson John H.,

women who have converted or were in the process of converting to Orthodoxy. These young women, predominantly stay-at-home-moms, blogged to connect with others like themselves and to ask for and give advice about home-keeping, child-rearing, and Orthodox-living. In their blogs, they shared their quotidian experience of icons. Their posts were one source that illumined for me the process through which Orthodox women come to love icons, and familiarized me with how they talk about this affection.

It is necessary to note that when I started this project I did not intend to focus specifically on women. My aim was to conduct a study of the social networks and processes that mediated how Orthodox Christians conceived of, interacted with, and experienced their icons. However, my initial inquiry into the blogs – as one of the nodes in the networks under investigation – made me realize that women were the predominant writers, even in cases when blogs were written by families. In their blogs, male converts predominantly engaged in the intellectual and theological discussions about icons. Women, on the other hand, shared not only what they thought about icons, but also what they did with them: how they engaged icons in their daily life and what they prayed with them about. Because this made available a wider range of data, I decided to focus on women.

To learn more, I supplemented my analysis of blogs with in-person interviews, surveys, e-mail communications and participant observation. I did a close reading of ten

Orthodox Christians In America: a Short History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Herbel Oliver D., Turning to Tradition: Converts and the Making of an American Orthodox Church (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014). However, even these important studies provide very little insight into daily devotional lives of ordinary Orthodox Christians.

blogs and read entries on icons in over fifteen other blogs written by female converts. I conducted in-depth interviews with five converts and observed them practicing icon veneration in their respective Orthodox churches in Texas and North Carolina, collected surveys from ten women, and electronically communicated with several other converts. I also followed the blogs of priests that the women read. I focused on the posts that spoke about icon theology and practice, especially when the women praised them or provided links to these clerical posts on their blogs.

This research helped me to notice that these women listened to the advice of the clergy who, both on-line and in church, encouraged them to establish a relationship with the icons' referents – the saints, Jesus, and Mary. By heeding the advice of the clergy and by adopting the prescribed ways of physically engaging with icons, these women came to experience a particular sensorial presence of the Divine when they venerated these objects in the church. However, this presence was not the only presence these women experienced. The stories about icons shared by the other lay Orthodox women – both on the internet and through personal interactions – allowed these women, while still using the practices learned and performed in church, to produce additional ways of engaging the icons and experiencing distinct sensorial presences in their domestic and work environments. I found that the internet mediated these women's congregational, domestic, and work lives simultaneously by allowing for complex relationships among themselves, clergy, and other Orthodox women. Paying attention to how individual women drew on these relationships and observing how they connected the ritual of icon veneration to other Orthodox practices and their activities outside the church, I noted that

it was possible for these women to particularize the experience of individual icons. Relying on the contributions of other scholars of material culture and lived religion, I came to notice that, while the converts used icons to secure the experience of the Divine, icons functioned as witness and catalogers of these women's memories.

Birgit Meyer indicated that we need to study images within historically and geographically contingent cultures of conceptualizing and engaging visual objects,⁹ and that insight allowed me to notice that these women constructed particularized sensory cultures around their icons. However, deviating slightly from Meyer's observation that these cultures rely on the repeatable patterns of feeling to produce an immediate sensation of the "transcendental," my case study illustrates that they depended on sensations that were simultaneously reproduced and altered.

To analyze icon veneration, I also relied on work of Robert Orsi.¹⁰ It helped me to make three observations. First, I realized that to understand how these women work out for themselves the parameters of the sensory cultures, it is not helpful to consider them as separate from and oppositional to the clergy, who are also seeking to define these cultures. And it is also not helpful to consider these women as a group. Rather, it is more productive to think of these devotees as individuals utilizing their relationships with

⁹ See Birgit Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 2010); Birgit Meyer, "Mediating Absence – Effecting Spiritual Presence. Pictures and the Christian Imagination. 'IMAGE AS ACTION, IMAGE IN ACTION,'" *Social Research: An International Quarterly* (Winter 2011); Birgit Meyer, "Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion," *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ See Robert Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

clergy and other women to produce a particularized culture of conceptualizing and engaging with different icons. Women work with clergy and other women in intricate, even idiosyncratic, ways. Second, it is impossible to understand how these women are able to see and sense the Divine with the help of individual icons without understanding how icon veneration is connected to other Orthodox practices. The ritual of icon veneration is inseparable from the veneration of the saints. Lastly, ignoring relationships developed outside of the ecclesiastical setting, along with distinctive personal interests and casual everyday activities that the believers would not identify as necessary for the invocation of God, provides only a partial picture of the process that mediates how believers see and sense their Divine as they engage in icon veneration. Icons are part of daily life and are in the middle of the relationships these women establish not only in churches, but also at work and at home. These three factors – relationships between Orthodox Christians, interconnectivity of Orthodox practices, and unique mundane activity – offer hints about how an individual believer constructs a particular culture of engaging and sensing the Divine for an individual icon. Attending to these three factors also makes it possible to note that as any of these factors change, the sensory experience of the icons also changes.

Keeping in mind Meyer's emphasis on mediated sensations and Orsi's focus on relationships allowed me, when I noticed the important role that memory played in lives of the women I studied, to suggest that icons functioned for them as witnesses and cataloguers of memories. This interpretive terminology helps to illustrate that these women remembered the emotional and sensory content of the relationships – among

people they engaged, places they inhabited, and activities they performed – through their icons, and also reinterpreted that content as the changes in these relationships created the opportunities for them to do so. Thinking of icons as witnesses and cataloguers of memories stresses that the Divine sensed by these women through their icons depended on what they could and wanted to remember.

Lay and Clerical Accounts of an Icon: Encountering an Image on the Internet and in the Congregation

Most of the converts I interviewed reported turning to the internet and sometimes libraries, to find out more about the Orthodox tradition. Sometimes driven by the question of “what we believe and why?”¹¹ sometimes feeling dissatisfied with Protestant faith and looking for an alternative,¹² and sometimes simply searching for a concrete way to transform their life,¹³ these women turned to books, internet articles, podcasts, blogs, and message boards for guidance. Most women reported that they had read a profuse amount of material about Orthodox Christianity and had been a part of Orthodox communities on-line for an extended period – sometimes over a year – before they ever stepped into an Orthodox church.¹⁴

Having interviewed women in diverse Orthodox churches in multiple states, it was surprising to hear them identify the same Internet sources as the most influential. The on-line resources that came up almost in every conversation were Ancient Faith Radio, Fr. Stephen Freeman’s blog, and Frederica Mathews-Green’s blog. These on-line sources are compilations of posts and podcasts created predominantly by the male Orthodox clergy, priests, monks and missionaries, and they address a variety of issues. In these sources, one can find information about Orthodox icons, fests, feasts, saints, and more. The information provided tends to be theological in nature. In addition to

¹¹ Interview with Alana, a woman in her 40s, a mother of four, Austin, TX, November 10, 2013.

¹² Interview with Monica, a woman in her 20s, without children, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

¹³ Interview with Lora, a woman in her 30s, a mother of one, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

¹⁴ For example, interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

identifying these sources as influential and useful, many women also noted that they used the internet to read the writings of the Church Fathers and to familiarize themselves with the results of the Ecumenical Councils. My interviews and my analysis of the cited sources showed that the internet exposes devotees and prospective converts to the authoritative voices of Orthodox theologians, clergy, bishops, and the wives of the priests.

