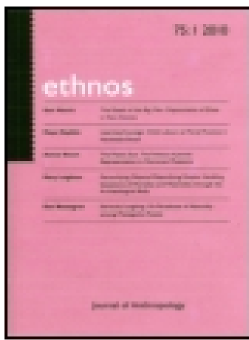

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Eating, Eschatology, Expectation: Fasting and Salvation in Serbian Orthodox Christianity

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ABSTRACT
Practising Orthodox Christians in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo 'work on' their salvation by striving to live a 'liturgical life' structured around attending the Divine Liturgy, taking Divine Communion regularly, and fasting. However, in these committed churchgoing circles there is little explicit eschatological discussion about the Second Coming. The paper argues that the intensity of fasting practices in the liturgical everyday not only produce more proximate expectations, but also provide potential glimpses of the Divine now, thus removing the emphasis on a far-sighted eschatological vision. With a concerted focus on working on oneself in the present, the liturgical day-to-day does not need an abstract, sequential future to imbue it with meaning. But, just as such a lifestyle is a path to salvation, so too it produces social differentiation: churchgoing Orthodox find themselves out of kilter with contemporary Serbian society.

KEYWORDS Fasting; Serbia; theosis; Orthodox Christianity; Christian temporality

After the Divine Liturgy it is common for Serbian Orthodox churchgoers to sit around, chat, and drink coffee. During fieldwork in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo, I spent many hours at such gatherings, participating in discussions on a range of topics: politics, miracles, upcoming feast days, pilgrimage trips, and the Church calendar. However, a theme that almost never arose in these committed churchgoing circles was any explicit eschatological discussion of the Second Coming. Why, I wondered, was such discussion absent amongst Christians who were so ostensibly concerned with their own salvation? Curious, I once asked two middle-aged men why the 'Last Things' were hardly ever mentioned. Saša responded quickly: 'prayer, confession, fasting', before elaborating a few seconds later: 'It's less about talking, more about *doing*'. My other friend, Dušan, recounted a story of how some elderly women had once asked a priest about the 'signs' that would indicate Christ's return. The priest

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had apparently replied by discounting such speculation and emphasising *prayer* – and prayer alone – as the only appropriate human approach to such issues.

However spontaneous and off-the-cuff, the remarks of my interlocutors are insightful since they reveal deeper assumptions both about the Orthodox understanding of salvation and the temporal perceptions produced by such an understanding. The historian Scott Kenworthy argues that we should consider the Orthodox 'conception of salvation' so as to better understand the Orthodox relationship to the world (2008: 24). In the Orthodox view, salvation is an attempt to 'to restore communion with God, to attain likeness to God and participation in divine life' (2008). But, whilst full communion with God can only be 'fulfilled at the end of time', it is 'realizable to a certain extent in this life' (2008).

Indeed, practising Orthodox Christians claim to be pursuing or 'working on' their 'salvation' (*spasenje*), their earthly lives dedicated to this goal. Ana, a woman in her mid-fifties, once enthusiastically handed me a book that had marked her profoundly: 'This is, for me, the point of Orthodoxy – it made everything clear'. The book was *Deification as the Purpose of Man's Life* by Archimandrite George [Kapsanis] of the St Gregorios monastery on Mount Athos.[1] As the title suggests, the short text elucidates the fundamental idea of deification or *theosis* (in Serbian, *oboženje*), the process of personal transformation whereby Orthodox Christians strive to become God-like. But the idea of striving to reach the Divine was expressed starkly and didactically in homilies, too. On one occasion, the local bishop urged the congregation to eschew speculation about the future of the world and 'worry about only one thing – how we will save our souls and how we will swim through the rough seas of this life'. On another occasion he was blunt: 'What is the main aim of our life? To gain the Heavenly Kingdom.'

In this article I show how Orthodox liturgical life is overwhelmingly characterised by an emphasis on living right in this world, *now*. What is less pronounced in this ethnographic context is a dispensationalist scanning for signs that might indicate Christ's return or a more explicit focus on the future. Saturated as it is with moral striving, ritual practice, fasting, and rich spiritual experience, the liturgical day-to-day does not need an abstract, sequential future to imbue it with meaning. My core argument is that – for the practising Orthodox I studied – the future is approached through a concerted focus on the present. Thus, taking my initial misunderstanding as an opening, and describing ethnographically a liturgical Orthodox model of time, I join recent attempts to push beyond thinking of Christian temporality solely in terms of rupture (Haynes 2020). The 'Orthodox path to human flourishing' has, of course, been convincingly analysed as a 'concrete process of ethical formation' (Naumescu 2018: 30). Here, however – drawing on data about fasting and eating practices – I focus less on the ethical dimension and more on the temporalities, tensions, and expectations that such an Orthodox view of salvation produces in people's lives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of my interlocutors did not explicitly conceive of their spiritual lives in terms of 'deification' or seeking to 'attain likeness' to God. Nor did they always employ such harsh, dramatic imagery as the bishop. However, regardless of whether people choose to read their religious lives in theological terms or not, certain assumptions about eschatology and salvation are *implicit* in Orthodox practice.

To put the issue in the form of a question: If 'salvation' is conceived as a process that can be worked on *now*, if the eternal is potentially proximate, how does this shape people's liturgical lives? Or, put otherwise, what sort of temporality is produced by striving to 'attain the likeness'?

