OLD BELIEVERS’ PASSION PLAY: 
THE MEANING OF DOUBT IN AN 
ORTHODOX RITUALIST MOVEMENT

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One could hear the bells ringing, an elaborate, melodious sound that totally embraced the still village, resonating across fields and waters. During the last days before Easter they rang several times a day announcing every prayer and reminding people to repent in expectation of the great event, Christ’s death and resurrection. A few old men and women emerged from their houses, as though anticipating a sign to return to the church they had left a few hours ago. The lengthy, arduous liturgical services during the fasting period were conducted by the deacon and the old psalm readers in the absence of a priest. During the service, the altar doors remained closed while people occupied themselves with singing and reciting the Old Slavonic rite. Every move seemed to follow an unwritten script, an economy of gestures that connected the visible and invisible worlds through the manipulation of the old books, touching the icons, lighting candles, and innumerable kneelings on the embroidered pillows. No voice raised above the others, no gesture in excess – it was an exercise of collective devotion become routine through years of practice. Once outside the church, however, blunt questions emerged: are we going to have a priest for the big celebration on Easter
Sunday? Who is going to bury the sick man who just died? What are we to become without a priest? This uncertainty undermined the ritual that had been just performed, exposing a moment of crisis in this community of Russian Old Believers in the Romanian Danube delta.

Such moments of crisis expose the uncertainties that mark everyday life in times of radical transformation, when institutions fail, new orders emerge and people navigate between them trying to survive and make sense of those changes. They offer excellent occasions for anthropologists to observe people ‘in doubt’ who reflect on experienced disruptions in search of new certainties. While processes of doubting are in this (initial) sense contingent to particular disruptive events, doubt as a condition of scepticism or disbelief is an essential dimension of Christian belief and ritual, a form of religious reflexivity intrinsic to ritual practice (Højbjerg 2002). These two conditions of doubt seem at first to be very different, articulating different relationships between certainty and uncertainty within different temporalities (post-socialist and Christian time). This chapter addresses precisely this relationship between external and internal doubt in Orthodox ritual and belief, arguing that Orthodoxy developed a particular configuration of doubt (and hope) in the language of mysteries articulated through specific material and ritual forms. In doing so it brings together two lines of inquiry that have proved extremely fruitful in recent anthropological thinking on Christian ritual and belief. The first approach considers doubt ‘as a condition that sustains the existence of religious ideas and practice … and as an essential element in the process of acquisition of religious ideas’ (Højbjerg, Rubow and Sjorslev 1999). It dwells on the theologies of doubt developed within religious traditions, and on the interplay of belief and disbelief that marks processes of religious transmission. The second line of inquiry I am pursuing here focuses on the relation between belief and ritual action in terms of the ‘efficacy’ of ritual transmission. This approach moves the focus from ritual as communication or medium of symbolic meaning to ritual as skilled performance – apt performance or bodily competence in Mauss’s terms (Mauss
To use Talal Asad’s formulation, it inquires into ‘the ways in which embodied practices (including language) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience’ (1993: 77). Following this line of thought one would argue that becoming Christian is a condition of skilled practice rather than belief.

Several contributors to the anthropology of religion have criticized the centrality of belief in anthropological investigation, considering it a feature inherited from Christianity (Asad 1993; Ruel 2002). The Christian preoccupation with meaning seems to be reproduced by anthropology’s compulsion to find meaning in every culture, what Vassos Argyrou calls anthropology’s ‘will to meaning’ (Robbins 2006). In his Genealogies of Religion, Asad (1993) provides a critical analysis of the construction of religion and ritual as anthropological categories and the excessive emphasis on ‘meaning’ in both. He shows how, in contrast to contemporary understanding of ritual as a symbolic, communicative act representing a theological ‘belief’, liturgical practice in medieval Christianity was the very action through which people cultivated their Christian vocation. Taking the example of the Benedictine rule, he argues that ritual was ‘a script for regulating practice’, a disciplinary practice that aided the cultivation of Christian values. In medieval Christianity, Asad contends, there was no separation between ‘outer behavior and inner motivate, between social rituals and individual sentiments, between activities that are expressive and those that are technical’ (1993: 63). One’s correct practice of the rite was the precondition for religious experience and for the acquisition of Christian virtues; in this sense it also prevented failure or disbelief as correct ritual practice would guard one against doubt.

The transformation that brought about the separation between inner belief and outer behaviour was a result of the Protestant Reformation, which also put the two in a hierarchal relation since it ‘privileged belief, associated with immaterial meaning, over practices that threatened to subordinate belief to material forms’ (Keane 2007: 67). In Calvinism, as Webb Keane shows with the example of the Protestant debate on transubstantiation, belief comes to be abstracted from material
entanglements – what he calls ‘the purification of agency’ following Latour (2007: 61–2). Wine and bread do not become the blood and body of Christ as pre-Reformation theology would have it, but only represent them. Since ritual comes to have only symbolic meaning but no efficacy in and of itself, faith becomes the a priori condition for the efficacy of ritual. Therefore in post-Reformation Christianity doubt becomes a matter of faith and not of ritual practice.