Asking questions about how these converts incorporate what they learn on-line into their everyday lives, however, reveals another set of voices that these Orthodox women have found influential. Converts, which included young independent women, single mothers, and homeschoolers with large families, told me that they have joined forums, message boards and blogging communities tailored to their particular interests and needs. The women I interviewed sought answers to questions such as: How do I tell my parents about my desire to convert to Orthodoxy?¹⁵ How do I regain a feeling of worth as a Christian woman after my husband has left me and my child?¹⁶ How do I homeschool my children, so that their education gives them necessary skills to be successful in life, but also strengthens their Orthodox faith?¹⁷ The internet gave the converts who struggled with these questions an opportunity to find other Orthodox Christian women with similar life circumstances and to “pepper[] them with

¹⁵ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

¹⁶ Interview with Lora, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with Alana, Austin, TX, November 10, 2013.

questions.”¹⁸ Monica, a young woman who converted to Orthodoxy from Evangelicalism, reported that for a while

I did not really have an Orthodox social circle, for years the only social interaction with Orthodox Christians I had was on-line and on blogs. If I had questions about the silly, little mundane things, you know, like keeping a fast, or blessing an icon, or a house blessing, or all those little not hugely theological issues, that people tend not write books about... it was wonderful to have an on-line community of people, who also are living this out and can say: ‘here you go.’¹⁹

These on-line relationships, I learned, proved strong and enduring. Monica told me that she has been friends with some of these women for over seven years and that they have once met, when they organized a trip to a monastery in Pennsylvania to attend a liturgy together. “One of my friends cried,”²⁰ Monica said, as she was describing the experience of their meeting. And those on-line friends continue to communicate, though they have moved away from a message board, in order to make their social network more private. They now use Facebook to talk about their daily experience.²¹ Monica comments that her friends “will post prayers, will post interesting articles that they read, you know, wishing each other blessed name days, blessed fest days, talking about the fasting periods that we are in... We just tend to talk about mostly living out our faith in daily life.”²² As Monica’s comments show, the internet functions as a space where these women can seek answers to theological and mundane questions pertaining to the domestic life of Orthodox Christians. There they can get advice not only from clergy, but

¹⁸ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

also from the other lay Orthodox women with whom they establish strong, long-lasting relationships.

Converts said that both priests and the lay Orthodox women with whom they establish virtual relationships eventually convinced them to go to church to experience Orthodoxy first-hand and to connect with local clergy. These converts reported that the Orthodox Christians they meet on-line portrayed the internet as a space where people can talk about Orthodoxy, but where they cannot gain practical experience. Further, their on-line correspondents also worried that what is said about Orthodox theology and practice may not always be correct, since “anyone with the connection can post on the internet.”²³ Motivated by this advice, most converts find and attend an Orthodox church, get to know its clergy, and establish relationships with these men. That allows the inquirers to feel comfortable enough to “ask them difficult theological questions,”²⁴ inquire about the proper execution of Orthodox practices, and request their recommendations about reliable Orthodox sources on-line.²⁵ Most women reported that the electronic sources recommended by the priests in their churches tended to be written by other priests. By encouraging these women to establish relationships with the clergy and to rely on their advice about the on-line sources, the internet reinforces priests’ authority.

The relationships with the priests, however, are not the only relationships through which converts become informed about Orthodoxy in a congregational setting. In the Orthodox churches, converts also have opportunities to observe the behavior of other lay

²³ Interview with Lora, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview with Alana, Austin, TX, November 10, 2013.

Christians and to talk with them about their practices. For example, when I interviewed Monica, after a Sunday liturgy at an Orthodox church in Austin, and asked why she went in the back of the church and venerated two particular icons, when the wall contained a plentitude of others, she said:

The icon of St. Elizabeth has a reliquary on the front of an icon... Which is very special. Just ashes I believe. And there is reliquary on the St. Rafael icon as well... I noticed, when I first started coming here, that these icons were paid special attention to. When I was watching how everyone else was venerating icons here, I noticed that, then I asked why, and they said that they contain the relics of the saints themselves. Which lead me to read up on the saints in the first place.²⁶

Monica's comments show that by following the on-line advice to attend Orthodox churches, these women get a chance to learn about Orthodoxy not only from clergy but also from other lay parishioners. In this way, the internet serves to reinforce not only the authority of clergy, but also the authority of the lay practitioners.

The multifaceted ways that converts learn about Orthodox theology and practice are well captured in this passage shared by a married couple on their blog: "Through resources recommended by priests and available on Ancient Faith Radio, we've been podcasted, booked, lectured, lunched, conversated, and prayed for in this journey and it's been incredible."²⁷ As this post illustrates, to understand what converts learn about the Orthodox icons on-line and with what practical results, a scholar, first, needs to pay attention to the converts' internet-mediated relationships with both laity and clergy and,

²⁶ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

²⁷ *Journey East* blog.

second, to trace how these relationships interconnect virtual, congregational, domestic, and other spaces.

Simply looking at blogs reveals much about what converts learn about Orthodox icons on the internet and how they use them in the privacy of their homes. For example, in a short post, *Truth in Images*, one convert offered a picture of an icon-wall in her living room and a personal account of how she incorporated it into her daily life. That message reveals how she, her husband and kids prayed with the help of their icons, and how she and her husband educated their children about the Orthodox faith by using these objects.²⁸ In addition, she provided a link to Father Stephen's blog *Glory to God for All Things* and his two theological posts: *The Truth of an Icon* and *Icons in a One-Storey Universe*.²⁹ She also offered a description of the icon of the Nativity of Christ as it appears in a Getty Publication of *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* and referred the reader, if they want to know more, to a multi-page discussion of the symbolism of this icon on the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America website.³⁰ Posts like this one illustrate that converts familiarize themselves with the electronic sources produced by Orthodox priests and also feel free to share publicly information about their personal interactions with icons.

However, a single post like this one fails to illumine fully the process through which an Orthodox family or an individual believer invites an icon to become a meaningful part of their lives. To learn more about this process I relied on the interviews

²⁸ *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog.

²⁹ *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog.

³⁰ *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog.

with the converts, participant observation in the places they worshiped, and content analysis of their blog posts. The analysis of these sources unveils the connections converts establish with clergy and lay Orthodox believers on-line and in congregations. It also illumines how converts, with the help of these connections, conceptualize a relationship with a saint, choose particular saints and their icons, and enact this relationship in congregational, domestic, and other spaces. To recognize this process is to take a first step toward understanding how the icons gain a sensory particularity and a special meaning that sets one icon apart from another and makes it possible for converts to report they love these objects.

Establishing a Relationship with the Icon’s Referent: Imitating and Befriending the Saints

It is impossible to understand how Orthodox icons function in the lives of these women without first understanding how these converts relate to the Orthodox saints to which icons refer. Theological reflections available on-line emphasize the icon as a tool that assists in establishing and maintaining a relationship between the believers and the Divine world – the saints, Jesus, and Mary. Consider, Father Stephen, an Orthodox Priest under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in America, who received M.A. in Theology from Duke University in 1991 and converted to Orthodoxy from the Episcopalian Church.³¹ He published *Everywhere Present: Christianity in a One-Storey Universe* in 2011³² and commented on his blog that “Icons are lovely objects – directing our hearts towards God – sometimes miraculous and truly ‘windows to heaven,’ allowing us to “know personally (hypostatically) in relationship” “the truth of who [the saints] are.”³³ A respondent to this post provided a link to a commentary on icons by Bishop Maxim of Western America – who is also a Professor of patrology at the St. Sava School of Theology in Libertyville, Illinois, and the editor of *Theology*, the journal of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the University of Belgrade:³⁴

The Icon is distinct from the Truth... because it borrows its means of expression from still-corruptible nature. Although its means of expression derive from fallen nature, the Icon refers to inexpressible Truth by encouraging our personal relations with Truth; a proper Icon creates true personal relationships. ...Here we

³¹ <http://www.antiochian.org/biography-fr-stephen-freemen>.

³² *Glory to God for All Things* blog.

³³ *Glory to God for All Things* blog.

³⁴ http://orthodoxwiki.org/Maxim_%28Vasilije%C4%87%29_of_Western_America.

understand the next characteristic of the Icon: it refers to another, not to itself...
...the Icon traces th[e] relationship between persons (God and man)³⁵

These theological remarks stress the connection with “God,” “the saints,” or “the Truth” that the icon makes possible. The icon is a “window to heaven” because the devotee is asked to look through it and recognize what is made visible by it. Engagement with an icon is supposed to assist the devotee with establishing a relationship with the icon’s referent.

The exposure to this type of theological reflection prompts the converts to also speak about icons as “windows to heaven” and to emphasize the connection with the Divine. For example, Julia, a wife and a mother of two, remarks on her blog that “icons are far more than art... they are an incarnation of the Theology and Spirituality of the Church. They are 'windows to heaven' and as such reveal to us the truth that our minds cannot see and that our hearts all long to know.”³⁶ The theological remarks provided by clergy help converts like this one to conceptualize icons as material means through which the icon’s referent can be recognized and engaged.