For Max Weber, the thrust of 'religions of salvation' – by which he understands those 'that hold out deliverance from suffering to their adherents', and a category in which we can include Christianity – is 'to direct a way of life to the pursuit of a sacred value' (Weber et al. 2009: 327). 'The rational aim of redemption religion', he argues, is 'to secure for the saved a holy state, and thereby a habitude that assures salvation' (Weber et al. 2009). Weber insists on the internalised dimension of this process: the more the source of suffering is understood to be 'inward', the more the religion proffers the believer 'a *permanent* state which makes him inwardly safe against suffering' (Weber et al. 2009, original emphasis). Now, Weber's language of 'inwardness' arguably has a Protestant inflection which may be unsuitable for fully capturing the Orthodox experience.[2] And, taken word for word, his formulation possibly sounds overly mechanical and formulistic.[3]

However, the point I want to take from Weber is that he characterises 'salvation' less in terms of distant, future-focused goals, and more in terms of 'states'. Here, 'salvation' has to with a 'habitude', a state which can be worked on in the present moment. Importantly, he speaks not of forward-looking projection (salvation as future prospect), but of the *internal*. The Orthodox work of salvation is something to be focussed on in the present, through an active spiritual life dedicated to the 'conscientious cultivation of the Christian virtues', as Simion Pop has described for his committed Romanian Orthodox informants (2018: 216). Such a framing of salvation is helpful to start thinking through how some Orthodox engage with transcendental absolutes, obliquely, through everyday practice such as fasting.

My arguments draw on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with practising Orthodox Christians in and around Kraljevo, a town with an urban population of over 68,000. Whilst the majority of ethnic Serbs identify nominally as 'Orthodox', only a slim minority attend church regularly, actively seeking to live a 'liturgical life' focussed on taking regular Divine Communion. This said, I do not wish to suggest that such practising Orthodox Christians are a bounded, homogenous group. The people who take an interest in this sort of life are demographically-diverse, varying in age, education, and socio-economic status. But, in seeking to live in step with the Church, they thus find themselves surrounded by a wider population that is often rather perplexed and irritated by their regular churchgoing.

Given the particular contemporary context I am describing, it is important to distinguish my work from ethnographies of small-scale, agrarian settings in Greece (Hart 1992: 225–263; Du Boulay 2009), but also Serbia (Halpern 1967: 232–245), which have offered detailed analyses of the passage of the Orthodox year. Whilst Juliet du Boulay's subtle account of how the seasonal and liturgical year flow together is convincing for a rural Greek village in the 1960s, it would be idealistic to imagine such a homogenous, liturgically-inflected temporality in sprawling, postsocialist, urban Kraljevo. Practising Orthodox *do* read the liturgical year in cyclical, calendrical terms – although this

sensibility hardly issues forth from collectively held assumptions in the town at large. On the contrary, people who try to follow the liturgical calendar find themselves not so much participating in harmonious, collective agrarian rhythms, but rather slightly out of step with contemporary Serbian life. Thus, the second part of my argument is that through striving to live liturgically, practising Orthodox come to feel out of kilter with wider society. Such a tension is, however, generative for Orthodox self-understanding: regardless of how much the pace and perversions of 'modern' life in Serbia are objects of criticism, they are also a key means through which an Orthodox temporality constitutes itself. Ultimately, that very awkwardness is deeply affirmative and indeed pleasurable – proof that one is on the right Orthodox path.

Orthodox Presents, Futures, and Ends

Du Boulay notes that Orthodox Christianity 'has been less concerned with mapping time as a linear movement from creation to apocalypse, and less troubled by millennial anxieties' (2009: 102), suggesting that 'the liturgical emphasis may seem to be as much on the cyclic as on the forward moving character of sacred history' (2009: 102–103). And, through her fine-grained elucidation of the liturgical year, she demonstrates how the cyclic effectively deemphasises the linear. However, whilst the future is devalued in a spiritual sense, the present is not. After all, the main thrust of Archimandrite George's book on *theosis* is that people 'can become gods by Grace'; humans might begin entering into union with God *now*. And, as Renée Hirschon (1998) suggests, in the Orthodox view, the divine realm (and flickers of eschatological fullness) are close at hand.

Such a view of time was illustrated by a conversation I had with Jovana – a lively woman in her mid-twenties, a secondary school teacher – whom I met at church. She was slightly taken aback when, in response to her mentioning 'salvation', I asked whether she had ever contemplated the Second Coming:

> No, I have never thought about it. Of course, as a believer (*vernik*) it means something to me to think of Him … But I don't need to talk about it. Maybe I have more of a need to talk about some general things, about fasting.

She nevertheless shared her thoughts about 'salvation':

> Of course, nobody's ever come back to tell us what it [salvation] looks like. So it's an unknown for everybody. And as soon as there is an unknown people draw a boundary … Now, it's an unknown for me – but I do everything because of it, and I know why I do it. … I even think that nobody can actually say what salvation is. It's something that we strive towards, but we simply can't know exactly whether we're doing everything right.

Perhaps somebody who had been going to church longer, an older person, might have opted to be less candid, or offered a more assured theological response. But with her honest – and initially bemused – answer, Jovana makes a crucial point. My question about the Second Coming was perhaps stimulating academically (Jovana said that she would think about it some more, that it was an interesting point), but it certainly failed to identify what makes liturgical practice compelling. A meaningful liturgical life can exist independently of abstract discussion about 'salvation'. Jovana said that she

would rather talk about *fasting* – a comment which is revealing and to which I return. Arguably, fasting is in and for itself an eschatological engagement, it is the work of salvation subsumed in practice.

The Orthodox model of time that I am describing can be better illuminated by momentarily contrasting it with a radically different model. Specifically, I am thinking of the particular version of Protestant eschatology described by Joel Robbins in his now classic analysis of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin, converts to Christianity, know that Christ will undoubtedly return, although they do not know when. Robbins describes 'a sloping temporal order in which people are forever pitched forward, placing their best attention on the future and their best energy on their efforts to be ready for that future' (2004: 164; see also 2011). For Urapmin, living in 'a constant state of millennial attentiveness' means that 'almost every action is produced with one eye toward its bearing on the actor's project of salvation' (2004: 164). Now, whilst the present becomes 'an important temporal arena' wherein to pursue 'good Christian lives', it is essentially diminished: it is the *future* which is symbolically salient and which structures the 'meaning of things' (2004: 163).

