

**“NOSTALGIA WITHOUT MEMORY”: A CASE STUDY OF AMERICAN CONVERTS  
TO EASTERN ORTHODOXY IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA**

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This dissertation explores the ascribed social meanings and processes of conversion among contemporary American converts to Eastern Orthodoxy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Employing the ethnographic field methods of participant observation and interviewing at two primary fieldsites, a Greek Orthodox and Orthodox Church in America parish, I examine how converts, as choice-makers using consumer-like strategies and print/electronic media to study and compare religious options, reflect and effect change in communities commonly regarded in the United States as preserving the languages and customs of various immigrant groups from Eastern, Southeastern Europe, and the Middle East. Much of the existing scholarly literature on Eastern Orthodoxy in the United States characterizes it as an ancient, unchanging form of Christianity that is highly resistant to the conditions of what religion scholars refer to as the “spiritual marketplace” of expansive religious diversity and individual choice-making in regard to religious affiliation. Yet, through the lens of conversion, I chart how the language and methods of the “marketplace” are taken-for-granted elements of church life, engrained in the words and actions of Orthodox clerics and lifelong church members in addition to converts themselves. Drawing upon the work of sociologist Ann Swidler, I argue that the marketplace remains one of the most powerful “toolkits” or “cultural repertoires,” although by no means the only one, by which local Orthodox Christians in Pittsburgh have come to understand their religious lives and serves as a new means of gauging the influence and engagement of Orthodox Christianity with its surrounding American culture.

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## **PREFACE**

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I dedicate this humble work to my mother and to little Elmo who see its completion through other eyes. I thank and love you all.

## 1.0 “NOSTALGIA WITHOUT MEMORY”<sup>1</sup>: A CASE STUDY OF AMERICAN CONVERTS TO EASTERN ORTHODOXY IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In his famous, psychological account of the phenomenon, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James outlines two models of conversion, the “volitional type” and “the type by self-surrender.” While “volitional” conversions involve change that “is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits,”<sup>2</sup> the “self-surrender type” is beset by “subconscious effects that are more abundant and often startling”<sup>3</sup> in the radical, instantaneous, highly emotional shifts they may contain. Rather forthrightly, James declares the “volitional type” to be “as a rule less interesting than those of the self-surrender type,”<sup>4</sup> thus justifying his analytical concern for conversions, in which “a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.”<sup>5</sup> Not only is James clearly much more interested in conversion as an *event* rather than as a *process*, but regardless of whether one attributes religious transformations ultimately to the interventions of superhuman agents, the convert is generally perceived as a person impelled, through an external force or set of circumstances, to change her religious consciousness or orientation. When describing the role of the self in conversion, James, for example, consistently portrays conversion as something that *happens* to an individual rather than something that she *does*. According to James, the person in such circumstances is alternately “to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance,”<sup>6</sup> in other words, to be the vessel of massive psychological shifts.

Yet, as an exception to this Jamesian “rule,” conversion, as a choice carefully made, as a gradual process consciously enacted through thoughtful comparison, study, and the “piece by piece” inculcation of new religious habits, *can* inspire genuine interest, curiosity, and admiration on the part of contemporary converts and their observers. It certainly did among the members of Eastern Orthodox churches in Southwestern Pennsylvania where I conducted ethnographic research (participant observation and extensive semi-structured interviewing) over the course of 2005-2006 to ascertain convert identity formation and maintenance in everyday parish and individual lives. One recent convert to Eastern Orthodoxy with whom I spoke remarked that his slow-in-coming, “volitionally” driven embrace of the church typically elicited frank astonishment on the part of lifelong Orthodox church members, “It has been kind of interesting to say the least ‘cause even in Pittsburgh you tell people that you converted to Orthodoxy and they look at you-I mean even Orthodox here look at you quizzically, ‘By choice? You *chose* to be Orthodox?’ They just look at you and they think that it’s bizarre that you would want to sign up for this stuffy old church that doesn’t have any fun at all.” The priest presiding over the church this convert attended considered the very *choice* to become an Orthodox Christian, regardless of the level of emotional “self surrender” involved, an occurrence of high drama to be put on display for the community. He described his approach, “I try to make it [conversion] as much of a public event as possible. . . . I think it imperative that everyone see this and that you verbally point it out to them, ‘This person was a Methodist and they saw in *your* church, in *your* faith, the true faith. They left all of that to become Orthodox, what you’ve been all your life.’ I think it can be very encouraging to people and help them rediscover their faith.”

Indeed, William James aside, the notion that contemporary Americans do choose to join the Orthodox Church, apart from uniting themselves in marriage to one of its members, has generated bemusement, puzzlement, and interest on the part of those within and outside the faith. By the late twentieth century, about a million of Orthodox Christianity’s 180 to 216 million members worldwide (estimates vary) resided in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Although first brought to North America at the end of the eighteenth century by Russian missionaries intent on spreading their faith to the indigenous peoples of

Alaska, Eastern Orthodoxy in the U. S., throughout most of the twentieth century, was regarded as something of an immigrant religion, tied to various groups from Eastern, Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, and not particularly open or attractive to American converts at large.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Orthodox Christianity, in the wake of a series of well-documented conversions of evangelical Protestants and persons from other religious confessions pointedly drawn to the church for theological and/or liturgical reasons beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing until the present, has appeared as an increasingly viable religious option for many Americans.<sup>9</sup> Often armed with considerable pre-conversion missionary experience (e.g., working for Protestant parachurch organizations such as the Campus Crusade for Christ) and post-conversion enthusiasm for their new faith, these early converts set upon the self-proclaimed task of spreading Orthodox Christianity to America at large through active evangelism and the establishment of mission parishes in areas of the U. S. where the historical presence of Orthodox Christians had been scarce.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, these American converts have been active in generating English-language literature on Orthodoxy, such as catechetical primers and conversion narrative anthologies, and filling the ranks of the clergy. According to Alexei D. Krindatch, over fifty percent of the students at St. Vladimir's and St. Tikhon's, two major Orthodox seminaries in the U. S., today are converts and many jurisdictions including the Antiochian, Orthodox Church in America (OCA), and Carpatho-Rusyn archdioceses derive the majority of their new membership from individuals entering the church as adults.<sup>11</sup> Prominent academics and even media-figures in the U. S., such as the eminent church historian the late Jaroslav Pelikan, the scholar of African-American religions Albert Raboteau, and the Pittsburgh Steelers team member, Troy Polumalu, among others, have converted to Orthodoxy in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

Although William James' consideration of conversion as an interiorized event involving a radical shift in a person's life orientation does make its occasional appearance in my conversations and interviews with Orthodox church participants, the most common use of the term "convert" among informants involved the notion that such persons had consciously entered the church in late adolescence or adulthood and had been administered the official Orthodox initiation rituals of baptism/chrisamation and or confession.<sup>13</sup> This is how I have defined a "convert" for the purposes of this study. As the opening

informants' quotes suggest, choice-making in regard to religious affiliation was a critical, much commented upon, feature of convert identity often considered naturally absent in the Orthodox-born. As we shall discuss in greater depth in chapter six, lifelong Orthodox church members too act as significant choice-makers in the parish setting, as ritual critics and in their continued affiliation with the Orthodox Church. Yet, in a manner paralleling Zygmunt Bauman's view of the "stranger" as someone grafted historically and culturally, rather than through nature (i.e., by birth) onto a new community, the convert is in most cases a parish "insider" who remembers and is remembered as once standing "outside" the church.<sup>14</sup> As the "stranger" of Bauman's analysis, the convert too is known for her "late entry" into community life or what Bauman describes as "the fact that he had entered the realm of the life-world at a point of time which can be exactly pinpointed. He did not belong into the life-world 'initially,' 'originally,' 'from the very start,' 'since time immemorial,' ... The memory of the *event* of his coming makes his very presence an event in history, rather than a fact of nature."<sup>15</sup> Thus, convert movement from the "outside" to the "inside," what Bauman refers to as the "master-opposition,"<sup>16</sup> represents a consciousness and deliberateness in affiliation that lifelong Orthodox members are believed to lack. Furthermore, the "outside" portion of converts' pre-conversion lives often possesses its own contours in the form of multiple shifts in religious affiliation and experimentation with various worldview options over the course of years or decades.

Seeking and choice-making, common ways in which Americans today more generally describe their religious lives, appear in informants' words and actions in two guises: as narrative formulae and ways of learning about the world. First, seeking and choice-making are principal narrative threads holding together and propelling the extensive life histories of Orthodox converts collected for this study. These vocabularies of choice and choice-making largely supplant traditional theological language regarding conversion processes and meanings. Converts to Orthodoxy describe themselves as "seekers" or "shoppers" intent on being "satisfied" in their new faith rather than as "sinners" in need of "salvation." While most of the converts and other Orthodox adherents whom I met did possess a strong belief in the existence of superhuman agents (i.e., God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, and the like), these figures

typically remained in the biographical shadows. Informants placed themselves at the center of their narratives as the primary instigators and motivators of religious change in their lives, rather than as the recipients of action from external ecclesial or divine authorities.

Second, these narratives are richly detailed accounts of the mechanics of conversion as an epistemological endeavor, as a Bakhtinian “knowledge through struggle”<sup>17</sup> or what Jean and John Comaroff refer to as the “long conversation”<sup>18</sup> of negotiation and strategizing inherent to processes of cultural or religious change. Conversion does not happen to the converts of this study, it is something they fundamentally *do*. Converts engage in extensive campaigns of investigating different worldview options and religious practices through formal study, private reading, and comparison. They become critically self-aware in evaluating their own needs, desires, and beliefs vis-à-vis the religious options available for experimentation or adoption. They develop finely tuned choice-making skills and acquire the self-confidence to employ them outside the sanction of ecclesial or societal authorities. Converts, as we shall see, effectively arrive at the ecclesial gates of Orthodoxy as well-exercised, fully habitualized choice-makers, virtuosi of the American spiritual marketplace (a concept to be discussed momentarily), rather than as obedient daughters and sons of their carefully selected “mother church.” Nor is choice-making limited to the pre-conversion phase of these narratives, but continues after entry into the Orthodox Church as well. Embrace of traditional Christianity in no way hinders personal individualism and choice-making in these instances, but simply provides novel ways for their expression.

In undertaking this field research, I was fundamentally interested in convert identity—the meanings converts and conversion held for the Orthodox parishes where I worked and the motivating factors and processes by which converts had come to the Orthodox Church. The themes of choice and choice-making, in their wide variety of “on the ground” permutations, emerged from the data over the course of their collection and analysis. Significantly they were evoked by *all* categories of Orthodox church participants, converts, clerics, and lifelong church members, as vital means of organizing and describing conversion at *every* stage of its unfolding, from earliest pre-conversion childhoods to post-conversion behaviors enacted and attitudes held within the Orthodox Church. This study, therefore, is a

critical examination of seeking and choice-making as overarching tropes and mechanisms for contemporary American conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy, from a variety of informant perspectives. While taking into account elements of Eastern Orthodox theology and ritual practice as they become pertinent at certain junctures of our discussion, this work is dedicated to conversion, not Eastern Orthodoxy as such. It is focused on how a group of Orthodox adherents, in this case American converts in Pittsburgh, describe their discovery of and entry to the church. This project relates the meanings Orthodox Christianity holds in their lives and the ways in which these conversions reflect and precipitate connections between local Orthodox parishes and features of American culture more broadly.

An analysis of Orthodox conversions through the lens of choice-making addresses issues of significance to three areas in the study of religion. First, the local, “on the ground” prevalence of religious seeking and choice-making, as taken-for-granted, even valorized, features of everyday Orthodox parish life, provides an alternate means by which to gauge and make sense of Eastern Orthodoxy’s engagement with its surrounding culture. Given its long-standing association with various immigrant groups and conservative stances on doctrine and ritual, Eastern Orthodoxy is often considered by its adherents and observers as change resistant, a traditional stalwart against the forces of modernity/postmodernity (with their pluralism, relativism, and Western [post-] Enlightenment views of the individual) rather than as vitally entwined and informed by them. Yet, the priests and laity of these Orthodox churches are in no sense impervious to wider cultural influences through their ecclesial affiliation, but rather come to reproduce and reinforce these taken-for-granted features of contemporary American life in the everyday words and actions enacted in their communities. I argue that the reproduction and reinforcement of these attitudes, pointedly encapsulated in the language of choice and choice-making, are as accurate and profound a reflection of the “Americanization” that has occurred in Orthodox church life over the past decades as the percentage of English used in liturgical performances, the types of furniture adorning church interiors (i.e., the presence or absence of pews), or the official pronouncements of hierarchs.

Second, this study also contributes to the analysis and theorizing of conversion itself, as a religious phenomenon, in highlighting the fundamental continuities in behavior and perception that inform and accompany shifts in religious affiliation. I argue that what remains unchanged over the course of conversion processes is as significant as what is altered and can have dramatic and profound consequences for post-conversion lives and newly adopted milieus. Understandably, scholarly treatments of conversion have tended to underscore its psychological disruptions and dislocations and/or the socialization needed to acculturate new members to unfamiliar contexts.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the more recent academic penchant to stress the gradual, process-oriented nature of conversion, such as that advocated by Lewis Rambo, Andrew Buckser, Stephen D. Glazier, and Diane Austin-Broos among others,<sup>20</sup> suggests that various elements of a convert's words and actions may undergo transformation at different rates and under different circumstances and sometimes not at all over the course of conversion. Implicit assumptions and habits from previous confessions and/or wider cultural contexts, such as the notion that religious affiliation and its accompanying beliefs and practices can and should be the objects of conscious, individual choice-making, are critical to understanding the transformative potential converts hold for religious venues.

Third, these conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy must be understood *within* the framework of contemporary American religious and cultural life, not as simple reactions *against* it. Richard P. Cimino has suggested that the marked interest many contemporary young people express in conservative Christianities (Roman Catholicism, Reformed Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy) exemplifies an overall willingness to swim "against the stream"<sup>21</sup> of American relativism, individualism, consumerism, and the like, an interpretation with which Colleen Carroll concurs in her book on "the new faithful" embracing "orthodox" Christianity, conservative churches grounded in the tradition of the Apostle's Creed.<sup>22</sup> These conversions to conservative Christianities are not simply the products of a wider context of pluralism and individualism, they *perpetuate* and *strengthen* these very ways of conceptualizing and acting in the world. No corner of the late modern religious terrain escapes these features; the subjective self remains the sole seat of religious authority and enactment, even in an individual's humble yielding to



the moral and spiritual guidance of “ancient” Christianities. The significance of this study is not in the simple offering of this observation, but in providing a detailed case study of *how* these processes are at work in actual religious lives. This ethnographic research pulls what has become known as the American “spiritual marketplace” from the ether-space of theory into an examination of the ways in which it is made manifest in the concrete words and actions of so-called “ordinary people” within a conservative form of Christianity. Previous discussions of seeking and choice-making, especially in regard to consumer culture and the spiritual marketplace, have tended to focus on evangelical Protestantism, with its frequent, overt, and rather spectacular examples of the marriage of choice and religion--such as the installation of food courts in megachurches.<sup>23</sup> Thus, this work sheds light on how the marketplace is perpetuated and strengthened within a religious tradition, Eastern Orthodoxy, so often posited as its antithesis.

We will explore each of these themes, beginning with the last, in a bit more detail before concluding with an overview of the research methodologies employed in this study of American converts to Orthodox Christianity.

## **1.2 CHOICE-MAKING AND THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE**

Although, as Zygmunt Bauman notes, scholars continually debate which terminology best describes the contemporary scene (‘modernity,’ ‘late modernity,’ ‘high modernity,’ ‘reflexive modernity,’ ‘surmodernity,’ or ‘postmodernity,’ among other options),<sup>24</sup> few features appear more consistently in characterizations of these differing labels than that of constant, inescapable choice. Certainly, the increased (or newfound) autonomy and reflexivity of the subjective self and the expansion of this self’s decision-making in areas of life once governed by external familial, social, or ethnic constraints and authorities, the proverbial church and king, are commonly cited features differentiating traditional from post-traditional societies, a fundamental distinction that, as Paul Morris points out, remains central to the

“grand progressive narratives of modernity.”<sup>25</sup> These developments are often considered in tandem with or parallel to the emergence of the modern capitalist market, with its proliferation of consumer goods and dependence upon individual purchasing power and desires for constant novelty.<sup>26</sup> These features are viewed as corrosive to external authorities and traditional ways of life, thus, as David Gross maintains, they “leave the past in ruins.”<sup>27</sup> Even scholars who question the strict dichotomization of traditional and post-traditional ways of life, or least as it has been classically formulated in the works of August Comte, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, as does Arjun Appadurai,<sup>28</sup> generally confirm that contemporary life *is* fundamentally different from life as it was lived in past eras. For as Edward C. Rosenthal notes, ever-developing technologies, the flood of consumer goods, and the ability “to work and play around the clock,”<sup>29</sup> have contributed to the emergence of new ways of life and to the prevalence and democratization of choice-making in all areas of individual endeavor. What was once the purview of kings and elites has now become the imperative of all.

In his analyses of contemporary society, Anthony Giddens has remarked that late modern lives are less biographically coherent wholes, shaped by preset social roles and modes of existence presumably inherited from forebears, than “reflexive biographies,” open stories composed and enacted through individual effort to learn about, reflect upon, and accept and/or discard various, competing “lifestyles.” Giddens writes in this regard, “The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible ... We are not what we are, but what we make ourselves.”<sup>30</sup> Although Giddens himself considered religion to be outside the bounds of this “reflexivity” given its fundamental entwinement with traditional ways of thinking and acting in the world,<sup>31</sup> other sociologists simply consider religion one category among the many today where individual choice is all but assumed. Whether one refers to these modern biographies as ‘reflexive,’ ‘elective,’ or ‘do-it-yourself,’<sup>32</sup> Ulrich Beck trumpets unending choice as the hallmark of the late modern age, “What is heralded, ultimately, by this development is the end of fixed, predefined images of man. The human being becomes ... a choice among possibilities, *homo optionis*. Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties—all are becoming decidable down to the small print; once fragmented into option, everything must be decided.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Beck, this individualism is so pervasive that it no longer even resides in the unit of the individual self. It has become firmly engrained in the very institutions of late modernity in a phenomenon he refers to as “individualization.”<sup>34</sup>

Naturally, these commentators maintain that the constant din of the hammer of choice-making in modern lives is not the drumbeat of unbridled, intoxicated freedom, but a source of existential anxiety and concern on the part of ordinary individuals “just trying to make it.” The individualism of the above analyses does not constitute a rebellion against established authorities, but rather arises as a consequence of their general dismantling. In a context where “religious legitimations”<sup>35</sup> have become diffuse and fragmented, late modern persons are simply left to fend for their own meaning-making selves, a situation that allows choice to assume, in Peter Berger’s estimation, the functional equivalence of “fate” in ancient times.<sup>36</sup>

Beyond these broad sociological analyses, expansive religious diversity and increased autonomy in regard to religious belief and practice are among the most ubiquitous features of scholarly discussions of post-World War II American religious life and culture. Leaving behind Will Herberg’s rather insular, tripartite nineteen-fifties assessment that America was essentially composed of the “Protestant, Catholic, and Jew,”<sup>37</sup> Robert Bellah was left to wonder, with no small amount of sarcasm, by the mid-1980s whether there might not, in fact, be “over 220 million American religions,”<sup>38</sup> given the rampant individualism he found raging through the American landscape. Of course, the most famous and disparaged specimen for what Bellah considered a trend corrosive to the integrity and cohesiveness of American society was the nurse Sheila Larson with her self-formulated and described religion of “Sheilaism,” from his collaborative study *Habits of the Heart*.<sup>39</sup> Daniel Bell too takes a rather dim view of what he refers to as the “new reformation,” which, in his words, “makes a distinction between personal faith and a cumulative historical tradition” and results in “the rejection of authority . . . the rejection of any notion of parent other than the peer group itself.”<sup>40</sup> For Bellah and Bell, the lamentable situation arises whereby external authorities may still exist but are circumvented through their generalized dismissal on the part of freewheeling individuals. In their view, this individualism necessarily breaks

down American social and cultural cohesiveness. As a much more recent counterpoint to these scholarly lamentations, Nancy T. Ammerman has suggested that religious individualism does not stand in contradistinction to community and tradition, but finds its precise expression within them.<sup>41</sup>

The language and imagery of the “marketplace,” reflecting these conditions of expansive religious diversity and the increased relegation of religious belief, practice, and affiliation to the spheres of the private and subjective, are commonly evoked in scholarly portrayals of late-twentieth-century American religious life. In his classic study, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger argues that the once venerable, premodern “sacred canopy” of robust, socially stabilizing religious monopolies providing “the ultimate legitimation for individual and collective life”<sup>42</sup> of yore has fragmented into a plurality of competing worldview and religious options available for individual choosing. Pointing to the example of American denominationalism in particular, Berger likens the modern religious landscape to a marketplace, where religions, now “competitive marketing agencies,”<sup>43</sup> compete for a clientele that increasingly considers religion to be a private affair undertaken for the meeting of psychological needs and fulfillments rather than a source of social cohesiveness. Religions respond either by becoming ever more homogenous in the meeting of similar psychological needs or developing “brand” distinctiveness in appealing to special subcategories of clientele. Overall, at the writing of this early work, Berger interpreted pluralism and the heightened subjective, privatized nature of religious affiliation as indicative of “secularization” and its weakening of religious faith and institutions.<sup>44</sup>

Other scholars take a far more generous or at least more impartial view of the contemporary American scene and its entrenched acceptance and/or valorization of individual religious experimentation and meaning-making. In his survey of “religion in postmodern times,” *Jesus in Disneyland*, David Lyon maintains that in the “consumer religion” of the ‘spiritual supermarket,’<sup>45</sup> “religious activity is, increasingly, subject to personal choice, or voluntarism, and that, increasingly, for many in the advanced societies, religious identities are assembled to create a bricolage of beliefs and practices.”<sup>46</sup> Like Berger, Lyon too argues that the religions of the “spiritual supermarket” develop as different “brands” appealing to the personal tastes and needs of specific religious consumers. Yet, in no way, does this indicate a

wholesale displacement of traditional, conservative religious institutions, for they too have their own particular “brand cachet,” attracting their own share of “supermarket” customers. Eastern Orthodox Christianity, for example, may pique the interest of persons in the market for “absolute truth” or elaborate ritual forms. Furthermore, contemporary “consumer religion” is not all whimsy, for a “sober seriousness”<sup>47</sup> can still prevail, for as Lyon maintains in the case of religious conversion, “switching denominations at a certain time, for instance, may reflect moral and spiritual commitment.”<sup>48</sup>

While Lyon focuses on the “supermarket” of today, R. Laurence Moore provides something of a long view in his work *Selling God*, in which he traces the fundamental entwinement of American religion and the marketplace, the natural outcome of religion finding itself in a cultural milieu without “legal privilege,”<sup>49</sup> for as Moore maintains, “It [religion] had to sell itself not only in the competitive church market but also in a general market of other cultural commodities that were trying in many cases to break free of religious disapproval rooted mainly in Protestant animosities.”<sup>50</sup> However, even keeping these long historical connections in mind, other scholars, such as Philip Hammond, have noted that deep societal shifts, especially pronounced since the 1960s among the Baby Boomer generation, have fundamentally changed the meanings of religiousness in American culture such that, “the values of free choice and the experimentation of the religious marketplace”<sup>51</sup> have become normative rather than exceptions to the rule.

Wade Clark Roof too employs the phrase and concept of “spiritual marketplace” as a means of organizing and understanding the overarching “seeker” or “quest culture” radically redefining religious institutional boundaries and introducing novel, ever more eclectic and fluid, modes of expression in post-World War II America.<sup>52</sup> While institutional religion is by no means rendered obsolete in the “quest culture,” neither is it a taken-for-granted feature of individual religious lives, increasingly, grounded as Roof argues they are, in self-reflexivity and increased expectations that religious participation and enactment should provide personal satisfaction, growth, fulfillment, and the like.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Robert Wuthnow has made a similar claim that “seeking” is a much more accurate way of

conceptualizing and measuring the strength of religion on the current American scene than headcounts of worshippers at formal religious sites.<sup>54</sup>

The “marketplace,” as a vehicle for understanding contemporary religious life, has also been central to rational choice theory, several examples of which appear in the field of religious studies. For example, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke consider American religious history through the lens of supply-side economics in their work *Churching of America, 1776-1990* as does Robert S. Ellwood in his study of 1950s American religious life, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace*.<sup>55</sup> Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge have marshaled rational choice theory to explain the decline of liberal Protestantism in the U.S. and Western Europe and to make sense of religion’s overall robustness in the face of earlier secularization theories positing its demise. These scholars put forward a rewards-compensator model of religion, whereby individuals turn to supernatural worldviews as compensation for unattained and perhaps unattainable material rewards. In the religious marketplace, therefore, religions with strong supernatural features (i.e., conservative or traditional religions) are thought to be more enticing than those in which such aspects are minimized, such as in liberal Protestantism.<sup>56</sup> Another scholar viewing contemporary religions through the lens of rational choice theory, Laurence Iannaccone, attributes religious phenomena directly and singularly to economic maximization. In discussing why “single religion” couples, for example, on the whole attend worship services more frequently than their “mixed religion” counterparts, Iannaccone suggests the gas money saved in using one rather than two vehicles an important factor.<sup>57</sup>

Although nearly everyone agrees that rational choice theory can shed light on the motivations of some individual actors in some situations, the explanatory power with which this theory is endowed is simply not as absolute as its proponents claim. Critics have questioned the theory and its direct applicability to religion on a number of levels. First, economic, market-driven motivations for religious choice-making cannot account for the simultaneous workings of other factors such as emotion, habit, circumstance, and constraint which too affect and even drive religious choices.<sup>58</sup> Second, as we shall see in the narratives and experiences of Orthodox converts, human lives do not exactly correspond to the rigid

ledgers of benefit/cost analyses. A number of converts articulate painful, ongoing “costs” incurred for the “benefit” of becoming Orthodox Christians including the loss of families, friends, and occupations. Finally, as Steve Bruce maintains in his critique, rational choice theory tends to be tautological and circular, and in the end really renames rather than explains phenomena.<sup>59</sup> To say that benefits outweigh costs for successful Orthodox converts and costs outweigh benefits for unsuccessful conversions in the end tells us very little about conversions to Orthodoxy.

This study, therefore, is not based on rational choice theory. Rather, this work, in a more impressionistic fashion, surveys the ways in which choice and choice-making are articulated in convert narratives and observed within the framework of parish social interaction.<sup>60</sup> I contextualize these conversions within the spiritual marketplace, as formulated by Roof, Wuthnow, and Berger, because informants in Pittsburgh Orthodox parishes themselves readily wield the concepts, language, and methodologies of the marketplace in their narratives. The marketplace is not an assumed context on the part of the researcher imposed from without upon informants’ narratives, but a field, conveyed by informants themselves, that provides a powerful set of habits, strategies, and assumptions for meaning-making in converts’ post-conversion lives.

I consider the actions and attitudes of research informants significant and stay relatively close to their narratives over the course of this study. In his own discussion, David Lyon maintains that the everyday accounts of religious adherents must be heard and incorporated into any wider explanation of social processes, “We should be prepared to listen sympathetically to the accounts of believers and to incorporate them into social explanation. . . . taking seriously insider accounts also helps us to avoid the elitism of some secularization dominated theories.”<sup>61</sup> He underscores this point by relating an anecdote provided by Nancy T. Ammerman, who too faithfully conveys her subjects’ outlooks on the world in her ethnography of Southside Gospel Church, *Bible Believers*,<sup>62</sup> “Nancy Ammerman relates how she once sat among several hundred academics earnestly discoursing on secularization and suddenly realized that they were nearly all men who had little sense of the practices of participants that ‘simply get them from everyday life.’”<sup>63</sup>

This study, thus, reflects the relatively recent and ever-more pervasive trend to focus on what is variously described as ‘lived,’ ‘living’ and ‘everyday’ religion. I have entered a tiny, rather circumspect part of the vast religious landscape about us, the terrain of Orthodox Christian converts in Pittsburgh, to report on how the grand macro-processes of conversion, marketplace seeking and choice-making, and the conveyance and resonance of “non-religious” assumptions within local religious communities, exist and are made manifest on the micro-level of individual lives and relationships. Scholars such as David Hall, Robert Orsi, and Nancy T. Ammerman<sup>64</sup> have embraced the category of “lived” or “everyday” religion as a way of breaking through the fundamental dichotomization of religious lives, between “ordinary” non-elites and institutional officialdom, a dichotomy engrained in the notion of “popular religion” itself.<sup>65</sup> “Lived” religion, as an analytical category, allows researchers to consider the religious ideas and actions of what Nancy T. Ammerman refers to as “nonexperts” in relationship to and within official religious institutions and theological frames of reference.<sup>66</sup>

Given my close reading and analysis of informants’ descriptions of conversion, I have adopted a theoretical frame sensitive to the “on the ground” enactment of religion. Earlier notions of “culture” as a coherent, totalizing system have been generally supplanted by others reflective of the everyday ambiguities and tensions that occupy the lives of most people. As have a number of scholars,<sup>67</sup> who have embraced the category of “lived” or “everyday” religion in their work, I have found elements of practice theory, especially as formulated in the work of Ann Swidler, in her article “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies” and book-length study *Talk of Love*, particularly useful.<sup>68</sup> According to Swidler, what should be foregrounded is how and in what ways culture is *used* by its participants, how it shapes reality in the classic sense formulated by Clifford Geertz of religion as a “cultural system” serving as a “model of and for” real-life actions and experiences.<sup>69</sup> In other words, “cultural systems define the kind of world people face, so that they can act with some confidence within it.”<sup>70</sup>

While arguing Geertz’ theorizing to be “the most powerful formulation we have of what it is culture actually does for people,”<sup>71</sup> Swidler maintains that he tends to focus his analysis too concertedly on ritualized spectacles, such as Balinese cock-fighting or Javanese shadow plays, and too little on the



more implicit and ambiguous uses of culture in everyday life.<sup>72</sup> Drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Ann Swidler has argued that culture is best conceptualized as a ‘toolkit,’ ‘repertoire,’ or ‘bag of tricks’ of context-specific resources available in a way similar to those employed by an artist or musician.<sup>73</sup> Cultural repertoires provide “discrete skills, habits, and orientations,”<sup>74</sup> for mastery and reproduction in a variety of settings. As in the case of a musician who can deftly play “Camptown Races” while struggling through a Beethoven sonata, individuals may have greater command over some aspects of a culture (or multiple cultures, such as in the case of the American “spiritual marketplace” and the Orthodox Church) than others. Some “cultural orientations” may become so habitualized that they are largely unconscious, while others require massive amounts of conscious effort to master. I argue here that the language and enactments of the “marketplace” are among the most highly developed of the convert’s cultural repertoire and naturally come to be reproduced, albeit in quite innovative ways, in post-conversion lives within adopted milieus. Significantly, as we shall see, Orthodox clerics and lifelong church members too are completely familiar with and deft in their manipulation of these “marketplace” habits and skills. An examination of “lived” Orthodox experience through this lens of culture as repertoire provides exciting new insights into conversion processes and the relative place of Orthodox Christianity in American religious life more generally. We will now examine how this research advances these two themes.

### **1.3 CHOICE-MAKING AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

The very etymology of the term “conversion,” from the Latin verb *convertere*, “to turn around” points to the most obvious and commented upon feature of the phenomenon, that one way or another it involves change or transformation. Yet, the nature of this change and precisely for whom remain contested issues. Andrew Buckser has argued that “religious conversion poses a powerful challenge to anthropological theories concerning the connection between culture and the self” since “to change one’s

religion is to change one's world, to voluntarily shift the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood."<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, Diane Austin-Broos has maintained that conversion should be best understood as a (Victor) Turnerian "passage" involving neither an "absolute breach" between pre-and post-conversion lives nor a "syncretism" such as that evoked in "the image of *bricoleurs*, experimenters, and iconoclasts involved in cultural pastiche."<sup>76</sup> According to Austin-Broos, conversion is an ongoing process of exchange and interchange between social participants rather than a hegemonic swapping of cultures.<sup>77</sup>

Interest in conversion as a volitionally driven process rather than as an all-in-a-moment event has had its own evolution over the course of twentieth-century scholarship. The classic Pauline/Augustinian models of immediate, divinely induced change as the "essence" of conversion remained tremendously influential in shaping later Christian as well as modern academic and popular understandings of the phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> Quoting A. D. Nock's 1933 study, *Conversion*, Paula Fredriksen observes that this pattern "is echoed in the classic definitions of conversion as a 'deliberate turning ... which implies that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.'"<sup>79</sup> Although bracketing or discarding altogether the role of superhuman agency in conversion, early twentieth-century psychologists, such as William James and G. Stanley Hall, continued to draw precisely upon these classic Christian theological models, especially in setting their analytical sights upon dramatic, highly emotional and instantaneous conversions akin to those of the Apostle Paul and Augustine of Hippo.<sup>80</sup>

These early, theologically informed views of conversion, however, came to be largely supplanted in the 1960s and 70s by new models and methodologies for the study of conversion.<sup>81</sup> Rather than considering conversion as an interiorized, socially decontextualized event involving a lone person and her psyche or, from a theological perspective, her god, sociologists and social psychologists wielded the field methods of interviewing and participant observation to understand the meaning-making and group-individual dynamics of conversion within specific religious communities. A number of significant studies emerged illuminating these processes within New Religious Movements (NRMs) in particular, such as the Divine Light Mission (James V. Downton, Jr., 1979), the American Hare Krishna movement

(Francine J. Daner, 1976), and Scientology (Harriet Whitehead, 1987).<sup>82</sup> As Lorne L. Dawson notes in his overview of this scholarship, the relative freedom and choice-making capacities of the neophyte members of NRMs remained key themes of these and subsequent studies, given the periodic, popular depiction of these movements as “cults” bent on “brainwashing” the gullible.<sup>83</sup>

Certainly, the most consistent and innovative theorizing in regard to conversion as a platform for strategizing and choice-making over the past thirty years has come from scholars evaluating conversion and missionization in colonialist contexts.<sup>84</sup> Highly nuanced historical and ethnographic studies such as those of Robin Horton, Jean and John Comaroff, Gauri Viswanathan, and Christopher Queen<sup>85</sup> have highlighted the processual nature of religious conversion as it emerges and comes to be negotiated amongst a host of social actors. While focused on cosmologies rather than persons as such, Robin Horton, for instance, provocatively suggests in a landmark 1971 essay that nineteenth and twentieth-century changes to “native” African worldviews cannot be attributed to Christian missionary influence alone, but rather to the cognitive elasticity inherent to these indigenous worldviews.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the Comaroffs explore in their “historical anthropological”<sup>87</sup> account of colonialism in South Africa, individual and institutional religious transformations within the intricacies of historical and social encounter. In this regard, the Comaroffs are sensitive to the multi-dimensionality of what they too refer to as “human agency”<sup>88</sup> in their work in taking into account “all the players in the game, the motives that drove them, the awareness that informed them, the constraints that limited them.”<sup>89</sup> In colonial contexts, therefore, both missionaries and the “missionized” are “players in the game,” persons and collectivities who make choices, effect transformations, and are, in turn, transformed. This same sense of conversion enactment and relationship “in the round” so to speak serves as a template for my work on American converts to Orthodox Christianity. Over the course of the succeeding chapters, not only will converts serve as the focus of our attention, but so too will the roles and perspectives of Orthodox clerics and lifelong church members.

