ABSTRACT: Acknowledging the growing interest in issues of religious transmission, this article reviews two promising yet contradictory approaches to religion that could be described as historicist and universalist. It offers an alternative view premised on their convergence in a pragmatic approach that can link the material, contextual, and institutional dimensions of transmission with corresponding cognitive, perceptive, and emotional processes. This perspective recognizes the historicity of religious transmission and its cognitive underpinnings while attending to the materiality of its semiotic forms. The article focuses on the relationship between time and transmission in recent ethnographies of Christianity that show how Christian temporalities influence perceptions of social continuity or rupture and individuals’ becoming in history. Within this frame, it examines the case of Old Believers, an apocalyptic movement that emerged out of a schism in seventeenth-century Russian Orthodoxy, to indicate how a pragmatic approach works in practice.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, continuity, materiality, Old Believers, religious transmission, rupture, temporalities, time

Recent years have witnessed a growing literature that aims to explain why and how religions persist and change and how people ‘acquire’ religion. Part of a broader trend that is reviving anthropologists’ interest in issues of cultural transmission, this literature discusses the complex historical, social, and cognitive factors that shape religious transmission and the role of individuals, institutions, objects, environments, and social interactions in these processes. In this article I review two prominent approaches that have been conceived as radically opposed and discuss their possible integration in a pragmatic approach to religious transmission that also accounts for the temporalities of transmission. Taking the anthropology of Christianity as a case that is ‘good to think with’ because of its sustained engagement with issues of continuity and change, I will show how particular conceptions of time inform models of religious transmission and the intentionalities within.

The concept of religious transmission could be seen as a recent substitute for ‘religion’, which, like many other central concepts in socio-cultural anthropology, has suffered sustained criticism for its parochialism, Christian provenance, and privileging of belief as its central tenet (Asad 1993; Needham 1972; Ruel 2002). Talal Asad’s (1993) critique proposes instead a historicist
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...approach that transforms religion into a product of processes of transmission (of ‘orthodoxy’), a series of authorizing discourses elaborated in time through which meanings and practices are constructed and legitimized within different religious traditions. Asad’s concept of ‘discursive tradition’ is in a sense an incomplete model of transmission because it is essentially about ‘producing’ continuity, a ‘referential chain’ to the foundations of a religious tradition in which every new contribution has to be formulated within the style of argumentation of that particular tradition (cf. Anjum 2007; Bangstad 2009: 196–197). Trying to account for the transformation of religion in modernity, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000, 2008) offers a similar response to Asad’s, conceptualizing religion as a ‘chain of memory’ rooted in an authoritative tradition that is based on the imperative to continuity. By responding to the need for more adequate definitions of religion, Hervieu-Léger (2008: 257) makes the problem of transmission central to a sociology of religious modernity, for which religious transmission becomes explicitly “the very movement whereby the religion constitutes itself in time as a religion.” In this perspective, what we come to define as religion, its content and form, is the product of socio-historical processes that established its material, linguistic, performative, sensorial, and symbolic forms—what Webb Keane (2007: 14) calls the “materiality of semiotic forms.”

Thoughtfully working from Asad’s argument, but also extending it toward a focus on materialities as mediators of social interactions (cf. Latour 2007), Keane (2007, 2008) suggests that anthropologists should start their investigation from the materiality of religion and explore the ways in which objects, symbols, and practices are articulated in meaningful configurations through signifying practices that reveal particular semiotic ideologies. By showing how these ideologies emerge historically and interact to alter or add new meanings to semiotic forms, this approach shows that the materiality of religion is important in itself and not just as evidence for something immaterial, such as inner faith or belief. Keane’s call for more attention to the materiality of semiotic forms, their emergence, apprehension, and transmission, is also a call to historicize the anthropological subject of religion, paying particular attention to ideological (re) formulations of immanence and transcendence. This approach focused on processes of mediation resonates well with the recent ‘media turn’ in the study of religion (Engelke 2010; Meyer 2011), but it goes further than that to propose a middle-ground approach between particularist and universalizing tendencies in the study of religion. Envisaging a comparative project that explores semiotic forms and their historical determination in various religious traditions, Keane gives shape to an ethnographic approach in which time and transmission merge to unveil the historical contingencies that shape the very form and content of religion.

Questions of transmission are also at the core of the cognitive science of religion, a broad interdisciplinary field of investigation that examines religion in terms of its underlying cognitive mechanisms rather than the content or contexts of transmission. Stemming from a thriving initiative for the naturalization of culture (Sperber 1996) produced at the interface of the social and cognitive sciences, this research program further aims to explain the salience of religion in human culture. Inspired by studies in cognitive sciences, which indicate that cultural transmission is shaped to a large extent by the way that human cognition works (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004; Tooby and Cosmides 1992), the initiative considers that “the challenge of explaining religion is, first and foremost, one of identifying particular mechanisms that drive the selection of culturally widespread representations in preference to all other representations that fleetingly occur in any population” (Whitehouse 2004: 7). In this sense, religious transmission becomes a matter of how specialized information treatment systems or modules (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2007)—that is, reasoning in specific domains such as face recognition, theory of mind, folk biology, and so forth—respond to the conceptual properties of religious concepts. The counterintuitive features of religious concepts violate ontological properties expected by these modules (as prototypical), which actually makes...
them more salient than ‘common’ representations (Boyer 1994). The role of the modules in cultural learning is potentially twofold: on the one hand, these evolved capacities enable people to develop intuitions about other people and the environment; on the other hand, they constrain cultural learning by prioritizing inferential, emotional, and perceptual processes in specific directions. While the ‘brain modularity’ hypothesis is still being debated in the literature (Karmiloff-Smith 1992), the ‘cognition and culture’ school has successfully introduced it into a systematic, ongoing study of the ‘naturalness’ of religion (Atran 2002; Barrett 2000, 2004; Boyer 1994, 2001).