In Kraljevo, liturgical time is weighted differently. My interlocutors know that Christ's Second Coming is an event on the horizon, though the way it shapes everyday expectations and routines is more indirect. Similarly, perhaps, to Naomi Haynes' Pentecostal interlocutors in the Zambian Copperbelt (2020: 62), the people I knew were not especially attentive to the Eschaton in their daily lives. This contrasts with the American Evangelical context described by Vincent Crapanzano where Christ's Second Coming is 'anticipated and expected', and the expectation 'characteristic of the immediate future' is shifted onto the 'remote' one (2007: 423). For practising Orthodox Christians, the Second Coming is just not (indeed, *should not be*) an explicit everyday concern (cf. Robbins 2001), and that point on the horizon predominantly works to shape time *implicitly*. A life lived liturgically – potentially inflected with glimpses of the Divine, *now* – saps the messianic urgency of a timeline conceived in linear terms. Otherwise put, through being able to (potentially) experience Divine presence as proximate, the symbolic weight of the 'future' is diminished.

Moreover, people claim that in overly focussing on the future one loses sight of the more pressing tasks at hand. Ivan, a man in his forties who works for an insurance company, suggested that whilst he knew 'intimately' that the Second Coming would happen at some unknown point, it was inappropriate to focus on it:

> If I constantly think about it I'll lose my compass; there are other priorities. I need to prepare myself for Christ's Coming, understand? [If] I were waiting for the Coming but not doing anything, I wouldn't get married, wouldn't make a home, wouldn't work. Just 'ok! We're waiting for Christ's Second Coming!' But you need to make an effort.

For Ivan, the inevitability of Christ's return does not imply abandoning everything to wait. Rather, that time should be filled with readying oneself. The anticipated Second Coming sets the tone and the task, though the event itself should not be the focus. He elaborated on the importance of continual *readiness* for Christ's return: 'you should think more about being ready, cleansed of sin. And being upstanding (*ispravan*)'.

And, like several other interlocutors, he directed me to the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, Matthew 25:1–13 with its ultimate message: 'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.'

Unlike the Scottish Protestants studied by Joseph Webster – for whom scanning the near future for signs was an 'essential part' of their 'eschatological experience' (2013: 180) – Orthodox Christians often reject this sort of speculation. Ivan downplays projection and urges a sort of self-oriented, non-speculative ever-readiness. One quotation that circulated on a social media group dedicated to Orthodox writings stated: 'If God had wanted us to know the future, He would have revealed it to us.' Of course, Ivan's explanation (be ready), Saša's riposte with which I opened the article (less talking, more doing), and the bishop's call to avoid speculation are a particular mode of eschatological thought insofar as they are all premised on that which is to come. But, rather than ascribing value to the place between now and then, they completely absorb the futuristic element in claims about the act of being prepared. To play with Robbins (2004) metaphor, it might be better to say that my Orthodox interlocutors are not so much 'pitched forward' as pitched at an attentiveness to the here and now, focussing on honing their relationship with God.

And here there is a related point. Whilst the Second Coming and Final Judgment might be seen as indirectly driving liturgical life, they remain abstract events. There is, however, another deadline which is more pressing than the Eschaton itself, and that is one's own death. After death, a person can no longer work on themselves, nor can they repent. Their soul consequently becomes wholly dependent on the prayers of the living to intercede on their behalf and ask that God takes them into His Kingdom. One middle-aged man said that Christians should 'always remember death' for precisely this reason. Death – and uncertainty about when it will come – places a considerably more imaginable and proximate gauge on a person's religious endeavours, and can act as prompt for trying to live the right way.

Of course, sometimes people do talk and read explicitly about the End times. Milomir, a middle-aged railway mechanic, gave me a booklet entitled *The Biblical Holy Prophecies about the Last Globalization of Humanity* – a selection of Biblical writings about the Last Things, assembled and introduced in quite dramatic terms by a certain Monk Nikolaj. Other people responded to my questions on this topic by suggesting that I simply read the Book of Revelation. I have heard several people cite the coronavirus pandemic – and the 'fear' and suffering it has induced – as proof that the last days have begun. However, the point is that whilst the impending Eschaton is undoubtedly of interest to some, it does not directly shape the rhythms of everyday liturgical life. But I now turn to a practice which does, and which is tangible, meaningful and immediate: fasting.

Fasting Food, Taste, and Expectation

Writing in the parish newsletter during Great Lent, a Kraljevo priest offered some reflections on the aim of fasting:

> Fasting should be a personal feat (*podvig*) and an endeavour of restraint, sacrifice and prayer, an expression and method of testifying love and forgiveness aimed at the transformation of the whole person, abstention from evil and sin, and the creation of a correct relationship towards nature and God (Parezanović 2017: 10).