But faith itself must take material form, since ultimately the very idea of transcendence in Christianity is mediated by the historical presence of Christ (Engelke 2007: 13).¹ Thus even the inner-worldly asceticism of Protestantism must materialize in certain forms, a body, a language and the means for salvation and ‘these materializations bear the marks of their temporality’ (Keane 2008: S124).² For Keane the materiality of religion is an outcome of historical formation, accumulation and purification, as objects and practices constantly find themselves in new meaningful configurations (semiotic ideologies). This call to attend to the materiality of religion in itself and not as evidence for something immaterial, like inner faith or belief, would come as no surprise to any researcher of Eastern Christianity. Unlike Protestantism’s constant attempt to disentangle from material forms, Eastern Christians are completely immersed in the materiality and historicity of their religion, articulated in the concept of tradition. The value of religious materialities in Eastern Christian tradition derives from its understanding of human nature, the anthropos: being made in the image and likeness of God, and the transcendent God made visible through the incarnation of Christ (Hann and Goltz 2010: 12). Following this particular understanding of materiality and personhood, Eastern Christianity makes God accessible to every believer in innumerable material ways. The veneration of icons is the best illustration of how a relationship with the divine world is made possible through material mediation and ritual action. Icons connect the realm of the transcendent with the material world in what David Freedberg (1989) has called an ‘aesthetics of presence’ in which the direct sensorial relationship prompted by the divine image
(prototype) is associated with specific bodily and material devotional practices. Icons are venerated because of their ontological relation to the divine prototype and their own historicity and agency emerges at the intersection of materiality, sociality and transcendence (Hanganu 2010). Eastern Christians’ heightened attention to icons, books, food and ritual may seem problematic from a post-Reformation Western perspective focused on inner belief as the ultimate expression of faith but it determines their ‘being in the world’ in a fundamental manner. It binds the divine to particular material forms, thus making it accessible and present in the everyday life of Orthodox believers.

The relationship between immateriality and materiality or the ambiguous presence–absence of God in the world is translated in Christianity into a problem of presence: the tension between the distance and the proximity of the divine (Engelke 2007: 11–16). This tension is maintained through a semiotic ideology which maintains that only ‘certain words and certain things … become privileged channels of divine apprehension’ (2007: 16; see also Morgan 1999). Eastern Christian theology and practice has offered its own reflection on the problem of presence, articulating this tension between distance and proximity in the language of mysteries. Kallistos Ware, a contemporary Orthodox theologian, offers a reflection on the theology of mysteries pointing out that ‘mystery’ (taintstvo in Slavonic) is to be preferred to the more common word ‘sacraments’ because it implies ‘something revealed to our understanding, yet never totally and exhaustively revealed’ (Ware 1991: 281). The sacraments are ‘both visible and invisible … there is a combination of an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual grace’ (1991: 281). Mysteries mediate God’s presence absence in the world by making God present in material substance (the holy sacraments) and allowing believers to draw closer to Him in the light of deification or theosis, the mystical union of man with God. The practice of mysteries is determined by a complex movement between revelation and concealment, what Michael Taussig calls very elegantly ‘the skilled revelation of skilled concealment’ (Taussig 2006: 123). This technique reaches perfection in Orthodox liturgy, itself a
highly complex product shaped throughout centuries of religious practice, where the precise tempo of exposure and concealment marks the relationship with God and the position of the believer between sacred and worldly times.

The fundamental mystery that is also the source of all mysteries at the heart of Orthodox theology is the incarnation and death of Christ. The mystery of the cross emerges at a particular historical moment, Christ’s crucifixion and His ‘cry of dereliction on the cross in the words from the psalm, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”’ (Pelikan 1999: 104). Jaroslav Pelikan considers that this moment represents the birth of theology, since ‘the beginning of wisdom, therefore, was the acceptance of that mystery: the one whom they believed to be “one in being with the Father” had been … forsaken by his Father on the cross’ (1999: 104). It is worth to reflect for a moment on the implications of this statement for our discussion of doubt as a theological matter. The centrality of the mystery of the cross for Christian soteriology implies the necessity of doubt as a way to salvation. Christianity has loaded this mystery with two attitudes that are necessarily intertwined: despair facing Christ’s death and the hope of His resurrection. Both Eastern and Western Christian theology and mysticism took the ‘exemplary suffering of Christ’ on the cross as the essence of Christian being but each tradition emphasized at times one or the other of these attitudes. The West developed Imitatio Christi, a devotion emphasizing Christ’s humanity, his suffering and crucifixion, which emerged as a model of Christian life around the end of the first millennium (Fulton 2002; Pelikan 1999).6 Within this tradition the body became a privileged site of mystical knowledge and ‘the medium for identifying oneself with Christ by virtue of Incarnation and the Passion of Christ’ (Morgan 1999: 61–73). After the Reformation the faithful imitation of the human Christ as a means of askesis (strict discipline) has been discouraged by the Church but the empathic response to Christ’s Passion was cultivated in various forms until today. In spite of this, the idea of human suffering as the basis of intimacy with the Christ of the Passion continued to be associated with asceticism and sainthood, especially
in Western mystical and monastic traditions. Aside from shaping hagiographies of great mystics, *imitatio Christi* also remained part of Western religious culture, popularized through various performances like passion plays or *via crucis*, Franciscan devotions enacted during Lent, in preparation for Easter.

In Eastern Christianity, with its particular understanding of anthropos, the *mystery of the cross* laid out in Christ’s passion received a different meaning. Since man is made in the image and likeness of God he has the capacity to know God and enter into communion with him while preserving his own individuality (Ware 1991: 224–5). The aim of Christian life, *theosis* or deification, is the mystical union with God in which man fulfils his inherited ‘image’ by acquiring divine ‘likeness’. This is made possible by Christ’s dual nature, human and divine, who showed what ‘the true “likeness of God” is and through his redeeming and victorious sacrifice He set that likeness once again within man’s reach’ (1991: 230). Unlike other theologies of Christ’s passion, Orthodoxy, especially in its more specific form of Russian kenoticism, proposes an ideal of Christian life modelled on the humility of Christ on the cross. Stressing that Christ was emptied of divine attributes when taking a human nature, and his acceptance of the suffering on the cross, kenoticism takes Christ as the true measure of humanity (see Fedotov 1960: 94–110).