Converts rely on these theological concepts when they venerate icons and attempt to establish a relationship with the saint. Consider Alana, a young mother of four, whom I have observed venerating – and teaching her children to venerate – icons in an Orthodox church in Austin. In an interview, she compared seeing and kissing an icon of the Mother of God to seeing and kissing a picture of one’s grandmother. She described

³⁵ Bishop Maxim of Western America, *The Icon and The Kingdom Homily*.

³⁶ *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog.

this activity as the means of connecting to Mary and transferring one's "reverence... to her."³⁷ Alana mentioned that she tried to establish a relationship with the saints when venerating icons, but it has not been an easy process for her: "From what I can see, some people have more in-depth relationship with particular icons, and particular saints than I do, and that's my own feeling, I think, because I am very practical, and I just don't connect as easily."³⁸ Converts like Alana conceptualize and use icons as means of visualizing and connecting to the saints to which icons refer.

Using an icon to establish a relationship with the saint is not an isolated or distinct process: it is entangled with the process of establishing a relationship with the saint through the practice of reading their hagiographies and emulating their behavior. In church and on-line, the priests advise converts to relate to the saints by reading their histories and mimicking their behavior. This advice supplies converts with a particular way to understand the role of the saints in their life. It gives them a way to transform themselves into a particular kind of an Orthodox Christian. For example, a priest at an Orthodox church where I did participant observation talked about a tax collector who, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, climbed a tall tree so that he could see Jesus when he walked by. Fr. Dominic then advised the parishioners to think of the holy men, saints, priests, and patriarchs as the tall trees on whose support lay Orthodox Christians can rely and whose example they should follow in order to get closer to Jesus. He concluded by saying that "if you surround yourself with bad people you would be bad, if with good,

³⁷ Interview with Alana, Austin, TX, November 10, 2013.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

then good” and advised that the parishioners “go and read about the lives of the saints.”³⁹ In promoting a particular way to relate to the saints, the priests promote a particular process of self-making. In this particular example, the practice of knowing and imitating the saints is intended to produce an Orthodox Christian that is “good.”

Given these clerical recommendations, it is not surprising that converts report that they read numerous hagiographies and consider the behavior of these saints worthy of imitation. For example, Monica comments that knowing about the saint “gives you a connection to the saint.”⁴⁰ She adds: “I also feel like I want to know about the saints because they are such a perfect example. Not all of them were martyred, obviously, but it is a pretty consistent theme among the saints. They give you examples of what other Christians went through for their faith.”⁴¹ Monica, among the other converts I interviewed, indicated her appreciation for the proper Christian living that the saints exemplify.

However, these women often make very particular choices about which saints to follow. Personal reasons affect these decisions. For example, Lora reports that when she buys icons she looks for specific ones – the saints that “touched [her] heart particularly.”⁴² One of these saints is St. Elizabeth, who became special because, after this convert has separated from her husband, the saint taught her how to be forgiving:

I became partial to the new saint, new martyr, St. Elizabeth of Russia, who was martyred, in 1917, during Russian revolution. I had to learn how to forgive people. And she was an example of forgiveness. I am fairly certain that if

³⁹ Field Notes, February 2, 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview with Lora, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

someone who blew up the man I loved, I would not go to his murderer and say ‘please, forgive me for what we did to make you want to do that.’ ...I had to get to know her a little bit more. Actually, a deacon gave me a book about her.⁴³

Utilizing the framework provided by the priests, Lora worked to establish a relationship with the saint: she not only venerated an icon of the saint, which she had in her home, but she also studied and emulated this saint’s behavior. Lora also made this relationship particular, because under the influence of Lora’s personal circumstances and interests, she used it to become the type of person and Orthodox Christian that she values: one that cherishes forgiveness and practices compassion.

Devotees can develop special relationships with more than one saint. Lora also reported that “St. Ruth is very special to [her],” because she helped her to understand that she was a worthy woman, at the time when she felt particularly “unworthy.”⁴⁴ “When your husband leaves you for another woman there is no other way to feel,”⁴⁵ she explained. Lora reported that she learned about St. Ruth at a bible study in a friend’s house, where she and those in attendance “were supposed to look up words relative to [them].”⁴⁶ Lora looked up “worthy” and found a reference to Ruth. After this, she “read the entire book of Ruth” and has referred to it so much that “it is where [her] bible now automatically opens.”⁴⁷ In this particular example, Lora established a relationship with the saint by transforming herself into a woman who, just like St. Ruth, feels “worthy” and

⁴³ Interview with Lora, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

unafraid “to ask anything of [God].”⁴⁸ The motivation to establish a relationship with the saint and to imitate her behavior, in this example, overlapped the desire to follow the advice of the clergy with the desire to find a way to overcome a personal circumstance.

Other converts report that they like to establish relationships with the saints who, instead of helping them to obtain new personal characteristics, can help them to maintain the virtues they already possess. Converts have reported that they like to venerate saints that are similar to them. For example, one convert commented that she “love[s]... St. Emily.”⁴⁹ Monica stated that, when she gets an opportunity to do so, she wants to have many children. When Monica read about St. Emily’s life and found out that she raised 10 children, some of whom, themselves became saints, she “felt instant ... [and] a real special connection to her.”⁵⁰ Monica joked that if by some chance she also happened to give birth to ten children in the future, she would avoid the names chosen by St. Emily. Commenting on the possibility of giving her son the name of Basil or her daughter the name of Macrina, she said: “I would not do this to my child.”⁵¹ Monica bonded and established a relationship with this particular saint because the two had a particular trait in common.

Monica also shared a story about her friend, a convert to Orthodoxy, whom she identified as being a “very driven” person. Monica commented that her friend was delighted to find out that her patron saint, Tamara, was “known for the same

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

characteristics.”⁵² Monica related that “St. Tamara of Georgia led her county in a battle. She was not a stereotypical woman of her time. ...and my friend is very countercultural in many ways.”⁵³ The two examples provided by Monica illustrate that converts like to establish relationships with saints they can identify with. In these instances, converts work to establish a relationship with the saint within the prescribed model of imitating behavior. However, they do this not in order to change themselves into a more desirable version of themselves, but in order to affirm and maintain who they already are. In this case, the desire to follow the advice of clergy overlaps with the desire to venerate a saint who best matches one’s own personality.

There other reasons, converts told me, they choose particular saints. Sometimes converts establish relationships with the saints simply because their story resembles that of someone they know. For example, St. Nectarios of Pentapolis is “special” to Lora because this modern saint had cancer and her family had a lot of experience with cancer.⁵⁴ Lora read the biography of St. Nectarios and keeps an icon of this saint in her icon corner at home. It was familiarity with the details of this modern saint’s life and their similarity to those of her family members, rather than the desire to emulate the saint, that allowed Lora to establish a close relationship with St. Nectarios, and to give him a special place in her life.

Getting to know the saints through various forms of familiarizing oneself with their history and emulating their behavior is not the only model for establishing a

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview with Lora, Raleigh, NC, January 5, 2014.

relationship with the saint. Converts also characterized their relationship with saints as a friendship. Reading about the lives of the saints, Monica said, allows you to “feel like you know them more. Because it’s almost like getting to know a friend more, the more you know about them, the more you can ask them to pray for you, or can ask for their help, you know. It just deepens the relationship.”⁵⁵ That young, lively convert, who had meaningful friendships with other converts, also saw herself as being in a friendly relationship with the saints.

Other converts said similar things. Andrea, a convert from Evangelicalism, utilizing a contemporary mode of establishing a friendship using new media, talked about Mary as a “facebook friend:”

Whenever I hear a story of a miracle that's attributed to her, or how she's stepped into someone's life I find myself thinking 'That sounds like something she would do' the same way you hear about a sibling or a friend and say 'that's so them.' I'm getting to know her character, her manner... It's like we're facebook friends, and we're planning on getting together in real life, but haven't yet, but we know we will... Perhaps the idea of being friends with the Mother of God is ridiculous. If so, feel free to chuck this whole thing in the 'crazy convert' bin, I'll figure it out eventually.⁵⁶

Drawing on the experience of their everyday relationships, converts like Andrea, create similar types of relationships with the saints.