In this hopeful view of what fasting should be, personal restraint is ultimately transformative of persons and their surroundings, and can nurture their relationship with the Divine. It is hard to overemphasise the significance of fasting in contemporary Serbian Orthodox life. That the topic is so frequently the subject of priestly reflections indicates not only its centrality to the work of being Orthodox, but also that as a practice it needs to be constantly reinterpreted and assigned meaning. Fasting is crisscrossed with numerous interpretations: personal habit or superstition, family tradition, priestly endorsement, and theological explication. Anastasia Mitrofanova (2018) aptly describes the discourse around fasting in post-Soviet Russia as 'polyphonic'. Fasting can be seen by people as an outwards (even pompous) display of piety, or a gauge by which to measure someone else's. Fasting can be intellectualised ('fasting is not about food'), just as it can involve carefully scrutinising ingredients. It both imposes culinary restrictions and inspires ingenuity in the kitchen. But my point is that regardless of how it is theorised and undertaken, fasting is a crucial element of what makes Orthodox practice immediate and compelling on a day to day basis. Here I describe how food allows lofty Christian ideas to percolate into the everyday, and how eating certain things at certain times produces specific temporalities. To use Diego Malara's deft formulation, 'the elementary forms of religious life are alimentary ones' (2018: 26).

The Orthodox year revolves around four principal fasts. The Nativity Fast (*Božićni post*) begins on 28th November and runs up to Christmas on 7th January. The strictest and longest fast is in preparation for Easter and is technically constituted of two parts. Great Lent (*Veliki post*) stretches from 'Clean Monday' up until Lazarus Saturday (a period of 40 days) and then, after the bridge of Saturday and Palm Sunday, the Holy Week Fast leads from Monday up to Easter day. The Apostles' Fast (*Petrovski post*), which varies in length, begins on the Second Monday after Pentecost and continues until 12th July, the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul. Finally, the Dormition Fast (*Velikogospojinski post)* lasts from the 14th to 28th August, the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. Fasts are kept for the two Feasts of the Cross (*Krstovdan*) on 18th January and 14th September, and the Feast of the Beheading of St John the Baptist on 11th September. With the exception of 'Bright Week' (the week following Easter) and in the period from Christmas day up until 18th January, Wednesdays are invariably fasting days (in remembrance of Christ's betrayal), as are Fridays (in remembrance of His Crucifixion).

In its simplest form, 'fasting' implies abstention from meat, fish and dairy products. Within this broad framework are nuances. The Serbian calendar distinguishes between 'fasting on water' (*post na vodi*) and 'fasting on oil' (*post na ulju*). Logically, then, fasting on water limits a person to food that is either not cooked (nuts, fruit) or is at most boiled (rice, soups). Fasting on oil, whilst still proscribing anything of animal origin, opens up a wider ('tastier') range of foodstuffs and the possibility of

frying. The severity of restrictions shifts depending on the particular fast and calendar day. The Dormition Fast is known for being 'harder' with more days 'on water', whilst the Nativity Fast is generally viewed as less arduous since there are more days 'on oil'. Within Great Lent itself there are gradations of severity capturing the mood of the date in question. 'Wine' is allowed on some days, whilst on Palm Sunday 'fish is permitted'. The first week of Great Lent is strictly 'on water' whilst on Good Friday one should try to abstain from eating anything at all until after Vespers in the afternoon. Note, too, that those wishing to take Divine Communion are expected to observe the 'Liturgical Fast' which means abstention from all food and drink (and sexual activity) from the midnight before the Liturgy up to the point of receiving Communion the following morning.

Many of Kraljevo's less practising residents choose to receive Divine Communion either at the beginning or end of each of the main fasts. However, the vast majority of the more active churchgoers that I know in Kraljevo keep the four main fasts and fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Communion always demands some form of prior fasting in spiritual and bodily anticipation and, observing all of the fasts means being able to take Communion regularly, without having to undertake any exceptional preparation. For my more committed interlocutors, fasting is integral to their Christian identities; it is normal, it patterns life. Marija, who teaches religious education at a local primary school, put the matter simply, downplaying the alimentary dimension of fasting and pointing to what she sees as its primary purpose: 'The aim is important to me – unification with Christ. What's hard for me if my goal is unification with Christ?! It's not hard for me to keep any fast.' The prospect of drawing closer to God is thus comfortably embedded in daily eating routines.

However, whilst for practising Orthodox fasting is an everyday, non-exceptional practice, it is also definitional of their identity and thus never so banal as to be completely unworthy of commentary. The first time I spoke with Jovana, for instance, she recalled her childhood, and how she had started going to church. Curious about the development of her spirituality, I enquired whether she had always believed in God. She replied: 'I knew that He existed, but I didn't always fast. Because my parents didn't really fast.' Thus, in one breath she confirmed that, as a child, she believed in the existence of God (not an insignificant claim) and immediately conditioned this with the fact that she did not fast. Believing in God is one thing, but this faith needs to be fulfilled in doing, in acts.[4] It was starting to *fast* that marked her transition to being a believer. Other people offered similar insights. Zoran – a young man who attended church frequently – simply defined 'devout' (*pobožni*) people as 'those who go to church, who fast'.

In his brilliant analysis of Ethiopian Orthodox practices, Tom Boylston argues that fasting and the Church calendar 'establish Orthodoxy at a prediscursive level' (2018: 42). Eating practices allow for an immediate, measurable expression of Christianity. As Boylston puts it, creedal and doctrinal questions aside, through fasting 'Christians are already doing the work of being Christian, together' (2018). Practising Orthodox in Kraljevo certainly report spiritual experiences that come during fasting, and they can elucidate their thoughts in a similar way to the priest that I cited above. However, food

keeps theological abstraction rooted. It is practice that mediates those Christian absolutes in a tangible, everyday way.