As Gauri Viswanathan points out in her cogent work on conversion and modernity, convert emphasis on personal religious choice and choice-making fundamentally alters the contours of modern

conversion narratives. Citing Christopher Queen's study of B. R. Ambedkar's late-in-life conversion to Buddhism, Viswanathan writes in this regard:

Recent scholars have drawn attention to the crucial role of choice in distinguishing conditions of modernity from those of premodernity. ... If modernity comprises a complex range of ideas, philosophies, and systems, the ability to process them calls not only for reason to make the requisite discriminations between them but also the skill to evaluate the quality of their respective demand on one's attention. Such evaluation is itself a form of choice, but the important point is that choice is possible only when the heterogeneity of belief-systems is made visible. Such acts of conscious selection account for new types of conversion narratives, which reflect the individual subject's greater access to a range of traditions, ideas, and doctrines.<sup>90</sup>

From this "evaluation" and "access to a range of traditions, ideas, and doctrines," Viswanathan concludes modern conversion to be fundamentally a "knowledge-producing" activity.<sup>91</sup> In her analysis of well-known modern converts such as John Henry Newman, Pandita Ramabai, and B. R. Ambedkar among others, Viswanathan fundamentally maintains conversion to be "an interpretive act, an index of material and social conflicts"<sup>92</sup> since "spiritual autobiography shades into critiques"<sup>93</sup> of both the rejected and adopted religious contexts as well as society at large. It is precisely the making and articulating of religious choices that makes the convert, both historically and today, such a powerful and suspect figure of social life, in very much the same manner as Bauman's "stranger." The act of consciously evaluating and crossing religious and cultural boundaries not only blurs the supposedly distinct margins of communities and institutions, but also provides the convert a wide vista of experience upon which to compare, analyze, and critique alternatives and milieus.

In considering religious conversion as process, scholars such as Robin Horton and Gauri Viswanathan have argued that what remains cognitively and experientially unchanged is just as significant as what changes over the course of conversion.<sup>94</sup> In the case of American converts to Orthodoxy in Pittsburgh, choice-making emerges as a critical lens by which to understand how these individuals participate in two apparently mutually exclusive, but in fact overlapping, worlds—American culture and the Orthodox Church. There are two ways in which the theme of modern choice-making becomes salient to the conversion processes of these informants. First, it furnishes a secularized set of vocabularies and narrative formulae allowing informants to reconstruct their biographies and make sense

of their conversions. This modern biographical template, so to speak, generally supplants traditional Christian vocabularies of conversion. Second, choice-making also appears in informants' descriptions as an action undertaken, in the very sense articulated by Viswanathan, with concrete methodologies and skills easily transferred from one context to another, in this instance across the boundaries of converts' pre-and post-conversion lives, from the marketplace to the Orthodox Church. We will now devote our attention to each of these issues in turn.

### 1.3.1 Choice-making and Narrative Formulae

Describing the processes by which humans seek to (re-) create aspects of the self, Umberto Eco observes that life "is certainly more like *Ulysses* than like *The Three Musketeers*--yet we are all the more inclined to think of it in terms of *The Three Musketeers* than in terms of *Ulysses*."<sup>95</sup> The continual streams of events, thoughts, and actions in life, the sum total of an individual's existence at any given moment, rarely remain blind "static noises," churning indistinguishably in the background of the present, but are invariably brought into sharp focus within the lived moment through autobiography. The autobiographical enterprise, as Eco suggests, is never about "a life as lived,"<sup>96</sup> but rather is a constructed life, in which a series of past, inchoate events are projected onto a narrative frame, providing a certain clarity and meaning to events naturally possessing neither. Therefore, while superficially a tool for refashioning the past, the autobiographical narrative is preeminently a genre of the present.

In keeping with the current penchant to consider conversion as a process extending far beyond the confines of the purported "event" itself, scholars such as Peter G. Stromberg and David A. Snow and Richard Machalek have turned their analytical attention to conversion narratives,<sup>97</sup> not as records of the past, but as vital vehicles for continuing the process of negotiating identity across contexts and into converts' post-conversion lives. As Eco's quote suggests, a convert's desire to transform her *Ulysses*-like, everyday life into a recognizable "plot," is not a passive endeavor, but one which requires the narrator's active, imaginative insertion of the self into wider frames of reference. The conversion

narrative is not a wholesale, unmitigated projection beyond the circumstances of one's life, but a (re-) construction of one's biography, in which elements, are shifted and/or eliminated or enhanced.<sup>98</sup> Such re-imaginings are necessary both for understanding religious shifts and in assuaging crises attendant with these experiences, lingering within the fractures of readjusted identities. Yet, this biography, in the midst of its narrative reconfigurations, is always a filtering of the past through the lens of the present, from the standpoint of the convert's current status as one religiously transformed. The conversion narrative, therefore, suggests the engagement of the convert with an on-going process; she is not merely a person converted, but is an individual active in continually redefining herself in response to these new experiences.<sup>99</sup>

In his work on evangelical Protestant conversion narratives, Peter G. Stromberg forwards a generalized theory of language, based on the work of J. L. Austin, emphasizing its performative rather than descriptive power. Arguing against conventional considerations of language as referentially connected to the world in the abstract, Stromberg maintains that language is not premised upon a reified one-to-one correlation between words/symbols and particular objects/concepts, but rather is a fluid stream of continually shifting referents and potential "meanings."<sup>100</sup> Although language, in Stromberg's estimation, is marked by a high degree of inherent fluidity, certain "fixed points," patterned "areas of stability"<sup>101</sup> of socially determined language use, can be identified in the midst of the "constantly fluctuating use of communicative symbols."<sup>102</sup> Imbued with the capacity to convey meanings transcending those generated by individuals, these "fixed points," encompass what Roy Rappaport refers to as "words and acts that have been spoken or performed before, orders, processes or entities, material, social, abstract, ideal or spiritual, the existence or putative existence of which transcends the present."<sup>103</sup> Although, as Stromberg correctly points out, symbols and metaphors too are marked by a natural plasticity in use and form, they can become increasingly reified when "used in a manner that conveys a consensual meaning within a community."<sup>104</sup>

In the context of this theoretical framework, the salient issue for the present study is which community's language and "consensual meaning" predominate informants' conversion narratives?

Strikingly, very few informants in Pittsburgh referenced classic Christian models of conversion in their narratives, especially those derived from sacred scripture often evoked in other Christian contexts historically and today to describe the phenomenon. Informants rarely likened their experiences of seeking and finding the Orthodox Church to New Testament examples or metaphors of conversion such as Paul's Damascus-road conversion recounted in the Book of Acts (Acts 9: 1-22) or Jesus' famous "seeking" and "journeying" parables such as those of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) or the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13: 45-6) among other examples. Even the more general contours of Christian conversion as a movement from sin through repentance to salvation were largely absent from these narratives. While references were certainly made to the divine as well as occasionally to repentance and salvation, they were scattered piecemeal within the narratives rather than giving them shape. This is all the more important since most convert informants came from Christian backgrounds with many possessing extensive theological and scriptural knowledge of their faith.

Certainly, "searching" and "journeying" are powerful Christian themes and metaphors formulated in literatures as diverse as Augustine's *Confessions* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but in the narratives under consideration here, they were theologically indistinct and in some cases wholly secularized. Although the conversion narratives were collected in the course of formal, semi-structured interviewing, informants were free to choose specific topics for discussion and the interviews themselves occurred in a very conversational manner in informal, relaxed settings (homes, restaurants, cafés). Under such circumstances, I argue, individuals relied on habitualized, everyday ways of thinking and talking about themselves, which in the majority of these cases appeared to be the language of choice and the marketplace rather than sacred narrative. This marketplace language and imagery appeared in the narratives regardless of an informant's stated "commitment" or "zeal" for the Orthodox faith or avid disavowal of the marketplace and its attributes--pluralism, individualism, consumerism, and the like. Significantly, these conversion formulae were fully accepted and wielded by the clerical and lifelong church members of local Orthodox communities as well, since they too are modern Americans who

imbibe and take for granted this context of investigation, experimentation, and choice-making in regard to contemporary religious life.

### **1.3.2 Methods of Choice-making in Conversion Processes**

The American religious marketplace not only influences how converts talk about their conversion experiences, but also the ways in which they come to be enacted. As mentioned, Gauri Viswanathan and Jean and John Comaroff have underscored the meaning-making and world-constructive character of religious conversion as a dynamic process of learning about the world. Conversion does not just happen to people, but it is effected and substantiated through practices, in everyday words and actions. Rather than the necessary result of blinding lights or celestial voices, modern conversion, as in the case of any other potential arena for individual choice-making, is an immanent phenomenon grounded in concrete, earth-bound strategies of interaction between self and other. Although the making of personal choices is a complicated amalgam of rationality, emotionality, happenstance, habit, and external persuasion among other features, the activity itself can be defined in rather broad strokes. Instead of expressing the unbounded freedom and possibility valorized, say, in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>105</sup> choice, in its everyday practice, is born of the very limits of individual action. Choice and choice-making fundamentally arise from and reflect conditions of marked contradiction and mutual exclusivity.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, given the heavy responsibility accorded to modern persons, fatefully determined to make choices at every turn in their lives down to the finest of the fine print (as Ulrich Beck claims), the making of choices is *work*, at least if the individual is at all concerned with the possibility of choosing the wrong option among the many rival alternatives, whether material or ideational, to be examined and decided upon.

Such a process necessarily involves the nullification rather than the expansion of possibility, as options are evaluated and discarded, even if only temporarily.<sup>107</sup> Edward C. Rosenthal points out that a vast gulf separates the “potential” and “decisive” states of choice-making. While individuals may



welcome the potentialities a world of competing alternatives can offer, the actual selection of *one* alternative to the exclusion of others can create situations of acute individual anguish and doubt.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, choice-making is rarely a neutral affair, since it serves as a significant and often highly charged form of boundary creation and maintenance. Such is often the case when individuals find themselves with the opportunity and/or necessity of selecting religious affiliation, a choice ideally, though not always in practice, requiring exclusive commitments from its adherents.

Certain epistemological and strategic implications, therefore, follow from this view of choice-making as an exclusionary/inclusionary endeavor. Whether specific motivations propelling individual decisions can be deemed “rational” or not, choices are not usually made willy-nilly, especially in instances of religion and worldview selection, but according to sets of strategies that highlight oppositions and provide for their evaluation.<sup>109</sup> Choice-making is nearly always, at least to some extent, an analytical process of categorization, comparison, and deliberation.<sup>110</sup> As in the case of Orthodox converts, who necessarily compare Orthodoxy with their former and other religious confessions, choice-makers, in the generalized course of option elimination, become increasingly more attuned to specific differences between options. Certainly, in the present case study, Orthodox Christianity was not the only or in many cases even the primary religion discussed in the collected narratives, since converts devoted considerable time to outlining the beliefs and experiences of other religions, only against which the attractions of Orthodoxy were thrown into sharp relief. This reiteration of Orthodoxy’s supposed “superiority” vis-à-vis other religions only confirmed for converts, from a post-conversion vantage, the rightness of their choice.

These processes of differentiation and analysis are not passive endeavors, but require the active seeking and accumulation of information on the part of would-be choice-makers.<sup>111</sup> In the modern American context, it is not enough simply for economic consumers to consume; they need to be “informed” about their objects of consumption. When making home and car purchases, for example, individuals are regularly forewarned to research their options. Consumers are advised to read manuals and price guides and to consult experts when making choices; they employ “test drives” and “comparison

shopping” as evaluative strategies. A significant theme of the Orthodox conversion narratives featured in this study, therefore, is the methods of information-gathering, especially electronic, that converts report employing in their pre-conversion searches. In American Orthodox parish life, this convert drive for knowledge, born of making choices, becomes a significant means both for measuring convert “zeal” and for bolstering their role as critics of Orthodox and other confessional settings. In this way, Anthony Giddens identifies the systematic accumulation of knowledge, on the part of individuals and institutions, a mark of late modernity.<sup>112</sup>

The epistemological dimensions of choice-making, however, do not end with the gathering of externalized information, for choices too demand a certain self-reflexivity on the part of individual decision-makers.<sup>113</sup> An individual’s past life, current circumstances, and (un-) conscious desires, are the common measures by which persons appropriate or abandon choices. Over and above “objective” criteria (e.g., cost/benefit formulae), as Peter Berger points out, “direct experience is always the most convincing evidence of the reality of anything.”<sup>114</sup> The variety of elements comprising a person’s life, including job, family, educational background, and aesthetic/dogmatic tastes among others must be examined, compared, and categorized as thoroughly as any external options under consideration. Self-reflexivity, therefore, is endemic to choice-making processes, for which a heightened sensitivity to external oppositions involves an increased awareness of the self.<sup>115</sup>

As vital components of choice-making, active knowledge acquisition and self-reflexivity lend shape to religious conversion. At each point in their conversions, from initial religious seeking to settling into life as Orthodox Christians, Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh consistently relate a kind of on-going negotiation between self and other, as they research religious differences and experiment with practices and dogmas. Such processes virtually ensure that converts arrive at the ecclesial doors of the Orthodox Church with these marketplace, choice-making skills and attitudes fully intact and ever more deeply engrained and habitualized in their lives.

## 1.4 IMPORTANCE FOR EASTERN ORTHODOX STUDIES

While a number of significant, finely textured ethnographic studies have been conducted on the adherents of other conservative religions in the United States, such as those authored by Nancy T. Ammerman, Brenda Brasher, R. Marie Griffith, and Julie Ingersoll (fundamentalist/evangelical Protestantism), Lynn Davidman (Orthodox Judaism), Robert Orsi, Thomas Tweed (Roman Catholicism), and Anna Mansson McGinty (Islam), few have been undertaken of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the United States.<sup>116</sup> This lacuna is all the more unfortunate given scholarly and popular tendencies to portray this historically and culturally complex and multifarious religion in uni-dimensional ways. As Paul Valliere has recently pointed out, Eastern Orthodoxy has long been the object of a kind of western “Christian orientalism,”<sup>117</sup> in which it comes to be cast either as a rigid, backward form of Christianity caught in the rote repetition of ethnic folk customs and ancient rituals and doctrines or as a mystical, otherworldly church offering a vast array of spiritual exotica and sensual beauty, but little in the way of practical reflection on legal, political, or social issues of critical import to late modern lives.<sup>118</sup> Both “orientalist” interpretations assume Orthodox Christianity’s supposed imperviousness to historical and cultural change; it exists outside of regular historical time—either in a perpetual past or a perpetual transcendence. In sum, these interpretations present the Orthodox Church as a self-sufficient and contained ritual, theological and spiritual universe, with hermetically sealed ecclesial boundaries and an existence paralleling rather than being influenced by the rapid-fire social and cultural shifts attendant with the consumerism, individualism, and religious diversity of late modernity.

Due to the continued influence of these prevailing “orientalist” stereotypes, Orthodox Christianity has often been considered by scholars as existing outside the “mainstream” of American religious life. Although typically receiving something of an honorable mention in most standard texts of American religious history,<sup>119</sup> Orthodox Christianity still remains cloaked in a generalized fog of “anonymity and mystery,”<sup>120</sup> as Daniel Clendenin has written. The Orthodox Church appears less a full-bodied participant

on the American religious scene, than a quaint ethnic outpost, with food festivals and unusual church architectures to boot, adding spice to the already complex flavors of American religious diversity.

Still, scholars have begun to take a more concerted look at Orthodox Christianity in the West by placing it precisely within the contemporary matrices of pluralism and globalization. An important essay collection, *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age*, addresses a number of issues related to the interplay of Orthodoxy and late modernity, though, as the volume's editors note, "The *dominant mode* of Eastern Orthodox responses to globality has been self-protective and communitarian (rather than self-adjusting and individualistic)."<sup>121</sup> At the same time, Elizabeth H. Prodromou has noted the intellectual and political factors contributing to the overall rendering of Orthodox Christianity as "marginal" and "irrelevant"<sup>122</sup> to American public life and, in her words, "the relative underdevelopment of the conceptual parameters for rearticulating Orthodox identity in America."<sup>123</sup> According to Prodromou, the "institutional culture" of American Orthodox churches, including the "hierarchy, clergy, and laity," has remained highly suspicious of the "market metaphor" and, therefore, "slow to develop the kinds of strategic vision and operational mechanisms required for religious competition in the public sphere."<sup>124</sup> She rightly posits that the "internal pluralization"<sup>125</sup> of Orthodox churches, as evidenced in conversions, interfaith marriages, and the gradual replacement of original "Old World" immigrants with their American descendents, may precipitate a serious self-reevaluation and redefining of the Orthodox Church's place within American culture. Yet, how and to what effects religious pluralism impacts Orthodox Christianity have yet to be fully understood, for as Prodromou concludes, "Analysis of the [Orthodox] response to these questions is the material for a rich research agenda that is ready for implementation."<sup>126</sup>

I consider my own research on the language and enactment of choice among converts to the Orthodox Church in Pittsburgh a modest way of advancing this "rich research agenda." Religious pluralism and individualism are not hypothetical circumstances awaiting hierarchical acknowledgement and engagement, once the scales of ethnicity supposedly fall from official eyes, but are habitualized and taken-for-granted among the participants of Orthodox parish life. Ethnographic research in actual Orthodox communities, such as that represented in Dmitro Volkov's work on Orthodox communities in

Chicago,<sup>127</sup> where the words and actions of religious participants are taken seriously and faithfully recorded affords us a new way of measuring and understanding the extent to which Orthodox Christianity has become enmeshed with its surrounding American cultures. While the Orthodox Church may not yet occupy the “American public square” in a sense the “American public square” has come to occupy its own space within local communities. A reading of Orthodoxy’s official “institutional culture,” its official pronouncements and theological formulae alone simply may not reflect these developments and habits. Therefore, this study offers another, long overlooked, vantage point from which to understand Orthodox Christianity in the United States.

A handful of additional studies, grounded either in qualitative or quantitative research methods, exist on Eastern Orthodox communities in the United States. Certainly, the most significant and wide-ranging work on American Orthodoxy to date is that of Alexei D. Krindatch whose extensive research on the demography, ethnicity, and clerical life of American Orthodox churches has been invaluable.<sup>128</sup> Yet, my research methods and conclusions depart from his work in two important respects. First, relying primarily on survey work instead of participant observation or interviews, Krindatch has focused little attention on the views or attitudes of Orthodox laity, “the ordinary members of American Orthodox Churches,”<sup>129</sup> a population about whom he admits “more research is needed”<sup>130</sup> for the emergence of a fuller understanding of the place of Orthodox Christianity in American religious life. Although certainly taking into account hierarchical and clerical views in my study, as indicated in my appeal to the category of “lived” religion, those of lay church members, both convert and lifelong, were central to my data collection and analysis.

Second, from my ground-level view of Orthodox Christianity, I draw different conclusions from those of Krindatch on the relative place and relationship of Orthodoxy to American life. Ethnography forces us to be sensitive to local nuance. Not only did the Orthodox Christians of this study differ markedly in their attitudes and relationships to the Orthodox Church, but my research of ethnic Orthodox parishes in Pittsburgh, a city known historically for its strong ethnic communities and neighborhoods (Polish, Italian, Carpatho-Rusyn and the like) bears a reading of at least one localized American Orthodox

scene that differs fundamentally from the assessment offered by Krindatch who writes, “Today, in spite of the fact that American society is richly endowed with multiple venues for public dialogue and cultural exchange, the Eastern Christians remain to a significant extent in self-isolated communities. Even gradual disappearance of the urban ethnic neighborhoods did not change this situation.”<sup>131</sup>

Although valuable, survey responses, such as those upon which Alexei Krindatch relies, cannot be the sole or even the primary basis for concluding the “American Orthodox experience” to be simply that of self-imposed societal alienation.<sup>132</sup> Rather, I found parishioners to be utterly familiar and deeply engaged with elements of American cultural life, an engagement that impacts local Orthodox churches. Younger parishioners, whom I met, were just as likely to watch the latest flicks and frequent local shopping malls as engage in ethnic folk dancing, while their grandparents often expressed as great an interest in visiting the gambling casinos of West Virginia than the cherished mountains of the “Old Country.” While official church debates may rage over the extent to which Orthodoxy should or could become engaged with its wider American context, it *has already long been occurring* on the local parochial level of “ordinary” clerical and lay experience. Orthodox Christians, even the most zealous and committed of the church’s newest members, do not simply inhabit their ecclesial temples, but also American workplaces, marketplaces, venues of popular culture and entertainment and the like. I am in no way questioning the continued importance of ethnicity to church life, for it remains central to the organization and understanding of American Orthodox communities, as we shall see in chapter six. However, its presence and employment is more situational and negotiated than objective and essential to parochial identities. Furthermore, converts themselves, as we shall see over the course of this study, do not simply represent “change” to their communities, although they can and do do so, but are entering contexts where choice, seeking and marketplace metaphors are part and parcel of lived Orthodox experience rather than the necessary objects of suspicion and rejection.

This vantage point is all the more salient in having been culled in the “holy land” of North American Orthodoxy-Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, referred to as such for Orthodoxy’s long-standing historical presence there. As an industrialized center of North America, Pittsburgh attracted large number

of immigrants from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe at the turn of the last century and the city has historically and currently hosted a vast array of different Orthodox jurisdictions and ethnic populations.<sup>133</sup> In this way, Pittsburgh represents a significant “test case” of the influence of the American religious marketplace on Orthodox Christianity. On the surface, Pittsburgh Orthodoxy seems to embody many of the very qualities scholars cite as resistant to the American marketplace: deeply entrenched “ethnic” communities, relatively large elder (over sixty five years of age) populations, and in the case of Slavic churches new waves of immigration from Eastern Europe since the 1990s.<sup>134</sup> “Americanization” of Pittsburgh churches has certainly occurred over the course of the twentieth century as discussed by clerical and lifelong church informants, but this has typically been measured in ritualized “externals” that are easily interpreted as not representing the “essence” of the Orthodox faith such as the installation of pews, the exchange of foreign liturgical languages for English, and the disuse of headcoverings for women in church. While by no means insignificant, for they certainly indicate an overall homogenization with neighboring Christian bodies and the wider American context as a whole,<sup>135</sup> these external shifts do not reflect the entirety of the changes wrought within Orthodox churches over the course of their decades-long presence in Pittsburgh nor are they necessarily the best measures of Orthodoxy’s entwinement with a marketplace culture. If, as I argue here, the marketplace language of seeking and choice-making comes to be so readily wielded and accepted by *all* categories of church participants- convert, clerical, and lifelong-within these ethnic communities, then the relative view of Orthodoxy and its recent conversions as existing beyond the reach of American “individualism and consumerism,”<sup>136</sup> as one observer writing in *The Christian Century* has argued, requires reevaluation.

Conversions to Orthodox Christianity in the United States have been the subject of study in recent years as well. Among them are Paisios Bukowy Whitesides’ 1997 article “Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions within American Orthodoxy” in which opposing hermeneutics, cut along essentialized “iconic”/“textual” lines and represented by “ethnic” Orthodox Christians and “evangelical” Protestant converts, are discussed. As the article’s subtitle suggests, these hermeneutic approaches are believed to create tensions in the formulation and expression of Eastern Orthodox theology in the United

States today.<sup>137</sup> While Whitesides examines the theological impact of conversions, Philip Charles Lucas has investigated the history and religious evolution of a 1960s esoteric group, the Holy Order of MANS, members of which converted to Orthodox Christianity in the late 1980s. While focused upon issues of religious transformation and conversion of import to my own research, Lucas's fascinating and significant book, *The Odyssey of a New Religion*, is more solidly devoted to the changing place of MANS as a New Religious Movement from the 1960s to 80s than to the subsequent experiences of its members as converts to Orthodoxy.<sup>138</sup> From this work, Lucas authored an article, "*Enfants Terribles*: The Challenges of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States,"<sup>139</sup> in which he describes and provides analysis of the challenges conversions to Orthodoxy, including that of the former MANS, pose for "ethnic" communities.

Two studies of American converts to Eastern Orthodoxy have been conducted contextualizing this group within modern American culture. First, H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant (1994) interviewed American converts of a Boston OCA parish to determine the extent to which collective religious life drives and gives expression to personal belief. In their valuable study, these researchers noted the "interactive"<sup>140</sup> nature of these conversions in their social context and the ways that the "private belief systems find communal support"<sup>141</sup> in the course of Orthodox parish life. Second, Richard P. Cimino interviewed thirty young adults between the ages of 23 and 35 years of age who had embraced (through conversion and reversion) "traditional Christianity" in its Roman Catholic, Reformed Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox guises.<sup>142</sup> His results, especially in regard to the motives young people cite for participating in "traditional Christianity," will stand as an important point of comparison to my own, in particular chapter four, which is dedicated to an examination of conversion motives and meanings of Orthodox Christianity.

Additionally, although not devoted to conversion per se, Sally K. Gallagher of Oregon State University has employed participant observation and interviewing in a comparative study of ritual space and architecture as used and conceptualized in different Christian communities, one of which was an Orthodox parish in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>143</sup> Also, Fr. Oliver Herbel is currently completing a valuable



historical study of converts to Orthodox Christianity in the United States and has written on the nineteenth-century American convert to Orthodox Christianity, Nicholas Bjerring.<sup>144</sup>

This study differs from these important methodological and theoretical forebears in a number of respects. First, as mentioned earlier, I have attempted to understand and present conversion to Orthodox Christianity from a number of different perspectives. While the emphasis is placed on the experiences of converts entering the Orthodox Church for theological and/or liturgical reasons, they are not the entire focus of this study since I also take into account the perspectives of intermarriage converts, clerics, and lifelong church members. Second, I do not focus solely on one parish or one demographic grouping (young adults), but men and women of diverse backgrounds and Orthodox jurisdictions (Orthodox Church in America, Greek, Ukrainian, Carpatho-Rusyn, and Antiochian). Third, I am interested not only in what Orthodoxy and its embrace means to individual converts, but to local communities as a whole. What does it mean to be a convert in local Orthodox parish life? If converts are perceived as distinct in their communities, what is it that distinguishes them from and among other religious insiders? What do these intra-parish views tell us about the relative place of Orthodox Christianity in American life? No other study of Orthodox converts takes into account this more generalized local context.

While several important general histories of Eastern Orthodoxy in the United States exist,<sup>145</sup> few historical or ethnographic works specifically dedicated to explorations of religious life in historically significant Orthodox centers such as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have been written.<sup>146</sup> This dissertation, therefore, in its focus on contemporary Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh, fills a lacuna in the study of American religions. With its rich plethora of Orthodox jurisdictions as well as other ethnic and religious groups, both non-Christian and Christian, Pittsburgh affords an important context for exploring the role of choice-making, as trope and activity, in the discourse and perceptions of religious communities deemed “ethnic.” Choice and choicemaking, as vital components of religious conversion, present a dynamic language of change and transformation seemingly at odds with the “given” nature of ethnic or familial affiliation with particular religious communities, such as those typically attributed to certain immigrant groups in North America.

Let us now conclude our introductory remarks with a brief overview of the research methods used in this study.

## **1.5 METHODOLOGY**

To make sense of communal and individual meanings of conversion within Eastern Orthodox churches in Pittsburgh, I employed the classic ethnographic field methods of participant observation and formal, semi-structured interviewing to collect data for this project. From February 2005 to May 2006, I worked at two primary fieldsites, St. Michael's OCA (Orthodox Church in America) parish and Ascension Greek Orthodox Church. These place names as well as all informant names in this study are pseudonymous. While almost the entirety of my participant observation was conducted at St. Michael's and Ascension, I supplemented this fieldwork with additional interviews with priests and parishioners from five other Orthodox churches representing the Carpatho-Rusyn, Ukrainian Orthodox, Orthodox Church in America, and Antiochian archdioceses, including a local Orthodox bishop. These additional informants were initially met and contacted at Ascension church during a community-wide biennial icon festival held the first Sunday of Lent. In the spring of 2006, Ascension hosted this event. Two of these informants attended churches located outside Pittsburgh in the Cleveland area. I used purposive sampling in my selection of these informants, who represented churches differing considerably in jurisdictional and ethnic affiliation, municipal location, size, demographic composition, and length of current pastoral leadership.

Since I wanted to understand conversion "in the round" from the perspectives of different social actors at St. Michael's and Ascension as well as observe the social placement and relationships of converts in everyday parish life, I spent seven months at each of these locations attending worship services, including Sunday Divine Liturgies, special feast day and prayer services, as well as the educational and social activities of the parishes such as weekly Bible studies, coffee hours, annual picnics

and the like. I also attended community-wide, pan-Orthodox events hosted by these communities such as the abovementioned icon festival and lectures conducted by national Orthodox authors (e.g., the convert author Clark Carlton lectured at St. Michael's and the American Orthodox theologian Fr. Thomas Hopko at Ascension at different junctures during my fieldwork).

Extensive participant observation in single locations yielded a number of benefits to my research. For one thing, it enabled me to record the extensive, on-going intra-parish relationships established among the members of these churches and to chart the different uses and connotations of “convert” and “conversion” as they appeared in the course of everyday social interaction. I did not consider conversion to be an event wholly contained within individual biographies, but to have social significances, impacts, and resonances within Orthodox communities; therefore, fieldwork in actual brick-and-mortar churches was necessary. Also, this fieldwork allowed me to locate and observe converts and other parish insiders in both formal and informal church settings and to expand my formal interview sample to include converts easily missed during shorter fieldwork stints. For example, I discovered that individuals who had converted to Orthodoxy decades earlier often no longer considered themselves “converts” or at least the “type” of convert of interest to a researcher like myself. Sometimes priests, who served as key informants vital for parish introductions when I first arrived, were unaware of converts and conversions that had occurred prior to their pastorates or steered me in the direction of converts they considered “ideal.” When I expressed an interest in interviewing a convert who rarely attended services at St. Michael's, the parish priest only provided contact information with great reluctance stressing that he did not consider this person in any sense an exemplar of the phenomenon. I only learned about this potential informant from other converts interviewed for this project.

Finally, I was able to establish “rapport,” which anthropologists stress is critical for data collection in the field,<sup>147</sup> with a number of parish insiders. While observing and recording in written fieldnotes the events and conversations around me, I spent a good deal of my time in the parishes “just hanging out” and getting to know people as H. Russell Bernard prescribes.<sup>148</sup> I drank coffee and ate donuts with parishioners during coffee hours, watched their annual Christmas pageants, learned the best

recipes for making hummus, and received advice on writing a dissertation from an informant with a doctorate. With the exception of the above example, therefore, I rarely interviewed persons whom I had not before met at church social functions and I usually heard a recitation of each informant's conversion story at least twice—first, in a truncated form during initial or subsequent informal conversations and later during the formal interview itself. Occasionally, these same stories would be repeated by clerics and other church members to different audiences, which allowed for natural variations in recitation and perspective to emerge across time and venue.

While participant observation was a significant component of my research, the heart of this project remained forty formal, semi-structured interviews conducted with clerics, converts, and lifelong church members. Since it was difficult to establish the exact size and composition of convert and lifelong lay populations at these fieldsites for the reasons outlined above in addition to the fact that even in the course of the relatively short tenure of my fieldwork I witnessed population shifts in these communities, I relied on snowball sampling to identify interview subjects. Initially, as mentioned, I was heavily dependent upon priests to introduce me to potential informants. However, once I began to make regular social contact with lay parishioners, I came to rely much more heavily on their recommendations as well as my own casual meetings with potential informants. As discussed in chapter three, I had a rather difficult time locating and meeting converts at Ascension given the preponderance of intermarriage converts there. These converts tended to be interspersed amongst parish families rather than grouped into an easily identifiable cohort as was the case among the more recent seeker converts of St. Michael's. The interviews were conducted with both men and women between the ages of 19 and 75 years of age who had been Eastern Orthodox, in the case of converts, anywhere from two to thirty two years at the time the interview had occurred.