The way in which an icon functions in a life of a convert cannot be understood without first understanding the connection between the veneration of icons and the veneration of the saints. Establishing a relationship with the saint by imitating and

⁵⁵ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

⁵⁶ *Journey East* blog.

befriending them becomes a part of icon veneration. When Monica talks about her icons at home, she expresses regret that she is not able – because it takes too long – to venerate them all.⁵⁷ She elaborates:

If I have these icons in the first place, you know, I learned about the saints, and respect and love them. And then, yeah, it does kind of seem strange to be standing there, especially in prayer, and not venerate them. Almost, just like a sign of respect, not like I think they would get mad, or feel bad if I ignore them. It would almost feel like being in the room with these people, and then only kissing a few of these people's hands and then leaving.⁵⁸

Monica's comments show that using an icon to venerate a saint is not a simple process of visualizing and engaging a distant holy figure, it also includes a process of establishing a loving and respectful relationship with the saint by getting to know their life story and imitating their behavior. Because women like Monica establish a relationship with a saint by drawing on the information provided by the clergy, and their own relationships in everyday life, icon veneration cannot be considered outside the particular networks of relationships and interconnected ritual activity.

The converts utilize priests' theological discussions and practical directions to establish a relationship with a saint, but they also draw on their personal circumstances and relationships with their friends, relatives, and other lay Orthodox believers. That allows them to participate in the construction of multiple and particular ways to get to know and to love the saints. Converts use icons to visualize and engage the saints. However, they do not do so without simultaneously imitating saints' behavior, treating

⁵⁷ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

them as like-minded friends, and using them as a way to connect to one's family members and familial history. These activities – concurrently shaped by the priests and the women themselves – produce distinctive but intertwined modes of relating to the saints. Those practices present multiple opportunities for becoming or remaining particular types of people and Orthodox Christians, and these activities affect how the converts experience the Divine with the help of their icons.

Venerating Icons: Particularizing Sensory and Emotional Engagement

As the converts work to establish relationships with the saints, they simultaneously venerate the icons referring to these saints. On his blog, Fr. Freeman, notes that an Orthodox Christian needs to have a “proper and complete understanding of icons as taught in the Seventh Ecumenical Council.”⁵⁹ Tina, a married woman with four children, indicates that she has read this decree; she refers to it as she notes that “icons should be venerated but not worshiped.”⁶⁰ By familiarizing themselves with the documents of the Council, reading materials on-line, and attending Orthodox churches, converts obtain specific directions on how to properly conduct icon veneration.

Fr. Dominic did just that once, after a service at the Austin Orthodox church where I was doing participant observation. He asked the men to turn the center stand on which rested the icon of the Mother of God to the side so that he could demonstrate how people in this Orthodox parish should venerate icons. Fr. Dominic said that an Orthodox Christian is supposed to cross oneself, then bow, and then kiss the icon. He also illustrated the technique by venerating the icon himself. Additionally, he commented that one does not kiss an icon on the face or at the top. Veneration requires kissing an icon at the bottom or kissing the hand of the saint. Fr. Dominic also suggested that an Orthodox parishioner does not kiss one’s own hand and then touch the icon with that hand. However, he identified an exception: this may be done, if the icon is placed high above, on the wall, and the only way to reach it is to stretch your hand upward. After this

⁵⁹ *Glory to God for All Things* blog.

⁶⁰ *Be as a Light* blog.

demonstration was over, and the men put the icon back into its traditional place, I heard one of the girls say to her mother: “it’s like a tutorial.”⁶¹ And this seems right; the clergy did provide very detailed directions on how to engage the icon.

Furthermore, the priests not only demonstrated icon veneration, but also explained the purpose of this activity. Monica said she had heard Fr. Freeman explain the purpose of engaging an icon in terms that she found very useful, an explanation she continuously relies on during her devotions: “he was talking about just the way we should approach icons, which is – we are standing before Christ, or we are standing before that saint. We are venerating that saint, we are honoring them, as if they were there.”⁶² Monica further emphasizes: “it is something I internalized, and I would... I try to think about. Because I still do fight the idea, that icon just represents them... We try to remember that within Orthodoxy these things have value in and of themselves.”⁶³ The converts are expected to venerate icons as if they gave tangible access to the saints to which they point, and they meet clerical expectations: converts kiss the hands and touch the garments of the depicted saints as if they were in the presence of those saints.

I observed converts engage repeatedly in these devotional activities in Orthodox churches. The cultural anthropologist Birgit Meyer notes that such repetitious activity with sacred objects engages the body of the believer in a particular way and mediates a particular encounter with the Divine.⁶⁴ Therefore, when venerated in church, icons

⁶¹ Field notes, October 27, 2013.

⁶² Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See Birgit Meyer, “Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism’s Sensational Forms,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 2010).

mediate a presence of Jesus, Mary and the saints, which is sensed not only as a specific combination of sight, and touch, but also smell and sound. Converts look at the icons. They kiss them. They also smell the incense and hear the choir singing. Like Clara, converts are aware of this: “[with Orthodoxy] you get a multi-sensory experience: rich harmony of acapella hymns, haunting odor of incense, flicker of candlelight, deep earth tones of the icons, taste of wine and bread on the tongue.”⁶⁵ Icon veneration in a church, as it is recommended by the priests – along other sensory practices, such as liturgy and communion – produces in the Orthodox believers’ bodies a specific sensation of the Divine to which icons refer.

However, venerating an icon in a church is not the only opportunity for sensing the Divine, and establishing a sensory connection is not the only way to make an icon meaningful in an Orthodox believer’s life. In addition to reading on-line publications of the clergy and getting clerical directions on icon veneration at the churches, converts also read the blogs by other lay women, both convert and cradle Orthodox followers. These women share how they pray with the icons in the settings outside of the church. They describe miraculous encounters with icons and volunteer mundane but intimate accounts about the role icons play in their family life. These stories – of how icons are made meaningful in the lives of Orthodox believers – allow the converts who read them to expand the range of possibilities for their own interactions with icons. They enlarge the variety of possible sensory and emotional experiences of icons.

⁶⁵ *Karissa Knox Sorrell* blog.

The primary place outside of the church where converts venerate icons is the home. “At home,” Julia notes, “we have an altar where we have our vigil lamp (candle), incense, our prayer books, and our family icons... It's a space that is set apart (sanctified) where we aim to present our fragrant offering and living sacrifice.”⁶⁶ Julia concluded that her family altar is “our church away from church and is central to our family's life as Christians.”⁶⁷ Though set up in a place where the liturgy is not heard and communion is not taken, by incorporating candles, incense, and traditional prayers, this family, and other converts like them, try to recreate the veneration of an icon in a church setting and produce the equivalent sensory presence of the Divine.

Not all instances of interacting with icons in domestic environment assure such a sensory stability, however. For example, a convert requested information about icon corners from a fellow blogger, Carrie: “It would be lovely if there was a site where there were pictures of people's space, as I was mystified when I first became Orthodox about what to do. Would you consider dedicating a post to that?”⁶⁸ To this request Carrie replied:

Prayer Corners can be very simple or very grand and accomplish their purpose. When we first became Orthodox, I think the idea was just to have a place to help focus your prayer and provide the sensual (visual, olfactory, tactile) experience of encountering God. Now, I also see it as a means and a reminder of bringing our family together to pray.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Teach Me Your Statutes* blog.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Orthodox Mother's Digest* blog.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

While Carrie emphasized the sensory work that her icon corner does and provided twelve links to pictures or descriptions of the icon corners similar to the one in her home, one of the examples in the list stood out as very peculiar. The icon corner was not an actual corner, but a *Theotokos* garden. Set up outside in the fresh air, with different plants, and icons of Mary attached to the pots, this garden made it difficult for the veneration activities performed there to mirror the sensory experience available at the church.

To illustrate how easily converts could adopt an idea of something like a *Theotokos* garden, consider this example. I once read a fascinating post, *A Parent's Place to Hide*, in which Sarah, a mother of three, shared that “with diapers and meals” “the day passes fast.”⁷⁰ She commented that even though she prayed with her children “in front of their iconostasis” containing “breathtaking and inspiring icons,” she realized that she needed “a space just for [her],” and this “space,” where she could place an icon and have meaningful interactions became her “glorious utility closet.”⁷¹ She explained:

That's right...and it's perfect. The kids don't even know it exists! Sure, you might say I'm surrounded by buckets and tennis rackets, ironing boards and boxes, but these are the items of our daily life. There is nothing 'unholy' there, and I sort of feel the presence of God and His Saints sanctifying even this space!⁷²

In our electronic communication Sarah quoted Mathew 6:6 and elaborated: “scripture calls us to close the door, so no one can see nor hear us.”⁷³ She also added: “well, for me [the closet] was the only space in which I could close the door and be alone with God. My life is particularly crazy raising children who always need something! Even finding

⁷⁰ *Orthodox Christian Education* blog.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Electronic communication with Sarah, February 27, 2014.

time alone from our spouses is needed for personal prayers.”⁷⁴ Fascinated by this biblical interpretation and this woman’s ability to create this unique domestic space for her interactions with the Divine, I wanted to find more stories like this one.