With few exceptions, this ambitious research program has received a cautious reception among cultural anthropologists suspicious of universalistic explanations concerning culture and religion. Several critics have pointed out that the exclusive focus on cognitive mechanisms and their constraining effects on conceptual transmission, as well as the tendency to equate religion with transmission, leave out the most important features of religious phenomena: their historicity, emotionality, and materiality (Keane 2008; Laidlaw 2007). As a consequence, religion becomes a by-product of ordinary cognition, and the study of religion a focus on conceptual transmission, acquisition, and distribution. In an engaging critique, James Laidlaw (2007: 227–229) remarks that the cognitive approach to religion seems to have failed in ‘explaining religion’ because most of what is distinctive of religion falls outside the cognitivist definition (see also Bloch 2005). Asking the question of what people are disposed to believe universally, cognitive studies employ an abstract category of religion—close to the idea of ‘natural religion’—ignoring the fact that religions are historical phenomena and that the very category of religion, with its content and semiotic forms, has been constantly reformulated and renegotiated by believers and non-believers alike. As Laidlaw remarks, we seem to have here two opposing views of religion, universalist and historicist, based on different epistemic and empirical stances that are hardly reconcilable. My argument hereafter is that the two approaches can be seen as complementary rather than antithetical and that their convergence may be most productive in relation to the issue of religious transmission.

The most important critique of the cognitive approach to cultural transmission is that it takes a too strictly conceptual perspective on mind and culture, thus overlooking contextual, formal, performative, and material conditions of transmission. Recurrent features of cultural transmission can be found not only in conceptual forms, as cognitive anthropology defends it, but also in how cultural knowledge is organized and performed. This involves not just concepts but also objects, spaces, actions, institutions, and contexts of transmission (Berliner and Sarró 2007; Halloy and Naumescu 2012). Some of these aspects related to the recurrent features of ritual have been fruitfully explored in studies of ritual transmission, which may be taken to represent a ‘soft’ cognitive anthropology of religion (as opposed to the naturalist approach mentioned above). Drawing on psychological research on memory and well-established anthropological work on ritual, these studies show the crucial role of ritual form and context in the transmission of religious concepts (McCaughey and Lawson 2002; Severi 1993, 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Whitehouse 2004). Research in this area has produced empirically testable hypotheses about the relationship between ritual frequency, emotional intensity, and participants’ motivation in ritual transmission. Some of these hypotheses, presented as general models of religious transmission, such as Whitehouse’s (2000, 2004) ‘modes of religiosity’ theory and McCaughey and Lawson’s (2002) ‘ritual form hypothesis’, have raised the interest of anthropologists, historians, theologians, and religious studies scholars, who have debated and criticized them on different epistemic and empirical grounds (Naumescu 2007; Whitehouse 2002; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004; Whitehouse and Martin 2004; Whitehouse and McCaughey 2005).

But there is also a qualitatively different take on ritual transmission best expressed in Houseman and Severi’s relational approach to ritual action, developed in their book on naven (1998) and further publications. Starting from empirical observations on the patterns of interaction
in ritual, the authors show that the actual object of transmission is the ritual context with its particular relational configuration (ritual form) based on a series of contradictory relations that distinguish it from everyday interactions. Participants in ritual performance do not necessarily acquire religious concepts (as cognitivists envisaged); instead, they acquire the very context of ritual communication. Severi (2002, 2003) develops this idea further to show how the successful transmission of a belief (a counterintuitive concept in Boyer’s terms) depends on the context of transmission and not on a clear understanding of its semantic content, which is oftentimes incomprehensible. This argument implies that religious traditions can influence the mnemonic salience of a concept by inserting it into a counterintuitive context of ritual communication (similar to Whitehouse’s observation about the correlation of ritual form with mnemonic encoding). Besides acknowledging this explicit connection between cultural patterns and psychological responses, Severi also points out that memory exists alongside imagination and that every mnemonic technique embedded in ritual is not just a means of better recollection but also a way to orient the subjective imagination of participants. His argument gives scope to a different perspective, which allows us to shift focus from the cognitive limitations to the creative potential of religious transmission and to acknowledge the meaningful contingencies and individual agency inherent in such processes. This perspective opens the doors to a very different approach to religious transmission, one that takes into account the pragmatic conditions and underdetermined nature of human sociality and communication.

It seems evident now that the search for particular cognitive universals is in itself far from sufficient for grasping the complexity and longue durée of culture. We have, however, moved one step closer toward the possible convergence of cognitive and historicist perspectives. The pragmatic approach to religious transmission offers a partial answer, inasmuch as it can relate the patterns of communication and ritual action that are intrinsic to contexts of transmission with specific mnemonic and imaginative responses. Traditions formalize such relationships in relatively stable configurations of cognitive and cultural elements (technologies or assemblages), which presuppose an elaborate relationship between specific objects, practices, and contexts and the corresponding perceptual, cognitive, and emotional responses. Simply put, the pragmatic features of religious transmission can ‘capture’ the imagination (Severi 2004) and the sensorial and emotional responses of participants (Halloy 2012) and can generate their mnemonic salience, thus ensuring a certain coherence of interactional patterns. Mystical training and possession cults provide excellent examples of such techniques meant to trigger specific cognitive, emotional, and sensory responses from participants and show how religious experts come to regulate their and others’ responses to them (Halloy 2012; Luhrmann 1991; Naumescu 2012; Noll 1985; cf. Luhrmann 2011).