Although all the interview guides began with a collection of more generalizable demographic data, I designed and utilized different interview guides reflective of the varied social groupings represented in parish life. [See the appendix for interview guides]. Occasionally, I interviewed persons who belonged to multiple social groupings, for example, priests who were also converts to Orthodox

Christianity. In these cases, I utilized the clerical interview guide in addition to sections three and four from the interview guide for converts. Although armed with these guides, I encouraged interview subjects to formulate their answers and conversion stories as freely, spontaneously, and naturally as possible, with informants responding to this desire in different ways. Some informants were so eager and articulate in their narrative renderings that I could barely engage them with my demographic queries, while other informants were heavily reliant on my direct questioning. I received permission from all informants to tape record the interviews, which ranged in length from forty-five minutes to four hours, which I then kept under lock and key and transcribed in full over the summer of 2006. Informants chose interview settings most preferable and convenient to them with interview sites ranging from the churches themselves (in pews, libraries, offices) to homes, restaurants, cafes as well as my departmental office at the University of Pittsburgh. The interviews themselves usually proceeded in a very conversational manner and were augmented with additional conversations and social exchanges occurring before and after the formal interviews took place. While most parishioners were positively responsive to my interview requests, some individuals, including two clerics, whom I would have liked to have formally interviewed, flatly refused to participate or ignored specific requests for interview scheduling. However, I was able to record more casual conversations with these individuals in my written fieldnotes.

While data collected over the course of this fieldwork remained central to my analysis, I also examined documentary evidence, published Orthodox conversion narratives as well as depictions of converts and conversion found in Orthodox Christian print and electronic sources. Although secondary, these materials allowed me to gauge resonances between the conversion experiences and perceptions of Pittsburgh informants and those found within American Orthodoxy more broadly. However, it is important to stress that this study in no way presents a complete, comprehensive, or generally representative portrait of “the conversion experience” of American-born converts to Orthodox Christianity. Still, even a localized case study such as this provides a valuable glimpse into how the participants of Orthodox communities often characterized as “ethnic” can imbibe and utilize marketplace metaphors and mechanisms. These processes may manifest themselves in other ways in other Orthodox

churches or parts of the country, but my analysis of the above documentary evidence, potent in its shaping of Orthodox attitudes, allows for the tentative conclusion to be made that the points of view and experiences of Pittsburgh informants are not unique but reflective of experiences and perspectives found within American Orthodoxy at large.

I used NVIVO, a computerized qualitative data analysis program to code my interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and imputed documentary evidence and took a “grounded theory” approach to my examination of these data, whereby themes were allowed to “emerge” and guide interpretation. I looked for recurrent themes and phrases and examined the ways in which different groups or persons utilized them. Although this was by no means a formal linguistic study, word counts and searches were part of this analysis and often yielded surprising results, though. For example, I discovered that 8% of persons interviewed did not use the words God, Jesus, Jesus Christ, or Christ at any point in their narratives and that 52% made no reference to God. The references that did appear were often adjectival in character. For instance, informants were more likely to use “Christ” as a descriptor, in phrases such as the “body of Christ” or the “gospel of Christ” rather than as a being directing or informing recounted events. Additionally, neither clerics nor lifelong church members were any more likely to refer to divine beings and specific aspects of the Christian cosmology and worldview (e.g., heaven/hell or sin/repentance/salvation) than converts and only two references to New Testament parables or stories were made in the course of the forty interviews conducted. Yet, of all social groups in this study, converts who had engaged in conscious religious searches were the most likely to make such references.

Through this data analysis, I detected patterns and variations in language and concept usage that were not generally available to individual informants themselves.<sup>149</sup> In this way, I also subscribed to Victor Turner’s multi-level approach to symbolic meaning, here applied to perceptions and experiences of religious conversion. In his essay, “Symbolism, Morality, Social Structure,” Turner argues that anthropologists must be aware of three “fields of meaning,” which include indigenous, operational, and positional interpretations.<sup>150</sup> While anthropologists must certainly rely initially on indigenous interpretations, they also can draw conclusions unfamiliar and contrary to those of indigenous informants

based on their wider vantage in conversing and observing a variety of social actors in multiple venues over a period of time. Not only did I collect multiple informant perspectives, but I also observed how notions of conversion were wielded in different parochial and interview contexts as well as their positioning vis-à-vis other categories, such as that of the lifelong church members. It is based on these observations “in the round,” in the sense used by Jean and John Comaroff, that I justify interpreting Orthodox conversions and their meanings in ways that informants themselves may feel uncomfortable and with which they may take issue. For example, informants, whether clerical, convert or lifelong church members, often expressed disdain over potential “secular” interpretations of phenomena. One of the parish priests with whom I worked once declared to me that, “In the end, this [ethnographic] research will tell us nothing about the Orthodox Church,” given its *sui generis* nature in his eyes. Therefore, the overall validity of my analysis is not dependent upon an unqualified informant recognition of herself in this final write-up, but in the careful charting of phenomena as used and conceptualized repeatedly over time at these fieldsites and across informants.

### **1.5.1 Fieldsites**

In 2000, Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is situated, was home to thirty seven Orthodox churches of which the Greek archdiocese had seven parishes (including Ascension), the OCA eleven (including St. Michael’s), with the remaining churches representing the Serbian (6), Carpatho-Rusyn (7), Ukrainian Orthodox (3), the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (1), and Antiochian (Syrian) archdioceses (2).<sup>151</sup> In a situation reflecting the overall jurisdictional fragmentation of Orthodox Christianity in the United States, Pittsburgh is home to a total of four Orthodox bishops representing the OCA, Greek, Serbian, and Antiochian archdioceses. My two primary fieldsites, an OCA and Greek parish, were selected based on the diverse jurisdictions, histories, populations, and conversion experiences each represented. We will take a brief look at each church in turn.

Founded by individuals of Carpatho-Rusyn descent in 1914 and located in its present building since 1917, St. Michael's Orthodox Church in America parish had approximately 120 members in 2005-2006, of whom approximately twenty percent were converts (both intermarriage and seeker converts). The church has experienced a sizable influx of Russian and Ukrainian immigrant visitors and members since the early 1990s. Thus, it was not uncommon to hear Russian spoken at church social functions. At the time I worked in the parish, Russian/Ukrainian immigrants comprised approximately ten to fifteen percent of church membership with the remaining sixty to seventy percent of church members being American-born lifelong church members. While not exclusively so, the recent seeker converts of the parish tended to be in their twenties and thirties. Social tensions within the parish often cut along immigrant/non-immigrant and generational lines between younger adults, many of whom are converts, and the older, mostly lifelong parishioners, of the church. Although originally established as a neighborhood church for a once economically prosperous section of Pittsburgh, St. Michael's today is located in an economically depressed, high crime area of the city. A number of parishioners expressed worries about visiting the church after dark or allowing their children to play in its gated yard during coffee hour and during the period of my fieldwork police dismantled a methamphetamine lab in a house yards from the church. Although the church counted many young professionals, including doctors and academics, among its members, St. Michael's had pronounced blue-collar roots with older parishioners often recalling the steady work and good incomes to be had for their parents and themselves in Pittsburgh's once thriving steel mills and other heavy industries.

Whereas the church was established to minister to the Orthodox of the neighborhood increasingly since the early 1970s, parishioners have moved to other parts of the city and today very few church members live in the direct vicinity of the church. Indeed, I traveled to a number of different locations throughout Pittsburgh to interview St. Michael's parishioners in their homes, which were in some cases forty five minutes to an hour away from the church. Also, St. Michael's, along with other "Slavic" Orthodox churches, experienced a sharp membership decline in the 1980s with the closing of Pittsburgh steel mills and the moving of younger populations from the area. This period of decline continued



unabated until Fr. Mark, an energetic evangelically minded man in his early forties, took over the pastorate from his ailing father in 2000. Whereas lifelong parishioners of St. Michael's regularly described the church as "dying" before Fr. Mark's arrival, they reported to me of being encouraged by the presence of more converts and young people amongst its predominantly aging flock. The church remained the one of the largest OCA parishes in its diocese (Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania), of which 57% of its total 45 parishes had 49 members or less in 2005-2006.<sup>152</sup> Despite this relative, steady demographic health, which parishioners repeatedly attributed to the efforts of the young priest, they were largely pessimistic about the future of their parish and Orthodoxy in Pittsburgh more generally.

During my fieldwork at the parish, St. Michael's was staffed by one parish priest, Fr. Mark, and a deacon, whom I was unable to interview for this project despite repeated requests. St. Michael's had a vibrant, active round of church activities for parishioners to partake. Many of these had been introduced during Fr. Mark's pastorate and included bi-weekly Bible studies, weekly coffee hours, Wednesday and Saturday evening vespers, men and women's clubs, a monthly all-day church school (on Saturdays), special lecture series (Fr. Mark conducted special workshops on prayer during Lent of 2005), church picnics, special luncheons, and the like. During the time of my work at the parish, a young adult group (of twenty-and thirty-somethings) had been formed to foster outside church social relations, especially among the young converts. As of spring 2008, the group is still thriving. Although Fr. Mark admitted there was little parochial outreach to the economically and socially depressed neighborhood surrounding the church, he was keenly interested in evangelizing non-Orthodox Americans, an endeavor that occupied a special place in his pastorate. He not only blessed the street campus evangelism of two of his parishioners, Alex and Paul, but was an active participant of a number of Orthodox convert and inquirers' forums. On official diocesan and national levels, he has been involved with the OCA Department of Evangelization. An avid technology aficionado, Fr. Mark designed St. Michael's website which includes answers to basic queries about the Orthodox faith and an audio archive of his Sunday sermons among other features.

Meanwhile, Ascension Greek Orthodox Church was founded in 1954 when group of parishioners broke from the municipal Greek cathedral to establish a neighborhood church serving the wealthy

suburban community where Ascension finds itself today. Although it is not uncommon to hear Greek spoken among the parishioners, Fr. Joseph, the parish priest, maintained that there has been no significant influx of immigrants from Greece to Ascension since the 1950s. The present church building has been renovated numerous times and today finds itself surrounded by upscale shopping boutiques, restaurants, and coffee houses. In contrast to St. Michael's, a good many of Ascension's parishioners lived within a radius of five to ten miles from the church and many of my interviews in informant homes occurred within close proximity to the parish. In 2005-2006, the church had approximately 500 members, about twenty to twenty-five percent of whom were converts. The population has remained relatively stable over the past couple of decades, thus Ascension has not experienced a population decline similar to St. Michael's. Ascension's parishioners tend to be highly educated, involved in professional careers, and economically well off. All members of the clerical staff (Fr. Joseph is the main priest assisted in his endeavors by Fr. Andrew a part-time cleric in the parish and a deacon, Morris all of whom were interviewed for this project) observed that materialism and conspicuous consumption were among the deepest "spiritual" problems facing church members and a number of Sunday homilies were preached on this theme during my time there.

Ascension is not only a relatively recent Orthodox parish in Pittsburgh but has its own peculiar history. For one thing, the community has a reputation as a "holy roller" Orthodox church due to a charismatic renewal movement that occurred there in the late 1960s and early 70s, where highly emotional, Neo-Pentecostal "revival" services, very similar to those found during the same period in some Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, took place.<sup>153</sup> Ascension's "revival" began after a handful of its parishioners attended the charismatic healing service of a nearby Episcopal church and was conducted with the full knowledge and approval of the local Pittsburgh bishop, though the regular Monday-night services began to die down in their fervor over the course of the 1970s. Many of Ascension's parishioners had little to no knowledge about this early aspect of this church's history and those who did were conflicted about its legacy. Some considered the revival "un-Orthodox" and were glad that it died away while others considered it a positive and spiritually fruitful period of the church's history. Among

the latter commentators was Fr. Joseph himself who had experienced his own renewed interest in Orthodoxy in its midst. Fr. Joseph also recounted in interview a number of other incidents that he considered landmarks of Ascension's inner spiritual history such as the miracle of an oil-streaming icon that occurred at a nearby Orthodox camp in the 1980s, the founding of a nearby Greek Orthodox women's monastic community, and the frequent visits of a monk from Mt. Athos to the parish. The church is also known for the large number of parish priests it has produced over the course of its existence, including Fr. Joseph, who himself counts Ascension his childhood church.

Given Fr. Joseph's early Peace Corps experience and avid interest in mission work, Ascension parish provided its members more opportunities and exposure to this aspect of church life than what I observed at St. Michael's. Not only did representatives from the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)<sup>154</sup> address the congregation on more than one occasion, but Ascension parishioners were heavily involved with an Orthodox orphanage in Guatemala as expressed in the many mission trips made there and the many adoptions of its orphans that had occurred within the parish. Fr. Joseph traveled to Guatemala each December to deliver medicine, clothing, and other supplies to the orphanage and in recent years, he has made mission trips to Africa and the Middle East.

Ascension also provides its parishioners a wider spectrum of organized, highly specialized activities than did St. Michael's. In addition to such mainstays as weekly coffee hours and Bible studies, the church offered chapters of GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth of America, for teenage youth) and JOY (Junior Orthodox Youth, for pre-teen youth) to its young members. It also has a chapter of Philoptochos, which is a national philanthropy for Greek Orthodox women. The parish also hosts a large, community wide Greek food festival each June. Fr. Joseph has been keen to enlist the help of converts and to place them in key roles within the community such as on parish board.

While nearly all my participant observation occurred at St. Michael's and Ascension, I expanded my interviewing beyond these two churches to include priests and lay parishioners of five additional communities. Three of these parishes, a Ukrainian Orthodox, a Carpatho-Rusyn, and Antiochian church, were located in the Pittsburgh area, while the remaining informants were from a Ukrainian Orthodox and

OCA parish near Cleveland. These churches reflected diversity in jurisdiction, church size, and numbers of converts. The priest of both Ukrainian Orthodox churches reported that less than ten percent of their respective populations were convert, while the priest of the Antiochian parish reported over forty percent of his congregants to be converts to Orthodoxy. I only interviewed lay parishioners at the Carpatho-Rusyn and Cleveland-area OCA churches, while my informants at the remaining churches were exclusively clerical. In addition to these informants, I also interviewed a local Pittsburgh-area bishop.

### **1.5.2 Interview Informants**

A total of forty formal interviews were conducted with informants from St. Michael's and Ascension as well as the above churches. Nineteen of these informants hailed from St. Michael's (four interviews were conducted with lifelong lay members; four with intermarriage converts; nine with seeker converts; one cleric), thirteen from Ascension (one interview was with a lifelong church member; four with intermarriage converts; five with seeker converts; three clerics, one of whom was a convert) and nine from additional parishes and jurisdictions (two interviews were conducted with intermarriage converts, two with seeker converts; five with clerics, two of whom were converts to Orthodox Christianity). Twenty four of these informants were male and 16 were female (60% male; 40% female); the higher number and percentage of male informants can be attributed to the many clerical interviews conducted, since the Orthodox Church only ordains men to its clerical ranks (deacon, priest, and bishop). Interview subjects tended to be highly educated (48% of the total number of informants had completed BA or BS degrees; 43% had completed MA, MS, MBAs, or M.Div degrees; 5% held doctorates; 5% had a high school diploma at the time of the interview).

Although I endeavored to obtain as diverse a sample as possible, I was limited by informant availability and willingness to participate in the study. Some peculiarities of this population reflect those of the Pittsburgh area more generally, since approximately 40% of study informants hailed from its environs. For example, according to statistical work completed by the Glenmary Research Center and

published in *Religious Congregations and Membership in the U.S. in 2000* approximately fifty percent of the population of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area (a total of 2.4 million) was Roman Catholic with nearly a quarter belonging to mainline Protestant groups such as the United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.<sup>155</sup> These religious groupings comprised the majority of informants' childhood confessions (62% were Roman Catholic; 35% were Protestant, in which I include the Episcopal/Anglican, Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, various Pentecostal and non-denominational churches as well as unspecified Protestant churches; 4% were Byzantine Catholic; 4% were unchurched). Approximately 46% of the total number of converts were seeker converts, whom I include both individuals who had investigated different religious options with or without officially becoming members of one or another religious group. Meanwhile, 25% of the total number of informants could be classified as "serial converts," persons who had officially taken membership in one or more religious groups before entering the Orthodox Church.

## **1.6 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

The central marketplace themes of seeking and choice-making will be examined from a variety of perspectives within an overall framework of "crossing" and "dwelling"<sup>156</sup> roughly corresponding to the pre-and post-conversion experiences of Pittsburgh converts to Orthodox Christianity. Chapter two will focus on the "crossing" portion of informants' pre-conversion lives, the influences of religious seeking and pluralism on their early biographies as well as the impetuses propelling them to engage in religious searches of their own. This chapter will conclude with an examination of the different information sources informants consult in their adult quests. Realizing that not all converts are necessarily theologically and/or liturgically driven to embrace Orthodox Christianity, I devote chapter three to a discussion of another type of conversion-those initiated through or in the aftermath of intermarriage with an Orthodox Christian spouse. While typically considered outside the purview of religious seeking and

choice-making premised as they are believed to be on marital or familial duty, these conversions provide a case study of how religious subjectivity and choice often trump familial religious unity as motivators for embrace of the Orthodox faith. Meanwhile, chapter four affords an important overview of Orthodox catechesis as implemented in the fieldsites as well as clerical perspectives on conversion and their spiritual mentoring of converts. I will devote chapters five and six to the “dwelling” portion of these conversions, with chapter five attending to the complex issues of conversion motives and informant perceptions of the Orthodox Church. These motives and perceptions are heavily influenced by prevailing marketplace images and expectations, as we shall see. Finally, in chapter six, I will examine the relationships and perceptual differences between converts and lifelong church members in addition to the issue of ethnicity in regard to convert choice-making and experimentation in converts’ post-conversion lives.

## 1.7 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Arjun Appadurai uses this phrase in *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 30.

<sup>2</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, forward by Jacques Barzun (NY: New American Library, 1958), 169.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>7</sup>Alexei D. Krindatch, “Eastern Christianity in North American Religious Landscape: Ethnic Traditionalism Versus Civic Involvement and Social Transformations,” report for project *Research on Orthodox Religious Groups in the United States* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/krindatch\[1\].pdf](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/krindatch[1].pdf)), 2.

<sup>8</sup>The Eastern Orthodox Church in the United States is currently composed of a number of jurisdictions each independently governed by its own episcopate and largely divided along ethnic lines

(Greek, Serbian, Ukrainian, and so forth). As church historian John H. Erickson notes, this structural disunity came about in the wake of the “new immigration” drawing people from Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe at the turn of the last century. These immigrants established churches according to ethnic affiliation rather than organizing into a single American church. This fracturing pertains to governing structures and, at times, ethnicity alone, for the churches share common doctrines and liturgical practices as well as full communion with one another. The Orthodox Church in America (OCA) is the original Russian archdiocese granted autocephaly by the Moscow patriarchate in 1970. For more on the historical development of the Orthodox Church in the U. S. see John H. Erickson, *Orthodox Churches in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially chapters 3-5. See also Alexei D. Krindatch, “Orthodox (Eastern Christian) Churches in the United States at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Questions of Nature, Identity, and Mission,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 3 (September 2002), 533-563 for a current discussion of the demographic configurations of Eastern Orthodoxy in the U. S.

<sup>9</sup>For scholarly perspectives on this phenomenon see Paisios Bukowy Whitesides, “Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions Within American Orthodoxy,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997), 19–35; H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant, “Collective Life as the Ground of Implicit Religion: The Case of American Converts to Russian Orthodoxy,” *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994), 441–54; and Philip Charles Lucas, “*Enfants Terribles*: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003), 5–23. See Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, revised edition (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992) for an “insider’s” account of these evangelical Protestant conversions in the mid-1980s.

<sup>10</sup>In the wake of these evangelical Protestant conversions to Orthodox Christianity, the Antiochian archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America (as the two jurisdictions receiving the majority of these converts) set upon missionary campaigns to establish Orthodox churches in areas of the United States with little historical Orthodox presence, such as the deep south and the western portions of the United States. According to the official OCA website over 150 new parishes have been established in the last 20 years primarily in the “underserved” areas of the South, West, and Midwest. See Mark Stokoe and Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, “The Emerging American Mission: Evangelization,” in *Orthodox Christians in North America, 1794-1994* (<http://www.oca.org/MVorthchristiansnamerica.asp?SID=1&CHAP-CH9>).

<sup>11</sup>According to Alexei D. Krindatch, twenty-five percent of the seminarians at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary (Brookline, MA) today are converts as well as over fifty percent at two other major Orthodox seminaries in the U. S., St. Vladimir’s (Crestwood, NY) and St. Tikhon’s (South Canaan, PA). See, “‘American Orthodoxy’ or ‘Orthodoxy in America?’ Profiling the Next Generation of Eastern Christian Clergy in the USA,” research report for *Research on Orthodox Religious Groups in the United States* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, <http://hartsem.edu/research/orthodoxarticle2.html>) for a wider discussion of these statistics.

<sup>12</sup>Sociologist Elizabeth H. Prodromou has noted that Orthodox Christians in the United States have come to occupy prominent positions in academia, the media, and the world of public policy and, in general, “possess impressive human capital assets.” Elizabeth H. Prodromou, “Religious Pluralism in Twenty-First-Century America: Problematizing the Implications for Orthodoxy [*sic*] Christianity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 3 (September 2004), 748.

<sup>13</sup>For the purposes of this study, I have defined a “convert” as a person who has undergone the Orthodox Christian initiation rituals of baptism/chrisation (anointing with oil analogous to the sacrament of confirmation performed in Roman Catholic and some Protestant churches) and/or confession in adolescence or adulthood. Although all Orthodox church members must be baptized and chrismated,

the baptisms of most other Christian confessions are considered valid and many Roman and Byzantine Catholics are brought into the Orthodox Church through confession alone. See John H. Erickson, "The Reception of Non-Orthodox Into the Orthodox Church: Contemporary Practice," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 41, no. 1 (1997), 1-17 for a discussion of the varied diocesan and parochial administration of these initiation rites across Orthodox churches in the United States.

<sup>14</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 59.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holmquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 351-1; Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>18</sup>Comaroff, 198 as quoted in Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Conversion*, edited by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (NY: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, 2003), 2

<sup>19</sup>Sociologist Bryan Taylor noted in the 1970s that scholarship up to that time tended to overlook convert agency in emphasizing missionization tactics and "conversion-inducing strategies." See his article, "Conversion and Cognition: An Area from Empirical Study in the Microsociology of Religious Knowledge," *Social Compass* 23 (1976): 6.

<sup>20</sup>Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 1; Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, "Preface," in *The Anthropology of Conversion*, xi-xviii; Diane Austin-Broos, 1-3.

<sup>21</sup>Richard P. Cimino, *Against the Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faiths By Young Adults* (NY: Religion Watch and University Press of America, Inc., 1997), x.

<sup>22</sup>Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup>Richard P. Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 55; For an excellent recent discussion of the intersection of American consumer and Evangelical Protestant cultures see, Richard G. Kyle, *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), especially chapter 7.

<sup>24</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 19; For the purposes of this study, I adopt Wade Clark Roof's stance in regard to the appropriate labeling of these phenomena as reflective of "late modernity." He says of the term 'postmodernity,' "it has become something of a buzzword, convoluted in its meanings, and ideologically loaded in ways that obfuscate rather than clarify. I think it is more appropriate to hold to assumptions of modernity, or late modernity, recognizing that the descriptive characteristics alleged to characterize 'late modernity' and 'postmodernity' often overlap." In *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), note 11, page 325.



<sup>25</sup>Paul Morris, "Community Beyond Tradition," in *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, ed. Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 226.

<sup>26</sup>There is a long history of sociological theorizing exploring the relationship between the emergence of the capitalist market and modernity. Examples include Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (NY: Scribner's 1958); Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960); Also as summarized in Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup>David Gross, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup>Appadurai, 2-3.

<sup>29</sup>Edward C. Rosenthal, *The Era of Choice: The Ability to Choose and Its Transformation of Contemporary Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>30</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 75.

<sup>31</sup>Kelly Besecke, "Beyond Literalism: Reflexive Spirituality and Religious Meaning" in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>32</sup>Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 5.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 1-19.

<sup>35</sup>Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 133.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Berger argues this in *The Heretical Imperative*. See Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979).

<sup>37</sup>Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor, 1955).

<sup>38</sup>Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 221.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (NY: Basic Books, 1996), 168. David Lyon also discusses Daniel Bell and Robert Bellah in his work, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 82.

<sup>41</sup>Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>42</sup>See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 135.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>44</sup>Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 77; See also Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 106-171.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 76,

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>Philip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 5; See also Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 12-13.

<sup>52</sup>Roof, 10.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 101-103.

<sup>54</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); See also Lyon, 88.

<sup>55</sup>Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>56</sup>Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (NY: Peter Lang, 1987) ; Steve Bruce offers an extensive analysis and critique of the Stark-Bainbridge theory in *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30-43.

<sup>57</sup>Bruce, 122.

<sup>58</sup>James Bohman, "The Limits of Rational Choice Explanation," in *Rational Choice Theory: Advocacy and Critique*, ed. James S. Coleman and Thomas J. Fararo (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 213-214.

<sup>59</sup>Bruce, 124.

<sup>60</sup>My use of the concepts “choice” and “choice-making” is similar to that of sociologists Elizabeth H. Prodromou and Nancy T. Ammerman who use market metaphors to describe American religious life without appeal to rational choice theory. Prodromou writes, “I do see utility in concepts such as choice, pluralism, competition, demand, and supply, which are rooted in the market metaphor, and, therefore, I draw on these to help understand the dynamics of engagement by religious actors in the public sphere in America.” In Prodromou, “Religious Pluralism in Twenty-First-Century America: Problematizing the Implications for Orthodoxy [*sic*] Christianity,” note 2, page 736. Nancy T. Ammerman writes, “Taking choice seriously, we should note, does not mean adopting a ‘rational choice’ perspective. Most of this book’s authors would agree with rational choice theorists that religious actors make decisions about religion in much the same way they make decisions about other aspects of their lives, and in many cases that means choosing the best the market has to offer, given what one is willing to invest. Most of us are skeptical, however, about the degree to which costs and rewards and market structures are the prime explanations for action, religious or otherwise.” In Nancy T. Ammerman, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. by Nancy T. Ammerman (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>61</sup>Lyon, 18.

<sup>62</sup>Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>63</sup>Nancy T. Ammerman, “Telling Congregational Stories,” *Review of Religious Research* 35, no. 4 (1994), 290 as quoted in Lyon, 18.

<sup>64</sup>See David D. Hall, “Introduction,” in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice* ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii-xiii; Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion*, 3-21 ; Nancy T. Ammerman, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Religion*, 3-18.

<sup>65</sup>Hall, ix.

<sup>66</sup>Ammerman, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Religion*, 5.

<sup>67</sup>Hall, xi; R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>68</sup>See Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (April 1986), 273-286 and Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), especially 11-26.

<sup>69</sup>Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (NY: Basic Books, 1973), 93.

<sup>70</sup>Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 21-22.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Andrew Buckser, "Preface" in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), xi.

<sup>76</sup>Diane Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction" in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, 1-2.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 37 (April 1986), 3-34. Religionist Paula Fredriksen discusses the narrative entwinement and historical import of these conversion paradigms in this article.

<sup>79</sup>A.D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford 1972; originally 1933), 7, cf 134; quoted in Fredriksen, 5.

<sup>80</sup>Andrew Buckser provides an overview of the history of conversion studies in the twentieth century in his preface to *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, xii.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>See James V. Downton Jr., *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to Divine Light Mission* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1979); Francine J. Daner, *The American Children of Krsna: A Study of the Hare Krsna Movement* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976); Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>83</sup>Lorne L. Dawson, "Cult Conversions: Controversy and Clarification," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (NY: Cassell, 1999), 284-7.

<sup>84</sup>Buckser, xii-xiii.

<sup>85</sup>See Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa* 41 (1971): 85-108; Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1; Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Christopher Queen, "Ambedkar, Modernity, and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation," in *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social change*, ed. by A. K. Narain and D. C. Ahir (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1994).

<sup>86</sup>Horton, 85-108.

<sup>87</sup>Jean and John Comaroff, 9.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Viswanathan, 145.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 175. Here, Viswanathan cites a number of recent studies where the impacts of previous religious venues in post-conversion situations have been taken seriously such as Robin Horton in “African Conversion,” as well as in other studies: Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, “What is ‘Conversion’? History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia,” *Journal of Religious History* 15 (December 1989), 496-518.

<sup>95</sup>Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 117-118 as quoted in Jerome Bruner, “The Autobiographical Process” in *The Culture of Autobiography*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 38.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Convert as a Social Type,” in *Sociological Theory* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1983), 259-289.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.; Folkenflik, 38.

<sup>99</sup>Snow and Machalek, 269.

<sup>100</sup>Stromberg, 7-9.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

<sup>104</sup>Stromberg, 9.

<sup>105</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre writes, “Each person is an absolute choice of self from the standpoint of a world of knowledges and of techniques which this choice both assumes and illumines. . . . I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it.” In Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman and Hazel E. Barnes (NY: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1957), 56-7.

<sup>106</sup>Rosenthal, xi.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>110</sup>See Rosenthal, 2-3; Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 19-20.

<sup>111</sup>Rosenthal, 2-3.

<sup>112</sup>Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>113</sup>Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 32.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>See Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* (NY: New York University Press, 2003); Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997); Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>117</sup>Paul Valliere, "Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition," in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity: On Law, Politics, & Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>For a sampling of these see Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 985-994; Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *A Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 285-6 and 392-393; Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 286-292.

<sup>120</sup>Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 13.

<sup>121</sup>Victor Roudometof, and Alexander Agadjanian, "Introduction: Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age-Preliminary Considerations," in *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Victor Roudometof, Alexander Agadjanian, and Jerry Pankhurst (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>122</sup>Prodromou, 743.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 751.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 752.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid.

<sup>127</sup>Dmitro Volkov, "Living Eastern Orthodox Religion in the United States," in *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Victor Roudometof, Alexander Agadjanian, and Jerry Pankhurst (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 224-244.

<sup>128</sup>Alexei D. Krindatch, "Orthodox (Eastern Christian) Churches in the United States at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Questions of Nature, Identity, and Mission," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:3 (September 2002), 533-563; "Eastern Christianity in North American Religious Landscape: Ethnic Traditionalism Versus Civic Involvement and Social Transformations."

<sup>129</sup>Krindatch, "Eastern Christianity in North American Religious Landscape," 15.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

<sup>133</sup>Pittsburgh has been a center for Orthodox Christianity in North America since the beginning of the twentieth century when large numbers of "new immigrants," many of whom were Eastern Orthodox, settled there to work in the city's steel mills and other burgeoning industries. Among American Orthodox Christians, Pittsburgh known as the "Holy Land" in recognition of the plethora of Orthodox churches found there.

<sup>134</sup>According to U.S. Census Bureau figures for 2000, 17% of Allegheny County's (where Pittsburgh is located) population was 65 years of age or older. This was compared to 12.4% of the population aged 65 and older nationally. See U. S. Bureau of the Census, *State and County Quickfacts (Allegheny County, Pennsylvania)*, (Washington, D. C., 2000). Accessed online at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/42003.html>. For some assessment of these statistics see, Peter A. Morrison, *A Demographic Overview of Metropolitan Pittsburgh* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand IP-246, Rand Corporation, 2003).

<sup>135</sup>Erickson, 110-111. Here, Erickson discusses the "Americanization" of Eastern Orthodox churches.

<sup>136</sup>Amy Johnson Frykholm, "Smells and Bells: Turning to Orthodoxy," *The Christian Century* 121, no. 26 (December 28, 2004), 18.

<sup>137</sup>For scholarly perspectives on this phenomenon see Paisios Bukowy Whitesides, "Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions Within American Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997), 19-35.

<sup>138</sup>Philip Charles Lucas, *The Odyssey of a New Religion: The Holy Order of MANS From New Age to Orthodoxy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>139</sup>Philip Charles Lucas, "Enfants Terribles: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003), 5–23.

<sup>140</sup>H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant, "Collective Life as the Ground of Implicit Religion: The Case of American Converts to Russian Orthodoxy," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994), 451.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>142</sup>Richard P. Cimino, *Against the Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faith by Young Adults* (NY: Religion Watch/University Press of America, Inc., 1997).

<sup>143</sup>Sally K. Gallagher, "Building Traditions: Comparing Space, Ritual, and Community in Three Congregations," *Review of Religious Research* 47, no. 1 (2005), 70-85.

<sup>144</sup>Fr. Oliver Herbel, "A Catholic, Presbyterian, and Orthodox Journey: The Changing Church Affiliation and Enduring Social Vision of Nicholas Bjerring," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 14, no. 1 (2007), 49-80.

<sup>145</sup>Aside from John H. Erickson's *Orthodox Christians in America*, other general histories of Eastern Orthodoxy in the United States include Thomas E. Fitzgerald, *The Orthodox Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), which includes an excellent bibliographic essay of additional source materials, 229-235 and Mark Stokoe and Leonid Kishkovsky, *Orthodox Christians in North America, 1794-1994* (Syosset, NY: Orthodox Christian Publications Center, 1995).

<sup>146</sup>Again, Dmitro Volkov's study of Orthodox churches in Chicago is an exception to this, since Chicago is also a traditional stronghold of Orthodox Christianity in North America.

<sup>147</sup>H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 368-369; Kathleen M. Dewalt and Billie R. Dewalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 40-45.

<sup>148</sup>Bernard, 368.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*, 492-3.

<sup>150</sup>Victor Turner, "Symbolism, Morality, Social Structure," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 50-1.

<sup>151</sup>Table 4: Religious Congregations by County and Group: 2000-Pennsylvania, Allegheny County," in *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States 2000: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported for 149 Religious Bodies*, compiled by Dale E. Jones, Sherri Doty, Clifford Grammich, James E. Horsch, Richard Houseal, Mac Lynn, John P. Marcum, Kenneth M. Sanchagrin, Richard H. Taylor (Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 2002), 389-390.

<sup>152</sup>These figures for the OCA diocese of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania (October 2006) were made available by V. Rev. Fr. William J. Evansky, "Annual Pastoral Report: 18 February 2007,"



*Holy Ghost Orthodox Church* (Ambridge, PA: March 2007 Monthly Church Bulletin). They were compiled from figures offered at the Diocesan Assembly of the Archdiocese of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, October 2006.

<sup>153</sup>For a description and analysis of the Neo-Pentecostal, charismatic renewal movement within Roman Catholicism see Richard J. Bord and Joseph E. Faulkner, *The Catholic Charismatics: The Anatomy of a Modern Religious Movement* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983).