The kenotic tradition has been embraced and cultivated by Old Believers, a conservative Orthodox movement originating in seventeenth-century Russia. The term itself describes a diverse number of groups that resulted as a rejection of the Orthodox Church reforms at the time. Even before they could organize themselves into a movement, Old Believers split again into priestly and priestless communities because of disagreements about canonical authority. Priestly Old Believers continued to recognize and attempted to recreate the apostolic lineage of the Church. The others, priestless Old Believers, considered that the Church itself and its priests are servants of the Antichrist and did away with priesthood all together (Robson 1995; Scheffel 1991: 47–9).

After the official Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated all followers of the old rite in 1666–67, it initiated, with the
help of an increasingly authoritarian state, a brutal persecution of Old Believers. Their responses were different, as some believed that they actually lived in apocalyptic times and chose to die by self-immolation or fight against the servants of the Antichrist – embodied by church and state officials (Cherniavsky 1966: 20–21). Others, starting with Avvakum, their most important leader executed in 1682, adopted a different stance, spiritualizing their apocalypticism by means of the kenotic tradition. They translated a traumatic collective experience into kenotic language, taking Christ’s crucifixion as the central mystery of life and their path to salvation (Hunt 1991). Their understanding of the world took the form of a deferred apocalyptic expectation that not only fed their resistance to change but strengthened their hope of salvation. This strong awareness of the end of time was translated into the struggle to preserve the old Orthodox rite in everyday practice, which led to a unique fusion of religious and social experience. Old Believers’ liturgical life became a comment on their preferred social organization, and religious practice the main mnemonic device for religious transmission: ‘It was this community, hoped the faithful, that would guide them through a changing world’ (Robson 1995: 52).

After the schism, Old Believers’ groups that followed in Avvakum’s footsteps chose a self-imposed exile in Russia and abroad, first resettling in remote areas in neighbouring countries and later spreading throughout the world. A large number of Old Believers settled in the eighteenth century in the Danube delta, in today’s Romania and Ukraine, where they continued to practise the old Orthodox rite following the priestly tradition. This area became a major spiritual centre for Old Believers in the mid-nineteenth century (1846) when a new church hierarchy was established in Belaia Krinitsa with the installation of Amvrosii (1791–1863), the former Greek Orthodox bishop of Sarajevo. The geopolitical transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to various reconfigurations of the Old Believers’ religious and social structures, severing the ties between Romanian and Soviet, and later post-Soviet (Ukrainian) communities. Periprava, the community described in this chapter, belongs to
Old Believers’ Passion Play

The story of the Easter 2007 celebrations in Periprava unfolds entirely like a passion play, a dramatic performance of the last days of Christ, taking place during Lent and culminating with the death of Christ on the cross. While the dramatic content of the passion play alludes to resurrection, it does not refer to it explicitly. Instead, it builds on the tension surrounding Good Friday, ‘the only day in the year when the original sacrifice of the cross on Calvary was to be commemorated’ (Pelikan 1999: 101). The passion play offers thus a reflection on the mystery of the cross and articulates the original doubt within the ritual commemoration of Christ’s last moments. The play magnifies human suffering, which takes a cosmic dimension through its main protagonist, and alerts one to the tension between unconditional acceptance and the limits of human comprehension.

Still enacted today in various parts of the world, passion plays originate in a religious ritual that has been secularized and altered to become a dramatic story for large audiences (Trexler 2003: 9–23). However, even with such ritual-cum-play events it is hard to separate the emotions it instills from its Christian meaning. The play is meant to educate and at the same time to affect the audience.

In preparation for the Easter celebrations the community in Periprava was concerned about the absence of a priest. Their last priest, Fr. Serghei, who served as parish priest for 12 years, had been immobilized at home after an accident and their two-year-long search for a replacement had not proven successful.
Among Old Believers priesthood is a communal institution as the priest is usually selected from the respectable male members of the community, someone of high moral status, well versed in churchly matters and literate in Church Slavonic. After making a choice, the community turns to the bishop to consecrate the new priest. Today, with the depopulation of the area it is harder to find candidates for priesthood not just in one’s own community but in the entire region. A good candidate, a married man in his late thirties who was favoured by church elders, refused the priesthood in favour of more lucrative business. The hopes of the entire community then shifted to an orphan whose grandfather used to be a respected priest in the village. A young man in his twenties, their new candidate has studied with the former priest and also undertook some training at the Metropolitan office in Braila. In spite of that, he did not feel ready for priesthood because of the restrictions and asceticism a priest’s life requires. Besides his hesitations, villagers were also aware that he was too young and had to get married to become a priest. Marriage is a prerequisite for Old Believer priests, but since many youngsters leave the village for bigger cities it becomes increasingly hard to find a partner from one own’s community or nearby villages.

The prolonged absence of the priest was a matter of concern for the entire community, and especially for the older generation, which was more preoccupied with religious matters. The provisory solution was to continue performing liturgical services without the priest, with the help of the deacon and the two readers of the village. This was not uncommon in the history of priestly Old Believers; because of the scarcity of priests communities had tended to focus their religious practice on reader services, performing abbreviated services and incomplete sacraments that did not require the presence of a priest (Scheffel 1991: 49). Basically any Old Believer community could function provided that they had the old liturgical books and a reader (chital’nik), a person (male or female) who could read Church Slavonic. Rituals in the village were thus shortened as the parts belonging to the priest were left out. Moreover, the liturgy was also incomplete because the mystery of the Eucharist could not be completed
without a priest. In fact in Periprava every church ritual was performed with certain hesitations because of the absence of the priest. Referring to this pervasive sense of confusion or uncertainty in church matters, one of the readers, a man in his eighties, acknowledged: ‘Our whole life is centered around the priest. This is what we were taught: that we are [one of the] Lipovan communities that left Russia in 1712–13 with the priests and came this way … Without him we can do the liturgy but it is not the way it should be … it is simply not true.’