We have now come fully around from an understanding of religion as the product of sociohistorical processes of transmission to a pragmatic approach to religious transmission that connects (historically determined) semiotic forms and contexts of transmission with patterned emotional, imaginative, and perceptual responses. As argued elsewhere (Halloy and Naumescu 2012), an anthropological investigation of religious transmission calls for a historically driven and cognitively informed ethnography that goes beyond cognitive and environmental constraints to explore the open-ended, innovative potential of cultural transmission and to account for those meaningful contingencies that shape religious traditions. This approach acknowledges the creative production (poiesis) of religion that enables situated reflection and individual agency (Laidlaw 2007; Lambek 2000). It also calls for a more consistent engagement with issues of temporality and historicity, that is, the ways in which people tie together past, present, and future in particular conceptions of time and perceive themselves as agents of change in these temporal frames (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Hodges 2008). These questions have been pursued more systematically in recent ethnographies of Christianity, which show how different temporalities are articulated
in everyday life in specific cultural forms and how conceptions of time influence perceptions of social continuity and individuals’ becoming in history. Such studies, to which I turn in the next section, constitute an excellent ground for investigating the temporal ontologies underpinning religious transmission in Christianity and the materiality of its semiotic forms.

**Time and Transmission in the Anthropology of Christianity**

Even if issues of time and transmission have always been central to socio-cultural anthropology, their relationship was rarely made explicit. However, as David Berliner (2005, 2010) perceptively points out, the issue of ‘transmission’ is so salient in anthropology precisely because it translates anthropologists’ long-standing interest in cultural continuity. Indeed, the presumption of continuity seems to be an epistemological imperative for anthropologists in order to construct their object. As much as early anthropology was interested in enduring patterns of culture, resulting in ethnographies of continuity frozen in the ethnographic present, contemporary anthropology seems fascinated by the change, flow, and fluidity of social life. An increasing awareness of time, framed by an “aesthetic of emergence which emphasizes the provisional, indeterminate, open-ended nature of reality” (Miyazaki 2004: 137; see also Hodges 2008: 402), appears to motivate anthropological production today. This kind of anthropology seems grounded in a different temporal ontology, one in which change rather than continuity becomes central to our understanding of the world. But even within current debates in which change is at the core of the anthropological investigation, anthropologists are still looking for enduring, stable cultural patterns in order to make sense of those very changes being observed. In a thought-provoking contribution from the burgeoning field of the anthropology of Christianity, Joel Robbins (2007: 6) argues that anthropology has had a bias toward continuity thinking, an in-built assumption “that cultures endure and are very hard to change.” While this assumption is substantiated by significant ethnographic evidence showing that cultural structures, beliefs, and practices do persist in time, it can hardly be assumed as universal. Restating an earlier critique by Johannes Fabian (1983), Robbins argues that the temporal ontology of anthropology based on a naturalized view of time has resulted in anthropologists’ failure to grasp or accept alternative models of time (see also Hodges 2008). The reified time of anthropology “in which things happen but not to which things happen … supports a model of the world in which continuity is the default assumption” (Robbins 2007: 12). This orientation, in turn, leads anthropologists to overlook indigenous notions of temporality and often to question informants’ claims of discontinuity or radical ruptures, searching instead for underlying continuities.

Not surprisingly, this critique has found fertile ground among anthropologists of Christianity, whose cultural sensitivity and experience of radical change among recent converts has led them to acknowledge the ‘rhetoric of change’ at the core of Christian culture. As part of their aim to describe a cultural model of Christianity, these anthropologists have set forth to explore the temporal ontologies and the temporalizing practices of various Christian groups (Cannell 2005; Lester 2003; Robbins 2001; Schieffelin 2002). They assume a Christian model of time predicated on a particular notion of rupture, a break in time that is caused by “the unique and irreversible event” (Cannell 2006: 38) of Christ’s Incarnation and of conversion as the essential experience for becoming Christian (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007: 10–13). For Robbins, this version of Christianity as a religion of ‘radical discontinuity’ is foreign to anthropology with its continuity thinking because of the radically different model of time it employs. Justified by the aim to expose epistemological assumptions that make anthropology and Christianity incompatible, Robbins’s antithetical perspective consciously ‘(mis)represents’ Christianity as a coherent
cultural system shaped by temporal ruptures. Beyond this contested claim, however, both Robbins and his commentators agree on one essential aspect: anthropology needs to formulate more precise models of cultural change that can grasp the complex ways in which ideologies and processes of reproduction and change shape religious cultures (Robbins 2007: 31). I see this as a strong commitment to an investigation of cultural transmission, one that considers the ways in which continuity and change come to be articulated in particular notions of time that inform models of transmission. This aim seems to be precisely what these ethnographies of Christianity strive for—to account for the semiotic forms (language, practices, artifacts, institutions, etc.) that shape religious transmission and the temporal ontologies that inform it.