<sup>154</sup>The International Orthodox Christian Charities is a pan-Orthodox charity organization that was founded in 1992 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) to provide relief for natural and humanitarian disasters around the world. The official website of the organization is <http://www.iocc.org>.

<sup>155</sup>Dale Jones, "Fifteen Largest [Religious] Groups in Metropolitan Areas of the United States, 2000," report for project *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported by 149 Religious Bodies* compiled by Dale E. Jones, Sherri Doty, Clifford Grammich, James E. Horsch, Richard Houseal, Mac Lynn, John P. Marcum, Kenneth M. Sanchagrin, Richard H. Taylor (Glenmary Research Center, <http://ext.nazarene.org/rcms>).

<sup>156</sup>I borrow this framework from Thomas Tweed's recent discussion of the importance of notions of "crossing" and "dwelling" to understanding and theorizing about religious belief and practice in his work *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). This framework will be treated in more detail in Chapter Two. See Sections 2.1 and 2.2.

## **2.0 MANY ROOMS: ORTHODOX CONVERSIONS IN A PLURALISTIC CONTEXT**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

A convert parishioner of Ascension Greek Orthodox church, Helen, at seventy five years of age, was the oldest person interviewed for this project. She was also one of the most recent converts to Orthodox Christianity with whom I spoke having been brought into the church only four years before I interviewed her in the spring of 2006. A tall, slender woman with white, bobbed hair and a gentle, purposeful manner of movement and speech, Helen embodied the two religious worlds, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox, that had encompassed the entirety of her life. Her graceful propriety and charm alone seemed to evoke the Anglo-Catholic parish of her childhood in New York where, in her words, “I had it just about as perfect as anybody could have it. The liturgy [there] was very beautiful, very beautiful and even the church itself was a beautiful place. It was an old stone English church, with a beautiful wood-beam crucifix and they had a Lady chapel. They had weekday services and feast days.”

She recalled being taught catechism there by “this grand old English schoolmarm type woman” who distributed holy pictures and lollipops to well-versed Sunday-school pupils. No doubt Helen earned more than her fair share since nearly sixty years later she explained and demonstrated the catechism drill:

And you had to repeat the question in your answer, of course. [Helen clears her throat] I’m trying to think of a good question now that she asked, ‘Uh, [She clears her throat and assumes a commanding voice] does God answer prayers?’ ‘God does answer prayers.’ ‘How does God answer prayers?’ ‘God answers prayers by yes, no, and not yet. But very concrete things. And so she, Miss Jean we called her, and she was a great influence on my life.

Helen's twin loves for Anglicanism and learning continued unabated throughout her adulthood as well with she and her husband eventually earning graduate degrees at an Episcopal seminary after their retirements.

Helen's deep piety, forged from her life in the Episcopal Church (U. S. A.), later found its apt expression in the gestures and practices of her newer Orthodox faith. Her punctual and consistent attendance of divine services at Ascension church, including weekday and special feast-day liturgies as well as the slow, careful way she crossed herself and bowed belied a thoughtfulness and precision that would have made Miss Jean, had she been Eastern Orthodox, proud. In keeping with her thirst for religious learning, Helen regularly attended lectures given by Orthodox teachers and theologians both in her home parish and in other Pittsburgh-area churches and she regularly read books and periodicals devoted to Orthodox spirituality and theology. When she and her husband investigated a retirement community in New England, to which they moved in the spring of 2007, Helen immediately set upon finding a new parish to attend, commenting favorably that the closest one had once played host to Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Despite the marked religious homogeneity of her childhood, Helen described her conversion to Orthodox Christianity in terms reflective of the wider religious diversity in which it occurred. Interestingly, her choice of imagery presented a view of conversion as neither involving a radical break between past and present lives nor a vertical movement from a true to truer form of religious expression, but a horizontal shift between two equally valid and largely interchangeable forms of Christianity. She said in this regard:

So, I wasn't running away from the Anglican Church at all, I was going towards it, you know. It was hard to write to the church historian at the Episcopal seminary and tell him that I was gonna do this [convert to Orthodoxy]. But he's big on C. S. Lewis and I said it's kind of like C. S. Lewis' little forward in his *Mere Christianity* where he talks about once you become a Christian you've got to decide which room you're going into. I said I've been in the Anglican room all my life, but suddenly I was drawing closer to the door and holding onto my husband like this [She makes a clasping gesture with her hands] you know, and the light was *blazing* out of the Orthodox room, just *blazing*, I couldn't ignore it. So finally I decided to convert and step across the hall. But I thought that was an apt analogy, you know, the rooms.

C. S. Lewis' "rooms" analogy provides an image of conversion that appears calm and quotidian even amidst the "blaze" shining forth from a more attractive alternative. In this case, "mere Christianity" represents a common denominator of Christian identity for which exact ecclesial denominations become matters of personal choice. It evokes a potential "hallway" of options whose perusal and appropriation involve little more than the making of individual religious decisions, largely devoid of external cultural or societal constraints or questions of transcendent "truth."<sup>1</sup> As formulated in C. S. Lewis' introduction and in Helen's appropriation of it, the rooms are largely interchangeable, marked as they are by greater similarities, all possessing we would assume metaphoric walls and entranceways, than differences. Even in the original analogy, for instance, Lewis stressed that there are "rules common to the whole house"<sup>2</sup> and that an eventual choice must be made since, as he continued "the hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable."<sup>3</sup> Surely in her estimation, Helen, gliding as she did through the hall at the blink of an eye, found her new "room" the most suitable and inviting of all.

While Helen described her embrace of Orthodox Christianity as a spatially compact "step across the hall," a singular movement between two churches, other informants often described their experience of finding and learning about Orthodox Christianity more broadly and energetically, in terms of a "journey," an "odyssey" or a "search" for moral and/or ecclesial certitude and fulfillment. Fellow parishioner of Ascension, Mary, a forty-two-year-old education professor at a nearby college who converted to Eastern Orthodoxy with her husband, Fred, in the early 1990s, described the wide-ranging parameters of their "journey" in finding a church in this way:

I mean everything was just very, very hard. But it was just part of this journey, you know, part of the journey and it actually ended up being a journey. So during that time that we were first married, we were Assembly of God, but we started going to a home church for a period of time and then we were involved in some other sort of loose home organizations. Then there was a period of time when he [her husband] was even looking at [the Society of] Friends or even some of these communities like the Hutterites or different places like that. I mean, we were really looking.

Meanwhile another informant considered his conversion to the Orthodox Church as the successful completion of an “odyssey,” for as he maintained, “I was always looking for guidance and I went through a kind of brief odyssey in college of looking for a church and went to every kind of experience you can imagine.”

In addition to this common view of entry to the Orthodox Church as the endpoint of “journeys” and “searches,” the provocative if rather less epic image of “shopping” was too used by informants to describe conversion processes. As noted in section 1.1, scholars such as R. Laurence Moore and Peter Berger among others have noted the deeply engrained, long-standing commodification of religion in American culture, with the common contemporary activities of “shopping for faith” or “church shopping” among its most recent exemplars.<sup>4</sup> Another convert from Ascension, Brad, an affable, bespectacled insurance salesman in his early fifties who entered the Orthodox Church in the 1970s, likened his Protestant-driven, pre-conversion investigation for a church in terms of a “shopping” excursion. Brad said of this period:

And I knew countless times that my friends church shopped. Even my friends who I was very close to, like this couple I met. They went church shopping with me and we’d try a different one [church] each Sunday. You know, if you didn’t like what the pastor said, you just left. Then you went down the street and found somebody else who said something you liked.

“Church shopping” made its appearance a number of times across the collected narratives, a phrase wielded and regarded by convert informants with a certain degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, “shopping” shares with ‘seeking,’ ‘journeying,’ and Helen’s Lewisian “rooms” analogy a similar *topos* of options existing side-by-side, available for individual inspection and appropriation (now in “mallways” rather than “hallways”), while on the other hand possessing a kind of moral suspiciousness largely absent in the other metaphors. The coupling of “shopping” with its highly charged connotations of commercial exchange, materialism, and programmed novelty/obsolescence and “church,” a supposed venue of tradition, permanence, and solidity, at least as often popularly imagined, rested uneasily in the mouths of many informants. Converts, in particular, tended to look down upon the practice and quickly disavowal themselves of it as an unsavory, if formative, feature of their pre-Orthodox lives. Another Orthodox

convert who spent her pre-conversion years in Protestant circles, for example, said, “People church shop because they’re not happy somewhere anymore or the pastor doesn’t speak to me anymore. I mean, I’ve heard that a hundred times from people, ‘Oh we have to go find another church.’ And we knew church shouldn’t be that way.”

While “shopping,” in contrast to the more romantically tinged metaphors of “search” and “journey,” at times, possessed this hint of moral taint (a taint by no means shared by all informants, especially Orthodox Christian clerics, as we shall see in chapter four), all of these tropes, including Helen’s “step across the hall” share a fundamental view of conversion as the outcome of self-propelled movement through landscapes dotted with a diversity of worldview options and ever-fluid institutional/communal boundaries. If, as Thomas Tweed surmises in a recent work drawing upon the insights of James Clifford, religion itself can be metaphorically formulated as “crossing and dwelling,” as strategic movement and place-making on levels as varied and ranging as the human corporeal to the cosmic,<sup>5</sup> then conversion, at least as expressed by Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh, is religious “crossing and dwelling” *par excellence*. These conversions to the Orthodox Church are not discrete, psychological events known only to a convert and her God, but are highly contextualized processes involving public institutional and communal boundary crossings and usually appearing in informant biographies as but one among a series of shifts in religious affiliation over time. Utilization of descriptors such as ‘journey,’ ‘search,’ and ‘shopping’ underscores the ultimate rootlessness marking the pre-conversion lives of a great many converts in this study. While conversion to Orthodoxy certainly can be the *impetus* setting a person into motion “to step across the hall” as in the case of Helen, others, such as Brad and Mary, much more frequently cast their embrace of Orthodoxy as the culmination of months, years, or decades of restless and rootless movement amongst a colorful array of religious options.

According to Wade Clark Roof, these all-pervasive metaphors, saturating as they do media airways and commonplace, backyard discussions of religion and “spirituality” reflect the process-dominated “reflexive spirituality” that has become normative to post-World War II American culture.<sup>6</sup>

These self-representations of conversion to Orthodoxy as “searches” or “journeys,” are by no means anomalies, but deeply engrained visions of what it means to be religious today and point to a general homogenization in the language used across American religious groups. Books such as M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* as well as the easily media-packaged teachings of figures such as Deepak Chopra and Joseph Campbell, the latter with his pithy exhortation to public television viewers, “To follow your bliss,” have popularized the notion of spiritual questing and reassured their audiences that ambiguity in life meaning and direction may, in the end, just be part of one’s overall “spiritual journey.” Within this wider context, Roof notes that even avowedly traditional “religious literature . . . published by denominational presses” emphasizes “the autonomy of the self, the importance of taking charge over religious and spiritual matters, and the necessity for some degree of managing one’s own interior life. . . .”<sup>7</sup> As examples of Giddens’ and Beck’s open-ended, “reflexive biographies,” ‘searching’ and ‘journeying,’ therefore, underscore a situation, in which the circumstances of one’s life are increasingly divorced from traditionally “fixed” natal determinants, such as family and ethnic heritages, that too have been pried from their moorings and await individual scripting and interpretation in their own right.

While keeping in mind the potential concurrent nature of “crossings” and “dwellings” and the inadvisability of drawing too sharp a distinction between the two, this chapter explores the experiences and attitudes primarily associated with the kinetic “crossing” portion of these conversions (“dwelling” within the Orthodox Church will be discussed in chapters five and six) where modern choice-making serves as a vehicle of movement. If the language and methods of the spiritual marketplace come to be replicated and reinforced in converts’ post-conversion lives within the Orthodox Church, it is important to understand how themes of choice and religious diversity appear in their pre-conversion formulations. This discussion, therefore, will proceed in a threefold manner. First, attention will focus on the early biographies of convert informants, especially on parental attitudes towards and experiences of changes in religious affiliation that so readily reflect this wider arena of religious diversity and choice-making and remain so critical to contextualizing these Pittsburgh conversions to Orthodox Christianity. Second, the shift from witnessing to engaging in these processes of seeking and journeying on the part of the convert

informants themselves, especially as the accompaniment to major life transitions, will be documented. Finally, as discussed in the introduction, religious “searching” is by no means a willy-nilly affair, but one based on concrete methods of information-gathering and learning about a diversity of religious/ecclesial options at hand. This chapter will conclude, therefore, with a brief overview of some of the methods informants employed in the course of their pre-conversion “crossings.”

## **2.2 SEEKING AND CHOICE-MAKING IN EARLY BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS**

In offering his own theoretical discussion of ethnography’s various and sundry “crossings” and “dwellings,” James Clifford begins his provocative book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, with Amitav Ghosh’s account of his fieldwork in a small village in the Egyptian Nile Delta. Although Ghosh had expected to meet a “settled and restful people”<sup>8</sup> among the villagers with whom he would spend the next few months living and working, he learned, to his surprise, that the “men of the village”<sup>9</sup> were experienced travelers having traversed the Middle East, the rest of northern Africa, and even Europe in some cases. Even more significantly, Ghosh continues, “none of this was new”<sup>10</sup> since “grandparents and ancestors and relatives had traveled and migrated too”<sup>11</sup> over the past centuries in search of more productive livelihoods or as a result of war dislocations. Indeed, as contemporary historians and anthropologists such as Peter N. Stearns and Anthony D. King assure us,<sup>12</sup> the supposed spatial and temporal stasis of past generations and so-called “pre-modern” peoples has proven to be a mirage, for upon closer inspection physical mobility, boundary crossings of all sorts, and cultural encounters are the ever-present contours of human history. Rootedness and dwelling, either physical or imagined, are not the historical norms to which late modernity, with its promises and fulfillments of constant novelty, movement, and blurring of religious and/or cultural boundaries, appear as necessary exceptions.<sup>13</sup> While these processes have been accelerated and accentuated, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai points out, by new media and migration patterns fundamentally altering contemporary



perceptions and experiences of time and space,<sup>14</sup> movement and boundary crossings are not a supplement to a human experience that can be essentialized by spatial and conceptual rootedness. While, as Clifford maintains, the assumption has long been that “roots always precede routes,”<sup>15</sup> historical and contemporary realities are considerably more complicated and nuanced, with “roots” and “routes,” as “crossings” and “dwellings” appearing as simultaneous rather than mutually exclusive phenomena.

On the surface, contemporary American converts to Orthodox Christianity residing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania seem to have little in common with Ghosh’s Egyptian villagers, yet both are journeyers in their own ways and spheres who have, in turn, descended from parents and families with their own tales of crossings and encounters to tell. Few converts with whom I spoke stepped directly from mono-religious birth families into an adolescence and adulthood of sudden multi-religious possibility, but emerged from contexts already well marked by the religious crisscrossing of family and friends, thus precipitating an early informant awareness of “other rooms.” The varied narratives strands bringing the context of religious diversity and choice-making for these American Orthodox conversions into sharp relief typically began to unfold in answer to the open-ended question invariably starting off my forty interviews (immediately following the collection of demographic data), “Can you tell me a little bit about your religious life growing up?” [See appendix for interview guides] The responses, from converts, along with those of clerical and lifelong Orthodox church members alike, made abundantly clear that personal religious change and boundary-crossings along with the finding and construction of dwellings were by no means newly occurring features of informants’ lives.

Scholars such as Robert Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof, and Robert S. Ellwood among others note that the moral and religious lives of the generations born after the Second World War, especially the well-documented and studied Baby Boomers as well as succeeding cohorts of Generation Xers and Baby Busters, have been marked by overall attitudes of restlessness and experimentation.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, members of the Baby Boomer generation remain close at hand in this study, with the vast majority of informants either its representatives or direct offspring. Therefore, in setting off on their own searches and journeys, informants, for the most part, were much less pioneers of religious questing and conversion amongst their

family and friends than followers of the well-worn paths of seeking and choice-making already predominating their childhood homes and neighborhoods.

Therefore, if Helen's early life stands as a model of religious homogeneity, Alex, a nuclear engineer and current parishioner of St. Michael's church in his early twenties who converted to Orthodoxy in college, recalled a childhood largely shaped by the religious experimentation, albeit of a wholly Christian sort, of his Baby Boomer parents. When asked about his religious life and experiences as a child, Alex, for example, responded that it was "pretty complex" beginning with his parents' inter-faith, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian marriage for which Lutheranism appeared as "something in the middle," a "compromise" denomination as the couple began their life together. Yet, the Lutheran church did not remain the family's primary church of attendance for long but simply served as a prelude to fifteen years of ardent church "hopping" and experimentation as the family moved throughout various parts of the United States. Alex provided an overview of his childhood:

During the time between when I was first born until I was about fifteen years of age we went to a lot of different churches. We lived here in Pittsburgh a little bit after I was born [he was born in a town near Pittsburgh] and then we moved to New Orleans, Louisiana where we went to some sort of Protestant church and then we moved to Lawrence, Kansas and there we probably attended some form of Protestant church and then from there we moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma. And I guess the reason I'm bringing these up is because this is sort of the influence my parents had. They had all these different locations that they lived and when they lived in the Midwest they experienced more of an evangelical and charismatic faith.

Alex's father worked for a time as an athletic strength coach and attended seminary at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, from which the young informant had an early memory of his father, who was never an ordained minister, preaching at "a Baptist church that was very charismatic." Alex also recalled a rather curious incident of his father, still at ORU at the time, baptizing both him and his older brother in the family bathtub when he was around six years old. He explained what he could of this event:

I do know that his mother, my father's mother, being Roman Catholic always wanted us to be baptized. She always wanted her grandchildren, my brother and I, to be baptized and really tried to have that done. But my father kind of resisted and so we weren't baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. But I'm not sure what his intentions were and what was going on at the time. I'm not sure what form of baptism it was-whether it was in the name of Jesus or in the name of

the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> But I do remember my brother and I were baptized in the bathtub, at home, and it was a big deal and it was just my father and mother who were there.

Alex situated his eventual conversion to Orthodox Christianity, therefore, against a childhood backdrop of parental doubt, compromise, and experimentation regarding religious matters and church affiliation. This ever-shifting and fluid ecclesial backdrop also possessed its own sad consequences in the shape of his parents' divorce in Alex's early teenage years and a pronounced rootlessness that took hold of his father shortly before he passed away when Alex was fifteen. While Alex's mother returned to the Presbyterianism of her childhood with her two sons following the divorce, his father, in Alex's assessment, "tended to favor the Roman Catholic Church but that's not to say that my father never went to a Protestant church after the separation. But I think he was in a kind of quandary. He wasn't sure which ones to go to and he just kind of went from church to church." Alex concluded of his early experience, "We got the full spectrum of all of western Christianity, but never really got introduced to the idea of Orthodox Christianity [during those years]."

A number of observations can be made of this rather remarkable account that at the same time resonates so decidedly with the already identified features of contemporary American religious life. First, the various churches, the veritable "spectrum" of young Alex's experience is simply Helen's metaphorical "rooms" in their embodied, brick-and-mortar existence, serially available for individual appropriation and/or abandonment. While utilization of terms such as "spectrums" and "rooms" does imply a distinctiveness between options, in both accounts churches appear as mere denominational "shadings" that, in their essence and substance, as "mere Christianity," are fundamentally the same and easily appropriated according to personal preference or need. For instance, Helen curiously argued that she was "running towards" Anglicanism in becoming an Orthodox Christian and Alex recalled attending a wide swath of churches, many falling under the general heading of "evangelical and charismatic" but which could hardly be distinguished one from another. Indeed, at certain junctures of his recollections, Alex could only say the churches his family attended were of a "Protestant" orientation. Significantly, in this

vein, Alex's characterization of his family's frequent ecclesial shifts lacked any reference to notions of "truth" as possible measures of religious affiliation.

These narrative presentations of a generic, "mere Christianity" point to a wider blurring or even erasure of American denominational lines, an eventuality that Peter Berger has long attributed to the pressures of a pluralistic "marketplace" demanding that religions met the similar, largely psychological and therapeutic needs of their clientele.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile Robert Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof, and William McKinney argue that denominational differences have been largely supplanted by deeper pan-denominational ideological distinctions, cut especially along conservative/liberal lines.<sup>19</sup> Nancy Ammerman has much more recently identified seven main congregational streams, which she too organizes to some extent along ideological and ecclesiological lines while maintaining the significance of broader congregational outlines. For example, she differentiates "conservative" from "mainline" Protestantism and considers Eastern Orthodoxy in a single block with Roman Catholicism because they have "common patterns of organization and practice in this country."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Alex's description of his "religious life growing up" yields a pattern of pronounced subjectivity, with the ultimate locus of religious decision-making residing almost wholly with the individual self or, in this case, the parental unit. As demonstrated in the above account, no externalized sources of authority, either institutional or familial, seemed to hold sway over the decision-making of Alex's parents. While ecclesial communities appeared in and out as interchangeable, familiar backdrops, no concrete sense of community materialized from the childhood narrative, no fixed persons or locales to anchor identity or provide connectedness (a point of contrast with Helen's early memories grounded as they were in senses of place and enduring relationship), a point poignantly underscored in the father's eventual mid-life "quandary" of finding no church to call his own. Even the most fundamental act of Christian communal identity, baptism, was curiously co-opted and privatized in its enactment in the domestic sphere. In stated "resistance" to grandmotherly appeals for a conventional church baptism, Alex's father opted for a highly individualized alternative that even his son, years later, found difficult to explain or understand. Additionally, the specific language Alex employed in his narrative emphasized his

parents' decision-making autonomy and reflected a view of religion as largely a matter of personal taste and preference. Not only, in regard to a church, did Alex's parents "want to determine which one they should choose" at the beginning of their marriage, but his father half-heartedly "felt drawn to" and "favored" the Roman Catholicism of his youth after his divorce, rather than compelled through familial or societal duty or expectation to return to the church in which he was raised.

Alex was by no means the only informant with an eclectic experience of, in his words, "the full spectrum of all of western Christianity," as Ingrid, another convert from St. Michael's made clear in her narrative. An independent-minded, thirty-nine-year-old mother of two who ran her own home business, Ingrid was first introduced to Orthodox Christianity while earning BA and MA degrees in Russian language and literature. She later married a man who had emigrated from Russia to the United States in the early 1990s and decided to join him in the Orthodox Church in 2002. In answer to my typical, opening query about early religious life, Ingrid responded by characterizing her birth family as a kind of casual, if rather haphazard, religious pastiche:

What do you want to know? [She chuckles] Okay, I was baptized Methodist but everybody in my family was baptized a different Christian religion. So, my parents were pretty indifferent towards religion in general. I mean, my father's a lapsed Catholic who loathes the Catholic Church. My mother is United Church of Christ. My sister was baptized Episcopalian and married a Baptist so they go to a small evangelical church outside of Alexandria, Virginia. So we never had formal religious training at all. I would occasionally go to different churches. . . . Sometimes we would go with friends like if we had a sleepover or something we would go to church or mass with them. But for the most part when I was growing up the only time I ever set foot in a church on a regular basis was if somebody was getting married or somebody died.

While Alex's family, until his parents' divorce, remained a single unit in their movement and exploration of different churches, Ingrid presented a scenario of generalized familial disjunction and apathy in regard to church affiliation. Still, a vivid, strikingly pluralistic image of each family member inhabiting, through the denominational locale of her/his appropriate baptism, her own "room" underscored a view of these churches, again, as essentially interchangeable. With the noted exception of her father's loathing of the Catholic Church, no strong feelings regarding one or another of these institutions emerged from Ingrid's narrative. Given Ingrid's later experimentation with non-Christian religions and her continued, post-

conversion skepticism of “organized religion” as a whole, one gets the distinct impression that if Ingrid experienced anything resembling “mere Christianity” it was only of the weakest and blandest sort.

Beyond the immediate confines of one’s birth family, informants reported other early channels for becoming aware of and coming into contact with the religious diversity about them. Converts, especially those who grew up in urban centers such as Pittsburgh, described stepping into a pluralistic expanse simply by walking through their neighborhoods. Such was the case with James, a native Pittsburgher and communications director of a local hospital in his late forties who attended a local Carpatho-Rusyn church. Raised in an Italian Roman Catholic parish, James converted to Orthodox Christianity shortly after graduating from high school. He offered a sketch of a childhood neighborhood rich in religious and ethnic diversity. Whereas Alex, to cite an earlier example, became aware of this American religious plethora through frequent geographical movement, James enthusiastically described daily contact with a “spectrum” of possibility by simply opening his front door:

So it [the neighborhood] had, for instance, in addition to four Orthodox congregations, a dozen Protestant denominations, but all of them small. Catholics and Orthodox made up probably eighty-five percent of that community’s population. Um, very large Roman [Catholic] churches, a very large Byzantine Catholic church, um, a synagogue . . . So we had a Syrian Orthodox church and a Finnish Lutheran church. I mean, that broad a spectrum-the only Finnish Lutheran church in western Pennsylvania. There was a Slovak Presbyterian church. I mean there was incredible diversity in that town. . . . There were five black Protestant congregations in town.

While James recalled that most of his close high school friends were, indeed, Roman Catholics, he also, “had Protestant friends and in that community they were mostly Methodists or went to the First Christian church and lots of Orthodox friends ‘cause in a town like that there’s a Ukrainian church, a Greek church, an OCA church and a Syrian church-an Antiochian church.”

As Ingrid’s depiction of her early religious life illustrates, awareness of this context and its choice-making potential is not restricted to the avowedly and actively religious, but appeared in the early lives of informants who described their birth families as more nominally or indifferently disposed to religious matters. A parishioner of St. Michael’s Church in his mid-twenties, John, for example, had converted to Orthodox Christianity in the fall of 2001 before moving to Pittsburgh from his native Washington state for graduate study. Raised in a lukewarm religious environment where his Lutheran

mother “had a hard time with any particular denomination or church establishment” and his church-shunning father was “spiritual without being religious,”<sup>21</sup> John confined the entirety of his childhood experience of religion, ecclesial or otherwise, to the two or three times a year his family did manage to attend Protestant services. Still, John cited his religiously inclusivist Unitarian aunts as early influences as well as a high school friend who introduced him to Eastern Orthodoxy in the midst of his own struggles to make personal religious decisions. John remarked that his friend “was intending to be a priest but he hadn’t decided whether he was going to be a Catholic priest, an Orthodox-an Eastern Orthodox priest, or a messianic Judaic rabbi. I don’t know what messianic Judaism is all about and so [John chuckles].” In the end, the young man became Eastern Orthodox, but only after their frequent conversations brought Orthodox Christianity into sharper relief for John as a religious option worth pondering.

Interestingly for Christine, a convert and mother of two in her late thirties who was received into Orthodoxy at Ascension before eventually moving with her family to St. Michael’s where I became acquainted with the family, the potential of such decision-making was strongly conveyed through her parents who alternately undertook their own crossings from Roman Catholicism and New England Christian Science respectively to the religious skepticism that dominated their adult outlooks. Although Christine maintained that her parents “definitely believed in a higher power” and expressed some interest in “Eastern philosophies,” Christine responded to the question of her “religious life growing up” with the word “non-existent” and characterized her parents’ attitudes towards religion, at least in its Christian manifestations, as “condescending” and “always cynical.” Still, the young Christine came into contact with other religions through her conversations with other children on the playground about which she recalled, “I was kind of envious of my friends who actually had a religion. It was like they belonged to something that I didn’t belong to.” When Christine would go home and complain of this lacuna to her parents, they consistently stressed her own freedom and ability to make “lifestyle” and religious choices even if only in adulthood, “They always said when I would come home as a child and say, ‘I don’t have a religion and all this. They’d go, ‘Well, when you are an adult and if you so choose to be-choose a religion go ahead, do it. We personally, we just aren’t into that, but if you want to that’s fine.’” True to

their word, Christine's parents registered no concern or disgruntlement at her conversion to Orthodoxy in the midst of marrying a lifelong parishioner of Ascension Church when she was in her early thirties.

Although informants such as John and Christine considered religious belief and observance peripheral to their childhoods, their early conceptualizations and descriptions of religion itself as a subjective choice resonated with that of more religiously exposed persons like Alex, Helen, or James. All of these informants considered religion a private matter, the expression of which was grounded in subjectively defined needs and preferences rather than fixed natal or social determinants. The individualized nature and pluralistic context of these crossings, where even the sturdiest of ecclesial/institutional frames appeared as mere background sets for ever-shifting allegiances and quests, were firmly embedded in these narratives.

### **2.3 THE JOURNEY BEGINS: INFORMANTS BECOME SEEKERS**

Emerging from childhoods where religious seeking and diversity, through parental intermarriage and experimentation, proved to be the norm and where increasingly fewer social constraints fixed ecclesial affiliation, convert informants, especially those *not* encountering Orthodox Christianity through circumstances of intermarriage, as will be made clear in chapter three, often described their conversions to the church as the culmination of years or decades of religiously driven searching and journeying encompassing significant portions of their adult lives. The vast majority of persons introduced to Orthodox Christianity apart from marriage were serial converts having crossed institutional religious boundaries, in most cases wholly within Christianity, one or more times in late adolescence and/or adulthood before entering the Orthodox Church. Although Orthodox Christianity too appears as an object of "church shopping," adopted or discarded at the simple will of its adherents, the processes of entry to the Orthodox Church, as discussed with greater care in chapter four, are often complicated and slowed through more extensive and prolonged catechetical requirements.



Even if exposed to the concept and actuality of religious seeking in childhood, informants do not typically embark upon their own searches until mid-to-late adolescence or in adulthood, with college and other post-secondary educational settings commonly cited venues for their inauguration.<sup>22</sup> Convert informants did occasionally commence religious searches in high school and two informants converted to Orthodoxy shortly after graduating from high school and before entering college. In what some commentators, such as Catherine Bell and anthropologist Bradd Shore, have argued as the general dearth of contemporary American rituals marking the transition from childhood/adolescence to adulthood,<sup>23</sup> “going away” to college has become a veritable *rite de passage* for many Americans. Invested with a subliminal, ritual-like cachet as well as actual movement from the parental home to new physical surroundings, social situations, and academic expectations, college looms large in a number of narratives as a period of intense questioning and experimentation. Much of this questioning revolves around issues of moral and religious decision-making. Not only are informants confronted with a vast array of religious and moral options, but away from the familial eye often for the first time, they have an opportunity to explore and appropriate them. Through classroom studies and social contacts with persons of different faiths and cultures, the university affords individuals, in a relatively short span of time and space, access to what appears to be “everything” in religious and world cultures for as one woman remarked of her own experience, “And then you get to college and there’s so much there. There’s everything from Hinduism to everything there and I searched around a lot, but nothing really clicked.”

It must be noted, however, that this crossing from the parental home to a greater sense of personal independence elicited a wide range of responses from informants. While a few individuals used their newfound freedom to experiment with differing worldview options, many others reported developing a deeper commitment to their home confessions in response to this keenly felt imperative to make decisions. In this regard, let us once again return to Alex. From his childhood of ecclesial wandering, Alex characterized his own first year at a large state university as a period of intense moral bewilderment. Away from home and in the midst of a vigorous new social context, Alex became acutely aware of his own decision-making potential for the first time in the critical need to make what he referred to as deep-

seated, if rather ambiguous, “moral” and “lifestyle” choices. At least as formulated from his post-conversion standpoint, these choices appeared to him in starkly dichotomous terms. On the one hand, as Alex observed, “When I got to college, I saw how I needed to make a decision. Was I gonna go out and get drunk with everybody who was going out to party or was I gonna do drugs or do I wanna try to sleep around with a bunch of girls? I saw a lot of people living different lives out there.” But, on the other hand, he noted, “I saw the Christian lifestyle too-meaning like the Protestant Christian lifestyle and they tended to do some Bible studies and they had their fun Friday night. But typically that meant going to a worship service and singing songs about God. And then after that they might go out to eat somewhere-go watch a movie or something simpler, you know, some might say a more moral lifestyle.”

Feeling the weight and responsibility of having to make significant life decisions, Alex referred to the various alternatives confronting him as a series of discrete “lifestyles” analogous to Helen’s linearly conceptualized “rooms” and lacking a clear guide for their differentiation. Alex’s use of the term “lifestyle” conveys the epistemological and moral uncertainty and urgency underscored in Anthony Giddens’ theoretical treatment of the concept and to Zygmunt Bauman’s roughly analogous, ever-provisional “life strategies.”<sup>24</sup> Endowed with weightier meanings than its common association with “glossy magazines and advertising images”<sup>25</sup> suggests, the notion of finding and cultivating a “lifestyle,” as Giddens maintains, becomes all the more significant in a post-traditional climate of receding fixed moral bearings “because it implies choice within a plurality of possible options, and is ‘adopted’ rather than ‘handed down.’”<sup>26</sup> However, while arising in circumstances of societal flux, a “lifestyle” too promises something of a respite—a structure or dwelling for the self to inhabit, however temporarily, for “a lifestyle involves a cluster of habits and orientations, and hence has a certain unity . . . that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern. Someone who is committed to a given lifestyle would necessarily see various options as ‘out of character’ with it, as would others with whom she was in interaction.”<sup>27</sup>

Clearly yearning for a “cluster of habits and orientations to appropriate,” Alex is confronted not only by “a plurality of possible options” but also by the lack of measures by which to parse them. In a

sense, Alex simply presented a dorm-room version of a mainstay of late and postmodern ethics and morality (and its so-called “moral crisis”), as Zygmunt Bauman again notes, “With the smokescreen of centralized legislation dispersed and the power-of-attorney returned to the signatory, the [moral] choice is blatantly left to the moral person’s own devices.”<sup>28</sup> Such circumstances “cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing. We yearn for guidance we can trust and rely upon, so that some of the haunting responsibility for our choices could be lifted from our shoulders.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly one can hear the uncertainty and agony inherent in the existential quandary confronting Alex in his early college days, for as he maintained, “I have decisions to make. Once you’re going into a culture where decisions are necessary and you could lead this form of life and this form of life, life A or life B or life C or life D, how do you make a decision? Which one is it going to be?”