So I told one of my interlocutors about this post, and inquired if she ever read anything similar. “I haven’t heard of anything unusual,” she replied. “Although the closet idea is an excellent one and I may poach it. :)”⁷⁵ This illustrates the ease with which a convert may adopt another woman’s practice, one not prescribed by clergy and one likely to produce a distinctive extra-ecclesial sensory experience. An icon, kissed, touched and prayed to in a closet, where there is a particular smell, sound, and environment, allows for a particularized sensory experience of the Divine. Posts like Sarah’s allowed the converts to consider additional ways of engaging icons and, as a result, particularizing their sensorial experience.

The stories about how lay Orthodox believers use icons to make a sensory connection with God or the saints are not the only stories circulating on the internet. There also stories about how icons reach out to the Orthodox believers. In these accounts, converts to Orthodox Christianity claim that icons “find” them. Courtney put this caption under the image of an icon she has on her blog: “THIS is the picture thought I’ve been wanting to share. This was found (or rather this found me) in a Half Price Bookstore in Dallas, TX. I’m still speechless of the beauty of this icon not to mention finding it in a used bookstore!!!”⁷⁶ This account shows the readers of Courtney’s blog

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Electronic communication with Lora, January 29, 2014.

⁷⁶ *Songs in the Rose Garden* blog.

that some icons obtain a special meaning in the daily life of an Orthodox Christian not because of the connection with the Divine they are able to secure, but because they are appropriated in a miraculous way.

Other stories of lay Orthodox Christians show that icons also become meaningful for believers when Orthodox Christians use them mundanely. For example, stories about teaching children to venerate icons show that the icons became meaningful to parents as they observed the creative ways their children engaged these objects. Consider Andrea, a wife and a mother: “[our child] will 'cross' herself (if you can call it that), and she loves to make big, excited bows and kiss icons. She also prays: 'Father, amen!'... [and] has her dollies kiss the icons at church or in our prayer corner.”⁷⁷ Shared, stories like these emphasize to the converts that different icons hold different meanings, because they are engaged in particular ways.

When I asked Monica to comment on how, if at all, reading other blogs helped her develop a better understanding of how to venerate icons she said:

I have always enjoyed reading about other people's experience with icons, because it has shaped and continues to shape my own veneration of them. Especially in the early stages of my exploration of Orthodoxy, I could intellectually grasp the theology of iconography but had no personal experience to go on. It was stories of the love, honor, and prayerful veneration that my Orthodox friends felt towards their icons that helped open me up to the realization that icons were more than just pictures that drew our attention to a specific person or historical event.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Journey East* blog.

⁷⁸ Electronic communication with Monica, August 11, 2013.

Monica's comments suggest that exposure to the stories about Orthodox Christians' loving interactions with their icons opens up a possibility for converts to interact with the icons in a similar way.

While the converts might feel inclined to replicate the behavior of the other lay Orthodox Christians, when they take veneration outside of the church, they, nevertheless, engage in devotional activities that allow them to construct relatively distinct sensorial and affective experiences. Converts relied on personal circumstances and interests to shape these experiences. Lora, for example, mentioned that she brought one of her icons to work: "I do keep an icon of St. Catherine of Alexandria at my library. Sometimes just looking at her reminds me of WHY I am a librarian because it definitely is not the money."⁷⁹ Here, the icon became meaningful because it served as a reminder of the convert's career path, and her attachment to reading. Lora identifies as someone who reads "voraciously (scifi, fantasy, politics, church history/doctrine and hagiographies, and constitutional law.)"⁸⁰ Because of this career path and reading interest, iconic devotion entangles with the sensation of the Divine it produces, the distinct smell of books.

On her blog, Lora quoted from: "'Why secondhand bookstores smell good' in *Perfumes: The Guide* (via YMFY):"

Lignin, the stuff that prevents all trees from adopting the weeping habit, is a polymer made up of units that are closely related to vanillin. When made into paper and stored for years, it breaks down and smells good. Which is how divine providence has arranged for secondhand bookstores to smell like good quality vanilla absolute, subliminally stoking a hunger for knowledge in all of us.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Electronic communication with Lora, January 29, 2014.

⁸⁰ *God Has Promised* blog.

⁸¹ *God Has Promised* blog. I want to reiterate that the writer of the blog indicated that this quote comes from *Perfumes: The Guide*, via YMFY. For citation purposes I tried, but was not able to locate this source.

At work, Lora is surrounded by a multitude of old and new books, and there her experience of an icon of St. Catherine included not only an emotionally charged reminder of how important books are in her life, but also their particular smell. Moreover, not any smell, but the smell arranged by “divine providence.”

Lora also mentioned that “I have other icons that I keep to remind me of family members to pray for: St. Euphrosynos for example because my grandfather was a chef and my grandmother was a cook.”⁸² Lora reported she has the icon of St. Euphrosynos in her kitchen. Looking at it there reminded her of her family members, their interests, but also incorporated the smells of different foods in her on-going experience of the icon. Relying on the theoretical work of David Morgan, who proposes that memory can bring back the emotions and bodily sensations once experienced in the presence of the image,⁸³ it is possible to suggest that every time Lora looks at the icon of St. Euphrosynos, she shapes her experience of the Divine by generating and later reproducing particular emotions and sensations. In this way, Lora creates a sensory and emotional environment around the icon of St. Euphrosynos that no other icon possess.

The experience of the Divine, through the means of an icon, becomes possible and particular only after a believer engages an icon in a meaningful way. Kelly volunteers this account about an icon of *Theotokos* at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Falls Church, Virginia:

⁸² Electronic communication with Lora, January 29, 2014.

⁸³ See David Morgan, Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

During Divine Liturgy about 8 or 9 years ago, I was in attendance with my children. *Theotokos* spoke to me through the icon with a message that was particularly comforting given the challenges that faced us at the time. Certainly, a peaceful presence emanated from this icon thereafter.⁸⁴

Kelly revealed to the *Theotokos*, in front of her icon, the particular troubles she was going through. She also experienced comfort, which she remembered and re-experienced every time she looked at this image in the future.

To emphasize the particularity of the emotional and sensory experience that the women created around individual icons, I want to add this story shared by Amanda:

One of my first Orthodox friend's had St. Elizabeth the New Martyr as her patron. She died a couple of years after my chrismation, so when I remember her I also remember St. Elizabeth. Her illness and death was such a difficult, beautiful and Orthodox thing to be a part of. I was privileged to be present and see the way Orthodox people love each other and help them through the veil. St. Elizabeth was a part of that.

A couple of years ago I was going through a tough time and seeing a counselor to help me through it. The therapist (who is Orthodox) gave me an icon card of St. Elizabeth with a little packet of dirt from her grave (the first grave that she was forced into). That gesture seemed to be from my therapist and perhaps from St. Elizabeth herself. So I loved her even more.⁸⁵

In this account, the sets of relationships within which this particular icon of St. Elizabeth exists are fairly obvious. An icon is connected to the Orthodox therapist, and to St. Elizabeth, as it is a gift from both of them. Also, the icon is linked to the practice of venerating the saints. Amanda signals the knowledge of St. Elizabeth's story and identifies St. Elizabeth as possessing admirable qualities. Most important, the icon is in the middle of the relationships the convert has established with her friend, who had St.

⁸⁴ Response to an electronic survey, March 13, 2014.

⁸⁵ Electronic response to an inquiry, February 5, 2014.

Elizabeth the New Martyr as her patron, and with the Orthodox Christians who were present at Amanda's friend's funeral and helped her "through the veil." The icon is also connected to the experience of therapy. Lastly, even though we do not have a description of the icon, we know that it came with a packet of dirt, which afforded this convert, as she touched it, a special sensory experience. These relationships – among people, Orthodox practices, and therapy – contributed to how Amanda could engage this icon. They determined what emotions and sensations she could experience in connection to this icon. These relationships shaped the sensation of the Divine experienced by Amanda through the icon of St. Elizabeth.