Joel Robbins (2001) gives an excellent example of this approach in his ethnography of ‘everyday millenarianism’ in Urapmin culture. Asking how these recent Christian converts can live with the expectation of an imminent change while going about their everyday business, Robbins looks at their conception of time, which allows for the co-existence of continuity and rupture. Through a subtle analysis of Urapmin accounts, he shows how narrative structures generate a sense of continuity of Urapmin social life while maintaining “the ever-present possibility of radical change” (ibid.: 531). Multiple temporalities become congruent by being articulated in a single narrative frame that ensures the reproduction of Urapmin millenarian expectations. With this, Robbins shows not only how narrative (as a particular cultural form) constitutes the privileged means for cultural reproduction in Urapmin society, but also how it continues to generate the people’s sense of time and historicity even when associated with different semiotic ideologies (i.e., traditional Urapmin and Baptist Protestant).

Robbins’s analysis adds to a growing comparative project within the anthropology of Christianity that tries to identify those cultural features marking the temporalities and semiotics of Christian faith. For example, the centrality of the Word (of God) in Christian culture is acknowledged by the growing emphasis on literacy, textual authority, and reading practices in various ethnographies of Christianity (Engelke 2009; Keller 2005; Kirsch 2008). In these Christian groups of Protestant ethos, language and formalized speech (creeds, sermons, conversion testimonies) are the main conveyors of faith, privileged semiotic forms that serve to render the transcendence of God immanent and inner faith visible (Engelke 2007; Keane 2007, 2008). By tying together the discontinuities of social life with the linearity of Christian soteriology, they become the means for (re)producing Christian temporalities in everyday life (Engelke 2009; Robbins 2001; Schieffelin 2002).

In the remaining space, I will take up this comparative project and discuss an ethnographic example from Slavic Orthodoxy, a long-established and fairly distinct Christian tradition, not least to balance the anthropology of Christianity’s overemphasis on the Protestant model. Presenting the case of Russian Old Believers, whose everyday millenarianism is based on a “deferred apocalyptic expectation” (Naumescu, forthcoming), I will show how an apocalyptic understanding of Christian time emerges at a particular historical moment fused with specific modalities of transmission. Exploring these modalities in further detail, I will indicate how written texts and rhetorical speech, which are part of the representational economy of Old Belief, operate as pragmatic dimensions of religious transmission.

Transmission and Textual Authority among Old Believers

Old Believers (starovery) or Old Ritualists (staroobriadtsy) constitute a conservative Russian Orthodox movement that emerged in response to the reformation of the Orthodox Church in seventeenth-century Russia. After initial attempts to control the unrest, the Russian Orthodox
Church excommunicated all followers of the ‘old rite’ in 1666 and, with the help of an increasingly authoritarian state, initiated a brutal persecution of Old Believers. People responded differently to this massive persecution of all those who supported the old rite. Some believed that they were actually living in the time of the apocalypse and chose to die by self-immolation or to fight against church and state officials, who were seen as servants of the antichrist (Cherniavsky 1966: 20–21). Others translated apocalyptic expectation into a struggle to preserve the old Orthodox rite against a world in constant change, a retreat into ritual that led to a unique fusion of religious and social experiences. Most of the Old Believers who survived chose self-imposed exile, resettled in remote areas in neighboring countries, and later traveled even farther, spreading around the world. In the eighteenth century, a large number of Old Believers settled in the Danube Delta, where they continued to practice the old Orthodox rite, following the priestly tradition. This area, now split between Ukraine and Romania, became a major spiritual center in 1846 when Old Believers established a new church hierarchy (the Belokrinitskaya Hierarchy), which survives up to the present day. The geopolitical configurations of the last century have significantly altered the ethnic and demographic component of Old Believers’ communities, leading to a constant decline and aging of the local population. Nowadays, caught between their increasing marginalization at the periphery of the Romanian state and the massive migration of younger generations, these communities cannot but imagine their future in apocalyptic terms.

Such were the reflections of an old man whom I met early in my fieldwork in a small community of Old Believers in the Romanian delta on the border with Ukraine. I first went to see him knowing that he was the psalm reader of the village church and an amateur collector of old church books. I was prepared to question him about Old Believers’ traditions and the history of his community, but as we sat down in the courtyard, I first asked him to show me some of his books. The old man went into his house and came out after a few minutes with two old volumes, which he carefully put on the table. He took one in his hands, made the sign of the cross, and opened it. He flipped through it slowly, stopped at an illustration of the apocalypse, and started reciting in a low voice a psalm that I could not recognize immediately. He paused for a while and then said, “What else shall I tell you?” It was as if the text he had just recited had said it all.

Artiom, the old man with the book, belongs to a priestly community of Old Believers in which he was born and raised. His family was illiterate but sent him as a child to learn Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of Slavic Orthodoxy, together with other children from the village. Here, as in all Old Believers’ communities, literate elders were in charge of religious education. Every year they would gather a group of four to five children to teach them Church Slavonic from the old church books, liturgical singing (znameny chant), and everything pertaining to the old rite. This is how they would transmit the old faith and create a mass of educated adults from whom they would choose their future priest—“the one who was more capable [destoinic], reserved, and who could read the liturgical books properly,” as Artiom put it. Since priesthood in Old Belief was a communal institution and required no formal theological education, the community was responsible for educating future priests from among its members. Such was the case at the time of my visit: the last priest, who had served there for 12 years, was immobilized in bed after an accident. After looking around unsuccessfully for potential candidates, the community decided on a young orphan whose grandfather used to be a respected priest in the village. However, this candidate was too young, had not been cultivated in religious matters, and, more importantly, was not married. Marriage is a prerequisite for Old Believer priests, but it was hard to find an Old Believer partner in this depopulated area. The prolonged absence of the priest was a constant concern for villagers because it deepened the “sacramental vacuum” (Scheffel 1991: 204) that has marked Old Belief since the schism.