Alex’s uncertainty extended to Christianity itself, which at once represented the “moral lifestyle” he saw upon arriving at college as well as an object worthy of further empirical testing and scrutiny. Despite the rapid denominational multifariousness of his childhood, Alex clearly considered Christianity a generalized religious home base, but not without reservation, “Yeah, I knew that I was brought up Christian and I think I just wanted to know-wanted to verify-is this the right religion? How do I really know that God is the Christian God and is not, you know, the Muslim God? Or that Hinduism isn’t the right religion? How can I be certain that Christianity is the right religion?”

In the midst of trying to establish moral/religious certitude, Alex discovered an “objective” means by which to test and verify his childhood faith-an introductory world religions course offered at his university. Alex said of his newly found “objective” measure, “And so that class really helped to clarify things for me and there was no bias to the teaching of it. It was a very well-instructed course taught specifically about different religions and I really saw a drastic difference between Christianity and the other religions at that time and that drastic difference I concluded to be love.” While, in Alex’s view, religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism provided “this mental form of how you create society or how you come up with laws or teachings,” Christianity offered a vision of “sacrificial love,” something he felt to be lacking in the other religions he studied. Furthermore, Christianity, in his words, was “very

applicable to my life at that time and also life in general as I knew it and it just made sense to me.” Just as notions of singular “truth” remained absent in descriptions of his parents’ serial church affiliations, so too Alex’s embrace of Christianity, despite the “objective” measures for its discernment employed, was contingently premised upon its practical “life applicability” and to what, in general just “makes sense” to the young man “at that time.” Indeed, in this regard, Christianity was cast as a healthful life choice, a “lifestyle,” strategically situated within one’s momentary circumstances and frame of mind and all the more attractive for its ability meet to subjective needs and desires.

In this realization of “sacrificial love,” at a single stroke, both his moral and religious dilemmas seemed to be settled. Alex continued, “From that point, I was very motivated, very interested in anything Christian-reading scriptures, really dedicated to a lifestyle that was in line with Christ’s lifestyle.” In the midst of gaining this increased surety however that Christianity was the “right religion,” Alex encountered only new choices to be made, now in the guise of which church to attend, again a choice for which no clear, “objective” standards of decision-making seemed readily available, “Let’s say there’s twenty churches in the area, well why do I choose one over the other? Why would I choose the Presbyterian church as opposed to the Lutheran? They all had their own problems, their own misunderstandings.” Furthermore, the few criteria he could identify as critical to the congregational selections of other Christians were suspect in his eyes, “Some people made a decision because, ‘Oh, I like the pastor or I like the way this pastor does his sermons.’ I didn’t really feel that was a valid reason to choose just because you like something or you don’t like something and so then I said, ‘Is there a good reason that I should choose one church over the others?’ And so I was kind of just not real sure what I was going to find, but I was going around and seeing if I did find anything.”

Themes of individually driven comparison and choice-making carried over into this young man’s explorations of Orthodox Christianity itself, which was first introduced to him through the efforts of a controversial Pentecostal-cum-Orthodox Christian street preacher, referred to in this study as Randy,<sup>30</sup> who has spent more than twenty years evangelizing a large state university in Pennsylvania. Known for his “fire-and-brimstone” delivery and pointed preaching against the “immorality” of campus life as

exemplified, in his view, in student drinking and pre-marital sexual activity as well as the existence of other religions, including other Christian churches, Randy attracted the attention of young Alex who listened to and debated him outside the academic hall he evangelized. Initially, Alex reported heavy personal resistance to the notion that one church was the sole possessor of ‘absolute truth,’ “Randy said, ‘Here’s where the church is, the Orthodox Church.’ I just thought, ‘Ah, it’s kind of just like another church.’” Alex continued, “I was pretty interested in what he was saying because I thought he was causing a division in the Body of Christ. He was preaching about the true faith, the true church and that there was a difference between those who were of a different Christian profession than the Christian profession that he had.” He initially disagreed with Randy on this point in his readiness to personally accept the notion that rival, competing authorities, interpretations, and doctrines simply existed, side-by-side within the ‘Body of Christ,’ “I thought, ‘We’re all Christians and why are you trying to say that there’s a separate Orthodox Christian identity? But then I was aware there were all these different interpretations of the Bible, you know. And I kind of settled myself to believing that we’re just not being sure sort of perspective. You can have your opinion about what Christianity is and I can have mine. But actually it started to bother me a little bit even before I went into Orthodoxy.”

Not only did Randy introduce Alex to Orthodox Christianity and absolutist notions of “truth” but he also furnished an apparently solid “objective” criterion for verifying these truth claims-the study of early church history. In this regard, Randy simply appealed to one of the oldest and most consistent interpretive “standards” wielded by nearly every Christian denomination to establish its verity-that it, apart from all others, is the church founded and most closely resembling the church as described in the New Testament. As will be discussed in greater depth in chapter five, this appeal to history as a supposedly “objective” measure for distinguishing churches and reaching conclusions as to which of them may be “true,” in all cases here naturally determined to be Orthodox Christianity, is a common thematic thread coursing through informants’ narratives. Indeed, religion scholars and historians such as Richard T. Hughes and Philip Charles Lucas, have commented on this fascination with Christian origins, with churches of all kinds stressing their supposed similitude to the “early church” as a means of establishing

legitimacy and emphasizing ecclesial uniqueness among a crowded field of competitors. This claim of Orthodox Christianity as the unchanged, present-day embodiment of the proverbial “New Testament church,” is a recurrent theme of published Orthodox conversion narratives and Orthodox Christian apologetics today as well.<sup>31</sup>

In claiming Orthodoxy as the “true” faith, the church of the New Testament, Randy encouraged Alex to read the early church and apostolic fathers, even at one point showing the young man the location of their writings on the university library shelves, and to compare their descriptions of the early church to contemporary Orthodox Christianity as evidence of Orthodoxy’s supposed imperviousness to historical change. A period of generalized questioning and comparison followed for Alex that included his steady reading of the Bible and apostolic fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. He also recalled having frequent conversations with Randy and an Orthodox priest from a nearby OCA parish and making multiple church visits before eventually deciding to become Orthodox nearly two years after being introduced to Eastern Orthodoxy.

Certainly, the experiences post-secondary educational settings offer, even within an informant’s own confession, can foster deep bouts of existential questioning and prompt ecclesial investigations. One young man in his early thirties from a solidly Roman Catholic home, for example, traced the origins of his own “search” from traditional Roman Catholicism through its Byzantine varieties to Eastern Orthodoxy to “the badly prayed” masses he encountered in the college chapel his first year away at college. He explained, “I’d always gone to mass or I’d always received the sacraments. But when I went to college, the masses were really badly prayed. They were loosely prayed. They didn’t follow the rubrics, um, [and that] started making me seriously question. The first time I went to mass at the university, I didn’t know if I was at a Catholic mass or a Lutheran service because I knew something was missing and it just got me thinking.” Dissatisfied with these specimens of post-Vatican II liturgical life, the young man began looking into increasingly more “traditional” and “conservative” strands of Catholicism, including the Lefebvrists and the Sedevacantists,<sup>32</sup> as well as Byzantine Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the latter of which was introduced to him through a college Russian history course.

College could also be the scene of highly dramatic, emotion-packed experiences, much more in keeping with William James' notion of conversion by "self-surrender," where a sudden, newfound awareness of and dedication to the religious life occurs. These experiences took the form of dreams, spiritual "voices," powerful encounters with religious teachers and the like. Such was case with Fred's embrace of Orthodox Christianity, which proved to be the endpoint of years of vigorous theological investigation and innumerable ecclesial crossings amongst Protestant churches, particularly of the charismatic/evangelical/Pentecostal stripe. Raised in a devout Roman Catholic home, Fred traced the origins of his religious search to a lecture he attended the summer following his freshman year at a small conservative Christian college delivered by a Franciscan priest. For the first time, the young man's rather staid, textbook Catholicism was shattered by a profoundly new and electrifying vision of the religious life. Fred described the moment from which his search began, "This priest came around and he spoke of the love of God in a way that just blew me away. Blew me away. I never heard anybody talk like that. . . . The way he talked about God was immediate and powerful and overwhelming and it just changed my life. It was like electricity." Fred continued that the priest, speaking from his own personal prayer experience and drawing upon sources from Catholic tradition especially the life and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, "spoke to a place that I think I was yearning." When asked in interview what the object of this "yearning" may have been, Fred promptly responded, "For the love of God, for communion, for the meaning of life" and maintained that the lecture made clear to him that religious faith was something "personal" for the priest "had moved it from a sense of an identification with an institution."

Quite similarly to the dilemma Alex confronted after concluding Christianity to be the "right religion," Fred found no immediate ecclesial outlet for these feelings. Although Fred began from this point to see his faith as distinct from institutional religion, he in no way considered them mutually exclusive and at no point in his narrative seriously questioned his need to be affiliated with a Christian community or church of some kind. This theme was echoed in other narratives as well. In this instance, however, realizing that the Catholic mass possessed none of the emotional "fire" smoldering in the words of the Franciscan priest (e.g., in Fred's words, Sunday mass "was boring the living daylight out of me"),

Fred turned to a college friend for advice of where he might go “to find something like *that* guy. Because that’s all I wanted to become was like *that* guy, that Franciscan, on fire, charismatic.” Upon this friend’s suggestion, Fred tried a “nondenominational charismatic church” with a “very expressive, very emotional” worship style and though he initially felt uncomfortable in this environment “it was closer” to the Franciscan’s “fire” than anything encountered in his childhood confession. This initial movement from Catholicism to Protestantism was simply the first of many more to follow over the course of the next fifteen years as Fred, whom his wife described as a “banker by day and a theologian by night,” investigated and experimented with a large range of Protestant ecclesial options, even becoming affiliated for a time with a circuit of house churches associated with the teachings of the Chinese Protestant evangelists Watchman Nee and Witness Lee,<sup>33</sup> before encountering Orthodox Christianity years later as a graduate student.

The existential and decision-making challenges posed by the “college years” were in no way limited to individuals raised in actively “churched” environments, but also shaped the lives of those with only the most nominal of childhood religious affiliations. Indeed, college in these instances often provided the first substantive opportunity for serious reflection on the potential need for and exercise of religion in one’s life of whatever specific sort may be eventually adopted. Such was the case with Ingrid who described the religious affiliation of her birth family, as noted earlier, as essentially a patchwork of largely unpracticed Christian denominations. Always, in her words, “quasi interested in occult stuff” such as astrology, tarot cards and the like, Ingrid found a host of outlets for her latent spiritual concerns at the small, elite women’s college she attended as an undergraduate. Moving from a familial context of general religious indifference to a new one of ample opportunity for religious experimentation, though indifference itself remained an option among the many, Ingrid did not shrink away from personal religious engagement, but quickly seized upon it as a chance to explore aspects of self and world.

Invited to a local Japanese Buddhist temple by a woman who approached her on the street her first year away from home, Ingrid who asserted, “I liked a whole lot of what they believed and I still do” became a practicing Buddhist in college. Fascinated by the physical accoutrements of Japanese Buddhist



worship such as prayer beads, meditation rugs, and a *gohonzon*,<sup>34</sup> still in her possession, despite the fact that, in her words, “technically I’m supposed to send it back [to the temple],” Ingrid reported that she “went to temple pretty regularly” and “would frequently chant with the woman who lived downstairs from me in college.” Beyond these ritualized features, Buddhism also provided Ingrid a framework for highlighting her religious autonomy. Again, Buddhism appeared here in all the contours of a distinct “lifestyle” choice, as a “cluster of habits and orientations,” anchoring Ingrid in patterns of stable thought and action. Ingrid here cast her Buddhist practice against a backdrop of general religious variety and experimentation, “I practiced for a while and I liked what it stood for. I liked the whole peace sort of thing-in harmony with the earth and things like that. Of course being in college, I knew people in Wicca and there were a lot of alternative people there. So, you felt comfortable in that kind of environment and probably didn’t question it because at least you weren’t getting naked and worshipping trees [She chuckles].”

Despite her deep admiration for what she considered its ritual forms and approach to the world, Ingrid only maintained her Buddhist practice and affiliation in college. Once she graduated and moved away from the large, metropolitan city where her college was located, she no longer had easy access to a functioning temple and this significant portion of her religious life receded into the background. Yet, even in the midst of her reception into the Orthodox Church, Ingrid’s collegiate stint as a Buddhist continued to linger in its effects as the OCA bishop in Pittsburgh ordered her rebaptized when she converted on its account and her *gohonzon*, prayer beads, and rug still hang in a cabinet in her home as closeted reminders of her past.

While college stands as a significant impetus to moral and religious self-reflection and initial “lifestyle” decision-making, it is not a universal element of these narratives. Occasionally, marriage or other major life transitions brought about religious searching and experimentation. Such was the case with Pam, one of the very few informants interviewed who had never attended college and who in her early sixties, was a vivacious, stylish woman who worked the perfume counter of a local department store. A Pittsburgh native raised in a Roman Catholic home but with paternal ties to Russian Orthodoxy,

Pam married a Methodist man immediately upon graduating from high school and, in her words, “We both sort of started searching then. We thought maybe we should try other churches and we moved away from Pittsburgh too after we were married to California. So we just sort of went to every church in Bakersville that we thought we might like to attend. And we found one. It was Southern Baptist.”

Pam was instantly attracted to the more relaxed “praise-oriented” worship style offered by the Southern Baptist church as well as its Bible studies, providing her the means and encouragement to study scripture herself. Tingeing her description with the highly subjective language of personal “liking” and “getting something out of it,” she again continued, “It just seemed like it hit your emotions more and then it was more of a fundamentalist type church and I really, really liked it. It felt like when I went there I was getting something out of it.” These ecclesial venues eventually extended from this initial Southern Baptist church to include the Assemblies of God as well as other Pentecostal and non-denominational charismatic churches. Pam encountered and considered Orthodox Christianity as a personal religious option years later when she returned to Pittsburgh to care for her elderly and ailing parents (her mother had in the meantime left Catholicism to become Orthodox along with her father) in the early 1990s.

As marriage can bring about a desire on the part of a couple for a religious new start, especially as in the case with Pam when each party of the nuptial union hails from a different confession, so too can divorce bring about a later-in-life questing for and questioning of religious matters and church affiliations. Such was the case with Ron a successful financial planner in his early fifties who was raised in a denominationally mixed (Roman Catholic and Presbyterian) household before his parents divorced when he was a child. Admittedly more interested in rock music and socializing with peers than church-going as an adolescent and young adult, Ron paid little heed to religion of any sort throughout most of his life. Only in the midst of the bitter dissolution of his first marriage when he was in his mid-forties did Ron’s attention more pointedly shift to searching for what he describes as a “more spiritual influence” on his life. He discussed this shift in priorities as centered on finding comfort and meaning in the midst of crisis:

I had a very painful divorce and it was a very difficult period and it really amplified my desire to become closer to the church. As we are all like that, you know, when times are tough what do we do? We always glorify God and ask God for help when we have problems. But then, when everything's nice and happy we just forget. Right? That's how life works. So, that was a very trying period in my life going through this divorce and I was searching for something but I didn't know what. I wasn't sure.

Ron slowly began visiting Protestant churches in his area but “nothing worked” and he contemplated returning to Roman Catholicism, about which he still had fond memories from his early childhood. He never fully investigated this option, however, quickly becoming romantically involved with a Ukrainian woman, Oksana, whom he met on the internet (after his divorce, Ron consciously sought to date women from overseas “shocked” as he was by, in his words, “how the morals had changed in [American] women over the previous eighteen years.”) A devout Orthodox Christian, Oksana introduced Ron to her church on the frequent trips he made to the Ukraine in the course of their dating. Fascinated with the beauty of the churches and the piety of the worshippers he saw in Kiev and elsewhere, Ron converted to Orthodoxy shortly before Oksana moved to Pittsburgh and the couple married. Today, Ron and Oksana, who works as an iconographer, are active members of St. Michael's parish.

Although, as we shall see in chapter five, informants do express an interest in finding religious “absolutes” (e.g., objective truth, loci of individually transcendent authority and so on), they rarely question their right to make individualized religious choices, even at the risk of creating religiously divided families and marriages, and nearly always couple these “ultimate concerns” with personal wishes for “fulfillment,” usually of a psychological, emotional or therapeutic nature. Fred, for example, discussed his desire to have an “immediate” experience of the divine much like that of the Franciscan lecturer. This desire, as we shall see in chapter five, deepened and transmuted over the course of his narrative into an even more substantive imperative to find a Christian means of “self-transformation.” At the same time, his wife, Mary stressed the couple's quest to discover a “deeper spirituality” amongst the many Protestant churches they visited and joined over the years. Meanwhile, a sense of being religiously “fulfilled” propelled Ron's midlife search for a vaguely formulated “spiritual influence.”

Religious/church affiliation as a private, individualized choice consistently colored the overall views of conversion and religiousness espoused in these narratives. When asked what advice she would impart to other (would-be) converts to Eastern Orthodoxy, Pam, who spent years in charismatic Protestant churches responded, “Just be true to yourself and your prayer life with the Lord is the most important thing of all. What’s your personal relationship with Christ? I think that’s the most important thing.” From her post-conversion vantage as an active Orthodox Church member, Pam continued to hold the diversity of Christian churches in high esteem and saw church affiliation more a matter of personal taste than an imperative to find the doctrinally “true.” She explained, “It doesn’t matter how you believe. It’s everybody’s general preference. I mean, I can tell people to come to my church [St. Michael’s] but everybody’s going to find their niche somewhere.” Another convert echoed Pam’s sentiments in quoting William Shakespeare’s “To thine own self be true”<sup>35</sup> as her guiding principle for maneuvering through the terrain of religious options and offered this as advice to others in response to the same question. Even in narratives where “truth,” of the decidedly unique and absolute variety, was cited as the hoped for end of religious searching and believed to be found in Orthodoxy, this subjective view of religion, as a kind of handmaiden to the needs of the self was not easily shaken. Such is the case for one self-styled “seeker of truth,” Karen, to be featured in greater depth in the next section, who at times favored subjective measures over the “truth” as the ultimate criterion for selecting a church, for she advised, “Find a very good teacher. Find someone you can ask questions and keep trying until you’re satisfied. Keep searching until you find yourself satisfied and, in fact, that’s what I did.”

It is important to keep in mind that these ecclesial shifts, changes, and awakenings, so deeply rooted in these biographies appeared as highly regarded, linear preludes to the religious fulfillment awaiting informants, in nearly all cases, in Orthodox Christianity. These informants in no way considered themselves religious or spiritual dilettantes out and about in the American marketplace for the sake of sheer adventure or experimentation,<sup>36</sup> but rather as persons of serious intent, spurred on by the lofty goals of finding truth, community, a sense of personal love and connectedness to the divine and so forth. While

reserving our treatment of these specific goals for chapter five, I want to turn our attention now to the sources of information informants consulted in their pursuit.

## **2.4 MANY PATHS: METHODS OF INFORMATION-GATHERING AND LEARNING ABOUT EASTERN ORTHODOXY**

Just as “many rooms” are available for individual perusal and/or appropriation amidst the noted diversity of the contemporary American landscape, so too a variety of means exist for learning about and parsing through their respective doctrinal and ritual contents and “decors.” Indeed, as discussed in the introduction, a frequently commented upon feature of the modern choice-making imperative, religious or otherwise, is the concomitant demands it makes on “ordinary people” to acquire information about options, to study their features, comparison “shop,” and take “test drives.” Religion certainly in no way escapes this information-gathering imperative, with individuals readily taking it upon themselves to study and compare theologies and ritual practices, to become amateur theologians, “bankers by day, theologians by night,” who read and interpret sacred scriptures and texts from the “armchair” so to speak.

Contemporary people rely heavily on their own ability to access and understand information, a situation only furthered and accentuated by the multiple, rapid-fire technologies providing a free flow of information about any topic of interest.<sup>37</sup> In addition to old stand-bys of information-gathering such as meeting religious practitioners and visiting places associated with one or another of their communities, the explosion in print and electronic materials have fundamentally expanded and altered the field of religious investigation in giving religions, heretofore little known or obscure, opportunities to tout their wares and make their beliefs and practices available for general consumption. As an informant earlier commented on her amazement at finding Hinduism and “everything” available in college, so too at a click of a computer mouse or a casual stroll through bookstore aisles, every tenor of spiritual or religious life from Augustine’s *Confessions* to the *Dhammapadda* and books on Zen gardening to Neo-Pagan spell

books and tomes on dream interpretation are readily at hand for quick, private study and comparison. As Wade Clark Roof notes, electronic media in particular have had a distinct leveling effect in furnishing previously marginalized groups as much airtime and space as the “world’s major religions.” He illustrates this point by observing that the pope in Rome and neo-pagan coven leaders in Peoria appear side-by-side today in these new media spheres with no clear measures for parsing one from the other. With the aid of relatively inexpensive print and electronic media resources, persons can sort through and learn about a swath of competing, often contradictory, worldview options in a short span of time and with minimum physical efforts and only through their own initiative and knowledge differentiate a pagan from a pope.<sup>38</sup>

Even in the midst of this proliferation of media resources, however, face-to-face encounters between seekers and religious insiders/participants as well others investigating religious options (religious seekers often meet up, compare experiences, and make recommendations to one another) continue to be significant ways of learning about religions and should in no way be discounted. These contacts carry an immediacy and import, through the on-the-spot answering of seeker questions and relaying of personal experiences with the said religion, often lacking in print and electronic resources. Furthermore, the establishment of interpersonal relationships is vital to the crossing of religious boundaries, for no amount of book-informed attraction to a religion is usually alone sufficient for effecting a conversion, provided, of course, that the object religion has an embodied community in the first place. Print materials may bring someone intellectually to the threshold of a religion, but more basic desires such as those for social comfort, acceptance, and camaraderie among other needs begin to take center stage once a person enters its physical midst. Certainly, here again electronic media are significant for creating online communities of various sorts, where contacts and relationships can be made and established long before a seeker arrives on the scene.

Finally, visits to worship sites and religious communities, impromptu or otherwise, too serve as critical sources of information about religious options, with some convert informants visiting different denominations or churches on a near weekly basis over the course of their respective journeys and quests.

Religious searches are complicated affairs, however, and informants typically rely on multiple, mutually-informing methods to gather and cross-check information. For example, conversations with religious insiders and (would-be) Orthodox converts are often coupled with readings of theological materials and increasingly frequent church visits. In this section, therefore, we will briefly review the common themes related to these methods emerging from informant narratives as well as how they play out in specific case studies.

Reading and studying were the most common means by which informants accessed information on Orthodox Christianity and other religious options more broadly. While not all informants necessarily engaged in extensive reading, nearly all the converts who did were individuals who came to the church primarily for theological and/or liturgical reasons rather than through intermarriage, a conversion type to be covered more extensively in chapter three. Given the largely Christian backgrounds and search orientations of study informants, most of the literature that informants referred to by title, author, and/or genre was Christian in nature with the Bible and the writings of the church fathers the most commonly cited materials. Of the secondary literature discussed by informants, the vast majority of it was of a distinctly Orthodox Christian orientation, with titles including Timothy Ware's classic study *The Orthodox Church* as well as those more recently authored by former evangelical Protestants such as *Becoming Orthodox* (Peter E. Gillquist) and *Thirsting in a Land of Shallow Wells* (Matthew Gallatin) among others which combine the author's own discovery of Orthodox Christianity with a meticulous defense of Orthodox practice and belief. Informants also made mention of the anonymous Russian text *The Way of a Pilgrim* as well as well-known Orthodox theologians (names of authors supplied without titles of accompanying works) such as Vladimir Lossky, John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann, and John Romanides. Many convert informants reported reading general works of Orthodox and/or Christian theology and church history, but were unable to recall exact authors and titles.

Besides specifically Orthodox works, other Western Christian classics were cited as influencing one or another juncture of pre-conversion investigations, normally to be replaced by the aforementioned literatures as the informant drew nearer to Orthodox Christianity. These other works and authors

discussed included Franoise Fenelon, Thomas Aquinas, Brother Lawrence’s *On the Presence of God*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Karl Stern’s *Pillar of Fire*, and Jacob Needleman’s *Lost Christianity*. Only very rarely did non-Christian religious works and philosophical tomes receive mention, with Ingrid discussing her interest in reading “occultish” materials and another informant conveying the significance Plato’s *Republic* held for her as a formative text of her college years.

Given the generally high level of education among informants as discussed in Section 1.5.2 and the ready availability of such works at local chain bookstores or through online publishers, this penchant for Orthodox convert reading is not surprising and is a regularly commented upon feature of other ethnographic/sociological studies so far conducted on this population such as those authored by Paisios Bukowy Whitesides and Richard P. Cimino.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, Karen remains a prime example of an informant for whom the life of the mind, both in formal educational settings and as a private pursuit, held key significance. Today, a stay-at-home mother of two daughters in her mid-thirties, Karen earned a doctorate in architectural engineering (her husband is a physicist) over the course of what she described as a near fifteen-year search for “truth,” in this instance as ecclesially embodied rather than philosophically abstracted. During this time, Karen, eventually with her husband in tow, made her way from charismatic megachurches catering to Gen-Xers with multimedia worship services and rock music to high-church Anglicanism, with its staid traditionalism and glimmerings of Chestertonian romance. This latter setting proved to be the last of Karen’s Protestant life before her lone crossing, for her husband has remained a staunch Episcopalian, into Orthodox Christianity.

Eventually, the writings of the church fathers, which Karen discovered in the catalogues of an evangelical Protestant mail order company, came to take on a certain authoritative precedence for her. In her view, these works described the early church “as it really was,” as it existed in the immediate aftermath of its founding by Christ. She mentioned devouring Eusebius of Pamphylia’s fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* and Josephus’ historical writings along with the works of John Chrysostom and Augustine among others. She recalled her intense reaction to these materials which immediately became *the* means of distinguishing “opinion” from “truth,” for as she said, “I was reading [the *Ecclesiastical*



*History*] and just a cursory reading of this book can tell you that the Protestantism I was experiencing was *nothing* like the early church, absolutely nothing and I thought, ‘How did it change so much?’ And if my pastor says that this certain doctrine is true, can I find that in the early church? If it’s true wouldn’t it be true for all eternity?” Not only did Karen choose these works according to personal preference and taste, for as she said, “I just got books that seemed interesting,” but she also trusted her own abilities to interpret these texts and to question the doctrinal verity of her Protestant pastors in light of their teachings. Furthermore, this standard of doctrinal and ecclesial measurement seemed all the more potent in *appearing* factual and exact, almost “scientific,” for, according to Karen, one must simply observe and compare these denominational options against the book-derived outline of the early church history to discern their approximation to “truth.”

The internet too proved to be a significant means by which converts gathered information about Orthodox Christianity or other religious options more generally. Not only do all the canonical (and many non-canonical) Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States have official websites, often complete with book recommendations, pastoral contacts, parish directories, and basic question-answer pages devoted to explaining the church to inquirers, but many parishes do as well. Indeed, would-be converts can preview an Orthodox Divine Liturgy or investigate the lay-out and architecture of any number of churches from the comfort of their own homes as some parishes regularly broadcast their Sunday services on the internet and offer pictorial web-tours of their temples. Furthermore, a host of more informal Orthodox blogs (many authored by converts, both lay and clerical), chat rooms, inquirer forums in which priests and other Orthodox Christian insiders answer questions on church doctrine and etiquette exist for individual perusal. Indeed, as Barbara Adam and Timothy W. Luke have maintained, religious tradition(s) in no way stand outside of or in necessary opposition to these modern technologies, but have quickly and effectively marshaled them for their dissemination.<sup>40</sup>

Both Ascension and St. Michael’s, for instance, have an internet presence with the former’s website still in its developmental stages, often providing out-of-date information regarding service times and parish activities when I conducted fieldwork there in 2006. Although Fr. Joseph expressed an interest

in completing and updating the website and certainly used email in his daily communications, he was not as interested in the overall evangelical and informational possibilities of emerging technologies as was Fr. Mark. For his part, Fr. Mark created a substantive website, replete with a parish history, photographs of recent church activities, a weekly liturgical/events schedule (usually accurate), audio sermons, and resources for further inquiry into Orthodoxy. At least two of the converts who had recently joined St. Michael's, one of whom was Karen, commented that they had visited the website and found it useful in their pre-conversion investigations of Orthodoxy. Before visiting the parish, Karen had communicated with Fr. Mark via email, inquiring whether services at St. Michael's were conducted in English and being assured of the overall "convert-friendliness" of the priest and parish. She also met Carl, a young man studying for conversion at the church, online at an Orthodox convert/inquirer chat room and emailed him several times before her initial visit to the church.

While most converts described their internet activity as supplementary to other means of religious inquiry (reading books, conversing with religious practitioners, visiting worship sites and so forth), Carl relied primarily on the internet in his active, highly self-conscious search for a church. With a Presbyterian mother and avidly non-religious father, Carl, a middle-school educational assistant in his early thirties, claimed little interest in church or religious matters in general throughout his adolescent and college years. Still, he reported learning about Orthodox Christianity in the culture portion of a Russian language course he took in high school. Given his deep love for music, Carl mentioned being particularly struck by the Russian liturgical chant his teacher played for the class and heard again in a college music history class, about which Carl speculated, "At that point it was like I guess the seed was planted in the back of the brain."

A chance visit to his mother's Presbyterian church one Pentecost became the catalyst for Carl's desire to "see what's out there" as far as ecclesial options were concerned. "Disgusted" by an informal worship service at the church involving papier-mâché flames and blue spandex-clad dancers, Carl turned to the internet as a research tool for finding a new church, an endeavor that unexpectedly germinated the "seed" still lying dormant from his high school and college days. He explained, "So I started in the

course of '97-'98. You know, the dawn of the internet comes and I go well, 'Okay, let's see what's out there.' I go, 'Well, this isn't for me. This isn't for me.' And somehow I come in contact with this Orthodox website and music comes playing and I went [he gasps], 'Oh, yeah. What's this all about?'" In this passage, the twin constituents of the contemporary American religious scene, religious diversity and subjectivity are underscored. At the click of a mouse, Carl can instantaneously investigate a wide swath of competing alternatives from the privacy of his home. Rather than looking to history or theology as a means of narrowing choices, Carl relied on personal intuition and taste underscored by the curt litany that one or another option "isn't for" him. Only the beauty of the liturgical chant wafting through his speakers flags Orthodox Christianity as somehow distinct, an incident that further highlights the power of electronic media to appeal directly to the senses of sight and hearing.

Carl's search was also a highly private affair, occurring within the confines of his own home and revolving solely around his own decision-making. Initially, he consulted no religious practitioners and visited no worship sites; no physical "church shopping" occurred at any point in this search. After making his internet discovery, he quietly returned to this and other Orthodox websites as he explained, "So, I started looking into it [Orthodox Christianity] and I started seriously just thinking about it and just keeping it to myself because I didn't want to make a decision that was gonna be in haste or anything, one that I would regret later one. If I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it and that's the end of it." From the official OCA website, Carl quickly found the link to St. Michael's parish about which he remarked, "I hadn't gone to a service yet and I hadn't met Fr. Mark. I just kept visiting the website every so often and get some information."

Eventually, this private interest developed into a more overt investigation of Orthodoxy as the young man emailed the parish priest after a particularly stressful day at work, "I contacted Fr. Mark and told him who I was and what I did and why I was so out of it that night. I think within twenty minutes, he emailed me back. It was like one in the morning and he said, 'Now don't worry, if you want to meet on Friday at the church, I'll be there.' And I drove down and met him at the church." From there, Carl began attending Sunday services, which impressed him from the start, and met with Fr. Mark regularly,

usually in informal sessions over breakfast in a local diner. Although the priest recommended Timothy Ware's *The Orthodox Church*, Carl reported consulting few books either before or after contacting Fr. Mark. Of this lacuna, Carl remarked, "No, I wasn't picking up books. I wanted to take the cheap way, to look at what I could find on the internet first and then go and do more intensive research." Finding both a Christian denomination and local parish suiting his tastes, Carl within a few short months of his arrival was chrismated and brought into the Orthodox Church in December 2002.

Nearly all the clergy interviewed attested to the rising significance of these electronic media in making Orthodox Christianity better known to Americans as a whole and of bringing seekers to their ecclesial thresholds. Interviewed in the spring of 2006, one Antiochian priest, for example, observed that the internet had risen in prominence as a recruitment tool in the last two to three years at his parish. Not only was Fr. Mark instrumental in ensuring his parish's internet presence, but he was active in coordinating "Ortho-convert" chat rooms, where he first received communication from Karen. Fr. Mark said in this regard, "I just knew that God would bring people into the [Orthodox] church. I just knew that if we did certain things. I knew that if we put a face on the internet. I knew that if we put the sermons out there, you know. I knew that we have something good here and something holy."

Even in the above statement, however, Fr. Mark in no way relied on the internet alone for he continued, "I knew that if we would just say it and pray for it and encourage it and tell the people here, 'Invite someone. Invite your family. Invite your friends.' Then it would just sort of build itself." Here, Fr. Mark recognized the importance of personal relationships to making Orthodox Christianity known and accessible to those currently outside the church as well. Indeed, as psychologist Lewis Rambo observes, a moment of genuine concrete encounter between the potential convert and religious insiders is a critical feature of conversion processes, although, rather significantly, this contact (Randy and Alex are important exceptions in this regard) between would-be converts and Orthodox church participants typically occurred outside of direct missionary efforts.<sup>41</sup> While this relational element is obvious in cases of conversion through intermarriage, it is by no means absent from those stating theological and/or liturgical reasons as the primary motivating factors for embracing Orthodoxy. No amount of reading makes one an Orthodox

Christian, for at some point would-be converts must establish contact with Orthodox clerics and other church members and a process of socialization and integration into the local community undertaken.