In such a liturgical model of time, fasting produces its own more proximate expectations. In particular, Easter is often conceived as a meeting or 'encounter' on the horizon towards which people strive to be ready. A greetings card distributed by priests to their parishioners during Great Lent began: 'Dear brothers and sisters! It is with joy that we announce that we have started towards our meeting (*da smo krenuli u susret*) with the great feast of Christ's Resurrection.' In his homily on the first Sunday of Great Lent, the priest reminded the congregation that 'every meeting requires preparation (*priprema*)'. The message of the homily was that before Easter, Christians, like Christ, should enter the 'desert of fasting' for 40 days. This preparation could take different forms. 'Those who sleep a lot can sleep less and dedicate more time to God.' 'People who enjoy eating a lot can try to eat less.' Thus, given its centrality and significance as a feast, Easter is seen to demand an equivalent level of self-preparatory work. It is a basic but important observation that the more effort a person channels into the fast – the more they refrain from comfortable habits and tasty foods – the greater the allure of its end (see also Malara 2018: 32). Easter and Christmas, most notably, are construed as future events that are actively anticipated and worked towards in the kitchen and at the dining table, just as much as they are during the Liturgy itself.

Ultimately, this attentiveness to what is eaten when imbues daily life with concrete anticipations, rhythms and shared temporal coordinates, as well as affective, gastrointestinal and bodily moods. At its most mundane it can amount to: 'After the fast is over, I'll take you to an amazing restaurant that does great roast meat.' The act of eating can no longer be non-reflexive: food becomes labelled, categorised afresh. Bodily and Orthodox calendrical rhythms become 'hard to separate' (Boylston 2018: 3).

For example, on 23rd November I was the guest of a family celebrating their patron saint day (*slava*) – *Aranđelovdan*, the Feast of the Archangels. Towards the end of dinner, one woman mused, as if she were slightly surprised at how quickly it had come around, 'Fast starts next week' (at which her teenage daughter, sitting next to her, groaned). But she continued, reasoning: 'no, it's a good thing, after all of these *slava* and weddings we need to slow down a bit'. Weddings and *slava* outside of fasting periods are copious culinary affairs, and the move into the fast marks a sudden and notable shift away from hams, sausage, cheeses, baked pork, and cream cakes. Zoran once told me about the enormous pizza he had specially ordered on the eve of Great Lent, and his disappointment about not being able to finish it. Pizza would not be an option again for the next six weeks.

Indeed, the taste of the year changes. After the Liturgy is over, a church or monastery *slava* always ends with a *posluženje*, a meal served for the congregation in the refectory. Outside of fasting periods, the stuffed cabbage rolls (*sarma*) are filled with mincemeat. The texture is coarser, they are more resistant to cut with a knife. On fasting days *sarma* are filled with rice and thus have a creamier, velvety smoothness. During the Apostles' Fast a woman offered me one of the bread rolls (*kifla*) that she had brought along for a picnic and I, grateful, commented that it was tasty. She was

quick to correct me: no, it would be much tastier if it were not a 'fasting *kifla*', and if she had been able to use butter, milk and oil. Coffee with milk becomes off limits during fasts – unless you are in Belgrade where *Costa Coffee* serves soya milk. (*Costa* can become the café of choice for precisely this reason.)

People flag up, and seek to clarify, the fasting credentials of meals and foodstuffs. On Great Thursday, after the Liturgy: 'Would you like to go for a fasting breakfast (*posni doručak*)?' At a picnic: 'Would you like a fasting roll?' On a coach journey home from a monastery visit, a woman is offering around biscuits. People are hesitant and before taking one ask: 'Is it fasting?' (*Da li je posno?*). Sometimes, when I declined food, people would try to tempt me, reminding me of its fasting quality ('It's ok, it's *posno*'), as if that might be the reason underlying my refusal, not my sheer satedness.

However, for my interlocutors, fasting is more than alimentary attentiveness, however satisfying that is in and of itself. Mladen, a man in his mid-twenties, reported having less sexual energy when he abstained from meat, meaning that he found it easier to pray during those times. Jovana expanded in some detail on her perception of fasting:

> For me concretely, as a believer, the very fact that I pay attention to what I eat in some way makes me pay attention to what I say. For me it's linked. Obviously, I try to always pay attention to what I say and how I relate to people. But especially during the Fast, that particular food, when I sit down to eat I remember that I need to pay a bit more attention. … And for me that is the meaning of fasting.

And then, like several other people, she makes a point about controlling one's passions:

> Through fasting you control yourself. Each of us would happily go and eat a burger, something really greasy, but instead these days we're not going to please ourselves. Instead, hang on, and these days just eat some bread rolls, or a banana, or something like that. In that way, we rinse ourselves (*ispiramo sebe*).

Finally, she considers what she sees as the spiritual consequences of fasting:

> You restrict yourself a little, so as to get back to the basics of faith, simply to dedicate yourself to that faith, to spirituality – we fill ourselves with the spirit (*produhovljavamo se*). We read some books, at least that's what I do. … To remember where we've made mistakes, to confess … To go back a little bit and remember everything that's happened.

In Jovana's description, fasting has to do with nurturing a renewed attentiveness to herself and to those around her. She evokes it as a process of spiritual cleansing, cutting out excesses to make room for loftier thoughts, and getting back to the basics of Orthodoxy. She is describing how she transforms her relationship to herself over extended periods of fasting, through acts such as choosing a banana over a burger. However, let me now turn to one specific day where rigorous fasting produces a very particular atmosphere, forcing a focus on the present.

The Atmosphere of Good Friday

During my fieldwork, Good Friday was a calm, sunny day in April. I went to the morning reading of the Hours at about 8am. Afterwards I met Radovan, a retired

man who was widely seen as eccentric, and yet who was invariably enthusiastic to help me with my research. He greeted me and then said, in a hushed, almost conspiratorial tone: 'Today God was killed. It's a great tragedy'. He explained very solemnly that 'today you don't eat or drink anything' (which I knew), before adding 'but let's go for a quick brandy' (which was not what I had anticipated). We went to a bar near the church, and sat on the terrace and drank, whilst he explained that, on Good Friday, the natural world becomes still and hushed out of respect for the Lord.