After the schism, when faced with the extinction of the pre-reformation generation of clerics, priestly Old Believer communities decided to accept reformed priests who had ‘converted’
from the official Orthodox Church. This was intended as a temporary solution to help preserve the institution of priesthood while the search continued for an Orthodox bishop to recreate the apostolic lineage. Because of the chronic scarcity of clerics, even priestly Old Believers started to focus their religious life on reader services—church rituals performed by lay readers that did not require the presence of a priest (Robson 1995: 22; Scheffel 1991: 49). In this way, any Old Believer community could attend to its religious dimension, provided that it had the old liturgical books and a reader (chital’nik), a person like Artiom who could read them correctly. As a result, every church ritual was shortened (since the parts belonging to the priest were left out), doubt was cast on the effective performance of the rituals, and the sacraments were considered to be incomplete (Naumescu, forthcoming). This is, in effect, what ‘sacramental vacuum’ means—an endless worry about access to the sacred and the availability of the legitimate forms of mediation, such as church sacraments.

This constant need to adjust to particular historical circumstances while defending the old faith had two major effects on Old Believers’ communities. First, it produced an excessive ritualization of everyday life and an ideological separation of the sacred and profane, each with its corresponding semiotic forms (Rogers 2009). Second, it transformed Old Belief into a ‘textual community’, as the different Old Believer factions remained interconnected through their adherence to and use of pre-reformation church books (Crummey 1993; Robson 1993). Strict observance of the old faith involved the scrupulous observation of the Russian Orthodox rite as written in the seventeenth-century texts. Since all the pre-reformation books were forbidden after 1666 and burned whenever found by church or state authorities, Old Believers undertook to safeguard them for liturgical use. For the next three centuries they preserved these books carefully, transmitting them within families, copying and recopying them by hand, printing and distributing them across regions and continents. Together with pastoral letters and various treatises, the books circulated among Old Believer communities, fostering the constitution of a community centered around a specific set of texts and literacy practices (Rogers 2009: 77; Scheffel 1991: 104–116).

The written texts of Old Belief had been essential for religious transmission from the start, but their use shifted over time while their importance increased even more with time. Since the old faith was accessible only through the pre-reformation books, religious authority came to be based on the interpretation of these texts as Old Believers faced the challenge of bridging the gap between ascetic ideals and everyday realities. In the absence of a hierarchy that could provide doctrinal interpretation, many unavoidable disagreements led to further schisms and the endless fragmentation of Old Belief (Rogers 2009: 71–104). The exegetical tradition functioned as long as there were enough literate people to read and comment on the texts, but it declined with the passage of time, further persecutions, and the migration of Old Believers across the globe. The prolific debates and exchanges within and between different communities witnessed in the years following the schism were soon replaced by passive literacy with an emphasis on precise repetition and correct reading instead of sustained exegetical exercise. Once the texts became opaque to exegetical reflection, and with the increasing ritualization of religious life, the aim of religious education shifted toward forming skilled readers who could recite Old Slavonic texts both correctly and rapidly. The transformation from active reading to textualism happened gradually, turning reading practices into a form of religious devotion and texts into objects of piety. As a consequence, the ability to read and write Church Slavonic, the language of religious texts, became the very basis of religious authority, and the books themselves became authoritative reference points in religious matters (Robson 1995: 25; Scheffel 1991: 43–44).

If we return now to Artiom’s act of reading in the courtyard, we can interpret it as a form of legitimation that establishes him as a reader in reference to the Old Believers’ textual tradition. This is consistent with his role in the village church, where he served as psalm reader for over 30
years, witnessing several priests succeeding one another. After retirement, he was also deacon for seven years and would have remained so had he not had serious health problems that made it impossible for him to stand throughout the lengthy, arduous rituals. As a reader, Artiom also fulfilled the other role of literate elders as an essential part of the chain of transmission: he taught the *azbuka* (the primer in Church Slavonic) to the village children and the proper service books (*chasovenniks* and *kanoniks*) to the more advanced. However, by the time we met, he had given up teaching as well. With his withdrawal, nobody taught children anymore, but this was not perceived as an acute problem by the community because its immediate focus was on the absent priest. In spite of his physical frailty, Artiom remained a psalm reader for the community, attending religious services from the pulpit and reading at funerals and commemorations for the dead. In the absence of a priest, his role became vital in sustaining religious life in the village. His reflections about the fate of his community and the question of “who is going to read the books” after his death occasioned apocalyptic readings of this troubled present and obscure future. The imminent break of the referential link to the written tradition seemed to represent a more serious danger than the temporary absence of the priest, because it threatened the very means of transmission and would have resulted in the village's exclusion from the textual community that makes Old Belief.