These personal readings and face-to-face interactions usually served as informational preludes for actual visits to Orthodox churches, the final means of learning about other religious options to be covered here. While much is anecdotally made of the aesthetic appeal of Orthodoxy, its proverbial “smells and bells,” for the ritually and iconographically deprived of other Christian traditions and unchurched Americans as a whole, this direct experiential dimension of physically entering and observing church settings and liturgical performances is fraught with ambiguity in the informant narratives.<sup>42</sup> First, direct encounters with Orthodox worship typically appeared in the narratives as something of a last stage of pre-conversion encounter between the potential convert and the Orthodox Church. In contrast to other Christian churches, Orthodox Christianity was never initially encountered in these narratives as the natural course of “shopping” excursions. While published conversion accounts do occasionally relate cases of eventual converts accidentally stumbling into Orthodox churches, usually out of curiosity about their architecture or building usage or in the course of foreign travels,<sup>43</sup> no informant in this study came into physical contact with parishes sight unseen before engaging in some sort of study or reading about the church or making contact with Orthodox insiders or other interested inquirers.

Second, converts reported a diversity of responses to these liturgical performances and their respective milieus. A few individuals did find the Orthodox liturgy, from their first visit, aesthetically, sensually, and/or socially pleasing often with these factors emerging as *the* new driving force behind their conversions. In such cases, converts reported an instant affinity with the Orthodox Church, recognizing in its ritual/iconographic accoutrements a long-sought after “home,” the fulfillment of their religious searches and ecclesial longings. Such persons saw the physical church and its liturgy as wholly congruent with the Orthodoxy of books and conversations and even exceeding their expectations as to what it might be like. Although official reception to the church may occur several years later, these affinities usually accompanied an almost immediate desire to become Orthodox. Meanwhile, other converts reported their first liturgies as sensually jarring, confusing, foreign, and strange even if they happened to be wholly

conducted in English. Often, informants found little commonality between the patristically formulated doctrines beckoning them to Orthodoxy and what they discover enacted each Sunday within parish walls. Here, these two rather stark convert reactions to Orthodox liturgical worship will be briefly reviewed, forming as they do the outcomes for this vital method of information-gathering about Orthodoxy.

For someone interested in becoming Orthodox, the inevitable moment came when she had to finally cross the church threshold to test empirically whether the Orthodox Church may, indeed, be a place and space worthy for personal dwelling. In the midst of his conversations with Randy and reading of the early church fathers, Alex visited an Orthodox church (OCA) near his campus within a couple months after his introduction to Orthodox Christianity. Although Alex supposed the Orthodox service would resemble those he had witnessed in Protestant and Roman Catholic settings, he admitted that “it was something I had never experienced before.” In contrast to the many other churches of his experience, when Alex arrived at the small, pewless church<sup>44</sup> he recalled, “I was actually really afraid to go in,” at which point he located and asked of a parish greeter, “I’ve never been to an Orthodox Church before what do I do?” However, this liturgical disorientation and discomfort at the same time served an important educational function:

I felt extremely uncomfortable and I thought it was the weirdest thing. I mean, to be honest, like it was weird. I don’t mean in a negative way, but I don’t mean in a positive way either. It was something I hadn’t seen before. It was a different sort of world, people coming and kissing what I considered pictures [icons] at the time. It was just very odd to me and I started asking questions after the service, “Why are people doing this? Why are they doing this?” And it was interesting to find out all the answers to those questions.

Each of the constituent elements of the liturgy, its sensual nature, the unfamiliar gestures enacted by its participants, the *a cappella* music and constant chanting rather than straight reading of texts, came together to form the “different sort of world” Alex found so “weird.” Even the most basic of Christian symbols, the cross, appeared completely different in its Orthodox setting, as Alex recalled, “I saw the cross. It was three-barred and I’m like, ‘Why are there three bars on there? I’ve never seen that before.’”<sup>45</sup> Despite the “weirdness” he felt in the midst of this first liturgical encounter, Alex, in his natural curiosity,

immediately set out to learn the origins, reasons, and meanings of the church's practices from Randy, the parish priest, and others.

While some would-be converts found Orthodox worship "weird," other individuals described initial encounters marked by an instant appreciation of Orthodoxy's divine services. Brad, who began this chapter with a mention of his early "church shopping," recalled the deep emotions occasionally triggered in his early visits to Ascension, "It may have been my third or fourth visit to Ascension and I walked in the sanctuary with the candles lit. You know how it is in this church when it's dark. And there was something that hit me that I'd never felt before. I mean I sat in that pew for like an hour crying like a baby and couldn't understand why. . . . You certainly don't get that in a Protestant nave. There's no sense of that-like this is otherworldly. So, I think that opened my eyes a little more towards it [Orthodoxy]." Although he could not put his finger on it at the time of his Protestant-oriented "church shopping," Brad affirmed that this "sense" of awe, holiness, "the otherworldly" was the "something missing" for which he longed, sought, and found fulfilled in the Orthodox Church.

Another woman said of her first visit to an Orthodox church occurring as it did a couple of years into her readings of Orthodox theology, "Only the choir sang. There was no organ, no nothing and just the incense and it was just beautiful. Just everything was beautiful. I remember sitting in the chair thinking, 'This is it.' But, I didn't know when or where and it felt like there was so much between my feelings and how do you get there?" Still, rather than quelling her interest in Orthodoxy or appearing merely as a ritual appendage to be accepted with a sigh, this liturgy confirmed for the woman that Orthodoxy was the endpoint of her religious searching, for she concluded, "I knew the first time I ever sat in that church. I knew I'd be Orthodox someday. So, I just kept going and searching."

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, the spiritual marketplace and its attributes of religious diversity and individual choice-making are at their most pronounced and explicit in the pre-conversion phase of these reconstructed biographies. Whether in their overarching and largely theologically indistinct utilization of the language of “seeking” or “journeying” or in the concrete particularities of early familial lives and methods of learning about different religions, converts repeatedly expressed appreciation for and confidence in their ability to make religious choices for themselves. Characterizing their eventual conversions to Orthodox Christianity as the eventual culmination of searches and journeys, informants stressed the self-propelled nature of their encounters with and investigations of a wide swath of competing religious options.

Although none of these seeker converts considered religious affiliation itself to be the natural inheritance of ancestors and forebears, they were bequeathed a rich legacy of avid religious questing from parents and friends. In this regard, the legacy of determining a “lifestyle” for oneself, however religiously or morally defined, was not a passive one, but required the informant’s eventual assumption of the choice-making mantle herself. In the case of converts to Orthodoxy, an awareness of one’s own ability to make personal choices often accompanied major life changes such as going away to college or the onset of marriage or divorce. Choice-making was also grounded in concrete methods of comparison and information-gathering as informants studied and made sense of competing religious options. The most critical sources of information on Orthodox Christianity cited by informants included the reading of print and electronic sources materials, personal contacts with religious insiders or other would-be converts, and visits to churches and other religious sites. These efforts only heightened convert awareness of and confidence in their own choice-making capacities, which converts brought fully developed and sharpened into their post-conversion lives within the Orthodox Church.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Orthodox converts themselves do not represent a single type, especially in their relationships to the Orthodox Church and the wider American religious



marketplace, but are often distinguished in parish life between those who purportedly enter the church for theological and/or liturgical reasons and those encountering it through intermarriage. The latter category offers both pronounced similarities to and departures from the variety of choice-making exhibited by seekers and will occupy our attention in the next chapter.

## 2.6 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In his preface, C. S. Lewis does insist that persons investigating different forms of Christianity take into account issues of “truth” and “holiness” but still considers these matters of individual conscience and offers no externalized guidance on how to distinguish their presence among Christian churches. See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, revised edition (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>4</sup>Again, as noted in section 1.1, see R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994) for a fascinating historical overview of the commodification of religion in American culture from the colonial period to the present day and Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (NY: Anchor Books, 1967), especially 127-153, for the effects of the “market” on religion under conditions of modernity at large. As noted in 1.1 a number of scholars have explored the application of “shopping” and other consumerist metaphors to contemporary religion. In this regard, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religions in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 106-129.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 80-163.

<sup>6</sup>Roof, 101-102.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>8</sup>Amitav Ghosh, “The Imam and the Indian,” *Granta* 20 (Winter 1986), 135; quoted in James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>See Peter N. Stearns, *Cultures in Motion: Mapping Key Contacts and Their Imprints in World History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) and Anthony D. King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, and Identity* (NY: Routledge, 2004), 79 as quoted in Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Ethnicities and Global Culture: Pants for an Octopus* (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 19.

<sup>13</sup>See Judith Okely's insightful critique of the primacy anthropologists have accorded to spatial "rootedness" in "Rootlessness against Spatial Fixing: Gypsies, Border Intellectuals, and 'Others,'" in *Managing Ethnicity: Perspectives from Folklore Studies, History, and Anthropology*, eds. Regina Bendix and Herman Roodenberg (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2000), 13-39.

<sup>14</sup>Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>15</sup>Clifford, 3.

<sup>16</sup>For discussions of features of Baby Boomer religiousness, see Roof; Wuthnow, especially 106-129; Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Baby Boomers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). For differing perspectives on the religious lives of Generation Xers, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998); Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002); Richard P. Cimino, *Against the Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faith by Young Adults* (Lanham, MD: Religion Watch and University Press of America, Inc., 1997); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup>Alex is here sensitive to the issue of baptismal formulae used in the enactment of the ritual (either trinitarian or in Jesus' name only) since the Orthodox Church itself makes a sharp distinction between the two. Evocation of the trinity is a necessary condition for the church's recognition of the baptisms of other Christian confessions as valid and efficacious. Alex was re-baptized by an Orthodox priest at the time of his official entry into the church.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 148-9.

<sup>19</sup>See Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) and *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) as noted in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, "Introduction," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, edited by Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4 and note 4, page 9. However one may interpret the continued relevance of denominations as a religious category in American religious life, Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey point out in their introduction to the essay collection *Reimagining Denominationalism* that the overall downplaying of denominational distinctions has been common in late twentieth century scholarship on American religions.

<sup>20</sup>Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>21</sup>See Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Brian Zinnbauer, "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzing the Fuzzy," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (December 1997), 549-64 for some critical reflection on this phrase.

<sup>22</sup>Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 115-6.

<sup>23</sup>Catherine Bell, for instance, discusses this in her *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100-101.; Bradd Shore, "American Middle-Class Families: Class, Social Reproduction, and Ritual in *Family Transformed: Religion, Values, and Society in American Life* ed., by Steven M. Tipton and John Witte Jr. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 194-195.

<sup>24</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 80-87 and Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 8-9.

<sup>25</sup>Giddens, 81.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>28</sup>Bauman, 7.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Although Nancy T. Ammerman notes a generalized aversion on the part of American Orthodox Christians to adopting more overt and widespread missionary tactics, (see *Pillars of Faith*, 197) there has been a marked interest, especially on the part of Orthodox church officials from the OCA and Antiochian archdioceses, to missionize areas of the United States (such as the deep South) that have previously had little historical Orthodox Christian presence. See Mark Stokoe and Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, "The Emerging American Mission: Evangelization," in *Orthodox Christians in North America, 1794-1994* (<http://www.oca.org/MVorthchristiansnamerica.asp?SID=1&CHAP-CH9>). Also, while rare and controversial among Orthodox Christians, some lay persons, in scattered parishes across the United States, have undertaken direct missionary efforts. Randy has been blessed to publicly preach the Orthodox faith by his parish priest and bishop.

<sup>31</sup>The religion scholar, Philip Charles Lucas, makes a similar observation of American converts to Orthodox Christianity in his article "Enfants Terribles: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003), 5-23. As suggested by Lucas, see Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) for a discussion of the theme of Christian origins in American religious history. Discussions of Orthodox Christianity as historically unchanged and indistinguishable from the "early church" are mainstays of published accounts and other literatures authored by contemporary American converts to the Orthodox Church. See for example Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992), especially 45-58 and Frederica

Mathewes-Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1997), xvii-xx.

<sup>32</sup>The Lefebvrists are a schismatic group adhering to the teachings of Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991) a French prelate who strongly resisted the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and was subsequently excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1988. The Sedevacantists (Latin for “the chair is vacant”) are a separate schismatic group claiming that the see of Rome is vacant and has been since Vatican II (all of the popes since this council are considered imposters), which is interpreted by many of its members as the work of the Antichrist. For a discussion of these groups see Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91-94 and 106-7.

<sup>33</sup>Watchman Nee (d. 1972) and Witness Lee (d. 1997) were Chinese Protestant authors whose teachings serve as the core for the Living Stream Ministry based in Taiwan but which has study groups in numerous countries worldwide. For a study of Watchman Nee and his Little Flock Movement in China see Joseph Tse-Hei Lee's, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” *Church History* 74, no. 1 (March 2005): 68-95. I thank members of Asia H-Net for this information as well as directions to source materials on these teachers. See also, Edward Irons, “Chinese New Religions After 1950,” in *New Religions, a Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*, ed. Christopher Partridge (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 241.

<sup>34</sup>A *gohonzon* is a mandala used for meditation and ritual in the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism. See Arai Ken, “New Religions,” in *Religion in Japanese Culture: Where Living Traditions Meet a Changing World*, edited by Noriyoshi Tamaru and David Reid (NY: Kodansha International, 1996), 107.

<sup>35</sup>Words of Polonius in Act I, Scene 3 of *Hamlet*.

<sup>36</sup>Robert Wuthnow, for instance, points out that “shoppers” and “seekers” tend to see “themselves as purists in search of deeper values than those supplied by commercialism and materialism.” See, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 119.

<sup>37</sup>Edward C. Rosenthal, 33; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 71.

<sup>38</sup>The literature on the impact of the media, especially electronic, on contemporary religions is immense. See, Steward M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds. *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997); Brenda E. Brasher, *Give me that Online Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Stephen O'Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 781-806. The pope and pagan reference comes from Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 71.

<sup>39</sup>Richard P. Cimino notes this in his work *Against the Stream*, 68-71; See also Paisios Bukowy Whitesides, “Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions within American Orthodoxy,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997). 19-35; H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant, “Collective Life as the Ground of Implicit Religion: The Case of American Converts to Russian Orthodoxy,” *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994), 441-54; and Philip Charles Lucas, “*Enfants Terribles*: The Challenge of Sectarian Convert to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003), 5-23.

<sup>40</sup>See, for example, Timothy W. Luke, “Identity, Meaning and Globalization: Detraditionalization

in Postmodern Space-Time Compression,” in *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority*, eds. Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 109-121 and Barbara Adam, “Detraditionalization and the Certainty of Uncertain Futures,” in *Detraditionalization*, 134-7

<sup>41</sup>Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 87-123.

<sup>42</sup>For an example of how American conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy are often portrayed as aesthetically driven in popular media portrayals of the phenomenon see Amy Johnson Frykholm, “Smells and Bells: Turning to Orthodoxy” in *The Christian Century* vol 121, no. 26 (December 28, 2004), 18-20. Certainly, aesthetics has long been considered an important motivating factor in conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy at least since that of pagan Prince Vladimir and Kievan Rus’ embrace of Greek Christianity in 988. According to the famous, though assuredly apocryphal, rendition of the conversion recounted in the eleventh-century *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Prince Vladimir sent emissaries to observe and report back on various religions, Islam, Judaism, Western (Roman) Christianity, and Eastern (Greek) Christianity, to which he and his people might convert. He accepted Greek Christianity upon the emissaries’ pronouncement that during their attendance at the liturgy conducted in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth.” See *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, translated and edited by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 110-111. See my article, “Imagined Aesthetics: Constructions of Aesthetic Experience in Orthodox Christian Conversion Narratives,” in *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity: Selected Papers of the International Conference held at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, in June 2004*, edited by Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005), 53-63 for a critique of this common coupling of Orthodox conversion experiences with aesthetics.

<sup>43</sup>For an example of such an accidental discovery of the Orthodox Church see Bishop Kallistos Ware’s account of his own conversion “Strange Yet Familiar: My Journey to the Orthodox Church” in *The Inner Kingdom*, vol. 1, *The Collected Works* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>44</sup>According to church canons (Canon XC of the Quinisext Council of 692) and tradition; the Orthodox faithful are expected to stand rather than sit during Sunday worship in commemoration of Christ’s resurrection. See *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, Together With the Canons of All the Local Synods Which Have Received Ecumenical Acceptance*, ed. Henry R. Percival. Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint 1997), 403 for a reading of the canon. Churches in traditionally Orthodox countries, therefore, do not typically have pews. The increased installation and use of pews over time in West European and North American Orthodox churches, especially in older, immigrant-established communities such as Pittsburgh, are occasionally considered by some church members, most notably recent converts, as “un-Orthodox.”

<sup>45</sup>The informant is here referring to the triple-barred, eastern cross common to Eastern Christian churches, both Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic, of Slavic orientation. See LeRoy H. Appleton and Stephen Bridges, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 21-22.

### **3.0 IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: PERSPECTIVES ON INTERMARRIAGE CONVERSIONS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

If relying solely on popular media and extant scholarly accounts, the interested inquirer would quickly conclude American conversions to Orthodox Christianity to be an entirely recent and unprecedented phenomenon. When scholars and Orthodox insiders began devoting attention to the issue of Eastern Orthodox conversions in the late eighties and early nineties, they did so in direct reaction to the increased prevalence and visibility of theologically driven seeker conversions, especially those of former evangelical Protestants.<sup>1</sup> Nearly always presented as the sole exemplars of conversion within the Orthodox Church in recent years, these conversions have been described by scholars as a “substantial revolution,”<sup>2</sup> “most significant”<sup>3</sup> in American Orthodox history, and having a “seismic impact”<sup>4</sup> in flagging Orthodoxy’s emergence from its supposed decades-long “ethnic isolation” in the United States. Even as a point of contextualization, the curious reader searches in vain in these writings for *any* mention of conversions to American Orthodoxy in past eras or through other channels, such as intermarriage, and could easily conclude from a perusal of this literature that they simply did not exist.

Yet, if Ghosh’s Egyptian village in no way can be considered a space utterly unknown to the processes and occasions of human mobility, so too the scenario that Orthodox Christianity, in the midst of a geographically and religiously fluid American culture, somehow escaped the traversing of ecclesial

boundaries until evangelical Protestants “discovered” Orthodoxy in the mid-1980s decidedly odd and evidentially untenable. As Orthodox church historian John H. Erickson has cogently noted, conversions are by no means new to American Orthodoxy, unheard of revelations on its ethnic horizons, but part and parcel of its varied historical and contemporary experiences within the United States, since the Orthodox Church has always accepted converts and, indeed, received a good number into its fold over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Two significant waves of Greek Catholic conversions, in which entire parishes entered the Orthodox Church *en masse*, for example, occurred at the turn of the last century under the leadership of Fr. Alexis Toth and then again at the end of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, efforts to engage American society at large, to evangelize and make Orthodox worship more accessible to the laity through the liturgical use of English and even the adoption of Western-rite liturgies among some Orthodox jurisdictions predate the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Although succeeding waves of immigration, especially from Eastern Europe, have periodically impacted Orthodox communities over the course of the twentieth century,<sup>8</sup> second and third-generation Americans interested in liturgical, educational, and evangelistic change, rather than immigrants wielding Orthodox Christianity as a shield for Old World ethnic cultures, were already populating many Orthodox churches by the mid-eighties.<sup>9</sup>

The difference between pre-and post-1980s Orthodoxy, therefore, is not the occurrence of conversions per se, but the motivational *type* represented, for, as Erickson maintains and as anecdotally confirmed by my informants, conversions through intermarriage between Orthodox Christian and non-Orthodox persons, were the most common vehicle for non-Orthodox crossing and entry into the Orthodox Church in previous decades and has remained so in a number of Orthodox jurisdictions.<sup>10</sup> The converts, discussed in the above articles and studies as well as introduced in chapter one, are almost exclusively those who have entered the church primarily out of theological and/or liturgical concerns and often as the result of concerted seeking, a conversion type that has been on the increase especially among the Antiochian, OCA, Carpatho-Rusyn and Greek Orthodox archdioceses in the last thirty years, though a relative rarity in earlier decades and uneven in its distribution today among differing Orthodox jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> Although converts apart from marriage entered the church in earlier decades, including

informants in this study who became Orthodox in the 1970s, Orthodox insiders often regarded them as eccentric and some Orthodox clergy even actively discouraged such conversions.<sup>12</sup> More often than not, older lifelong Orthodox Christians with whom I spoke considered intermarriage conversions to encompass the entirety of the phenomenon as they remembered it growing up in Pittsburgh parishes, for as one lifelong Orthodox woman in her mid-fifties recalled, “There were no converts outside of marriage. I can’t think of one. I mean, nobody came into the church because they had an epiphany or discovered the church and I’m here because, you know, for whatever reason. Everyone who came in came because of the spouse.”

In providing overviews of conversion and its trends in their parishes and within Orthodox Christianity at large, Orthodox clerics and lay informants frequently categorized conversions in the same dichotomous manner as the woman above, between intermarriage converts and those entering the church independently of the marital estate. My current categorization of Orthodox converts according to this twofold type, thus, is drawn directly from informant views. Since I did not have access to the metrical records of either church, I had to rely primarily on anecdotal evidence in highlighting the shifts in conversion motives that church participants believed had occurred in their communities. Fr. Mark of St. Michael’s, for example, noted that conversions through marriage have historically been the most significant source of new membership in his parish since its founding in 1914. He contrasted this long-held situation with the more recently observed trend of people “looking for Orthodoxy” out of dissatisfaction with home confessions or a vague curiosity to see what other religious options may be available. He said, “There has been an increase in conversions and converts not just from marriage, but conversions of people who are just looking for Orthodoxy. I think all of the Orthodox churches have [experienced] that to one extent or another.” Meanwhile, noting the increased prevalence of theologically driven conversions in his church, Fr. Joseph of Ascension made a similar distinction between conversion types. He said in this regard, ‘We have all kinds [of converts]. We have some people who because the spouse is Orthodox, they want to become the one religion. That is one type. But we have others who



literally walk in off the street that have read something about the Orthodox Church, Timothy Ware or some source, you know, the internet.”

Despite the historical and in some cases current ubiquity of intermarriage conversions in Orthodox churches in Pittsburgh and elsewhere in the United States as study informants and scholars such as John Erickson maintain, they continue to be overlooked in studies of contemporary conversions to Orthodoxy. This lacuna only reflects much wider trends within conversion studies as a whole, which as Andrew Buckser notes in his study of intermarriage conversions to Judaism in Denmark, has all but ignored this particular “social dimension”<sup>13</sup> of shifts in religious affiliation. Certainly, the most concerted scholarly and popular examinations of contemporary conversions “through marriage” have focused on the official debates surrounding and experiences of persons entering Judaism and Islam, since conversions in these contexts are believed to touch upon issues of modern communal identity and authority in acute ways. Jane Kaplan and Egon Mayer, for example, have devoted sections of their wider studies of Jewish-Christian intermarriage to issues surrounding religious conversion, while Anna Mansson McGinty and Karin van Nieuwkerk discuss the role of marriage in effecting conversions to Islam.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, Stefano Allievi has contributed to the overall typology of conversion in drawing a distinction between “relational” and “rational” conversions, the former of which are primarily effected through “personal contacts” (of which marriage remains an exemplar) and the latter which result from “an intellectual search.”<sup>15</sup> While such typologies can be useful in organizing and making sense of conversion types, they also do not strictly conform to the all-around categorical messiness of conversions as they occur in actual lives. For as mentioned in the previous chapter and will be made clear here, these conversion types certainly share fundamental features. Seeker converts still described “personal contacts” as critical to learning about the Orthodox faith, while intermarriage converts, although generally *not* religious seekers as we shall see, can and do demonstrate sincere spiritual interests in their new faith, that arise and develop quite personally and independently, at least from informants’ own points of view as we shall see, of any said “personal contacts.”

In addition to attracting little critical scholarly attention, intermarriage converts within American Orthodoxy rarely pen conversion narratives and based on my parochial observations tend to be much less vocal than seeker converts in discussing their conversion experiences with other parishioners. Often lacking clear-cut stories of their own, intermarriage converts are easily typecast *by others*, clerics and laity alike, as much more influenced by external factors in their conversions (coming to the church “because of the spouse”) rather than by genuine religious desire (having “an epiphany”). Yet, as my interviews and conversations with a number of converts through marriage at St. Michael’s and Ascension churches and elsewhere yield, such converts often describe their conversions quite differently as deeply felt, consciously made decisions undertaken precisely for the fulfillment of individual needs and desires. Although the contours of these conversions do differ markedly in some ways from those who discover Orthodoxy in the midst of a marketplace search, intermarriage conversions too are grounded in privatized, subjective notions of the nature of religious affiliation and the felt imperative to make singular choices apart from external constraints, including those of marriage and family. In this way, intermarriage converts have much more in common with their more theologically and/or liturgically driven counterparts than is typically assumed in parish life.

This chapter, therefore, provides a glimpse behind the stock-board stereotypes of intermarriage converts to elucidate some of the significant similarities and differences these conversions have with those of seekers, dominating as they have the academic, popular, and parochial imaginations. In this way, intermarriage converts will offer their own varied experiences and perspectives on crossing into and dwelling within the Orthodox Church. Our present discussion will, therefore, proceed in a threefold manner. First, perspectives on intermarriage and its conversions as expounded in official Orthodox church teaching and practice and as considered by clerical and lay fieldsite informants will be discussed. Emphasis will be placed in this section on how *others* see and discuss this conversion type. Second, the ways in which religious choice-making and seeking appear in the narratives of intermarriage converts will take center stage. If religious diversity is the de facto context of contemporary American life, defining its myriad experiences and vocabularies, then intermarriage conversions too must be situated and understood

within this frame of reference. Finally, since intermarriage conversions are seen as heavily entwined with issues related to the domestic sphere, we will discuss the roles family and marriage do play in three critical areas: first, the socialization of non-Orthodox spouses into Orthodox communities; second, the domestic negotiations of religious affiliation in homes where conversions do not immediately occur after marriage; third, as a direct motivator in bringing about a spousal embrace of Orthodox Christianity at the commencement of or years into a marriage. Let us begin our discussion, then, by once again turning to official as well as clerical and lay attitudes towards intermarriage converts and conversion as found in the Orthodox Church.

### **3.2 OFFICIAL AND CLERICAL VIEWS ON INTERMARRIAGE CONVERSIONS**

While intermarriage conversion is naturally correlated with marriage itself, as something of a duty-bound imperative in the narratives of priests and other lay informants in Pittsburgh, the Orthodox Church as it understands marriage in practice today permits a certain amount of choice-making leeway in regard to the church affiliation of non-Orthodox individuals who marry Orthodox Christians, a flexibility that is fully embraced and exercised in the Pittsburgh parishes under direct consideration here. For example, church-sanctioned marriages, sealed with the official rituals of the sacrament, are permitted between Orthodox Christians and baptized persons of other Christian denominations, although intermarriage between Orthodox Christians and non-Christians is strictly prohibited.<sup>16</sup> However, even this allowance for inter-Christian unions is an interpretation made in light of practical considerations, for the canons of the Orthodox Church themselves forbid marriages between church and non-church members of any sort.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, church-published pamphlets and manuals aimed at informing couples as to the sacramental meanings, regulations, and responsibilities of Orthodox marriage typically discourage marriage outside the church even when the proposed partner is Christian.<sup>18</sup>

As in the case of other Christian and religious contexts, internal social barriers, such as intra-parish strictures/stigmas discouraging marriages outside one's ethnic or religious group, have relaxed considerably and increasingly bi-religious families, in which no post-marital spousal conversions have occurred, have come to quietly populate the churches under study here. During my time at Ascension and St. Michael's and in my many conversations with Orthodox clerics including a bishop, I neither witnessed nor heard any direct attempts to discourage intermarriage, even if not as "ideal" a circumstance as marriage in which both partners are Orthodox Christians. Clerical informants simply accepted it as the "reality" faced by parishioners living in a predominantly non-Orthodox society and with social contacts ranging beyond the supposed ethnic enclaves inhabited by their grandparents. Furthermore, none of the intermarriage converts with whom I spoke mentioned clerical resistance at the prospect of their marrying a member of the Orthodox Church.

The acceptance of interfaith households, regardless of whether conversions result, as a normal course of life today is by no means peculiar to Orthodox Christianity, but reflects wider trends found across the span of religious groups in the United States as other scholars have assessed and noted. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, for example, observes that there has been a significant increase in Americans marrying outside their own religions since World War II, with very few confessions today escaping the readiness of their adherents to cross institutional lines in search of husbands and wives. He attributes this trend to increased opportunities for other kinds of boundary crossings that stand beyond the reach of official religious institutions and bring persons of different faiths and backgrounds into contact with one another such as travel, college attendance, culturally diverse neighborhoods and the like.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the acceptance and undertaking of religious intermarriage by ever-larger segments of the American populace does not appear likely to abate in the near future if the attitudes of contemporary college-educated young adults are any indication. According to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's study of this cohort, "fewer than half (42 percent) of single young adults believe that it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religion"<sup>20</sup> and when religion was cited as an important quality, they "seem to want their ideal mate's religious faith to be as syncretic and blandly 'spiritual' as possible."<sup>21</sup>

The official Orthodox position on interfaith marriage affects how intermarriage conversion itself can be defined, presenting as it does an on-the-ground decoupling of conversion from nuptial rituals and the commencement of the marital estate. For the purposes of this study, therefore, intermarriage conversions are those for which Orthodox Christianity is by and large *introduced* as a singular option, aside from the non-Orthodox spouse's home or childhood confession, over the course of meeting and marrying an Orthodox spouse, rather than those occurring simply at the outset of marriage itself. Thus, informants often began their married lives as part of an inter-religious couple, making conscious decisions regarding religious practice and belief in the home. Intermarriage converts are persons who learn about and embrace Orthodoxy over the course of meeting, marrying, and/or living with an Orthodox spouse, not necessarily out of an ecclesial or familial imperative to become Orthodox. In this definitional regard, Orthodox intermarriage conversions are by no means peculiar. McGinty, for instance, draws a similar picture of the relationship between marriage and conversion in her work, whereby marriage often acts as a vehicle for introducing American and Swedish-born women to Islam with several of them converting to the faith only years into their marriages with Muslim men. Jane Kaplan has made similar observations in her work on intermarriage converts to Judaism as well.<sup>22</sup>

In popular parochial parlance, however, as relayed by priests and laity, the individual choice-making potential of intermarriage conversions is typically lost in the institutional glare cast by its entrenched association with the duty-bound estates of marriage and family, of hearth and home. In this way, intermarriage conversions were frequently perceived by others in parish life, by Orthodox clerics, lifelong church members, and other converts, as motivationally far removed from the apparently unalloyed and preferable desire of uniting one's self to the faith solely out of personal affinity with its doctrinal and ritual aspects and regardless of external social or familial circumstances. These views were particularly prominent among Orthodox clerics who provided overviews of both conversion types and demonstrated an unabashed admiration for the effort self-proclaimed seekers and journeyers expended in learning about and entering the Orthodox Church. For example, the presiding clerics of my two fieldsites, as key informants, were much more likely to introduce me to seeker than intermarriage converts as

potential interview subjects. Meanwhile, Fr. Mark, who was fond of weaving converts' stories into his Sunday homilies as illustrations of religious zeal and commitment, only drew upon the conversion narratives of former seekers for the Orthodox Church. While by no means wholly free of hints of suspicion on the part of religious insiders as we shall discuss in chapter four, seekers were by and large held up in parish life as the preferred and more interesting conversion model, conversion as it *should be*, worthy of examination and emulation in the spiritual lessons of struggle and love for the Orthodox faith clerics and lifelong lay members believed it to afford.

Clerics buttressed these words and actions with more pointed characterizations. Fr. Joseph, for instance, said in this regard, "I think in some instances because they [intermarriage converts] are coming in to unify themselves with the Orthodox family member, there is a certain motive, while not bad in itself, that is not speaking to a deeper conviction [of conversion and the religious life]. So, we have those converts and they're not gonna be as much on fire, so to speak, as are the ones who are more deeply drawn into the faith through study, through prayer." Still, Fr. Joseph found much about which to be pastorally hopeful in these "lukewarm" conversions, as he continued, "That convert may be lacking in that type of conviction. But, again, with something to build on we try to bring them in. I mean, it's a good start. They've taken this step." Meanwhile, Fr. Mark noted with a certain vehemence in casual conversation during coffee hour one Sunday that "converts through marriage have weaker ties to the church" and despite the fact that, in his words "they can grow in their faith" he found them discouraging in their overall lack of interest and devotion. This was also the conversion type for which Fr. Mark saw the greater number of "failed conversions," where after official entry to the Orthodox Church, the convert gravitated to former confessions or non-churchgoing altogether.

Fr. Nicholas, a priest interviewed from a nearby Antiochian parish, offered a similar assessment in expressing the disappointment he often felt in connection with conversions precipitated in the course and aftermath of marriage, "Some want to convert with such a casual attitude that it's hardly a conversion at all. They're not interested in knowing the theology. They just want to bring the family up in the faith." Yet, like Fr. Joseph, he too maintained a certain hope that the initial conversion, however

unenthusiastically undertaken, may eventually foster a deeper religious awareness on the part of the converted spouse, for as he continued, “That timing [of conversion] does offer an opportunity to have an adult examine their beliefs and embrace the faith. But they certainly come with much less enthusiasm for it and depth of study. But only God knows how he’s going to use them and make them grow.” While, an embrace of Orthodoxy Christianity on the part of seekers is often viewed as the culmination of particular pre-conversion processes of searching and journeying, conversions through marriage were viewed, from their commencement, as representing the merest rudiments of knowledge and action necessary for living one’s life within the Orthodox Church. Conversion in such cases was considered “an opportunity” or “a good start” for “embrace of the faith,” rather than any demonstrable measure of its attainment.