This example shows the intricate connection between people, practices, and places that make an experience of each icon particular. Converts draw on the directions of the clergy and follow the promoted ways of venerating icons in the church. That allows for particular sensory experience of the icons. As they take veneration outside of the church walls and draw on the stories of other lay Orthodox women, converts attempt to recreate this experience, but often render it distinctive. Within the broader cultural content prescribed by clergy, women particularize veneration by enfolding their own emotions and sensations into their experience of the icons. They incorporate into this experience the memories of their relatives and friends, of un-accidental appearances of icons in their lives, and of the mundane activities performed in the presence of icons in their homes and at work. The women particularize these experiences even further by integrating them with the experiences they gain from reading hagiographies and imitating

the saints' behavior. The women infuse the experience of individual icons with the particulars from their everyday life, and thus render these experiences unique.

Mediating Objects: Icons as Sensational Forms

Scholars of material culture such as David Morgan, Sally Promey, and Birgit Meyer have long advocated that those studying images need to “approach pictures as placed in particular traditions of looking, upon which the sensorial engagement between people and pictures is grounded, and through which pictures may (or are deliberately denied to) assume a particular sensuous presence.”⁸⁶ This approach is helpful because it allows scholars studying Orthodox Christians’ devotional use of icons to examine how specific socio-historical processes influence how practitioners imagine and sense the Divine. To this end, Birgit Meyer developed a helpful interpretive term “sensational forms.” Meyer suggested that we think about material objects, such as the icons I discuss in this M.A. Report, as “authorized modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental ...[which] involve[] religious practitioners in particular practices of worship” and “induce repeatable patterns of feeling.”⁸⁷ Meyer’s perspective helped me to notice that icon devotions, which Orthodox Christians interpreted as direct interaction with the Divine, were mediated and relied on the repeatable patterns of sensation.

While Meyer proposes that sensational forms are relatively fixed and authorized, she also specifies that “the extent to which religious followers are actually prepared to

⁸⁶ Birgit Meyer, “Mediating Absence – Effecting Spiritual Presence. Pictures and the Christian Imagination. ‘IMAGE AS ACTION, IMAGE IN ACTION,’” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* (Winter 2011), 1051. For similar argumentation also see David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and Sally Promey, “Sensory Cultures: Material and Visual Religion Reconsidered,” *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Phillip Goff (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010).

⁸⁷ Birgit Meyer, “Aesthetics Of Persuasion: Global Christianity And Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2010), 751.

fully adopt the sensory regimes and bodily disciplines that characterize particular religious organization varies very much.”⁸⁸ She adds: “this also depends on the will and capacity of religious authorities to influence and control believers’ behavior, either via external authority structures or internalized modes of self-control.”⁸⁹ Meyer suggests that while religious authorities promote specific uses for material objects, practitioners are capable of rejecting or replacing them with their own alternatives. Therefore, according to Meyer, sometimes it is possible for lay practitioners to “singularize” the way of engaging and experiencing visual objects. Discussing the images of Jesus used by Pentecostal Christians in Ghana, Meyer notes that:

we learned that people develop a personal relationship with their own picture of Jesus through prayer. While these pictures are available on a mass scale in all kinds of versions and bought as commodities, they are, as it were, singularized through personal practices of visual piety. Praying repeatedly in front of a picture of Jesus in the home generates a deep relationship between beholder and picture that can no longer be contained in a simple person-picture dualism. At stake is a logic of animation, in which beholder and picture merge through a mutual look (similar to the devotional Hindu practice of darshan, where the eye operates as "an organ of tactility.")⁹⁰

Meyer’s account emphasizes that sometimes an individual image, rather than the same images as a group, can “be loaded with some kind of aura”⁹¹ and function as a distinct sensational form. This observation encouraged me to focus on Orthodox believer’s interactions with individual icons. In doing so, I noticed that Orthodox women

⁸⁸ Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press), 717.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 717.

⁹⁰ Birgit Meyer, “Mediating Absence – Effecting Spiritual Presence. Pictures and the Christian Imagination. ‘IMAGE AS ACTION, IMAGE IN ACTION,’” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* (Winter 2011), 1046.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 1046.

particularized their engagements with specific icons and through these engagements produced individualized sensations of the Divine. Each individual icon, for these women, generated and reproduced a specific set of sensations, and therefore was its own sensational form.

In order to make sense of how Orthodox women assembled particular cultures of engaging and sensing the Divine for individual icons, I found it useful to also draw on the scholarship of lived religion. Robert Orsi notes that “lived religion” focuses on

religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience... in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners, by real men and women in situations and relationships they have made and that have made them.⁹²

Orsi’s emphasis on relationships allows him to construct a situated view of religion – as something that “cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life, from the ways that human beings work on the landscape, for example, or dispose of corpses, or arrange for the security of their offspring.”⁹³ This view is useful for analyzing Orthodox women’s interactions with icons because it draws our attention to the diverse factors that together shape personal visual piety. It encourages scholars to pay attention to the relationships the clergy and Orthodox women establish in congregations and on-line, and to note how they entwine the ritual of icon veneration with other devotional practices – such as venerating the saints. Further, this interpretive model draws attention to the relationships outside congregations, including interactions with friends and relatives, and

⁹² Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997), 9.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 6-7.

it provides ways to talk about how these relationships affect believers' engagement with their icons. Lastly, by focusing on non-congregational spaces and everyday life, this model nudges scholars to consider how diverse activities, specifically those not explicitly identified by the believers as devotional, affect how the believers experience the Divine with the help of material objects.

Paying attention to the relationships between the clergy and women in my case study showed that, for these converts, their own activity and the activity of the priests intermingled in the production of the particular sensory cultures for the individual icons. The authorization of these cultures did not belong exclusively to either the clergy or the women. The priests, in congregations and on-line, tended to suggest that the women should see an icon in a particular way: as “a window to heaven.” They also taught Orthodox women to kiss icons, to bow in front of them, and to pray with them in a church building, all of which allowed for a particular sensory experience of the Divine: consisting of the visual perception of the icons, the smell of the incense, the sound of the liturgy, and the architecture of the building.

Women followed priests' directives while in church, but also engaged icons in different ways outside of the church setting. Sometimes encouraged by the advice of other women and sometimes on their own accord. Consideration of these non-ecclesiastical spaces revealed that they supplied these women with a new set of possibilities for the sensorial experience of the Divine. By experiencing icons in their kitchens, gardens, and work spaces, Orthodox women particularized the sensation of the Divine by adding to it the smell of old books, particular foods, and garden flowers.

Addressing the relationships that these women maintained with their relatives and friends made it possible to see that these converts – while venerating icons in the domestic and occupational places with their specific smells, tastes, and arrangements – particularized the experience of their icons even further by using icons as reminders of these special people in their lives. Particular icons generated specific emotions because they were associated with certain loved ones. Finally, giving attention to the interconnectivity of Orthodox practices unveiled yet another way women could produce an exclusive experience of an icon. These women used icons to connect to the saints they wanted to resemble. If they wanted to obtain a particular character trait their circumstances required (as with Lora who wanted to cultivate forgiveness), devotees venerated the icons portraying the saint possessing that quality, just as they also tried to mimic that saint's behavior. This process of cultivating particular moral traits also shaped the women's experience of some of their icons.

Particularizing the experience of icons through all this activity, the women, however, never fully stopped engaging icons in the ways suggested by clerical theologizing. The personal practices of visual piety always exerted its influence. In their particularized devotions, the women still thought of the icon as a window to heaven. Venerating an icon in diverse places, they often continued to bow in front of an icon, kiss it, and pray with it. Furthermore, even when venerating saints to fulfill their own desires to become a particular type of Christian or cultivate a particular moral virtue, these women were partially fulfilling the desires of the priests. Even in instances when establishing a relationship with a saint was not simply a spiritual or moral practice, but

also a way to transform their personal life (Lora needed to learn forgiveness, so that she could manage the consequences of her divorce), women did what clergy wanted them to do: they learned about and mimicked the saints.

The women made their piety personal and their sensory experience particular by drawing simultaneously on advice of clergy and other women, on their own desires and desires of the priests, on the physical particularity of the various places they deemed suitable for worship and on the experiences secured through diverse ecclesiastical and non-devotional activities. Personal piety was never exclusively the product of women's own work. That piety's shape and meaning depended on collaborations among various people, utilization of different practices and convergence of diverse needs and desires.