The absence of a priest and the constant concern with the correctness of the ritual shaped villagers’ lives to a great extent. Their search for a priest was motivated by the recurring anxiety of having the most important liturgical celebrations such as Easter, but also pressing events like funerals, properly performed. The uncertainties related to particular moments of crisis were aggravated by the more general feeling of despair about being part of a dying community. Significant urban migration during socialism and after, together with labour migration to Europe in recent years, led to a significant decrease in village population, mostly inhabited now by old people and their grandchildren. This generational gap was not uncommon in Old Believer communities prior to socialist times, when the middle generation would do seasonal work, nor during socialism when they would be legally engaged in the economic system. However, nowadays the middle generation do not expect to return. Old people have the option to remain alone or follow their children to town, but this rarely happens due to the financial burden it involves. Most elderly remain in the village, occupying themselves with churchly matters and lamenting the imminent end of the community. And they had plenty of reasons for that: they could not find a priest, the old readers could not find replacements and the tradition seemed to die off since no one was able to teach children anymore. The frequent deaths in this ageing community added to their feeling of loss. Funerals and services for the dead marking the departure of relatives occupied a significant amount of villagers’ time, sometimes joined by preparations for major religious feasts, such as Easter.
As Easter was approaching in spring 2007, the community in Periprava became more anxious about finding a priest to perform the Easter liturgy and bless the Easter food. The blessing is especially important since most old people observe a strict fast for 40 days and anxiously await the Easter feast. This time rumours circulated that since there was no priest available in the region, the bishop would tour all parishes without a priest and would arrive for a brief visit in Periprava on Sunday morning. However, no concrete information about his arrival existed and the psalm readers were preparing for an Easter night vigil without a priest. Expectations were high but people knew how difficult it was to travel to this isolated place if no boat was available or private transportation prearranged.

In this atmosphere of heightened expectation, on the evening of Maundy Thursday, two days before Easter, a man passed away. He had been ill for a long time without any
prospect of recovery. Because of the lack of a priest funerals are very complicated affairs: families have to find a priest and bring him to the funeral at their own cost. This means either six hours by boat from the regional capital (Tulcea) or three hours by car from the nearby town (Sulina), which is no less complicated because of the lack of roads and cars. The deceased did not have children and since he and his wife had been very poor they had not saved money for the funeral. The widow asked for money in the village and several people contributed small amounts; but since this was not enough to arrange transportation and priests would not be available during Easter the deacon together with the two psalm readers decided to bury the man. A few neighbours helped with preparations and the funeral took place hastily around noon on Good Friday.

‘Good death’ is a serious concern among Old Believers and complex rituals mark the passing of a person from this life (Warner 2000a, 2000b). A lot of attention is paid to the dead who retain their humanity up to the internment: he or she can still ‘feel’ until everybody throws handfuls of earth into the grave. The dead body is cared for, washed, dressed, touched, kissed but also placed with the face towards the icon corner so that he can ‘see’ them. The whole community is involved as the dead must be seen off (provodit’) through a very lengthy ritual that starts at home and finishes in the cemetery. On the day and night preceding the burial psalm readers take turns reciting burial psalms for the dead. On this occasion time was too short and the two old readers were too feeble to pray throughout the night. Usually, the priest comes to the home in the morning of the burial in order to perform the funeral service and subsequently leads the procession to the cemetery. But since there was no priest this time, the deacon and the two readers recited the burial service and moved on with the rest of the people to see him off to the grave. Even if the village had not had a priest for two years, this was the first time that a funeral was performed without a priest. This stirred a lot of discussion, with several people remarking that the man should have had a ‘proper burial’, performed by a priest who could ‘give him back
to the earth’. One of the most active persons in the church, a well-respected old widow, chose not to attend the funeral because it was not ‘proper’. Additionally, she pointed out that by disregarding the normal procedure and burying the man themselves, the deacon and readers had jeopardized the already precarious future of the community:

The bishop already knows that the deacon buried the dead and [he’s asking] why he was not informed about it. You must have [his] blessing (blagoslovliat’sia) to do that, you understand? If you don’t have priest here you must tell [him]: ‘Prosty, blagoslovy mene pohoronyty chilovekom!’ [Forgive,[and] bless me so I can bury that man] But the deacon didn’t tell the bishop anything [about the funeral]. Had vladyka [the bishop] given his blessing, God would have given the dead to the earth. God forbid that they expel the deacon now, and then we’ll be completely abandoned!

The deacon and readers defended their position on the hasty funeral arguing that they were perfectly aware that the burial was ‘improper’, but in absence of a priest they had no other choice but to bury the dead man. However, they also mentioned that ‘the dead must still be returned to the earth [properly]’, something that only the priest can do. Their statement implied that they expected that a priest would eventually come to complete the burial, even though it was not clear when that would happen.

The controversy over the funeral continued on Holy Saturday, the day following the burial. It was a day of silent expectation, filled with worries about the still unconfirmed visit of the bishop and the consequences of the incomplete burial performed the previous day. The story of the funeral naturally merged with worries about Easter given that the burial had taken place on Good Friday. In people’s view Good Friday was the day when ‘we bury Christ’, a special moment surrounded by mystery and anxious expectation. In the spirit of the kenotic tradition their concern resonated with the words of the famous nineteenth-century Old
Believer bishop Mikhail Semenov (1874–1916), who argued that ‘every Christian must undergo his own Golgotha’ (Dixon 2008: 715). The parallel between the man’s death and burial and Christ’s own death and burial marked their Easter celebration that year.