Finally, in their assessment of these conversion types, all of the interviewed clerics took for granted the notion that religion first and foremost involved personal ‘interest,’ ‘conviction,’ and the taking of one’s faith “to heart,” rather than ensuring that familial and ecclesial traditions and practices were passed down to succeeding generations. Certainly, in this regard, the clerics reflected in their comments a shift in the very meanings and enactments of religiousness from societal and familial adhesive to an arena of private feeling and fulfillment, a point treated in the study introduction.<sup>23</sup> In this way, American Orthodox clerics, no less than convert and lifelong church members, considered religion a private, conviction-laden affair premised on feelings and psychological self-awareness, rather than solely as the inheritance of forebears.

Before dismissing these assessments of intermarriage conversions as anomalous or indicative of curmudgeonly clerical posturing, convert informants too made such distinctions, with a few individuals, especially those married to lifelong Orthodox spouses, emphatically stressing that their “authentically” convicted conversions should in no way be confused with those of the intermarriage variety. Introduced in chapter two as a consummate religious “shopper” in his pre-conversion days, Brad married a lifelong member of Ascension Greek church two years after his conversion to Orthodoxy in the late 1970s. Drifting from church to church (mostly Protestant) throughout his late adolescence in search of ecclesial stability and an “otherworldly” sense of worship and religious practice, Brad was introduced to Orthodox

Christianity by his wife-to-be in the early course of what began as a solid friendship. Still as articulated in his narrative, Brad's exploration of Orthodoxy was decidedly drawn as an exercise of personal will and interest wholly set apart from this relationship. When asked if he knew he would marry his wife at the time of his reception to the Orthodox Church, Brad emphatically responded, "No, and I'm actually in some perverse way proud of that fact. I did not convert to marry and, in fact, I did not know that I was going to marry Lynn. She and I were just friends at the time. We kinda dated-were friends and I don't think at the time I was doing it with the intentionality of getting closer to her. It was really an authentic pull to the church that made me want to convert." At another juncture in his interview, Brad offered further comment on the differences he saw between these conversion types:

It just seems like a given, you know, you got married and you joined the church and it doesn't seem to have quite the impact as somebody who comes in choosing it. I don't think. It's just something you do kinda to make peace [in the marriage or family]. But is it something you hold at your gut level? Will it make you core or fringe? And I suppose you have to see their involvement afterwards.

It is this view of intermarriage conversions as based on external expediency (e.g., "to make peace") rather than individual choice (e.g., something held at "gut level") that forced Brad to pause and evaluate how he presented his own conversion to others at Ascension and elsewhere, "I guess that's why I always kinda make sure people know that I did not do this [convert] to get married. Yeah, I chose the church for what it is and who it is and who she is in all time and will be in the future, not because I wanted to make peace with my wife."

Ron, whose embrace of Orthodoxy Christianity too could be interpreted as an intermarriage conversion introduced as he was to the church over the course of his courtship to his Ukrainian-born second wife Oksana, emphasized his conversion as a volitionally predicated act divorced from the marriage itself. It was in these very terms that Ron described his chrismation, which took place in a small church in Oksana's hometown before she immigrated to the U. S.:

It [his chrismation] was wonderful and, you know, I was chrismated for *my* soul, for *my* self, not for Oksana, not for anyone else. It had nothing to do with doing anything for anyone else. It simply fit for me and it was the right thing for me to do so I felt very strongly that I was doing this for myself. It was not something that Oksana pressured me to do. You know, she didn't



want me to do that or not want me to do it. But, I felt comfortable doing it and I did that for myself. So, I felt very, very good about it.

This declaration of convert choice, in the midst of competing factors, underscored the value Ron placed on his own decision-making in bringing about his conversion. In this way, he endeavored to distance himself from other intermarriage converts.

In the excerpts above, intermarriage conversions appeared as an unfortunate nod to the relational messiness of real life, standing in sharp contrast to the ideal of what conversion in all its motivational purity should be. These conversion types were nearly always situated in oppositional terms as capturing at once the dichotomous attitudinal positions present within the church and religious life as a whole. For example, converts may be “core” or “fringe,” with choice-makers more easily falling into the former and those “making peace” into the latter category. Converts may plunge into the theological depths of the Orthodox faith “through study, through prayer,” or they may waft on the surface with their “casual attitudes.” Converts either have “epiphanies” or have dowdy “spouses” in tow. Individuals may ardently search or investigate religious options in a concerted effort to find an ecclesial context for the fulfillment of needs and desires or half-consciously stumble into the church in the wake of nuptial celebrations. These dichotomies came to take on a life of their own in defining the experiences of converts and how they were portrayed in parish life. Let us now turn our attention to what intermarriage converts have to say about their own experiences of becoming Orthodox Christians.

### **3.3 IN THEIR OWN VOICE: INTERMARRIAGE CONVERSION NARRATIVES**

Despite the deeply engrained character of these categorizations among many Orthodox insiders, especially clerics, one important group consistently failed to employ this dichotomous framework in discussions of intermarriage conversions, namely converts entering the Orthodox Church through marriage themselves. While significant differences could be detected between the narratives produced by intermarriage converts and those attracted to the church primarily for theological and/or liturgical reasons,

especially in regard to the presence and utilization of religious seeking, the narratives of both conversion types were remarkably similar in their overall linkage of the processes of conversion to individual deliberation and choice-making, with the fulfillment of *personal needs and desires* (e.g. Ron emphasized that he became Orthodox “for *my* soul, for *my* self”) trumping ecclesial, social, or familial expectations in regard to religious affiliation. Additionally and perhaps not surprisingly, intermarriage converts did not often describe their own conversional attitudes and actions as “casual,” devoid of “fire” or “enthusiasm” for the Orthodox faith. Rather, these convert informants repeatedly situated their conversions within frames of authentic interest in and appreciation for the rituals and life of the Orthodox Church and frequently enumerated the ecclesial qualities they found appealing and critical to their own decisions to become Orthodox.

Echoing the above clerics’ views of religion as a vehicle for the affective (conversions without deep feelings no matter how noble one’s intention to achieve ecclesial unity in the home were simply less desirable than those fueled by such emotions and affinities) the intermarriage converts of this study simply assumed religious affiliation to be a private matter falling wholly within the decision-making purview of the atomized individual, apart from spousal and social influence and requiring no justification or explanation within their narratives. Not only were informants willing to live in religiously divided households for years or decades into their marriages before deciding to embrace Orthodox Christianity, but when finally choosing to join the faith of their spouse and, in many cases, children, it was invariably predicated on the meeting of subjective desires rather than external obligations. Even when hints of duty materialize in the narratives, such as in instances of wanting to raise children in religiously united households or in the case of a divorced Roman Catholic man attracted by the more lenient remarriage policies of the Orthodox Church,<sup>24</sup> these are quickly tempered in the narratives by discussions of informant interest in and appreciation for Orthodoxy.

A part-time physical therapist and mother of four in her mid-forties, Olivia embraced Orthodox Christianity a number of years into her marriage with James. A former Roman Catholic who described herself as “the good little kid” who “didn’t ask questions, just learned all the stuff” taught her by the

clergy and nuns, Olivia only learned of the existence of the Orthodox Church upon meeting her future husband while in college. Although her initial encounters with Orthodoxy were pleasant as James took her to Orthodox churches over the course of their dating, Olivia recalled the lack of enthusiasm with which she greeted the idea of changing religious affiliation at the time, “I was not looking for anything when I met him or even after I met him. I was not necessarily going to convert or anything like that.” Olivia did receive some pastoral instruction on church doctrine and practice prior to her Orthodox wedding, but said of her early relationship with the church, “It wasn’t like I found ‘home.’ It took me a little bit longer to decide this is where I always wanted to be.” Feeling no immediate need to leave Catholicism, Olivia continued attending a Catholic church Saturday evenings before accompanying her husband to his Orthodox parish on Sunday mornings in the early years of their marriage.

Although certainly introduced to Orthodoxy through her future husband, Olivia maintained that he played little to no role in effecting her ultimate decision to become Orthodox, which occurred shortly after the birth of the couple’s first child. According to her, James seemed to recognize and respect her choice-making autonomy in regard to ecclesial affiliation from the very beginning of the marriage:

He didn’t really say anything. He can be very outspoken, very exuberant about his faith and for the longest time I really didn’t want to hear it. And he was smart enough to know, okay, step back, just let it go, which tends to work better for me. So, he pretty much stayed out of the whole thing. But, of course, he was very happy when I converted, but he did not encourage, discourage, nothing. He really didn’t do much at all. And I think if he would have pushed, I would have pushed harder and that just would not have worked. I wouldn’t have even converted at all.

If James, in this assessment, “didn’t do much at all” in bringing about her conversion, Olivia’s birth family played an even more diminished role in her eventual acceptance of the Orthodox faith. She concluded, “I never had anybody saying, ‘Oh, that’s not a good decision.’ Or ‘are you really sure about this?’ They were supportive in not being unsupportive. You know what I mean?”

Olivia’s situation was by no means peculiar among informants. Generally, intermarriage converts reported minimal spousal involvement in their decisions to become Orthodox while at the same time recognizing that the conversion itself probably would not have occurred outside the initial circumstances of marriage. Although Ingrid forthrightly admitted that “the main reason why I joined [the Orthodox

Church] was because my husband was there. I never would have otherwise” this decision was presented as her’s alone to ponder and make, as she continued, “It was totally my choice, kind of like he was to Orthodoxy what I was to his citizenship [He was born in Russia]. That’s a personal choice.” Occasionally, Orthodox spouses expressed surprise and skepticism at their husbands’ and wives’ interest in joining the church. Such was the case with Ken, an accountant in his early forties who married a lifelong member of Ascension parish. He described his wife’s reaction when he converted eleven years later, “I think she [his wife] was really surprised. She was like, ‘Are you sure?’ And I said, ‘Oh, I’m sure.’ You know, it was really my decision and it was something I thought about. I mean, this is where I need to be and there’s no reason that I need to straddle this fence. So, it was my decision and she was kind of like, ‘Make sure. There will be repercussions.’”

Interestingly, while intermarriage converts as a whole were considered less “committed” to and “convicted” in their embrace of Orthodox Christianity by clerics and some other church members, Ken continued by pointing to another distinction he saw among converts of the intermarriage variety, those who convert at the outset of their marriages and others, like himself, who wait, reflect, and decide slowly over time to become members of the Orthodox Church. He said of this distinction:

I see those that convert when they’re married immediately as part of being married and they’re not, I would say, as actively involved as those that convert after being part of the community for at least a couple years. I think that they’re doing it more for the ceremonial perspective than this is what I want to do. And those that kind of wait a little they say, “Before I do this [convert] I want to be part of this and get a sense and see what it’s all about.” So I didn’t convert right away.

Ken again forwarded the idea and ideal of religious conversion as a decision undertaken in response to a certain amount of information-gathering, reflection, and deliberation, as an action one “wants” to do rather than a “ceremonial” enacted “as part of being married.” This is precisely how Ken went about his own conversion, as he recalled, “I waited and as a result, I had a period to sit back and reflect and do the old compare-contrast kind of thing” between Orthodox Christianity and his childhood Roman Catholicism. He also offered an assessment that echoed Brad’s aforementioned concern about post-conversion commitment on the part of intermarriage converts, with the timing and deliberateness of

conversion appearing as indicators of whether one will be “core” in actively engaging church life or fall into the margins of the parochial “fringe.”

Yet, conversion remained no less a choice for non-Orthodox individuals entering the church on the very threshold of the marriage ceremony itself, those whom Ken characterized as perhaps driven more to conversion for “ceremonial” reasons than from what he considered to be a reasoned desire for the Orthodox Church itself. Introduced in chapter two, Christine was a stay-at-home mother of two small children who, as we recall, hailed from a wholly unchurched background. Christine married a lifelong Orthodox member of Ascension parish (they have since joined St. Michael’s where I met the couple) where she was baptized and chrismated days before her wedding at the church. A marked ambivalence courses through Christine’s description of her conversion. On the one hand, Christine cast her premarital attendance of Orthodox services and functions as a demonstration of solidarity with her future husband, “I love Matthew [her husband] so much and so deeply wanted to support him and his life too in the sense that this was very much a part of who he was and I wanted to recognize that and I wanted to say, ‘I’m all for it. I support you in this. I will come along and sit with you and make nice to the parishioners.’” Yet, the conversion itself, the official act of being received into the church, is presented in the narrative as largely within Christine’s own choice-making control, for as she recounted of her attitude at the time, “I was open to joining a religion, but I really wasn’t sure which one, if this [Orthodox Christianity] was for me. But it all happened so fast as far as my deciding, you know. My son [a son was born to the couple before the marriage took place] is Greek Orthodox and my husband-to-be is an Orthodox Christian. I can do this. So, it sounds good to me.”

Another woman from Ascension parish in her mid-fifties who converted to Orthodoxy from Roman Catholicism on the eve of her marriage in 1976, Andrea too refused to fully attribute her conversion to Orthodoxy to her impending marriage, “I was open to discussion about it (conversion). Being still in college, you’re open to reasoning and ideas and we [she and her future husband] discussed it. Yeah, we discussed it a lot.” While expressions of concern regarding her ecclesial affiliation were issued on the part of her husband-to-be’s family, Andrea saw her conversion as a decision based primarily

on her growing dissatisfaction with what she considered the “legalistic” tenets and authorities of the Roman Catholic Church and attraction to Orthodox Christianity as a “loving religion.” She recalled, “I know for a fact that his parents were concerned about my faith. I remember that--that I was a Catholic and he was Orthodox. But that wasn’t the reason I changed. I’d changed because there were so many aspects of Catholicism I didn’t like.” Although her marriage presented a ready opportunity to leave a church she “didn’t like,” Andrea viewed her conversion as fundamentally grounded in her own attraction to the Orthodox faith, “I was open to the change with it [Orthodoxy] still being a Christian faith and still having an important liturgy. And having seen baptisms and marriages, I relished the thought of being Orthodox. I thought it was a very charming faith, a close knit faith and I didn’t feel that in the Catholic Church.”

In these instances, therefore, conversion did not simply involve interiorized psychological shifts or encounters with superhuman agents, but the establishment of a *relationship* with an ecclesial context, a relationship that could be grounded, at least theoretically, in any number of criteria. One criterion was precisely that of the “ceremonial perspective,” to convert “for spouse and family,” to prize familial religious unity over and above even personal feelings for or affinities with the Orthodox Church. Even intermarriage converts under mild familial pressure to become Orthodox, however distanced themselves from this as the basis of their conversions, favoring rather to see their relationships to Orthodoxy grounded in “pure commitment” involving their feelings and even certain notions of intimacy closely paralleling those of modern romantic attachments. Interestingly, Egon Mayer has noted similar attitudes among Orthodox Jewish rabbis, many of whom view motivations of familial religious unity, without demonstrable religious conviction and zeal for the Jewish faith itself, insufficient grounds for conversion.<sup>25</sup>

In a sense these conversion ideals are analogous to Anthony Giddens’ “pure relationship,” which he argues has become *the* model for inter-personal relationships under conditions of late modernity. Writing extensively on the topic, Giddens defines “pure relationship” as that “in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship as such can

deliver.”<sup>26</sup> Such relationships are based on “trust” and “intimacy” and come to be decoupled from the “criteria of kinship, social duty or traditional obligation,”<sup>27</sup> the supposed moorings of relationships in past eras.<sup>28</sup> These “external criteria” serve as the constituents of the *stereotypical* intermarriage conversion, again, as cast by Orthodox informants and receiving such sustained, near universal, informant scorn. Rather, intermarriage converts are careful to deemphasize these elements of conversion to replace them with the language of “commitment” and “intimacy” (even high romantic feeling as in the case of the rather large number of informants who describe their relationship to the Orthodox Church as based on reciprocal love) so accepted and esteemed by contemporary Americans at large.

Still, the narrative contours of intermarriage conversions, in particular the constituents of their pre-conversion phases, can differ markedly from those propelled for theological and/or liturgical reasons. Whereas individuals who discovered and were drawn to the church apart from circumstances of marriage often presented their pre-conversion lives as comprised of series of movements across singular or multiple religious boundaries, this ardent movement and its concomitant descriptors of “search” and “journey” were frequently absent from the narratives of intermarriage converts. Ingrid, Ron, and Brad were the only intermarriage informants interviewed for this study who reported pursuing other religious options before their conversions to Orthodoxy, with the latter two, as mentioned, emphatically distancing themselves from the intermarriage category altogether. Significantly, most intermarriage converts claimed that even the very notion of leaving their home faiths had *never* occurred to them before their pre-and post-marital encounters with Orthodox Christianity. These informants, however, were by no means unaware of the religious diversity surrounding them nor of the fact that individuals can and do change religious affiliation at will, but simply refrained from placing themselves into its midst as seekers.

However, it must be borne in mind that remaining within the familiar territory of one’s childhood confession, which too may involve intra-ecclesial crossings and movements of various sorts, is no less a decision made than that of journeying into unknown religious terrains, for as surveyors of the late modern condition are fond of pointing out even the mercy of opting out of the constant round of biographical self-evaluation and adjustment, what Ulrich Beck refers as a “tyranny of possibilities”<sup>29</sup> too has become

increasingly remote. Ann Swidler's likening of culture to a "repertoire" of competing, context specific strategies available for adoption and manipulation provides a framework for understanding individualized responses to the marketplace one of which is to stay put in the religion or non-religion of one's youth.<sup>30</sup> However, this is no less a personal religious choice than that of investigating and/or experimenting with various worldview options, only less spectacular, perhaps, in its contours and effects.

Olivia, for example, characterized her pre-conversion relationship to Roman Catholicism as one of quiet compliance and assent, as she here recalled, "I was always the good little kid. I went to religious ed. classes but didn't ask questions, just learned all the stuff." Even when, in her words, some of the church's teachings "didn't really make sense," Olivia, as the "good little Catholic girl" that she was, learned to "just accept it," thus remaining firmly entrenched in the church of her childhood. A rather shy, retiring woman, Olivia admitted to having possessed no interest in investigating religious options prior to marriage and found the singular "crossing" from Catholicism to Orthodoxy an undertaking requiring years of serious reflection. She explained, "I'm not like James [her husband]. I'm not a risk-taker. I'm not someone who questions everything. I learn about things, but I don't necessarily make major changes or anything like that. So, it took a little bit longer for me to decide that this [the Orthodox Church] was where I was going to stay."

As in Olivia's case, even if the informant expressed pre-conversion dissatisfaction with aspects of her home religion, other religious or ecclesial alternatives were rarely pursued or entertained. As another example, Renee, who today attends a Carpatho-Rusyn church, mentioned feeling little connection to the other members of her childhood church, "The Catholic church that I attended for twenty-some years at that point, you sat by the same people at the same church service, but I didn't know who they were. I couldn't tell you their first or last name." She also discussed her penchant for pre-marital "church shopping," but wholly within the denominational bounds of Roman Catholicism, "I was shopping around at that time trying to find the right Catholic church that maybe I could feel I could belong to and be a member of." Still, despite the expansive religious marketplace in which she and her denomination were situated, Renee admitted that she too had never thought to search beyond the Catholicism of her youth, "I



never did. I never did. Never attended another church or anything like that. All the friends that I grew up with all seemed to be Catholic and that sort of thing. No, that never crossed my mind to venture outside the Catholic faith.” Only on the occasion of her marriage and afterwards did Renee entertain the prospect of conversion, a decision she, like so many other intermarriage converts, made several years into her marriage.

Yet, as the other aforementioned examples illustrate, even in the absence of physical religious searches and boundary crossings, the language of “search” and “shopping” still occasionally appeared in the narratives of intermarriage converts, though its meanings generally differed from the usage found among persons initially drawn to Orthodoxy for theological/liturgical reasons as outlined in chapter two. Generally for the latter category of convert, ‘search,’ ‘journey,’ or ‘shopping’ referred to the actual physical and/or intellectual enactment of investigating and comparing religious options with the intention of substituting one or another for the informant’s home, childhood, or present religious affiliation. For informants introduced to Orthodoxy through marriage, however, “search” and “shopping” were imbued with more localized meanings of discontent with the home religion or “shopping” for the “right church” within the same denomination. The “searches” and “shopping” excursions do not occur between different churches or religions, but between theological and parochial expressions within the singular home confession.

Despite these connotative differences in the utilization of “seeking” language, the informants introduced to Orthodoxy through marriage were just as likely as their seeker counterparts to discuss their ecclesial affiliations in emotional, affective terms. As in any “pure relationship” convert informants were eager to demonstrate their commitment to and appreciation for Orthodoxy in and of itself by enumerating the ways in which the church met their personal needs. Independently of clerical or familial promptings, for example, Kay, an intermarriage convert from Ascension, determined Orthodox Christianity to be “something that was steadfast and pure and real” in contrast to the Roman Catholicism of her pre-conversion days. Kay’s description of the differences between Catholicism and Orthodoxy seemed to mimic those that might be applied to human interrelations, especially romantic attachments. Whereas

Roman Catholicism (as we might imagine in the case of an unresponsive lover) was described as emotionally “cold,” distant, and punitive, Orthodoxy appeared as a kind of religious “knight in shining armor” to provide the love, attention, and intimacy for which Kay craved, “So, I came here [to Ascension] and I fell in love with the church. I met all these wonderful people. They were so kind and they embraced me and I loved the liturgy. I came and it was the same every week and you felt love.” Evincing anything but a “lukewarm” attitude, Kay forthrightly maintained that it was “the love” that attracted her to Orthodoxy for, “it’s a loving atmosphere and forgiving and it’s so unchanging. It’s so nice.” At the same time, Olivia too cited personal factors of feeling spiritually “complete” and connected to the divine as key to her conversion. Again, one can easily imagine the same language here employed of “completeness” and honesty being applied to a human relationship, especially one conforming to the emotionally available, “pure” variety grounded in trust and commitment that Anthony Giddens argues to have become *sine qua non* under conditions of late modernity:

Orthodoxy for me was like a completeness. I didn’t have to give up anything per se. . . . Orthodoxy completed something that I didn’t even know I was missing. But it was a faith that was more than the one I already had. It made more sense and was more complete in its understanding of the whole God-people relationship and everything. . . Orthodoxy wasn’t afraid to share everything with me.

Another woman echoed these sentiments in assessing what “meaning” her conversion held for her, “I guess one-ness, openness, communication when you talk about your experiences of being at the liturgy and being in church. I guess that’s a simplistic way to put it.” At the same time Renee, discussed the profound sense of “spiritual nakedness” that overwhelmed her when she stepped into her current Orthodox parish, “When I walk into St. Paul’s (her Carpatho-Rusyn parish) it’s kinda like spiritually you’re completely naked. It’s like you walk in and you feel like you have nothing that you’re able to hide from God or whoever it is-that Big Fellow is that you connect with. . . . It’s sort of like anything that’s bothering you is kind of out there, open, but it’s a safe feeling.”

Yet, conversions are complex, multifaceted phenomena and while sharing these features of subjectivity and choice-making with those of the more avowedly seeker variety, intermarriage conversions also differ in being tempered by familial and marital concerns largely absent or downplayed

in conversions resulting from theologically/liturgically propelled shopping and seeking. Let us now turn our attention to these other aspects of intermarriage conversions.

### **3.4 FAMILIAL CONTEXT AND CONCERNS FOR INTERMARRIAGE CONVERTS**

While the wives and husbands of intermarriage converts are commonly reported as exerting little direct influence on the religious decision-making of non-Orthodox spouses, marital and familial ties do affect these conversions in profound, if often understated, ways. Certainly, such relationships are the very foundations of these conversions since informants typically remark that they would not have become Orthodox Christians or even seriously contemplated leaving their home confessions apart from the initial circumstance of marrying a member of the church. Aside from this rather obvious connection between marriage/family and conversion, others emerge from the narratives at hand, including that of the social situating of (would-be) spousal converts in Orthodox communities, questions of how religion is to be negotiated in households that begin as inter-religious, and finally the practical and emotional impact marriage and family can have in effecting conversions to Orthodoxy Christianity. In this section, we will examine each of these issues in turn.

#### **3.4.1 Social Networks**

In social and symbolic terms, a convert, regardless of motivational intent, exists in the communal memory of a religious group as a “stranger” now come to dwell within a community’s confines--to learn its ways, follow its rules and conform to its often unspoken social strictures, for as Zygmunt Bauman observes, “Like all other roles (perhaps even slightly more than other roles), the role of the stranger needs learning, acquisition of knowledge and practical skills.”<sup>31</sup> Often this movement from the “outside” to the “inside,” with its requisite learning and knowledge acquisition, is slow and progressive and often aimed

towards the ever-yearned for, if at times elusive, goal of feeling accepted by the community as a whole. In these circumstances, marital and familial bonds with religious insiders can be advantageous both in the learning of practices and norms as well as the overall fostering of social familiarity, if not outright acceptance, within communities. Intermarriage informants, even in situations where conversion may be delayed, possess a ready-made place within American Orthodox communities as members of established families and may quickly come to share the same social networks of a husband or wife. Not only are the means of crossing into Orthodox Christianity potentially different, therefore, between the conversion types, but so too the ways in which converts come to establish a dwelling within the Orthodox Church.

Intermarriage converts *may* have an easier time in overcoming the initial social awkwardness many individuals experience when entering unknown religious environments, since they have a friendly person by their side to explain practices, answer questions, and introduce them to other parishioners. By contrast, seekers frequently commented on the fact that they knew no one in the Orthodox churches they initially visited and felt conflicted about participating in social functions. Fred and Mary from chapter two, for example, delayed visiting an Orthodox Church for over two years as Fred engaged in his private readings of Orthodox theology, fearful about how they would be received by an actual flesh-and-blood community. Meanwhile, Karen mentioned her unease in attending coffee hour after Sunday liturgy in her early visits to St. Michael's and began doing so only after being approached by a convert member of the church who took notice of her as a newcomer. It was not uncommon over the course of my fieldwork at both churches to hear expressions of anxiety from convert informants in being placed in new social situations and in having to establish relationships with unfamiliar people within the parish, something that many lifelong Orthodox Christians, especially those raised in singular church environments where people largely know one another over the course of years and generations, generally do not encounter. For example, converts without familial ties to their respective communities often coupled participation in social functions such as church picnics, festivals, coffee hours and the like with expressions of worry that they "wouldn't know anyone" in attendance or they "wouldn't have anyone to sit with" at events. While intermarriage converts too may experience social anxiety on this account, they did typically know others

attending church functions and had a pre-established social “place” at the side of spouses and children within the church setting. With some exceptions, intermarriage converts in this study generally did report feeling “accepted” in their communities, a feature they pointedly attributed to spousal/familial influence.

While most clerics drew distinctions in conversion type along the lines of convert effort expended and enthusiasm demonstrated in becoming Orthodox, Fr. Andrew, an OCA priest who pastored on a part-time basis at Ascension church and who himself had converted from Byzantine Catholicism in the early 1970s, considered the differences to lie primarily with the patterns of convert social integration in Orthodox parish life. Quite simply, intermarriage converts had ready-made familial networks and supports that seeker converts largely lacked. He discussed the differences he had observed in his twenty five years of serving as a priest, eighteen of which had been spent at Ascension:

If a non-Orthodox marries an Orthodox person, particularly in this parish, you are automatically brought into a familial situation, so therefore, by extension you are a part of that family once removed so to speak. If a person is not coming to the church through that means, but through being received into the church because they are seeking Orthodoxy or Christianity in its fullness, in Orthodoxy. Just obviously there’s going to be made a distinction between person one and person two.

Again, Fr. Andrew offered a more detailed assessment of the social situation of seeker converts who are not “automatically going to be brought into a familial situation,” but need, in his estimation, “to really be a family unto themselves in a greater sense.” He further explained, “I think any Orthodox convert in a parish as such needs to be brought in and I think there really needs to be more of a connection between converts to one another so that they can themselves develop into a family relying on one another because their own families are predominantly non-Orthodox and they don’t have those family ties.” While intermarriage converts can rely on marital and biological bonds, once children are born, as bases for social interaction within Orthodox communities, seeker converts must “have their family linkage among that small group of individuals (other converts). So, that becomes their family, in a sense, not their biological family, but their family unto themselves within the faith.” Fr. Andrew noted that these family-like relationships among converts had not been actively promoted by either he or Fr. Joseph at Ascension, but were “just a natural outgrowth of the lives of individuals.”

From my own fieldwork observations conducted at St. Michael's and Ascension, these two categories of converts did exhibit social patterns largely conforming to those outlined by Fr. Andrew. With the majority of its recent converts, most of whom were quite young in their twenties and thirties, coming into the church after engaging in self-described searches and journeys, St. Michael's had an easily identifiable cohort of converts who sat together and socialized with one another at parish functions, such as coffee hours for which they had their own designated table. Meanwhile, intermarriage converts of the parish, such as Christine, generally sat and conversed with their spouses and children rather than other converts on such occasions. St. Michael's more recent seeker converts also had extensive social ties with one another outside the church setting. They often met one another for dinner or movie-going and played important participatory roles in one another's major life events, such as weddings and baptisms. These converts also established kinship ties through ecclesial opportunities to "sponsor" new converts and stand as godparents to each other's children.<sup>32</sup> Given this context, I had little difficulty initially identifying and meeting the majority of St. Michael's regularly attending recent converts and found intermarriage converts much more difficult to locate scattered as they were among the parish's many biologically entwined families.

This relative ease of informant identification, however, was not duplicated when I continued my work at Ascension, which still acquired the majority of its converts through intermarriage, at least by Fr. Joseph's estimation. Converts were more widely dispersed among the various families of the parish with whom they socialized and spent time at church functions rather than with other converts per se (e.g., Ascension had no regular "convert" table during coffee hour). Although when I first entered the field at Ascension I was repeatedly assured by clerics and parishioners that there "are a lot of converts here" at the church, I had difficulty locating them since the intermarriage converts were singly embedded in individual families. Additionally, a few persons who had converted "through marriage" decades earlier in the 1960s and 70s had become so enmeshed and accepted within the normal course of parish activities and life that they no longer even considered themselves "converts" or at least the "type" whom I would be interested in interviewing, a phenomenon found at both parishes. At Ascension, I was only able to break

through the frustrating doldrums of meeting very few converts week after week, occurring over the course of a month, when the long-time, intermarriage convert Andrea kindly took me one Sunday morning from family to family in a quick round-robin introduction to converts she knew in the parish.

Intermarriage converts themselves frequently saw their acceptance into Orthodox communities as closely tied to their spouses' established social standing within it. Rather than fretting over the potentiality of sitting alone at church picnics or coffee hours, these converts often underscored that they were accepted as "part of the parish family" as a matter of course. Olivia, for example, attributed the warm, immediate reception she received in Orthodox churches to the fact that she came to be coupled with her future husband in parishioners' minds. She recalls, "The people were very welcoming, but the simple fact is that most people know who James is [in Pittsburgh-area Orthodox churches]. So, the fact that I was there with *him* automatically put me into the group. So, that was very nice and people took me under their wing and made me feel very much part of what was happening in the group, you know, the whole church and the whole nine yards." Olivia even recalled singing with the church choir along with her future husband on her very first visit to an Orthodox service which happened to be a Carpatho-Rusyn parish accustomed to singing their hymns in Slavonic, "He had me up in the choir loft which probably helped because at least I was singing-didn't know what I was singing, but at least I was singing."

From this initial sense of feeling "very much part of what was happening" in the parish, Olivia became more involved in the activities of the church in the early years of her marriage even though she did not, as mentioned, initially convert and she continued to attend a Roman Catholic Church by herself on Saturday evenings. During these early, pre-conversion years, Olivia taught Sunday school at her husband's Orthodox parish and eventually became its director, a position she continues to hold along with other positions in her parish. When Olivia decided to become Orthodox shortly after the birth of her first child, her chrismation simply strengthened ties already well established with other parishioners and represented a simple continuity with her pre-conversion life within the Orthodox Church. Olivia said of her conversion itself, "We went through the whole service and, of course, people said, 'Well, it's about

time.’ They had already accepted me, you know. . . . I was already part of the church when I joined the church. So, it wasn’t a major thing.”

Other intermarriage converts too remarked upon the ease with which they acquired and felt social acceptance from their spouses’ Orthodox communities, often to their great surprise and contrary to their own expectations of walking anew into unknown ecclesial territories. Ken recounted feeling some initial trepidation about accompanying his future wife to church during Orthodox Holy Week, “And when I went, I was sure a lot of people would be like, ‘Who is this guy?’ Or whatever. But it wasn’t like that. Everyone was really friendly and when I was walked in and saw what was going on [with the service], I felt very comfortable.” Throughout his courtship and early pre-conversion years of marriage, Ken, like Olivia, recalled being well received by Ascension’s parishioners, a situation he also attributed to the fact that he was instantly tied in their perception to his wife and her family, who had attended Ascension for decades and were deeply involved in the life of the church, “The church was very warm, very welcoming because it’s very family oriented. I mean, families have known families and so as soon as you become part of a family, you’re instantly known--you’re considered part of the community.” Ken even credited his delayed conversion to this “welcome” which seemed to erase any immediate need for official entry to the church:

It was probably why I didn’t convert right away and I told Father [Joseph] that if they would not have been as accepting, I might have converted sooner. . . . Because I was made to feel welcome and warm and knew everyone, there wasn’t this pressure saying, “You know what? If you’re going to be here, you need to convert.” They [the priest and parishioners] figure when you’re ready, you’re ready. And there are some people who have been here twenty-thirty years and [they’re] still not members. You know, they haven’t converted.

These non-convert spouses of lifelong members receive a great deal of social acceptance at Ascension church and, apart from its sacramental life, often take an active part in parish activities, as Ken continued, “But they come here and they participate whether it be the food fair, whether it be a financial need. They have no problems and it’s just that little thing they won’t do as far as converting and it could be for whatever reasons. I mean, it could be a matter of faith or a lack [of it]. Who knows? But they strongly support Ascension.”