Marie Griffith has argued that scholars should “avoid the either/or perspective, by which practices are viewed as either opposing or conserving certain meanings and values, but rather understand them as doing both, upholding power arrangements even while exposing them to unexpected challenges.”⁹⁴ Griffith's suggestion helped me to notice that converts' practices of icon veneration did just that. Their devotional practice was neither simply oppositional nor simply affirming. Women particularized their engagements with individual icons by enacting some of the clerically prescribed meanings as well as some of the less traditional interpretations proposed by other Orthodox women. Drawing on those diverse meanings, which sometimes complemented

⁹⁴ Marie Griffith, God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 212.

and sometimes contradicted each other,⁹⁵ women assembled a practice of icon veneration that was meaningful for them. Utilizing the recommendations of priests and other Orthodox women, converts conceptualized icons as “windows to heaven,” engaged them in a special way in the home, and relied on them to obtain a particular moral virtue. These converging recommendations shaped their visual piety and made it personally meaningful. While individualizing icon veneration, women simultaneously adopted and contested the different ways of engaging icons proposed by the priests and the laity.

Since the converts produced meanings in this complex way, I found it necessary to avoid thinking of the clergy and lay women as disconnected or antagonistic, and, further, I tried not to even think of them as members of bounded groups. That allowed me to resist the temptation to reduce the individual variations among the clergy and among the women. Individual women worked with specific clergymen and selected lay women and, therefore, utilized distinct sets of meanings to construct their particularized cultures of engaging and sensing the Divine with individual icons.

The work of Birgit Meyer and Robert Orsi helped me see how an icon venerated by an individual believer within a particular network of relationships becomes a relatively distinct mode of engaging and sensing the Divine. Building on Meyer’s notion of sensational forms and Orsi’s emphasis on relationships, I would like to propose an expanded account of the devotional use of objects that emerges from my case study. This account will focus on how these women utilized icons to capture, remember and

⁹⁵ Robert Orsi observes this in devotions of Catholic women to St. Jude. See Robert Orsi, Thank You St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 210.

reevaluate their devotional experiences. Attention to those memorial practices, I propose, adds to what we know already about how the experience of an individual icon is particularized. It also provides a possible answer to the question that prompted this case study: why do some converts report that they come to love their icons?

Loving Objects: Icons as Witnesses and Cataloguers of Memories

In order to suggest new interpretive terms and provide a model that might explain a bit more about the devotional use of objects, I return to Amanda's story about the icon of St. Elizabeth, which was gifted to her by an Orthodox therapist and reminded her of a friend for whom St. Elizabeth was the patron saint. Like Courtney who providentially found a special icon of an Angel in a used bookstore, Amanda said she believed this icon appeared purposely in her life. She received it from an Orthodox therapist, but it was also a gift from St. Elizabeth herself. Just like most of the female devotees who enacted the clergy's ways of engaging with icons, Amanda received the icon of St. Elizabeth from her therapist, who intended for it to be used in a particular way. Furthermore, just like Beth who reported that she admired St. Elizabeth's ability to forgive and emulated that saint's behavior, Amanda indicated that St. Elizabeth possessed admirable qualities. Amanda signaled knowledge of St. Elizabeth's story as she talked about the grave into which the saint was forced. But she also identified St. Elizabeth as a loving and caring Orthodox Christian, because she was present at the death of her friend, together with other Orthodox Christians, who helped her "through the veil." This narrative shows how the relationships among Orthodox practitioners – specifically Amanda, her Orthodox therapist, and the congregants – mark out the possibilities for how Amanda can engage this icon and what kind of sensory experience of the Divine she can secure.

It became possible for the icon of St. Elisabeth to become a gift from the saint and an image of a model worthy of emulation; however, this icon did more than that. It also offered itself as a special kind of witness. We do not know why Amanda was seeking

counseling. However, even if she shared the details, her partial narrative would offer only a glimpse into her thoughts and emotions. We would have access only to Amanda's representation of her experience. The icon, on the other hand had a chance to capture Amanda's experience as it happened. In her study of Pentecostal Christians, Birgit Meyer identified images' potential to engage a believer into a relationship "in which beholder and picture merge through a mutual look."⁹⁶ Similarly, when an Orthodox Christian is in an icon's presence, the distance between them disappears. The icon knows what the believer knows. The icon senses what believer senses with her own body. The icon of St. Elizabeth witnessed Amanda's thoughts and feelings during her time in therapy exactly as they were. In silence, Amanda, just like Kelly who shared family difficulties with the icon of the *Theotokos*, could communicate those emotions and sensations to the icon that could not be verbalized. In other words, she could reveal to the icon that which resists linguistic representation. That level of communication, where the experience of one's body is perceived to become accessible to another, is achievable only in relation to visual objects, so this icon witnessed and came to know more than we – and even Amanda's therapist – ever could.

Icons, however, are not just witnesses; they are also reminders. In his discussion of pictures, David Morgan stresses that vision, memory, and sensation are interconnected. This allows images not only to capture one's life stories, sensations and emotions, but also keep the believers in touch with them:

⁹⁶ Birgit Meyer, "Mediating Absence – Effecting Spiritual Presence. Pictures and the Christian Imagination. 'IMAGE AS ACTION, IMAGE IN ACTION,'" *Social Research: An International Quarterly* (Winter 2011), 1046.

Memory operates iconically in the sense that it attempts to recapture and hold on to certain features of the past to re-present what is past by making it appear to happen again. The act of remembrance is magical because it repeats the past in mental imagery and in the sensation, time, place, and material form that act as a kind of sensory trace. Memory cancels the temporal difference between past and present. Visual images help concretize or fix the mental imagery and sensation of memory.⁹⁷

While Amanda interacts with the icon of St. Elizabeth, the icon witnesses and catalogues everything she feels and senses. Every time Amanda looks at this icon, she is reminded of that. Because images operate this way, the experiences each icon produces become particular. Memories construct a particular emotional and sensory feel for the icon of St. Elizabeth. Emotional memories about Amanda's friend, about Amanda's interactions with the Orthodox counselor, about what was expressed and felt during therapy, all intermingle with the memories about St. Elizabeth and what Amanda has learned from her. The particular sensory feel this icon and the packet of dirt that came with it produced in the body of Amanda also becomes a part of these memories. The icon of St. Elizabeth remembers the relationships among people, practices and everyday activities. This icon is the product of these relationships, and the memories about them. Because these relationships change over time, the memories have the potential to change also. This makes the Divine captured by individual icons reliant on these women's emotions and sensations that are not only continuously reproduced, but also continuously altered.

In his essay "Everyday Miracles," Orsi discusses Rebecca Kneale Gould's work on homesteading and Leigh Eric Schmidt's ideas on gifting to emphasize that these types

⁹⁷ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 195.

of practices are “an activity that changes over time, practiced by people who are transforming themselves as they work on the world and whose understandings of themselves and of [their practices] are always shifting.”⁹⁸ Orsi concludes his analysis emphasizing that “Nothing is fixed here; there is no single exemplary moment of meaning capable of being isolated and exegeted.”⁹⁹ This reflection helps us to see that Amanda and the rest of the converts, existing within particular sets of relationships, assign particular meanings to individual icons. And with the means of memory, they create particular sensory patterns around them. It also helps us to note that as these women change their relationships and add new memories and sensations to the icons, their experiences of these icons also change.

When I asked Monica, who reported in her blog that she has “four different images of Christ in [her] room” and that she “really like[s] having them [t]here” to say more about why she enjoys these icons, she replied:

Every icon is different. ... Icons can [] be distinct from each other because some express - more than others - a particular feature or aspect of the one being depicted in the icon... [But] [s]ome are significant because they have a personal significance: one of the Christ icons that I have is the very first icon that I ever bought, while another is a small travel-sized icon that has accompanied me on travels around the world (including the fateful trip during which I decided to move from "interested in Orthodoxy" to "actually going to an Orthodox church" just as soon as I got back home). Those icons, in particular, hold very personal meanings and memories for me.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Electronic communication with Monica, August 11, 2013.