A moment of crisis and the doubt within

The funeral on Easter eve proved to be particularly disturbing for Old Believers in Periprava because it exposed a crisis of religious transmission and the obvious decline of the community. Their hesitations and feelings of uncertainty related to the coinciding incomplete funerary and Easter rituals were proof of the community’s failure to sustain religious practice: ‘Tradition is dying’, lamented the elders. The temporary absence of priestly authority could only reinforce their already strong doubts about the future of the community. The unsuccessful search for a priest resonated with millenarian concerns but also with a deeper anxiety that marked Old Believer history since the end of the seventeenth century. Facing the extinction of the pre-Reformation generation of Old Believers priests, many Old Believer communities decided to accept reformed priests ‘converted’ from the official Orthodox church. Through this compromise they could temporarily preserve the institution of priesthood but a long-term solution was still needed. In the meantime they started an endless search for an Orthodox bishop who would agree to join them and thus recreate the canonical lineage by consecrating new Old Believer bishops. It took them almost two centuries to find this bishop, in the person of Amvrosii (1791–1863), the former Greek Orthodox bishop of Sarajevo, who accepted the invitation to become the first Metropolitan of Old Believers, thus establishing the new hierarchy of the priestly Old Believers’ denomination in Belaia Krinitsa to which the community in Periprava belongs. The current Metropolitan, Leontii, now seated in Braila, was the person whom the community
in Periprava was waiting for on Easter morning to bless the Easter food. He was also the one supposed to grant them permission to bury the dead without a priest, or at least to acknowledge that the burial had been proper.

The element of doubt in the funeral ritual could be associated to the absence of formal authority. Historically, however, the hard-earned presence of an Old Believer bishop offered symbolic legitimacy at least in dealing with the Orthodox Church, but it did not significantly affect the autonomy of Old Believer communities and their decentralized, communal structures of authority (Robson 1995: 25; Rogers 2009: 43–4, 74). Priesthood was organized as a communal institution, since priests were chosen from and trained within the community. Old Believers’ communalist spirit was reflected in their writings and liturgical practice (Robson 1995: 46–52), and a priest’s role in the community seemed to be more collegial than authoritative. Any church-related issue used to be decided by elders, among whom one finds the deacon, readers and other older (male and female) members of the community. Priests’ religious authority was based initially on their authoritative interpretation of religious texts but the diminution of intergenerational transmission led to a shift in religious education, now focused on precise repetition and passive literacy instead of sustained exegetical exercise. Old Believers in Periprava were training children to become skilled readers, to correctly and rapidly recite Church Slavonic texts without a basic understanding of the content. The shift from active reading to textualism happened gradually and led to reading practices turning into a form of religious devotion. As a consequence, Church Slavonic literacy became the very basis of religious authority and the written tradition, as preserved in Old Believers’ books, the authoritative reference in religious matters. This strengthened the position of literate elders as preservers of the Old Believer tradition.
The villagers’ concern with the incomplete rituals was driven by a heightened attention to the present crisis of transmission rather than being a short-lived outcome of the missing priest. The deacon and psalm readers responsible for ritual correctness
acknowledged that the ritual was incomplete even if they performed the funeral service according to the *trebnyk* (the book of needs containing the most important liturgical services). The difficulty of finding a priest was evidence of the absence of literate people in the community, mostly due to urban migration but also because of young men’s disinterest in priesthood. The young man chosen by the village to be their future priest had received some religious education and he was capable of *correct* reading. But due to his age he had little authority, and moreover had many doubts about his engagement with the church. Most people from his generation had already left this remote, impoverished village in search of economic opportunities and even if priesthood would secure him a (basic) living, the religious restrictions were uninviting. Literate elders, responsible for religious transmission in Old Believer communities, did not teach children nor did they educate young men into priesthood anymore. The generational specialization which allowed elders to ‘withdraw from the world behind a set of elaborate taboos and rituals based on the ascetic ideals of old Russian Orthodoxy’ (Rogers 2008: 119) while the middle generation became *mirskie* (worldly or secular) functioned before and during socialism but seemed to have failed now. The two psalm readers in Periprava, now in their eighties, were the best example of this generational differentiation: they had contributed their share to the socialist system and upon retirement dedicated themselves to the church (Figure 4).16 As readers, they trained children and undertook all the lengthy, arduous rituals conscientiously until they became too feeble. During those times in the village the question of who was going to ‘read the books’ after the last psalm reader died was on everybody’s lips. In fact, the possible break of the referential link to the written tradition was perceived as a more serious danger than the temporary absence of the priest, because it entailed their exclusion from the textual community that comprised the Old Believers, faith.

**The meaning of doubt in Old Believers’ ritualism**

The uncertainties surrounding the funeral, and incomplete rituals more generally, do not address ritual per se but rather reflect
the reconfiguration of social relations in the village, the church and Romanian society in general. This ‘experienced doubt’, as pointed out in the introduction to this volume, is all-pervasive in the post-socialist context in which new and old ideologies are proclaimed, debated and constantly negotiated in everyday life. In fact ‘being in doubt’ seems to be a necessary condition of such major transformations, and coincides with attempts to regain certainty through conversion (Pelkmans 2009; Steinberg and Wanner 2008) or ethical action and moral reshaping (Wanner 2003, 2007; Zigon 2007, 2009). The prolific literature on post-socialist moralities translates the experienced doubt characteristic of times of social unrest into ethical dilemmas (Rogers 2009) and moral breakdowns (Zigon 2007). This approach, informed by the burgeoning anthropology of moralities, draws on ethnographies of moral questioning (Robbins 2004) to expose individuals’ moral reasoning in cases of conflict or confrontation between different moral frameworks (Heintz 2009) or ethical regimes (Rogers 2009).

Scrutinizing the process of doubting rather than the nature of doubt tells us more about the ways in which people navigate between certainty and uncertainty in everyday life. It exposes the experienced or episodic doubt driven by specific events or social transformations and the search for certainties in response. But it also emphasizes (individual or social) rupture as the primary locus of moral reasoning, something that according to anthropologists of Christianity pertains to the very nature of Christian belief and ritual (Cannell 2006; Robbins 2007). It becomes necessary then to provide a more nuanced view of doubt, one that can account for the different layers of the relationship between certainty and uncertainty in religious life. Much like Old Believers’ worries about incomplete rituals and their uncertainties about the future, experienced or episodic doubts run parallel to ritual action, as an external reflection on the ritual and its efficacy. However, as Carlo Severi argues, this doubt is not always exterior to ritual but it can be seen as a ‘constitutive part of ritual itself’ (Severi 2002: 27). People’s reflections on ritual action are not just objectified commentary outside of
ritual action but they are part of the ritual context which establishes the effectiveness of ritual performance. But one may dig one level deeper to discover doubt as an implicit dimension of the ritual, sometimes the central dimension, which captures that particular tension between distance and proximity of the divine.