**Beginnings: Avvakum’s Kenoticism and the Temporality of Old Believers’ Transmission**

Artiom's reading in the courtyard represents not only the affirmation of the Old Believers’ textual authority but also an acknowledgment (and enactment) of the referential chain that makes a religious tradition. Reverently holding a nineteenth-century book of needs (*trebnyk*) containing the most important liturgical services, the old man uttered something in a low voice that was hardly intelligible. And yet it was clear that his recitation went beyond the simple act of reading. The book itself is an object of ‘visual piety’ (Morgan 1999), combining the materiality of the text with the immateriality of the Word. It is at once a carrier of theological knowledge (the scripted ritual) and an object of veneration in ritual practice. Similar to an icon, the book refers the reader to a reality beyond itself and at the same time retains its distinctive sacredness; hence, Artiom crossed himself before opening it. Like all Old Believers’ sacred texts, this book represents the written Word as revealed Truth, but it has also acquired in time its own historicity and agency, generated at the intersection of materiality, sociality, and transcendence. In this sense, the book is a privileged semiotic form and constitutes the very means through which Old Believers’ relationship with God is defined and lived out. It is inscribed in a semiotic ideology that binds the divine to particular material forms, thus making it accessible and present in the everyday life of Old Believers.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, icons rather than books have typically been taken to represent its particular conception of mediation (Hanganu 2010; Hann and Goltz 2010), and some have referred to the ‘iconic principle’ as the dominant mode of transmission in Old Orthodoxy (see, e.g., Scheffel 1991: 225). For Old Believers, books, like icons, must be faithful copies of earlier prototypes and thus participate in the chain of reproductions that instantiates the original revelation. This repetition, which is supposed to ensure the accurate transmission of the divine Truth, references both an atemporal and a temporal moment. The atemporal moment represents the mythical beginning that is outside time: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The temporal moment represents the historical beginning marked by the presence of the human Christ as the Word incarnated. In this sense, the written Word “introduces a linear approach to history [originating in the Creation]. It looks forward to
fulfillment and the *eschaton*, the end of time*” (Constantelos 1999: 137). Since the historicity of Christian time is rooted in the story of Christ’s life and death, most Christians define themselves through the commemoration of these events in light of his resurrection.

While Christian time is marked by this economy of salvation, different Christian traditions have developed different understandings of the passing of time and of their own historicity within Christian time. As an apocalyptic movement, Old Believers developed a notion of time that marks a beginning and foregrounds an imminent end. The beginning is the time of the Creation, calculated to be 5,508 years before Christ’s birth, and this number is added to every year after the birth of Christ (according to the Julian or Old Style calendar). But as noted at the time of the seventeenth-century schism, Old Believers also developed a concrete perception of the finitude of the world, fearing that they were actually experiencing the apocalyptic moment. Those who survived and decided to escape postponed this imminent end, deferring their apocalyptic expectations indefinitely. Since then, they have continued to see humanity as moving toward its demise and every step toward modernity as another step toward that end. So while the apocalyptic moment is vaguely at hand, and there are no more clear predictions about its arrival, Old Believers like Artiom continue to explain the world as if the end were imminent. In this sense, they maintain a concrete hope of the Second Coming, but without the urgency of Robbins’s (2001) Urapmin converts or Christian fundamentalists. Furthermore, Old Believers’ millenarian expectation, which is the key to their experience of the everyday, seems to have been formulated at the precise historical moment that was to become their own beginning.

From the early days of the movement, Old Believers interpreted their existence as being inscribed in a divine plan. Their leaders, especially archpriest Avvakum (1620–1682) and his generation, took care to frame their suffering in biblical terms. Here again a written text is central to Old Believers’ transmission, but this time as a form of ‘beginning’ (Said 1985), an intentional act establishing a tradition of interpretation and action. Avvakum’s story is too long and convoluted to be resumed here, but he took care to write it for us, and his *Life* (Avvakum 1979) became the key to Old Believers’ historicity. Written in the first person, with Avvakum as the main narrator, main personage, and judge of his life, this text deploys a persuasive rhetoric of martyrdom and sainthood that makes it a proper hagiography (Hunt 1975–1976: 168–169). Avvakum’s vivid description of his tormented life mixes personal events with prototypical biblical events and symbols, thus merging the particular with the universal and historical time with biblical time. The narrative voices become fused, as do Avvakum and Christ (especially the Christ of St. Paul), and Avvakum’s suffering and fight for the Old Belief are merged with Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. This fusion of persons and temporalities raises the human condition to the divine prototype, reminding us that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God—the key to Orthodoxy’s *oikonomia* (Hanganu 2010: 43; cf. Lossky 1985). This written text, which exceeds its subject and even the model (Said 1985: 221), helps Avvakum convey a persuasive message to his readers about the potential of suffering as a transformative experience toward their salvation.

As historians of Old Belief remark, Avvakum could accomplish this end by drawing on the kenotic tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, a religious idiom largely available at the time (Hunt 1991, 2009). Kenoticism stresses Christ’s dual nature, his emptying of the divine and adoption of a human nature in the Incarnation, a form of humanity further proved by his suffering on the cross (Fedotov 1960: 94–110). The kenotic model of Orthodoxy has maintained the dialogical nature of human existence: the transcendent God becomes human through Christ incarnated and, by living a human life and suffering, reaches salvation and transcendence. Kenoticism therefore gives the true measure of Christian life, an *imitatio Christi* in the Pauline sense of a humble witnessing through redemptive suffering (Hunt 1991: 207).
Inscribing himself in this tradition, Avvakum (1979: 38) starts his *Life* by showing what distinguishes a true Christian from a false one and thus separating the Christian community from the corrupted world: “These people are the real Christians, since by understanding Christ they became wise. They do not get seduced by the lust of this world. They avoid all temptations and not only live in poverty up to their death, but die humble, without knowledge of earthly matters.” At a time of dramatic events, when Old Believers were being persecuted, tortured, and killed en masse for maintaining the old rite, Avvakum responded to their torment and anxieties by showing them how to live out the apocalyptic myth. By following the Christic model, he represented himself and his life as exemplary and offered Old Believers the possibility of a new beginning, picking up where the Gospels left off to show them the path to becoming true Christians. Avvakum’s *Life* thus provides a founding moment for all those who held to the old faith and coalesces all of their intentions into a deferred apocalyptic expectation that can be lived out through the redemptive potential of suffering. Like Christ, Avvakum’s sacrifice at the stake represents the end that forms and substantiates Old Believers’ historicity, their being in time. A sacrifice is “a powerful and definitive form of beginning,” Michael Lambek (2007: 33) notes in the steps of Said’s reflection on beginnings, as “each act of sacrifice is simultaneously a passion; each turns us irrevocably in a certain direction, locates us on a certain path; and each invites identification and repetition.” Avvakum’s *Life* ends with an appeal to readers-witnesses beyond his time “to reincarnate his spirit as the apostles had reincarnated the spirit of the resurrected Christ” (Hunt 1975–1976: 175), and thus, like them, take this end as a new beginning and carry his revelation across time and space.