As Monica's account suggests, different icons hold different meanings for converts because different experiences are shared with and remembered through these icons. However, as believers create new experiences and memories in relation to the icons, these meanings can change. The icon that collected Monica's memories as she traveled with it could reframe these memories, as Monica shifted "from 'interested in Orthodoxy' to 'actually going to an Orthodox church.'"

Memories are an important aspect of converts' lives, and contribute to the construction of particular emotional and sensory experience of icons. Several converts, who blog about their Orthodox experience, have commented that they love blogging specifically because it is a type of "journaling" that allows them to glance back into their past. When I asked Monica to identify her favorite thing about blogging, she mentioned this memorial function:

I think archiving. I think being able to look back at what I've gone through. ...It just preserves it. And I like that aspect of blogging. Almost more than anything. I am going to have this thing, that I can look back on and go 'wow, that's where I was when I was twenty three.' ...To be able to look back at my early Orthodox journey. I mean, I really, I did blog a lot about the struggles that I was having, with Evangelicalism, for instance. And it's very humbling. And I feel very grateful now, when I look back at where I was, so not at all sure what the next step was going to be. Or when I was processing moving to Texas. You know. And I am sure some day I would look back on blogs about adjusting to life in Texas and would be going "oh, wow, I am so much more settled now, then I was back then." I love this aspect of blogging.¹⁰¹

The blogs allowed these women not only to stay in touch with their past, but also to reinterpret it. Monica felt grateful and humbled that she no longer struggled with

¹⁰¹ Interview with Monica, Austin, TX, November 17, 2013.

Evangelicalism, and that now she perceived herself as a more assured Orthodox Christian than she could have imagined herself when she was twenty three. When Monica looks at her struggles from the present moment, they take on a different meaning. She is appreciative of them. Just like blogs, the icons catalogued these women's emotional and sensory memories. With the help of icons, these women remembered and re-experienced their struggles and joys, they returned to who they were as Orthodox Christians at the beginning of their journey. However, these past selves are experienced differently as they are reinterpreted through these women's constantly changing interactions with Orthodox priests, other Orthodox women, their friends, relatives, and even Orthodox saints. It is the icon's ability – to capture the past as it was, to make it meaningful, and available for continual reinterpretation – that makes icons loved and missed.

So the attachments to particular icons were not accidental. Utilizing the recommendations of clergy and the experiences shared by Orthodox women on-line and in churches, converts used icons to educate their children, to providentially find icons in a bookstore, to remember a particular friend or relative, to recall the details of a saints' life, to transform themselves into a virtuous Orthodox Christian, or to maintain their particular Orthodox self. These practices entangle emotive and sensory memories to produce a unique presence of the Divine in an icon. That is why a specific icon cannot be easily replaced. Not only would it take time for an Orthodox woman to establish a similar meaningful connection to a different icon, but also this connection would be a product of distinct set of relationships. New memories would be attached to it, and a different part of life shared with and reinterpreted through it. A displaced icon – one that is lost, stolen,

or destroyed – would carry away the most direct access to the memories of joy, fear, anxiety and whatever else was continuously experienced and re-experienced in relation to it. Those memories matter and the icons know them. They keep these women in touch with them and help these women to re-interpret them.

Birgit Meyer suggested that “in the context of religious organizations, objectifications of the transcendental [as those allowed by material objects] are being more or less fixed, rendered re-approachable and repeatable across time (and possibly space).”¹⁰² Thinking about icons as witnesses and cataloguers of memories helps to capture this point and also stress that it is particular icons that objectify the Divine for individual believers by allowing a particular sensory and emotional continuum to be associated with them. Additionally, this terminology captures Orsi’s emphasis on relationships and the changing meanings of practices, and helps to emphasize that while Orthodox women produced and maintained this continuum, when they lived and remembered their lives in relation to icons, clergy, other lay Orthodox believers, friends, and relatives, they also periodically altered it. The relationships within which these women exist are not stable. They change. By bringing back the experiences of the past in their original form and allowing for a re-interpretation, memory permits these women to sense the Divine through individual icons as something that is both constant and altered. The icons witness the particular sensation of the Divine, catalogue it and make it

¹⁰² Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press), 708.

available for creative reappropriation. The photographs in the icon's catalogue of memories can be preserved, discarded, and reshaped.

Conclusion:

Driven by desire to understand how an Orthodox Christian in the modern day United States would come to claim to love an icon, and wishing to contribute to the scant literature addressing every-day devotional practices of Orthodox Christians in America, I analyzed blogs, conducted interviews, and communicated electronically with Protestant women who converted or were in a process of converting to Orthodoxy. To understand the context even further I also conducted participant observation. Analysis of these sources and the attention to the analytical frameworks set forth by the scholars of material culture and lived religion lead me to propose that the icons serve as witnesses and cataloguers of these women's memories. Considering an icon as a witness and a cataloguer of memories allowed me to draw attention to the need identified by the scholars of material culture to study Orthodox icons within particular historically and geographically contingent visual cultures that, in turn, produce particular sensory experiences of the Divine. However, it also helped me notice that these experiences relied on embodied sensations and emotions that were not only continuously replicated, but also altered. Further, I observed that women worked with clergy and other women to connect the ritual of icon veneration to the veneration of the saints, and also made icons a part of their daily lives at work and at home. Scholarship about lived religion helped me see that the confluences of these factors allowed these women to construct a particular culture of engaging and sensing the Divine for individual icons. Interpreting icons as witnesses and cataloguers of memories also extended and deepened that insight. By emphasizing the significance of memory, this approach draws attention to how icons

continuously capture, reproduce, and alter Orthodox Christians' particular bodily sensations and private emotions. It shows how specific sets of relationships – among people, places and activities – make icons a meaningful part of their lives.

Although focusing on Orthodox Christians and Orthodox icons, this case study also might be useful for those who study other ritual practices within cultures that affirm a non-material realm that can be sensed through material objects. This case study suggests that scholars might focus on the dynamics of human relationships within which material practices are shaped. It also calls on scholars to consider not only diverse people as mediators of how the non-material is experienced, but also to notice the variety of spaces participating in this process. Finally, this project invites scholars to look at different practices, even those that believers do not identify with the sensation of the non-material, as having the potential to affect that sensation. In sum, it calls us to look at how objects, people, places, and activities interconnect and give meaning and sensation to the non-material.

But readers might imagine some objections. It could be argued that the methodology I use for my case study limits scholars to the production of particularized studies of specific people, and that those narrow studies do not have much to say to each other. Some readers also might object that my insistence that women work interdependently with the clergy to define an icon's sensory cultures underplays the power that the clergy has over women. I would never propose that the authority of clergy is equal to that of Orthodox women. Clergy do have real power to enforce particular types of practices, as illustrated in this example shared by Lora:

I love the icon of the *Theotokos* on our iconostasis and sometimes I will think about her when I am home. It's one of the most beautiful icons of that style I've seen (*although because it is in my church I am willing to admit I may be biased). My priest has warned me against imagination/visualization when I pray however so I intentionally try not to do so. The reason for this is to keep my mind focused on Christ and the words of the prayer instead of what's going on in my head.¹⁰³

Lora altered her initial approach to icon veneration in this case, as she submitted to the authority of her priest. However, she was as likely to submit to the authority of other women, if she found it helpful. As I noted earlier, Lora was as willing to adopt the “excellent” practice of venerating an icon in a closet from another lay woman as to follow the advice of the priest not to visualize the icon of the *Theotokos* during her prayers at home. In her influential essay “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History,” Ann Braude argues: “In assessing women’s involvement in religion, we should not limit our perception of power to those forms that are publicly recognized within religious institutions.”¹⁰⁴ It is only through this sort of focused study that it becomes possible to discern that Orthodox women have these subtle levels of authority and power, which they deploy in creative ways. The relationships within which these women operated and the desires these relationships produced both upheld the authority of the clergy and provided opportunities for these women to exercise their own clout. The authority and power that women shared with the clergy – however unequally – allowed them to produce personally relevant ways of engaging and sensing icons. After all, Trudy mourned the lost icon because it had given her “much comfort and reassurance of

¹⁰³ Electronic communication with Lora, January 29, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Ann Braude, “Women’s History is American Religious History,” *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 91.

God's love and personal interest in [her].”¹⁰⁵ I hope that this focused study of devotional practices has offered some hints about how Trudy and these other women came to love the icons that often loved them back.

¹⁰⁵ Electronic communication with Trudy, March 16, 2014.

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