Later, I called in to see Miroljub, a very observant, unemployed man in his fifties. Several days earlier he had shown me his fridge: he had removed all of the shelves, and cleaned it thoroughly. The sole contents now were a lamb's head, a shoulder of pork, slices of ham, and several bags of giblets – the food that would break the fast. He had invited me to help him boil and paint Easter eggs, an activity that is traditionally reserved for Good Friday. Miroljub had not eaten all morning. He was calmer, less ebullient. He asked whether I had had a coffee, to which I said that I had not, to which he replied: 'Good, we don't have to'. He did not put on the water. Hardly amused by Radovan and I going for brandy, he explained quite sternly that humans are free to follow rules or not. Good Friday, he insisted, 'is the saddest holiday (*praznik*) of the Christian year'. Miroljub stated, again, that we should refrain from eating until the evening, and that, even then, it should be nothing more elaborate than a slice of bread. We put the eggs in the pan to boil. To pass the time, he suggested that we watch *The Passion of the Christ* together. So we spent the morning slumped in front of the television watching the excruciating suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, and periodically going into the kitchen to monitor the eggs. That afternoon I visited Miodrag and Jelena – a couple in their early sixties. Jelena told me that she had not eaten all day, and that Miodrag had only nibbled something before going to work. And, in a noteworthy change to her hospitality, she did not offer me a coffee. They, too, were decorating eggs. Miodrag did this pensively, more morose than usual and unwilling to chat.

Boylston notes that fasting is able to 'establish an identification between today and the archetypal event' (2018: 43), and Good Friday is a particularly vivid illustration. For the Orthodox Christians I studied, Good Friday *is* Good Friday. They are able to 'participate' in those past events (see Carroll 2015: 196). Radovan said that 'today God was killed' and *not* 'today we remember the day when God was killed'. He even perceived the gravitas of the feast day as being reflected phenomenologically in the sudden serenity of the natural world. Fasting does not ask people to 'think' of Christ's suffering, but rather 'reenact a small part of it' (Boylston 2018: 43). My interlocutors would not state explicitly that they were seeking to partake in Christ's torment, but in refraining from eating and drinking (and in watching Mel Gibson's representation of it) they produced a certain mood for the day. Another acquaintance once described the general atmosphere on Good Friday as 'like being at a funeral'.

Through these examples, I showed how fasting (and feasting) reify liturgical time. Fasting, I suggest, does two things here. On the one hand it produces, in a very real and non-abstract sense, its own immediate horizons and expectations. On the other, in making Christian time so proximate – in terms of meal choices and practical cooking considerations – fasting deemphasises a more abstract, long-term view of

Christian time. Fasting centres bodily energies on the present and this hunger can, potentially, help to point people beyond it. However, whilst the Orthodox Christians I studied live within a national context that is unambiguously ‘Orthodox’ (Good Friday is a state holiday in Serbia), in their fasting and liturgy-going they are not participating in ‘mainstream’ pursuits.

In This World, but Not of It

On 8th December, I was invited to a pig slaughter (*svinjokolj*) at the house of some friends who, whilst unequivocally identifying as ‘Orthodox’, very rarely attended the Liturgy and who, by their own admission, fasted when it suited them. As should now be clear, the date is significant since it falls *after* 28th November which is always the beginning of the Nativity Fast. My interlocutors from church reacted gravely when I told them where I was going. It is common knowledge that as well as the practical business of butchering the pig, a good *svinjokolj* always involves drinking and the consumption of pork products. This would mean breaking the fast and this was why, in theory, *svinjokolj* should be completed *before* the end of November. When I later described the event to Ana she ruefully reflected on the situation:

> That *svinjokolj* during the Fast will destroy us [Serbs]. In enjoyment (*uživanje)* you forget spiritual principles. … Spiritual principles always come after bodily (*telesni*) ones [i.e. it should be vice versa]. The body comes first, and then the spiritual. But this only matters for fanatics like me. Enjoyment in food, enjoyment in fashion … But this is all a lie! … We live for this worldly life. We forget that view on eternity (*večnost*).

Here, the very *idea* of a *svinjokolj* during the fasting period leads Ana to elaborate on Orthodox assumptions about ‘this world’ and its heavenly counterpart, and how over-indulgence in ‘enjoyment’ clouds a person’s view of the eternal.[5] In her opinion, the Nativity Fast is a time for restraint, reflection and prayer, not for the merriment and excess that comes with slaughtering pigs. Now, Ana is more than aware that her views are not widely held and even jokingly refers to herself as a ‘fanatic’. However, her stance is quite ordinary amongst regular churchgoers.

In aspiring to lead liturgical lives, practising Orthodox can find themselves slightly out of step with those around them. In short, a liturgical conception of time does not always map neatly onto the rhythms, calendars and plans of the contemporary Serbian state and much of its population. In Du Boulay’s account of rural Greece (2009: 101–133), and in Boylston’s description of the Zege peninsula (2018: 41), fasting, labour and the seasons interweave to produce a homogenous, shared sense of time. One cannot make quite the same argument for contemporary central Serbia. In their mode of engagement with Orthodoxy – working on their salvation through trying to live liturgically – practising Orthodox place themselves at odds with the many people who are comfortable, indeed fulfilled, with asserting a more nominal Orthodox identity. John Dulin (2020) describes an interreligious setting in Ethiopia, where, in an attempt to avoid ethnic conflict, Orthodox Christians and Muslims seek to conceal their opinions of the others’ fasts. But in Kraljevo – where the overwhelming majority of the

population identify as Orthodox – people do not always feel the need to hold back on their judgement, critiquing and commenting on each other's degree of piety (Lackenby n.d.).