Returning to the moment when Artiom recited something in a low voice while turning the pages of the old *trebnyk* up to the image of the apocalypse, we can recognize that the force of his action is rooted in Avvakum’s act of beginning. More than three centuries after Avvakum wrote his *Life*, Artiom recites a passage from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which testifies to the meaning of Christian life as conceived by St. Paul, by Avvakum, and, following him, by Old Believers up to this day:

We have become a spectacle for the world, for angels and for people to stare at.
We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ.
We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored, but we are humiliated.
We are hungry, thirsty, dressed in rags, brutally treated, and homeless, right up to the present.
We wear ourselves out from working with our own hands.
When insulted, we bless. When persecuted, we endure.
When slandered, we answer with kind words. Even now we have become the filth of the world, the scum of the universe.
I am not writing this to make you feel ashamed, but to warn you as my dear children.
For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers,
for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.
So I urge you to imitate me. (1 Corinthians 4:9–16)

In his act of reading in the courtyard, Artiom recited the first lines of this biblical passage, enough to point out once again the opposition between true Christians and the rest as affirmed by his predecessors, an act that reaffirms the immutability of Old Belief against a changing world.

In what follows I focus on the meaning of this act of witnessing about being an Old Believer. Can we see the old man as a link in the chain of transmission that helped Old Believers reproduce their apocalyptic culture throughout the centuries? What gives him the certainty of a continuity of faith, of being in agreement with Avvakum and, through the kenotic ideal, with Christ
incarnated? How close is his act of reading to Avvakum’s own witnessing to the crowds when facing persecution? These questions take us back to the pragmatic approach to religious transmission presented in the first section, which explores the potential connections between those semiotic forms and contexts of action and communication that make a religious tradition and the cognitive, emotional, or perceptive responses that they trigger.

As a religious tradition, Old Belief has established, legitimized, and maintained particular semiotic forms that mediate Old Believers’ relationship to the divine and produce their everyday millenarianism—the mixing of temporalities characteristic of an apocalyptic movement. Yet, as argued earlier in this article, an analysis of a religious tradition in terms of its pragmatic features exceeds the reference to form, pointing toward cognitive functions triggered by specific patterns of action and communication. Religious materialities such as Old Believers’ books and icons provide cognitive support for the imagination, triggering particular associations between visible and invisible, presence and absence, and making people’s relationship with the divine immanent and intimate. The specific context of interaction with the Church Slavonic texts, which Artiom exemplified in his act of reading, is something learned early on, as children are taught by the elders to read and write from the old books. This patterned interaction teaches them to attend to the double determinacy of the material world, divine and natural, and thus to see ‘beyond and within’ immediate reality as conveyed by Orthodoxy’s central concept of the ‘image-likeness’ (for a detailed analysis, see Naumescu 2012).

Once we recognize the act of reading as a special context of transmission, we start to understand the symbolic transformation of the reader, the assimilation of his ordinary identity into the spiritual succession established by his predecessors. The psalmodic manner in which Artiom recites the text is a form of ritual recitation involving an enunciating technique that leads to his acquiring plural identities—the reader becomes a ‘complex enunciator’ (Severi 2007b: 208–228). The analogy made between the concrete situation in which Artiom finds himself as the last reader of the community and that evoked by means of a reference to the referential chain, which includes Avvakum, St. Paul, and Christ, is acquired through a linguistic technique—parallelism—which, in the ritual context, becomes a way to orient the kind of imagination involved in this evocation. As Severi remarks in his analysis of a shaman’s recitation, parallelism can be used not only to generate the world described by the ritual language but also to redefine, in a more reflexive manner, the identity of the person enunciating it (ibid.: 211). We have observed this at work in Avvakum’s Life, which produced the double identity of the narrator, Avvakum-Christ,10 and we notice it again in Artiom’s recitation of the same Pauline text, which encourages the kenotic identification with Christ. In this sense, through his act of reading, Artiom transcends his ordinary identity by becoming a representative of the tradition, an ‘ego memory’ or the reader of his fellow Old Believers’ fate, in the same way that Avvakum became the reader of another generation of Old Believers and translated their historical experience into an imitatio Christi, thus offering them the means to transcend it. Here, Artiom “follows closely in his steps” (Job 23:11), using the power of the written word as a means of self-transformation and intervention in the world, in the same way in which Avvakum had written himself into Christian time to generate Old Believers’ historicity (and in reference to Christ as Christianity’s ‘beginning’).11