In an introduction to a special issue on religious reflexivity Christian Højbjerg (2002) reminds us that ritual is reflexive in nature, where ‘the term reflexive points, minimally to the effects of an action upon an actor’ (Rappaport 1999: 187). Moreover, ‘the reflexive act of subordination also establishes that to which there is subordination’ (Højbjerg 2002: 2) which means that ritual performance establishes the liturgical order. This understanding of ritual suggests that meaning is produced within the ritual action. If considering the centrality of meaning in Christianity, the moments of uncertainty or moral questioning in religious life are provoked by the failure of meaning or meaninglessness as Tomlinson and Engelke (2006) convincingly show in their volume on the ‘limits of meaning’. This, however, tends to bring our analysis back to the level of reflexivity as a dimension of the ritual context. But the question of ritual failure could be explored differently, by relating the production of meaning in particular instances of religious practice (as the cases in Tomlinson and Engelke’s volume do) to the nature of ritual in a religious tradition. This approach, as I will argue in the remainder of the chapter, could account for doubt being constitutive of ritual.

What then does ritual failure mean in such a ritualistic tradition as Old Belief? In the light of the post-Reformation emphasis on inner faith, Old Believer ritualism has been often seen by church, state and scholars as meaningless, an excessive formalism which only covered for the absence of educated elites and theological substance (cf. Scheffel 1991: 207). Such a view is based on theologically informed dichotomies like ‘religion as practice’ vs. ‘religion as doctrine’, or orthodoxy and orthopraxy (thought and action), which are still pervasive in the anthropology of religion. And yet, as Asad (1993) and others have suggested, the distinction between ritual and belief is a more recent outcome of a particular (Western) historical development. Other religious
traditions maintained ritual as the fundamental action through which believers cultivated their pious selves. Old Believers’ view of ritual had been elaborated long before and it was strongly defended during the seventeenth-century Russian Orthodox schism. Claiming the spirit of the early Church tradition, they defended a semiotic ideology formulated around a particular conception of the symbol as a means to God and an end in itself, ‘the symbol being not only the way to perceive and understand reality, a means of cognition, but also a means of participation’ (Schmemann 1973: 139). Understanding the world as ‘symbolic’ ... ‘in virtue of its being created by God’ (1973: 141), the patristic tradition perceived the relationship between the sign in the symbol (A) and that which it signifies (B) as epiphanic. This means that the symbol was both knowledge about and experience of God (theosis). The progressive dissolution of the symbol in post-patristic theology led to the differentiation between form and content, participation and knowledge or what is more commonly known as ritual and belief. This differentiation became constitutive of Western Christian theology and also influenced Western thought on religion more generally. The Russian Orthodox Church has followed suit when deciding on the radical reform of Russian Orthodoxy in 1654, arguing that symbols should be changed to represent God more truthfully. Fighting against any change, Old Believers referred to the patristic understanding of symbols, arguing that a change in form equalled a change in meaning (Robson 1995: 135, n. 4). They argued that the smallest modifications in liturgical text and ritual will alter their relationship to the divine and thus have critical consequences for their salvation. Keeping faithfully to the old rite (hence their other name, Old Ritualists or staroobriadtsy), they contended that only the verbatim reproduction of the old texts and correct ritual practice could secure the referential link between material and immaterial worlds, and the efficacy and doctrinal coherence of Orthodoxy. The increasing ritualization of liturgical practice and everyday life in Old Believer communities was an outcome of this conception of immanence, which offered the possibility of salvation through ritual participation.
In Periprava, the difficulty of performing a proper ritual was perceived by the community as a moment of crisis because it revealed the incompleteness of their Christian existence. Since Old Believers trusted that only through correct ritual practice and ascetic behaviour did they become true Christians, they developed a strong awareness of their continual becoming through ritual and ritualized everyday life. The incomplete rituals and especially their denied access to the Orthodox liturgy as a way to theosis was perceived as a direct threat to their Christian being. The essence of this reasoning was grasped by the nineteenth-century Old Believer bishop Mikhail (Semenov) in one sentence: ‘Without liturgy there is no Christianity’ (Robson 1995: 41).

In Orthodox Christianity the Divine Liturgy is the ritual per se, the ‘royal door to enter and grasp the very spirit of Orthodoxy’ (Evdokimov 1996: 18). It is the perfect model of prayer which encompasses all prayers because it brings the particular to the universal, ‘uniting the people with the priesthood in a single Divine people, searching for salvation together’ (Bishop Mikhail, quoted in Dixon 2008: 711). The central aspect of the liturgy is that it serves both as a means to pious conduct and as an end, the experience of God (theosis). It also represents the central process of religious transmission since in each enactment of the liturgy multiple temporalities interact, thereby generating the historicity of Orthodoxy (Naumescu 2010). The apparent immutability of liturgical form and language maintained through Old Believer textualism generates a sense of continuity, of an uninterrupted tradition of faith.