This said, it is not an overstatement to remark that, in recent years, fasting has become something of a social phenomenon in Serbia. One survey found that 28.7% of those questioned fasted 'regularly' and 44.7% did so 'periodically' (Mladenović 2011: 216). Bakeries frequently indicate acceptable 'fasting' goods with small yellow stickers, and in supermarkets various foodstuffs – from packet soups to pasta – are labelled *posno*, fasting. There are fasting equivalents to cheddar cheese and to take-away pizza. However, whilst fasting discourse can comfortably occupy the public and media realms of post-Yugoslav Serbia, not everybody is fasting in the way the Church would teach – and nor do they necessarily wish to. Thus, rather than fostering cohesion and common purpose, scrupulously observing the fasting calendar can, at the extreme, produce fissures, boundaries and awkwardness between churchgoers and others, or at least force practising Orthodox into taking a personal decision about whether to break their fast in some social settings.

Ivana – a married woman in her forties – observed that her colleagues at the local hospital are ever curious about her sex life during the fasting periods. 'Do you really not sleep together during the fast?!' Over time she has grown used to their inquisitiveness, and recounted their fascination with some amusement (though also with sadness at their lack of comprehension). For the argument that I am making, what is noteworthy is that her liturgical life did not go unnoticed, and it was a source of bemusement. Nemanja, a man in his early thirties who works for a local law firm, described similar reactions. He recalled the surprise of his colleagues when he continued to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays after the end of the Nativity Fast in January. 'But you've just finished fasting! Why are you fasting again?' For him this was self-evident; for his colleagues, less sensitive to the intricacies of Orthodox practice, his behaviour appeared overly zealous. Why bother fasting again if you have been fasting for so long? A more radical case involves Zoran who lives at home with his parents and yet buys (and cooks) his own food. His parents, slightly sceptical of his churchgoing, do not fast themselves, nor see fit to prepare special food for him. However, the arrangement that he will provide his own meals, he explained, is not without its significant financial and practical drawbacks (see also Mitrofanova 2018: 9).

Of course, fasting is a personal choice. And, just as some people continue to fast even in settings which are unfavourable to it (Zoran's living arrangements being a prime example), others, out of politeness, may forego fasting in some social scenarios. Miodrag and Jelena were invited to a wedding in August, during the Apostles' Fast. The bridal couple were not particularly liturgically-orientated and the catering arrangements reflected this.[6] Not wishing to cause any unpleasantness for the hosts, my friends ate some of the meat and cheese, albeit with restraint. However, having broken the fast, they both decided to avoid taking Communion the following week. In socialising beyond exclusively 'Church' settings practising Orthodox are sometimes placed in such situations and forced to weigh up the social and spiritual ramifications of choosing to fast or not.

A particularly pertinent example is New Year. Since the Serbian Orthodox Church follows the Julian calendar, Christmas is observed on 7th January and – by logical extension – 'Serbian New Year' falls on 13th January. The Serbian state and most of the Serbian population celebrate New Year on 1st January meaning that, again, a secular, non-Orthodox moment of celebration inevitably falls *during* the Nativity fast. This is a source of consternation for liturgically-minded Orthodox Christians. On 29th December, during the period when national television bombards viewers with festive commercials, Father David warned his congregation against succumbing to these media pressures. 'Being a stranger in this world is hard, but we [i.e. we Christians] must be strangers.' He elaborated for me in more detail a few days later:

> We have to be strangers in these surroundings, in our world … Because of that New Year which the media preaches and emphasizes … For them, Christmas isn't the central event … They don't celebrate how we celebrate … with that food and drink and madness all night. In those situations we need to be strangers. We have to be here, but we mustn't fit into that company. … We should behave in the way that we learnt about in the Gospels. We should be here, but without fitting into the surroundings of a worldly life.

Father David makes an explicit call for Christians to ignore the media onslaught and overindulgence that come with the New Year celebrations and retain their focus on the fast leading up to Christmas. Speaking in his hushed, fatherly tone this was hardly an aggressive rejection of society, per se. It was, however, a calm reminder that for Orthodox Christians 1st January should essentially be a non-event, meriting no attention. Most of my older informants simply go to bed, claiming indifference. Jovana said that, for her, going out with her friends on 31st December posed no problem, though she would eat fish, not meat, and refrain from drinking alcohol.

These various examples illustrate how, in following a calendar pegged to fasting and feast days and 'working on' their salvation, practising Orthodox Christians inevitably enter into a soft, yet real, counter-dynamic with contemporary Serbian society. Ana liked to speak in terms of 'Christian logic' which she described as a sort of 'anti-logic', always going *against* that which seems most impulsive and natural. She said: 'People can't understand that I'm much happier when I'm hungry than when I've eaten too much.'

In many ways, to self-identify as a believer (*vernik*) is to be in a dialogical relationship with 'unchurched' society. That mismatch of perceptions is grating (it can be annoying to be made to feel different, to be treated as overly pious), but it is also seen as the stuff of being Christian. The tension is, in itself, formative. Christians are called to be 'in this world but not of it', and trying to live liturgically can actually concretise this. Being outside of social norms can make eminent sense in Christian terms: 'true believers', I was very frequently reminded, 'were always a minority'.