Conclusion

This article started out by describing two competing but equally promising perspectives on religious transmission: the historicist approach, which attends to religion (as a discursive tradition) and its semiotic forms, and the universalist orientation of cognitive studies of religion. It has
been argued that these two can be successfully combined in a pragmatic approach to religious transmission, which can bring together those contexts, forms, and patterns of action and communication that give rise to religious traditions and corresponding cognitive, emotional, and sensory responses. Furthermore, it has argued that an ethnography of religious transmission should consider the fundamental relationship between time and transmission, one that would account for the temporalities of transmission and historicize the temporal ontologies informing indigenous perceptions of continuity and change. Following Fabian’s critique of the epistemological basis of anthropology, one might expect anthropologists to be more aware of the question of time, yet it seems to remain a problem in a contemporary anthropology shaped by an “aesthetic of emergence” (Miyazaki 2004: 139) that maintains the temporal incongruity between knowledge and its object. Recent ethnographies of Christianity have added to this critique by arguing that anthropology’s conception of time has prevented a serious engagement with Christianity as a cultural model pervaded by its own temporal ontology. Whether one agrees with this critique or not, it seems clear that anthropology needs better models of cultural transmission and that part of the merit of the anthropology of Christianity is its in-depth investigation of the ways in which time and transmission become tightly connected in various Christian traditions.

But time is important in another way as well: it provides a frame to explore intentionalities within these chains of transmission. Anthropologists often assume that cultural transmission ‘simply occurs’ through socialization, enculturation, or embodiment and rarely acknowledge the ‘punctual’ engagement and intentionality of individual actors. Where does transmission start? What counts as a beginning and for whom? This issue, obviously discounted in cognitive studies of cultural transmission that tend to cultivate a deterministic view of transmission framed by the larger temporal scheme of human evolution, constitutes an excellent starting point for future ethnographies of transmission. Such studies could account for the particular ideologies of transmission developed within religious traditions, recover human agency and the intentional production of meaning from different structural constraints, and point to its extension in various semiotic forms. I have briefly illustrated this approach with the case of Russian Old Believers, showing how continuity and change are articulated in an eschatological model of time at a certain historical moment and how this specific temporality, which I have called elsewhere ‘deferred apocalypticism’, was embedded in particular modalities of transmission, such as the old texts and people’s iconic relation to them. The semiotic ideology of Old Belief ensured the transmission of the kenotic message set out by archpriest Avvakum in seventeenth-century Russia and prompted Artiom’s act of reading in the courtyard. In this sense, Avvakum and his Life constitute a paradigmatic act of intervention in history, providing the founding moment of Old Belief and the beginning of a (model of) transmission that has oriented intention forward toward the eschaton and given the measure of Old Believers’ existence up to the present day.

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NOTES

1. The rather heterogeneous field of the cognitive studies of religion covers much more than the approaches mentioned here. For a comprehensive review, see Geertz (2004).

2. This resonates well with Keane’s (2008) emphasis on the relative autonomy of material forms that enables them to enter new configurations and acquire new meanings through people’s innovative responses to them.

3. In their attempt to bridge the gap between cognitive and social anthropological approaches to religion, Berliner and Sarró (2007) take a similar perspective focused on religious learning and transmission. Their contribution is partially successful because it provides a critique of cognitivists’ reductionist frame without engaging with their epistemological basis. Halloy and Naumescu (2012; cf. Ingold 2003; Toren 1999) argue for an ontogenetic approach to culture and cognition that can help us see how religious ideas originate, become internalized and reflected upon over time, and materialize in actions and experiences deemed religious.

4. In this sense, see Fabian’s (1983) critique of the temporal and spatial distance produced by anthropology’s ‘denial of coevalness’ with its subject.

5. Robbins (2007: 16–17) contends that while being perfectly aware of the various Christian traditions emphasizing continuity rather than discontinuity, he chose to work specifically with a Protestant ideal type of Christianity because it best represents anthropologists’ own conception of Christianity. See also critiques raised by Robbins’s Current Anthropology commentators (in Robbins 2007) and Hann (2007) and Scott (2005). For a very different take on questions of continuity and change in Eastern Christianity, see Hann and Goltz (2010) and Naumescu (2007).

6. Old Believers following the priestly tradition continued to recognize and attempted to recreate the apostolic lineage of the Orthodox Church, while priestless Old Believers adopted a more radical eschatology and communalist stance toward religion and church, doing away with the priesthood altogether (Robson 1995; Scheffel 1991: 47–49).

7. Old Believers use the Old Russian Orthodox singing tradition (znameny chant), a form of unison, melismatic liturgical singing that uses its own notation system based on special signs or ‘hooks’ (kryuki), which are both notes and religious symbols.

8. It took them almost two centuries to find this bishop, Amvrosii (1791–1863), the former Greek Orthodox bishop of Sarajevo, who agreed to become the first Metropolitan of Old Believers and thus re-established the church hierarchy of the priestly Old Believers (Pospielovsky 1998; Robson 1995).

9. Here Avvakum paraphrases the commentary of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite on St. Paul’s Acts 26:14–18, where Paul is called to witness about Christ, his own conversion, and the beginning of the apostolic mission (Hunt 1991: 207). The quote is adapted to standard English.

10. This double identity is achieved through a careful use of parallelism as a linguistic tool: “The linguistic fabric of the Zitie [Life] is structured not only on the presence but on the interaction of two contrasting parallel lexical and stylistic planes” that are made explicit in the introduction (Hunt 1975–1976: 163n1).
11. While the case presented here is somewhat particularized for the purpose of this article, the practice of inscribing oneself into Christian time has been widespread among Old Believers, who not only used the sacred books to preserve or transmit their faith but often inscribed them with personal events, such as births, baptisms, and genealogies (cf. Rogers 2009: 122).

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