The liturgy is the inherent medium for the transmission of mysteries, and the most elaborate expression of an Orthodox semiotic ideology in which icons, books, reading and singing practices, prayers, prostrations and gestures are brought together in a collective experience of the divine. It consists of three well-defined parts, of which the second and the third are an invitation to participate in the great mysteries of Christian faith (the first part, Proskomedia, does not involve the faithful). The second part, the liturgy of the Word, culminates in the revelation of the ‘Word of God’, as the Bible, brought out from the altar, is revealed to the people and
then read aloud (the ‘Small Entrance’). The sacredness of the Bible brought out in this liturgical moment can be seen as the epitome of Old Believers’ textualism as practised in everyday life. The third part, the liturgy of the Eucharist, is an invitation to participate in the whole Christian cycle from Passion through Resurrection, Ascension, Second Coming and the Kingdom of God, in fact a ‘reiteration of the economy of salvation’ (Evdokimov 1996: 109). Its culmination, the Eucharistic celebration, reveals the mystery of the Eucharist, the coincidence of transcendence and immanence or the ideal fusion of materiality and immateriality. For all the Church Fathers the miracle of the Eucharist remains a mystery which should not be interrogated or analysed (Evdokimov 1996: 85). For them the realization of the union in the Eucharist is the authentic proof of the presence of God in the world, the absolute affirmation of the Christian faith. Through this practice, liturgical ritual offers both the means of experiencing God (made visible in the Eucharist) and the knowledge of God (the acceptance of mystery). But the liturgy of the Eucharist is also the affirmation of the Eucharistic community which makes the ‘church’, and the means for every Christian community to join the universal church (Louth 2009: 10).

This exploration of the nature of Orthodox ritual in its historical-theological dimension then offers another interpretation of Old Believers’ moment of doubt: the incomplete liturgical rituals denied them the possibility of participation in the Church and closed their path to becoming true Christians.

The ethnographic exercise of hope

I will end this chapter with a brief reflection on the role of doubt and hope in the production of anthropological knowledge. This ‘ethnography of doubt’ centred on a particular event that could reveal the different temporalities within which doubt and hope are articulated. The incomplete funeral on Good Friday exposed the general uncertainty and scepticism that marked Old Believers’ lives and made them question the efficacy of ritual in a moment of crisis. In the first part I discussed this ‘meaningful
event’ in relation to recent social changes in the community, placing the ‘experienced doubt’ in a temporal frame marked by post-socialist transformations. A similar approach was recently proposed by ethnographers of post-socialist moralities, who analysed individuals’ uncertainties and their moral questioning in situations of confrontation between different systems of values or moral frames. While acknowledging the scope of this approach to doubting, my aim here has been to connect the experienced doubt to the way doubt is intrinsic to Christian thought and ritual. Compared to what one could call an ‘internal doubt’, which pertains to the very nature of ritual and Orthodoxy’s semiotic ideology, the ‘external doubt’ in the case of the improper burial is an outcome of a particular moment of crisis, an episodic reflection on the ritual performance and its outcomes.

One could see these two levels, internal and external, as two frames of analysis (see Geertz 1973) or, as I suggested here, as different temporal frames in which doubt and hope are articulated. By pointing out the coincidental association between the unexpected death of a villager and the commemoration of Christ’s passion on Easter eve, the ethnography already showed how different temporalities intersect in Old Believers’ everyday lives. Following the concern with temporality and materiality in recent ethnographies of Christianity, I have looked at the ways in which the tension between doubt and hope, certainty and uncertainty, shapes Christian doctrines of salvation and is made explicit in Orthodoxy through the language of mysteries. While in Western theology the soteriology of Christianity has shifted from the concrete hope for the second coming to a more abstract faith in the afterlife (see Miyazaki 2004: 12), Christian fundamentalists maintain the concrete hope for Christ’s second coming through a moral tension articulated in their ‘everyday millenarianism’ (Robbins 2001). Similar to Robbins’ born-again Christians, Old Believers live their everyday lives with a millennial expectation, which has been formulated in their writings following the seventeenth-century schism. But unlike born-again Christians, Old Believers’ deferred (or spiritualized) apocalypticism is grounded in
the kenotic tradition, which makes Christ’s passion available to and reproducible in every Christian life. In seventeenth-century Russia, when due to strong persecutions and their massive exodus Old Believers were giving up hope, they turned to kenoticism as a way of reinserting their experience of suffering into Christian time. Christ’s crucifixion became for them the key to reading their historical experience and at the same time the means to transcend it. It offered them a theology of hope, which by uniting Christ’s death with his resurrection fused despair and hope into the *mystery of the cross*. This relationship is best articulated in the Orthodox liturgy, the essential means to shape oneself as a better Christian. It is the most complex formulation of the relationship between doubt and hope within Christian temporality, which, through its numerous enactments, becomes ‘a performative inheritance of hope’ (Miyazaki 2004: 128) in everyday life. Old Believer ritualism has safely maintained the reproduction of hope without any need for further objectification or doctrinal expression. The incomplete rituals which I witnessed during my stay in this community seemed to have broken this chain of transmission as Old Believers’ common uncertainties were suddenly amplified by the difficulty to enact hope in ritual.

How to account then for the commitment of the few who were still enacting the passion play in spite of their own doubts? How to answer any question about the fate of the community, without falling into the trope of a ‘disappearing culture’? The sceptical tradition in which anthropologists are trained and the temporal incongruity of anthropologists and people (Fabian 1983) make us doubt methodically from outside religion and ritual, rarely engaging with them ‘on their own terms’. I have attempted here to offer an alternative reading by looking at the nature of Old Belief, its doctrine of salvation and how it is enacted in historically determined configurations of materiality, language and ritual action. In doing this I thought to replicate the method of hope (Miyazaki 2004) by showing how hope emerges from the tension within *the mystery of the cross*, how this turns into a mode of Christian being (and knowing) in the kenotic tradition and how it is constantly reproduced yet always actualized
in Orthodox liturgy. This modality of transmission always references a past while maintaining a prospective momentum in the present. By adopting this method in my own analysis I hope to have produced the moment of hope in this particular interpretation of the Old Believers’ crisis of transmission.