However, Kenworthy has sought to dispel some of the overly simplistic stereotypes surrounding Orthodox 'otherworldliness', conservatism and the rejection of the fallen world, offering a more complex picture (2008: 22). Indeed, to live a liturgical life in Kraljevo is not an attempt to withdraw from the world. More regular churchgoers are not an isolated group who interact amongst themselves. On the contrary, tensions

arise precisely because they live, work and socialise in society, as lawyers, midwives, teachers, family members, friends, and neighbours. Now, the discourse within the Church is undeniably critical of what it sees as the poor moral condition of contemporary Serbia: the promiscuity, hedonism and corrosive influence of reality television. But this, I suggest, does not amount to a wholesale spurning of the fallen world in itself. Rather, the critique is premised on the idea that, for one, *it was not always thus* (there are frequent evocations of 'true values' and the way that Serbs lived 'before'), and second, that *it need not be like that now*. People, the Church argues, can *change*. Nevertheless, that perception of godless contemporary Serbia can be a useful foil against which to elaborate a liturgical identity.

There is, of course, another important idea implicit in Ana's thoughts on slaughtering pigs during the fast: if a person *does* restrain themselves from 'enjoyment' then they can potentially gain a glimpse of the eternal, now. In the Orthodox view, people are not irreversibly shackled to a 'worldly life' and have the capacities and freedom to step beyond it. And, in trying to avoid satedness at particular times, so Orthodox Christians try to feel closer to the Divine. The focus becomes the present, rather than a distant, unknown future.

In this sense, the data from central Serbia tessellates insightfully with Haynes' data from the Zambian Copperbelt. At one level, both Serbian Orthodox and Zambian Pentecostals have an ostensibly presentist focus and a 'lack of millennial fervor' (Haynes 2020: 63); Christ's return does not seem to hold a dominant place in everyday religious life (see also Haynes 2020: 62). However, in the 'prosperity gospel framework' (Haynes 2020), the present is a moment where one can potentially receive material abundance and blessings meaning that, logically, 'the distant promise of eternity' (Haynes 2020: 63) becomes less alluring. Heaven is temporally distant, and people are uncertain about their chances of attaining it anyway (Haynes 2020) In Orthodox Serbia, the relationship between the present and the eternal is calibrated differently. The present is valuable, not as a domain in which one can accrue blessings, but as a moment where the eternal might actually be glimpsed – eschatology is perpetually potentially present.

Conclusion

In abstract terms, *theosis* describes theologically the process whereby Orthodox Christians strive to attain 'likeness' with God. This article illustrated ethnographically the tensions and temporalities that such striving produces in the everyday. In particular I have focussed on fasting – a means by which my interlocutors claim to work on themselves and nurture a relationship with God. Such a concerted focus on the ongoing, day to day work of being Orthodox produces proximate expectations – feasts which are worked towards, anticipated, planned around, hungered for. But such a calendar minimises a sort of explicitly future-oriented temporality. The Eschaton is obviously pivotal to the Orthodox narrative, but a far-sighted eschatological vision is only indirectly driving liturgical time in Kraljevo. Here, salvation and ultimate moral judgment are subsumed in daily practice; absolutes are approached obliquely.

However, just as the Orthodox calendar provides reassuring spiritual-temporal coordinates for right living, so too it inevitably makes some events (pig slaughters, New Year) happen at the wrong time. Moreover, with its focus on food – a universal concern obviously shared by more and less practising Serbians – the fasting calendar makes some Orthodox Christians stand out when they eat differently. Indeed, as well as noting that church calendars can engender harmonious social relations (Boylston 2018; Malara 2018: 28) it is worth remembering that the opposite may well also be true – in post-Yugoslav Serbia fasting practices can produce disharmony, awkwardness and discord. The work of salvation can translate into social differentiation.

Regardless of how it is couched in theological terms, fasting is always *consequential* in some sense. At one level, it has to do with (discreetly or performatively) reaffirming an Orthodox Christian identity to oneself and to society at large. But it can be many overlapping sensations, whether satisfaction derived from keeping rules, joy at the prospect of being able to take Communion frequently, increased prayerfulness, longing for the fast to end, decreased libido, weight loss, or frustration at not being able to eat yoghurt. And such sensations are all very relevant to the anthropological study of Christian time. Our analysis has often focussed on people's explicit eschatological claims, their future-oriented discourses, or the ways in which they relate to and interpret Biblical scripture. But here I have suggested how we might also consider fasting and abstinence, that most 'basic' form of bodily discipline (Walker Bynum 1987: 2). We can look for Christian temporal structures embedded in taste and texture, hunger and satedness. Because, in one sense, Orthodox eschatology starts in the stomach.

Notes

1. The book was originally written in Greek and later translated into English and Serbian. For simplicity's sake, I cite from the English version which is available online: http://www.greekorthodoxchurch.org/theosis_purpose.html (accessed 10 August 2018).
2. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this important point.
3. And Orthodox readers might rather emphasise God's mysteriousness, suggesting that, however diligently worldly practice is undertaken, only He knows who will be saved. This said, the insistence that only God knows who will be saved is found in Protestantism too, and is integral to Weber's analysis of Calvin. I am grateful to the reviewer for underlining the latter point.
4. Jovana's comment about believing arguably points to much wider debates about belief and sincerity in Orthodox contexts, debates which I cannot deal with in depth here. My interlocutors frequently insist upon the centrality of sincere, steadfast belief (*vera*). However, for them, such belief has to be embodied, witnessed, enacted. That is why fasting is so crucial to Jovana's self-understanding as a 'believer'.
5. For a view of fasting expressed in a strikingly similar way albeit in a different ethnographic context, see the comments of one of Diego Malara's Ethiopian Orthodox informants (2018: 25).
6. The very fact that the couple organized their wedding in this period suggests that they were not overly concerned with Orthodox practices. Church weddings are not permitted during any of the four fasts, so couples wishing to have a religious ceremony (in addition to the legally-binding state formalities) have to wait. This is, note, one way in which the fasting rhythms of the Church can potentially impinge on those who might otherwise be indifferent to them.

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