Notes

1  Post-Reformation Christianity developed a theology of transcendence determined by the tension between God’s abstraction from the world and the materiality of human condition. Theologically, this tension comes from the dual nature of Christ, ‘the nature of God as uncreated divinity and that of the God-man as incarnate humanity’ (Fulton 2005: 195) as discussed further in this chapter.

2 Keane sees language (especially the creed) as the principal semiotic form of religion because it ‘encourages a distinction between the abstraction of thought and the materiality of its expressions mediated by the norm of sincerity’ (2008: S123). For Protestant missionaries among the Sumbanese (Keane 2007: 215–21) or American Pentecostal preachers (see Harding 2000) sincerity is the evidence of their inner faith. As a consequence, becoming Christian means becoming ‘sincere speakers of the language of truth’ (Keane 2007: 216).

3  In Engelke’s ethnography, what makes Masowe apostolics refuse the evidence of the Bible is precisely its materiality, which seizes the Word of God and distances one from God, in stark contrast to the direct experience of God they cultivate in religious practice. The rejection of scriptural authority poses a new problem of presence, of how apostolics construct a relationship with the divine in the absence of the Word. Engelke takes this as a starting point for an ethnographic exploration of the ways in which believers articulate and maintain a particular relationship with the divine through language, ritual actions and objects (Engelke 2007, 2009).

4  Taussig uses the phrase in a very different context referring to magic and the ‘shaman’s trick’ as a form of technology which reaches art: ‘the supreme level of technique, so rarified, so skilled, that it passes from mere technique to something we might dignify as magical or sacred …’ (Taussig 2006: 155).

5  Some have argued that in the logic of Christian thought uncertainty comes in the very beginning since ‘the root of uncertainty – as
necessary separation from God – stems from the fall’ (Crapanzano 2000: 91, 165). Historically, however, Christianity had first to understand the implications of Christ’s sacrifice before ‘a mature understanding of the human predicament’ could emerge (Pelikan 1991: 72) and therefore the doubt on the cross would come first.

6 The most famous spiritual book of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *The Imitation of Christ* [De imitatione Christi], by Thomas à Kempis, is only the culmination of several centuries’ devotion to Christ crucified.

7 For example, the frequent experience of ‘stigmata’ among saints, seen as bodily evidence of their mystical relation to Christ, is a central model of sainthood in Western Christianity, at least since Saint Francis of Assisi (Klaniczay 2009).

8 Russian kenoticism has a special position within the broader Orthodox tradition, which tends to see crucifixion and resurrection together, emphasizing the suffering of the human Christ together with His divine glory in resurrection (Ware 1991: 232–4).

9 According to the last census data from 2002 Periprava has only 141 inhabitants.

10 Church or Old Slavonic, the language of the pre-reform liturgical books, had been the sacred language of Slavic Orthodoxy prior to the schism and remained so for Old Believers and many autocephalous Orthodox churches to the present day. In Old Believer communities children are raised from the age of five to learn Church Slavonic and the correct recitation of liturgical texts.

11 They did contact a priest in the nearby town who could not make it at such short notice but they did not feel compelled to ask for the bishop’s approval in this situation.

12 Like many of the Old Believers’ leaders, their last bishop, Pavel of Kolomna, was burned at the stake in 1656.

13 Rogers (2009) refers to priestless communities as decentralized in comparison to priestly Old Believers, but I see strong similarities in terms of structures of authority between priestless and priestly Old Believer communities.

14 This was also because Old Believer priests were financially dependent on their communities. However, in post-1990 Romania priests of recognized religious cults, including Old Believers, started receiving a salary from the state (cf. Law 142/1999), which gave them more autonomy in relation to local communities.
Old Believers’ bibliophilic activity was an outcome of the 1666 ban on pre-reformation church books in Russia and their struggle to save the original liturgical texts. For the next three centuries they hid the old books, preserving them carefully and transmitting them within families; they also copied them when possible and distributed them secretly. Church books as well as pastoral letters and various treatises circulated continuously among Old Believer communities fostering the constitution of a ‘textual community’ centred around particular literacy practices (Crummey 1993; Scheffel 1991: 104–16; Rogers 2009: 77).

Most of these Old Believers took jobs in the army or on collective farms and upon retirement they often returned to the village and became active in the local church.

In Robbins’s view, Christianity, at least in its revivalist Protestant tradition, has the tendency to set up a moral conflict in situations of cultural change, generating radical discontinuities in Urapmin society (Robbins 2004: 320). The insistence on ‘rupture’ in the anthropology of Christianity has been criticized for its limited view, which does not take into consideration Christian traditions emphasizing continuity rather than discontinuity (Hann 2007). I argue elsewhere against the continuity–discontinuity debate, proposing instead an ethnography of religious transmission that investigates the different temporalities which inform indigenous perceptions of continuity and change and anthropologists’ own models of transmission (Naumescu 2010).

This section draws on Alexander Schmemann’s discussion of sacraments and symbols in patristic and post-patristic and Western Christian theology (Schmemann 1973: 135–51). Patristic theology refers more commonly to the writings of the Church Fathers until the Synod of Calcedon (451), while post-patristic refers to Byzantine theology developed after this Synod (cf. Louth 2001). Since there is hardly any sustained engagement with Old Believers’ views in Orthodox theology, one has to recreate it from historical accounts of Old Believer debates.

The ideal of Old Believers’ communalism was a total merging of ritual and everyday life (Robson 1993).

I refer to the most common mass in Byzantine Orthodoxy, the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, which is also very similar to the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, performed on special occasions (including Lent). Evdokimov (1996) provides an excellent introduction to liturgy in Eastern Christianity.
Here language and ritual sustain the continuity of Orthodox tradition, the opposite of how (Protestant) Christianity generates discontinuity in postcolonial contexts (Robbins 2001; Schieffelin 2002).

References