Certainly the experiences of intermarriage converts are by no means homogenous and despite the ready-made entrée spousal relations to a parish *may* present for the non-Orthodox partner, social discomfort and even a sense of wholesale rejection may still be part of one's parochial experience. Despite the fact that her husband was an active lifelong member and church councilman of Ascension, Christine maintained that she never felt "wholeheartedly" accepted by the church, a factor contributing to the family's eventual move to St. Michael's where she felt a much greater degree of social acceptance, "I don't feel like a visitor here like I did at Ascension. And Fr. Mark has always stressed to all of us, that no one's a visitor here, you know what I mean? It's like you're here, you're here. You're a member of our church, which is really cool." Still, she considered herself "philosophically an outsider," as she explained, "I don't feel I've embraced the church wholeheartedly in all aspects and I don't know if I ever will. I told Fr. Mark that it would be artificial of me to embrace the church wholeheartedly when I've never been a Christian. I wasn't baptized as a baby. You know, it's not in my bones." Meanwhile Ingrid characterized herself as "outside the loop" when it came to parish activities at St. Michael's (I never saw her in attendance at any church services or activities in my six months of fieldwork there) and jokingly said of her conversion and life in the Orthodox Church, "I'm absolutely, positively convinced that God wanted me to join the church. I don't know what the heck he wants me to do now, but I'm absolutely convinced."

However wary Christine may at times be of the Orthodox Church and some of its members, she does have a firmly established "place at the table" so to speak in parish life, even if her closest companions happen to be her husband and children. Finally, it is important to point out that seeker converts initially lacking these familial relationships with Orthodox "insiders" can and do gain acceptance in Orthodox parish life, becoming active, vital participants in parish activities and developing deep and abiding relationships with priests, fellow converts, and lifelong parish members. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five, the search for "community," a sense of personal situatedness, emplacement, and dwelling as well as the establishment of long-term relationships is a commonly cited motive for conversion on the part of informants, many of whom claim to have found a fulfillment for these yearnings

in local Orthodox churches. Indeed, such converts often saw beyond the immediate, biological ties to describe the entire parish as a “family” one to which they decidedly belonged.

### **3.4.2 Inter-religious Marriage and Decision-making**

Inter-religious marriages between non-Orthodox and Orthodox Christian persons in which no conversion results are certainly beyond the scope of this study. Yet, this phenomenon was observed and noted at my fieldsites and was occasionally mentioned in informant narratives. For instance, two married seeker converts, Karen and Helen, made solitary treks into Orthodoxy leaving behind in former confessions spouses and children and thus quite deliberately created religious divisions in the domestic sphere through their conversions. Additionally, as Ken noted, inter-religious families abound in Orthodox parishes, where non-Orthodox spouses may participate in aspects of parish life while refraining from official conversion to the church. Finally, in situations such as Ken’s, where a significant time lag existed between a wedding and a spouse’s eventual decision to become Orthodox, the initial years of marriage and family life were marked by inter-religious divisions that must be negotiated and worked through by the couple. In Robert Wuthnow’s view, few opportunities for observing the potential intricacies of inter-religious engagement are as rich as in those circumstances in which individuals marry outside their home confessions and must consciously come to grips with religious differences within the domestic sphere.<sup>33</sup> Let us here briefly examine some of the fundamental decisions, emerging from my data, that inter-religious couples at Ascension and St. Michael’s made prior to the conversion of the non-Orthodox spouse.

Again in contrast to seeker converts for whom marriage itself played little to no role in effecting conversions to the Orthodox Church, *all* intermarriage converts must make fundamental decisions regarding religious affiliation in direct response to entering the marital bond. Although marriage did not necessitate conversion to the Orthodox Church, it did demand that some sort of decision regarding religious matters be made. On its most fundamental level, informants such as Andrea and Christine

decided to become Orthodox Christians from the very outset of their marriages, while others forewent conversion altogether. Meanwhile, Kay, Olivia, and Ken among others converted years into their respective marriages. Even beyond these various outcomes, the most common movement in church affiliation following Orthodox intermarriage, based on anecdotal evidence gathered from informants, has been Orthodox Christian abandonment of the church altogether for other religious confessions, for as one lifelong church member commented, “It was always the Orthodox leaving the church when it came time to marry. I can’t guess percentages ‘cause churches are different, but it was mostly you lost, you didn’t gain and even the ones that did come they didn’t convert. They were either non-religious or non-churchgoing, you know.” Although beyond the parameters of the present study, this common outcome of religious intermarriage has had significant impacts on local Orthodox communities in Pittsburgh and exemplifies the long-standing crossings that have occurred between Orthodox Christianity and American society at large throughout the twentieth century.

While the specifics of when and under what circumstances conversion occurs differ among informants, virtually no one, including clerics, with whom I spoke questioned the right of non-Orthodox Christian spouses to make decisions of ecclesial affiliation even if these decisions might result in religiously divided households. In fact, informants intimated that such outcomes were preferable to the half-hearted, “casual” conversions for “convenience” receiving such consistent informant scorn. Fr. Joseph of Ascension discussed his approach aimed as it was in allowing “genuine” desires for conversion to organically emerge from the feelings and experiences of the non-Orthodox spouse:

I don’t push at all. I’m very laid back about that. That’s something you’re gonna have to decide. I’m not gonna tell you what to do. I don’t push at all ‘cause it doesn’t really do any good. It’s counterproductive. If I’m pushing and then they do it [convert] reluctantly and then with the consequence of which is gonna be that they feel they made a mistake. That’s no good. I want them to say to me, “I want to do this on my own. I’ve made the decision.” Then I’m ready to receive them with open arms.

According to this clerical assessment, the end result of a bi-religious household in no way stands as a scenario to be avoided at all costs when the alternative may be conversions “reluctantly” undertaken in light of external coercion and later deemed “mistakes.” The potency and depth of these notions of

religious commitment and decision-making are so engrained in the words and actions of even Orthodox officials that externally propelled, potentially insincere conversions (the very opposite of the analogously conceived “pure relationship”) are far worse than no conversions at all.

In addition to the casualness with which inter-religious unions were greeted by informants at the fieldsites, another factor affecting the relaxed acceptance of spousal decision-making in religious matters was simply the fact that the vast majority of inter-religious marriages at St. Michael’s and Ascension and more broadly in Pittsburgh-area Orthodox churches were inter-Christian in nature. As mentioned, Orthodox marriage rites can be performed in such circumstances and, though inter-denominational differences certainly exist and are noted by informants, a certain continuity of “generic” Christian belief and practice is felt to still be fostered in the home. The general absence of seeking among intermarriage converts also results in a downplaying of Christian difference, for this conversion type stressed more vehemently than its seeker counterpart the similarities between Orthodox Christianity and former confessions, which for the majority of cases in this study is Roman Catholicism—often considered a close ecclesial kin to Eastern Orthodoxy. The *tendency*, therefore, prevailed for intermarriage converts to see Orthodoxy as ritually and theologically similar to their home churches as “just another Christian denomination,” for as Ken related of his father’s support for his conversion, “In his mind, it’s not like I was jumping off the deep end like I was converting to Islam or something.” Olivia also mused on this point vis-à-vis her own circumstances, “Moving from Roman Catholicism to Orthodoxy was not a major leap. It was just a faith that was even more than [the faith] I had already had” as did Renee, “I was born and raised Catholic, Roman Catholic, which is very similar to the Orthodox faith as far as the beliefs and the doctrines and everything. To me it didn’t really make that much difference. The religions were so similar.”

Another intermarriage convert from Ascension, Terence, a white-haired restaurant manager in his late fifties, commented that he and his wife shared the same repertoire of conservative moral beliefs that seemed to transcend specific church affiliation and provided a basis of commonality for the couple even before Terence’s embrace of Orthodoxy shortly before the couple married in 2003, “I’m pretty

conservative and so is she and I would say that religion was *the* primary topic of our conversations [before marriage]. And just our backgrounds, beliefs, ideas—we find that we’re actually very similar in our thinking both in morals and in church life. We both feel that family is very important. Uh, family prayer is very important.” Echoing his aforementioned intermarriage colleagues on this account, Terence saw his embrace of Orthodoxy in terms of a lateral shift between two equally valid and authentic expressions of Christianity, a point he reiterated a number of times in his narrative, “The history of the two faiths or whatever or the politics, who’s right and who’s wrong, who was the first that’s not really that important to me. I just love God and this is a valid way of worshipping him.”

In addition to the personal decision of whether or not (and when) the non-Orthodox spouse will convert to the Orthodox Church, other decisions regarding family life too must be confronted and negotiated by couples in the intervening years before conversion occurs. The vast majority of intermarriage convert informants reported discussing religious differences with their future spouses early in their dating and nearly all attended Orthodox services at least once with their future spouses before marriage. Most of the informants interviewed said that they realized early in their relationships that there would be little to no chance of the Orthodox Christian spouse leaving Orthodoxy to convert to their home confessions. Entering the Orthodox Church on the very eve of her wedding in 1976, Andrea said flatly of her husband, “No, I know for a fact that he would never have considered leaving the Orthodox Church. It wasn’t even a point of discussion.”

Meanwhile Ken maintained that he realized from the very outset of dating his future wife that the Orthodox Church was a vital, integral part of her personal identity in the most fundamental and existential of ways, “For the Greeks their faith and their culture are one and it’s very important to them that if you’re going to be involved and you’re going to marry and you’re going to have a family that you’re not gonna lose that identity. And for her I would say there would be no decision. There would be no conversion. I wouldn’t say you would be an outcast, but you just wouldn’t do it [convert]. Just my sense of being here for thirteen-fourteen years, it’s just not gonna happen and if it does, it’s almost like the person disappears. It’s almost like they don’t quite exist anymore. So it’s hard.”

Another intermarriage convert at St. Michael's, Bill, who entered the church in the mid-1970s said of his lifelong Orthodox wife, "She's like a stone. I knew there was no way she was ever going to leave [the Orthodox Church] so, I had this decision to make and we were at a fork in the road and so I decided to go ahead and do this [convert]." Convert informants commented that their (future) spouses were often heavily involved in parish activities and that their continued membership in the Orthodox Church was a non-negotiable *given* of their future married life, regardless of the non-Orthodox spouse's decision to join the church. Therefore, both partners entered into marriage with the full knowledge and awareness that their wife or husband may never convert to one's own faith.

Yet, in the majority of cases presented in this study, the dual Christian affiliations were not in equal measure engaged, practiced, and taught in the home. In her work on Jewish-Christian intermarriage, Jane Kaplan notes that some couples try to observe and blend the practices of both religions in the home in an attempt to pass along elements of each to their children, but that this was a much rarer circumstance than the dominance of one or another religion within the home.<sup>34</sup> Instead, a decided, if somewhat unspoken, asymmetry emerges whereby one religion becomes "dominant" in the family and the other is relegated to the solitary, private practice of the non-affiliated spouse.

Certainly, the American nuclear family contains its own enactments of "private" and "public" (religious) spheres. Anthropologist Bradd Shore has commented, for example, on the significance "private space" holds for the American middle-class family in which spatial and psychological separation is as integral a component as togetherness. For example, Shore observes that ideally children are partitioned in separate bedrooms as soon as possible after birth and the need for each person to carve out "personal space" within the home, an unheard of luxury in other cultural settings, is fully recognized and embraced.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, separation rituals of various sorts underscoring the individual autonomy of family members, from childhood sleepovers to "going away" to college, mark the experience of nuclear families. Under such circumstances, the religious segmentation of family members into independent recesses of private practice, autonomous "rooms" so to speak (e.g., Ingrid's characterization of her childhood religious life recounted in chapter two illustrates this precisely) is not hard to imagine. The

point here argued is not that the “public” sphere of familial religious affiliation vanishes with the expansion of individual choice and autonomy, but that the “private” arena of religious practice can be so quietly received and fostered without question or discord within the family. Very few of the intermarriage informants, for example, considered their lone engagement with another church to be disruptive or threatening to the overall identity of their families.

In the cases under consideration here, Orthodox Christianity came to take on the role of the “public” familial religion the one called upon to minister in times of major life change and to serve as venue for Sunday morning worship, a significant time still for the public display of religious sensibilities and connectedness in Christian contexts-to give “public” expression to “private” belief. Conversely, the non-Orthodox spouse reported going to church alone and with much less regularity than the family as a whole in its attendance of Orthodox services. Non-Orthodox spouses often attended church during more marginal “off peak” hours for Christian houses of worship such as during the week, Saturday evenings, or very early on Sunday mornings. Given the difficulties often encountered in just showing up for these services (that may be sparsely populated in any event) such as time constraints, tiredness, decreasing interest in home confessions and so forth, such spouses usually reported minimal participation in other church activities and thus formed much weaker social ties with other members of the non-Orthodox church. This was especially true if the Orthodox spouse and children were heavily involved in the social life of the Orthodox parish, which tended to be the case among informant families. By and large, people simply do not possess the time or energy to volunteer for and participate in the slate of extra-liturgical activities of two religious communities let alone one with the attention and consistency they often would like. One woman mentioned that she saw little point in “doing double duty” through attendance of two sets of church services and redirected her attention and time to the Orthodox parish, which had become more attractive in her eyes in any event.

Noting the importance of the Orthodox Church to their spouses, the similarities they saw between Orthodoxy and their former confessions (which in most of these cases, again, was Roman Catholicism), and the overall sense of feeling “welcome” in their spouses’ parishes, the intermarriage informants did not

recount the encroachment and dominance of Orthodoxy in family life with bitterness or discomfort, but rather openly embraced and fostered it themselves. Very few intermarriage converts reported struggling with their spouses over religious matters although other members of informant birth families, especially parents, often expressed discontent over the fact that their grandchildren would be baptized and raised in a church other their own. For the most part, however, intermarriage converts viewed Eastern Orthodoxy as a solid Christian faith providing their children a firm moral framework and sense of continuity with the past through Orthodoxy's supposed emphasis on "ritual" and "tradition." In this regard, a number of informants also looked favorably upon the Orthodox practice of communing infants and small children from the time of their baptisms, as a sign of the inclusive "participatory" nature of the religion and the respect the church had for its youngest members.

In its practical configurations, the "dominant" religion typically comprised the majority of nuclear family members (usually one of the spouses and all of the children) and served as the focus of the family's religious activities *as a familial unit*. In this regard, *a hundred percent* of the children born to formally interviewed intermarriage convert informants after marrying Orthodox spouses (two informants had children from previous marriages who remained in former confessions) were baptized and raised Orthodox, a decision usually thoroughly discussed and agreed upon prior to the marriage itself. Ken, for example, said of the decision reached between he and his wife, "We had dated for about three years or so and I kinda understood and knew the importance of it [Orthodoxy] and so I didn't convert initially, but we made an agreement that we would as a family worship here [at Ascension] and our children would be baptized here, so we can keep sort of a family connection." Olivia said of her situation, "James and I had decided that the children would be raised Orthodox and we would go to church as a family. There was never any question about that."

At the same time, Renee too mentioned Orthodoxy as the quickly chosen ecclesial context for the raising of any future children she and her husband may have, "Before we got married we talked about that. We weren't quite sure if we wanted children or not, but we decided if we did and if we were blessed with children that they would be raised Orthodox." Renee also related an encounter she had at the time of



her Orthodox wedding with a Roman Catholic priest who at the insistence of her staunchly Roman Catholic mother presented the young woman with documents to sign pledging that any children born of the union would be brought up as Catholics.<sup>36</sup> To appease her mother, who was unhappy with the prospect of Renee marrying in the Orthodox Church, Renee signed the papers, but with a stern warning to the priest, “I had to sign papers at the Catholic Church saying that if I had children I would raise them Catholic. And I told the priest, that I want you to understand that I am signing *your* piece of paper with the intention of not following through with it. And he didn’t really say too much. I think at that point he kinda knew that my heart wasn’t in the Catholic faith any longer and that this wasn’t something that *I* wanted.” Although Renee and her husband have set forth to raise their small daughter as an Orthodox Christian, Renee still wanted her daughter to know about her Catholic heritage as well and was cognizant that the child may want to make autonomous decisions regarding religious affiliation later in life, an eventuality that Renee wholeheartedly supported, “So, I want her to be able to keep both and at some point make the decision in her life if she wants to remain Orthodox, become Catholic or something else.” Stressing the individualized nature of religious affiliation as grounded in personal belief rather than social or familial obligation, Renee concluded, “I’d rather see her practice some religion than no religion at all or to be forced to practice something that I believe in even though she might not buy into it.”

With the Eastern Orthodox parish usually serving as the “family church,” informants had a ready-made framework of learning about and comparing/contrasting Orthodoxy with home confessions, a circumstance rarely reciprocated by Orthodox spouses who only infrequently sought active engagement with a husband or wife’s non-Orthodox church. These first-hand encounters with Orthodox church life coupled with conversations with family, clerics, and other members of parish communities came to be the primary channels for religious investigation for intermarriage converts. This conversion type much less frequently consulted print and electronic media in gathering information on Orthodox Christianity either before or after their conversions and were less likely to participate in the educational offerings of the parish, such as Bible studies, special lectures, and so forth than those attracted to the church primarily for theological/liturgical reasons based on my fieldwork observations of these events. Occasionally

informants eschewing this general tendency appear, however. Kay, for example, had developed a keen interest in Orthodox Christianity, especially its history and theological tenets, and years after her conversion, avidly read materials on the church, especially noting her love for the *Lives of the Saints*. Kay, who observed that her husband was not particularly “spiritual” though involved with the church board, also visited nearby Orthodox monastic communities on a regular basis and adhered faithfully to fasting and prayer practices often to the consternation of her less religiously rigorous lifelong Orthodox husband.

Despite the overall acceptance of Orthodoxy on the part of this self-selected population (indeed, when pointedly asked, most intermarriage converts said they missed *nothing* from their childhood confessions), occasional stirrings of longing for former ways and days drifted into informant narratives. Though quite satisfied with his new life within the Orthodox Church, Ken, for instance, mentioned that at the start of his marriage he was not particularly beholden to his wife’s faith. When discussing with her the religious affiliation of future children prior to marriage, Ken asserted that he would not have been at all opposed to baptizing and raising their children as Roman Catholics. Meanwhile, Terence mentioned how Christmas for him would not be the same without midnight Christmas Eve mass at a Roman Catholic church, so he and his Orthodox wife do attend this service at a nearby church every year. Finally, although pleased with having such “an ancient tradition” in which to bring up her children, Christine said that she herself has “reached no higher levels” since becoming Orthodox and prefers spending her Sunday mornings with coffee and a newspaper than going to church. While Christine’s husband and children were regular worshippers of St. Michael’s, Christine, as she freely admits, is frequently absent, easily falling back into the habitual non-attendance of her pre-church days.

### **3.4.3 Family and Conversion Motives of Intermarriage Converts**

If marital/familial relationships lend shape to intermarriage conversions especially in providing social “placement” of (initially) non-Orthodox spouses within communities and eliciting decisions in the

handling of religious matters in the home, they also serve as powerful factors in bringing about conversions themselves. While casting their decisions to become Orthodox as autonomously made, especially apart from spousal influence, feelings for hearth and home appear as significant subtexts coloring these “freely undertaken” actions and easily merging with other needs and desires. While forthrightly eschewing the view that marriage and family as *social institutions* had any part to play in their conversions, informants did consider them potent arenas for the meeting of emotional and psychological needs and desires. To a certain extent, “marriage” and “family” much as religion itself under conditions of late modernity have been pried from their institutional moorings of societal expectation and obligation to become sources of self-fulfillment and happiness. Rather than necessarily envisioning marriage and family as means for ensuring economic stability or enhancing social standing, contemporary Americans fundamentally consider these estates as venues for personal love, intimacy, and commitment (e.g., Giddens’s “pure relationship”), so scholars argue. Historian and moralist Christopher Lasch, for instance, attributes the much-discussed rise in American divorce rates over the latter portion of the twentieth century to higher than fulfilled expectations for the meeting of emotional needs at marriage outsets.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, a number of empirical studies highlight the import Americans place on such matters as marrying one’s “soulmate” and having opportunities to share feelings with partners and other family members, even if as Ann Swidler observes practical concerns often naturally overwhelm the first flush of early relationship romance.<sup>38</sup> Child-bearing and rearing too have become less “obligation” than “choice” with parenting for its own sake, as a source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment, trumping the more utilitarian, economically driven motives of past eras (e.g., extra-pairs of hands for household chores or economic security for one’s old age) as stated reasons for having children.<sup>39</sup>

In some contexts, family runs parallel to religion as a “secularized” rival in providing meaning and support to its members, and in others, they appear wholly entwined and barely distinguishable one from another. Indeed, as Robert Wuthnow points out, the religious groups in the U. S. most vehement in their “institutional” support of the family, such as conservative Protestants, are also the ones “emphasizing expressivity and emotional bonding”<sup>40</sup> within the familial unit. Certainly “family” in its

daily rounds and earmark events comes closely coupled, in the minds of many, to the enactment of one's life in the church and feelings of "religiousness" however that may be defined. For example, when Andrea described her attraction to the Orthodox Church it was precisely formulated in terms of the strong attraction its familial rites of passage, "its baptisms and weddings," in all their sacramental splendor hold for her.

In this vein, even if spouses remain in the background of these conversions, the eventual birth of children to informants often figures prominently into decisions to officially step across the ecclesial threshold and become Orthodox, a situation documented in other contexts of intermarriage as well.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, however, these births seem to awaken subjective feelings of religious longing in the non-Orthodox parent, rather than simply bringing into focus any external imperative that parents should be of the same faith as their children. Intermarriage converts repeatedly attested to being emotionally overwhelmed by the beauty of the Orthodox baptismal service and coming to a realization, in the midst of witnessing this event, that they too wanted to be connected to the church through official membership. Her daughter's baptism, for example, only confirmed for Olivia the all-but-finally-made decision that she herself needed to join the Orthodox Church, for as she said, she was "already accepted" by the church's parishioners, which offered her a spiritual "completeness" she had not even realized as lacking in her early years as a Catholic. Despite her avowal that her conversion "wasn't a major thing," given the long-standing relationship she had with the parishioners of her church, Olivia still considered it a major event in her life. For example, she teared up when describing her decision to become Orthodox, "When we had our first child, we baptized her and by that time, I had pretty much figured out [Olivia starts to cry. Pause of about twenty seconds] that this is what I wanted to do, that this was the faith that I wanted to belong to. So, after she [her daughter] was baptized, um, I went and saw the priest and I said that I wanted to join. And he was like, 'Well, that's good.'"

Despite his growing attraction to Orthodoxy, Ken attributed his decision to finally convert, like Olivia, to the birth of his first child, "When my son was born, I saw how important it was that you be part of the sacraments and that you physically take part in the liturgy. We went to the baptism and it was such

an overwhelming experience that I was like, ‘This isn’t right. I need to be part of this community to actually share and benefit.’” When asked what he found so “overwhelming,” Ken discussed the “interactive” and “participatory” nature of Orthodox liturgical life, which became so forcefully apparent in the midst of his son’s baptism and clearly appealed to him on a personal level, “So, I felt that in looking at the baptism and seeing that you are physically receiving communion very early [as a child]. You physically experience a baptism with all the screaming and the crying and I just felt a physical connection that I felt was lost with the Catholic faith. It wasn’t participatory anymore.”

Despite the fact that she also described her conversion as predicated on personal choice-making, Ingrid, the free-thinking former Buddhist from chapter two, rather remarkably interpreted an unexpected second pregnancy on the eve of her baptism into Orthodoxy as a divine “sign” that she should go through with her conversion, despite her deep misgivings about the church and “organized religion” as a whole. She had even postponed a previously scheduled baptismal service on her behalf at St. Michael’s. Always wanting a son and convinced that she and her husband would never have another child after the birth of her daughter years before, Ingrid recalled, “Well, I got pregnant, you know, and I was like this is God telling me I’m supposed to become Orthodox and then I always felt that because I did it [convert], I got my son. I know there is a God and I honestly believe that for whatever reason I was supposed to be Orthodox. But anyway, I’d been studying. I’d been talking. I’d been going to church--all those things, but at the last minute I’m not sure I really want to do this and then I found out I was pregnant. I was like, this is a sign. I mean, if you don’t read that sign, then you’re not paying attention.”

Occasionally, conversion followed upon personal tragedy. Renee converted to Orthodoxy shortly after suffering a miscarriage in the early years of her marriage. Renee said that the church provided a supportive community and a conceptual frame of reference for enduring and making sense of her loss, “I would say there was just a sense of peace knowing that there’s somebody kinda watching over you and there’s a bigger reason for why things happen and you might not know why or understand why or even like why, but there’s a bigger purpose for everything that happens and things aren’t always as it seems.” In the aftermath of this crisis, Renee realized the largely reciprocal nature of her relationship to the

Orthodox Church (formulated in terms very similarly to how one might describe inter-human relations), for the deep comfort and sense of “belonging” the church furnished her demanded, in turn, a demonstration of long-term commitment on her part. Thus, her conversion appeared as an act of solidarity with a faith that, in her words, “had been there for me” in a time of personal need, “About the time that I’d converted, it was shortly after the miscarriage like within the first year and everything so I felt at that point, okay I need something I feel that I’m belonging to. You’ve gotten me so far through this point and through this horrible mess and so at that point it was like now I needed to commit to you, being my faith since it had been there for me.”

Beyond the direct context of births and losses, a few informants cited more mundane events and concerns of hearth and home as drawing them closer to the Orthodox Church. Kay, for instance, cited the many years she worked as a nurse at her children’s Orthodox summer camp as critical for the formation of lasting bonds with other Orthodox Christians and the “love” she felt so strongly within the Orthodox Church, “I found so much love there and I knew that I wanted to become Orthodox through that camp experience. And I just met such wonderful people there and my godmother was from Lancaster and we were always at camp together and we had kids the same age and there was just a lot of good things goin’ on.”

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

Converts to Orthodox Christianity are not an homogenous group. Beyond the fact that individual biographies differ one from another, converts entering the church in the course or aftermath of marriage to an Orthodox spouse are often perceived, by clerics and converts alike, as less committed to or interested in Orthodox Christianity than former seekers more overtly drawn to the church for theological and/or liturgical reasons. Whereas the latter are believed to have freely *chosen* the church, the former are characterized as passive and unreflective in their embrace of the faith. Significantly, however,

intermarriage converts themselves, a group traditionally overlooked in studies of conversion to Orthodoxy, rarely consider their entry into the church in this light. While they did not typically investigate and/or experiment with competing religious options before their marriages, such converts characterized their embrace of the faith as an individual matter based on personal affinity for the faith rather than a familial or marital duty. With this view, they often delayed their embrace of Orthodoxy for years or decades into their marriages.

Still, family and marriage had significant impacts in framing and effecting these conversions. First, in contrast to the experience of many seeker converts to Orthodoxy, intermarriage converts necessarily possessed ready-made social networks and placement in their relationships to spouses, children, and in-laws who had often lived their entire lives within single Orthodox communities. Second, the circumstance of intermarriage itself necessitated religious decision-making on the part of the couple who must decide how religious matters and affiliation are to be worked out in the home. In almost all of the cases in this study, Orthodox Christianity was the “dominant” family religion while the non-Orthodox spouse was typically left to practice her faith alone. Third, major structural and emotional changes within the family, especially the birth of children, often served as catalysts for conversion to Orthodoxy. While the means and contours of their conversions differed from those of seekers, intermarriage converts often expressed a deep, abiding attachment to the Orthodox Church and considered themselves no less than other converts to be religious choice-makers.

### 3.6 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>These recent studies, again, include Paisios Bukowy Whitesides, “Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions Within American Orthodoxy,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997): 19-35; Philip Charles Lucas, “*Enfants Terribles*: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003): 5-23.

<sup>2</sup>William J. Abraham, "Orthodoxy and Evangelism," in *Sourozh* 61:3 (1995) 1 quoted by Whitesides, "Ethnic and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, 20.

<sup>3</sup>Whitesides, 19.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*. 2<sup>d</sup> ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 166.

<sup>5</sup>John H. Erickson, *Orthodox Christians in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 118; Alexei D. Krindatch, "Eastern Christianity in North American Religious Landscape: Ethnic Traditionalism Versus Civic Involvement and Social Transformations," report for project *Research on Orthodox Religious Groups in the United States* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/krindatch\[1\].pdf](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/krindatch[1].pdf)), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Erickson, 62-65 for a discussion of Fr. Alexis Toth and Erickson, 96 for a treatment of the formation of the Orthodox Carpatho-Rusyn archdiocese. Also see James Jorgenson, "Father Alexis Toth and the Transition of the Greek Catholic Community in Minneapolis to the Russian Orthodox Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 32, no. 2 (1988): 119-137.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>8</sup>Alexei D. Krindatch has recently estimated that forty percent of Orthodox church members of American parishes today are recent immigrants who have entered the United States since the 1990s; See Krindatch, "Eastern Christianity in North American Religious Landscape," 6. Although I have no national numbers to counter this, such a percentage is *not* reflective of the Orthodox churches in this study. According to Fr. Joseph of Ascension Greek church, there has been no major influx of Greek immigrants to Pittsburgh since the 1950s. While St. Michael's OCA parish has experienced a rise in immigrants coming from Russia and the Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union, Fr. Mark estimated this group on comprising approximately 10 to 15% of his parish membership (many immigrants visited without officially joining the church) when I was there in 2005.

<sup>9</sup>Erickson, 105-118.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 118. Erickson estimates that by the mid-1960s approximately 15% of Orthodox church members were converts, most of whom had entered the church through intermarriage.

<sup>11</sup>Alexei D. Krindatch, "Orthodox (Eastern Christian) Churches in the United States at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Questions of Nature, Identity, and Mission," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 3 (September 2002): 540-1.

<sup>12</sup>Bishop Kallistos Ware recalls encountering clerical resistance to his conversion to the Orthodox Church in the 1950s. See Ware, "Strange Yet Familiar: My Journey to the Orthodox Church," in *The Inner Kingdom*, vol. 1, *The Collected Works* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>13</sup>Andrew Buckser, "Social Conversion and Group Definition in Jewish Copenhagen," in *The Anthropology of Conversion*, edited by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 69.

<sup>14</sup>See Jane Kaplan, *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage* (Wesport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 173-230; Egon Mayer, *Love & Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and*



*Christians* (NY: Plenum Press, 1985), 209-242; Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 115-122; Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 1-4.

<sup>15</sup>Stefano Allievi, *Les convertis à l'islam. Les nouveaux musulmans d'Europe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Allievi, "Pour une sociologie des conversions: lorsque des Européens deviennent musulmans," *Social Compass* 46: 3 (1999): 283-300 as cited in van Nieuwkerk, 3-4.

<sup>16</sup>Lewis J. Patsavos, "A Canonical Response to Intra-Christian and Inter-religious Marriages," in *Intermarriage: Orthodox Perspectives*, ed. Anton C. Vrame (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997), 75.

<sup>17</sup>See Canon LXXII of the Quinisext Council (692) for the original prohibition of intermarriage between church and non-church members in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, Together With the Canons of All the Local Synods Which Have Received Ecumenical Acceptance*, ed. Henry R. Percival. Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint 1997), 397.

<sup>18</sup>See for example Charles J. Joanides, *Ministering to Intermarried Couples: A Resource for Clergy and Lay Workers*, foreward by Demetrios Trakatellis (NY: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2004).

<sup>19</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 260-261.

<sup>20</sup>Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The Changing Pathway to Marriage: Trends in Dating, First Unions, and Marriage Among Young Adults," in *Family Transformed: Religion, Values, and Society in American Life*, edited by Steven M. Tipton and John Witte Jr. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 176.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>22</sup>McGinty, 115 and Kaplan, xiii.

<sup>23</sup>See Section 1.3.

<sup>24</sup>The Orthodox Church permits divorce and allows its members to marry up to three times. See Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 294-5.

<sup>25</sup>Mayer, 214-15.

<sup>26</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 6; Mayer, 30-37.

<sup>27</sup>Giddens, 6.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 7.

<sup>30</sup>Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001): 24-25.

<sup>31</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 75.

<sup>32</sup>Adult candidates for entry to the Orthodox Church must be sponsored by a church member who stands as the person's godparent. This is an official tie of spiritual kinship that, from a theological point of view, is considered even closer and more binding than that of family blood relationships.

<sup>33</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 259.

<sup>34</sup>Jane Kaplan, 101. As an additional side note, scholars have commented on the general uni-directionality of conversions in cases of Jewish-Christian intermarriage. Christian partners convert to Judaism in much larger numbers and frequency than Jewish spouses convert to Christianity. The reasons for this relative uni-directionality in conversions remain unclear. Mayer, 235.

<sup>35</sup>Bradd Shore, "American Middle-Class Families: Class, Social Reproduction, and Ritual," in *Family Transformed: Religion, Values, and Society in American Life*, edited by Steven M. Tipton and John Witte Jr. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 193.

<sup>36</sup>The Roman Catholic Church does permit intermarriage between its members and those of other Christian confessions under certain conditions. One of these conditions is that the couple must raise any children resulting from the marriage in the Catholic Church. See article 1636 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), p. 408.

<sup>37</sup>Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (NY: Basic Books, 1977) as noted in Robert Wuthnow, "The Family as Contested Terrain," in *Family Transformed*, 76-77.

<sup>38</sup>See Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, "Who Wants to Marry a Soulmate?" in *The State of Our Unions 2001* (Piscataway, NJ: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2001): 13; Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 201-2; Wuthnow, "The Family as Contested Terrain," 77.

<sup>39</sup>See Uma Narayan and Julia J. Bartkowiak, "Introduction," in *Having and Raising Children: Unconventional Families, Hard Choices, and the Social Good*. Edited by Uma Narayan and Julia J. Bartkowiak (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1999), 1-14.

<sup>40</sup>Robert Wuthnow, "The Family as Contested Terrain," 77

<sup>41</sup>Mayer, 220-221.

## **4.0 OF CHILDREN AND CONVERTS: CLERICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

A mainstay character of Orthodox conversion narratives all the more necessary for enacting the rituals of initiation, baptism and/or chrismation or confession,<sup>1</sup> into the Orthodox Church is a priest. Regardless of the stated means of learning about the Orthodox faith (through marriage or search), *all* convert informants in this study made mention of meeting or conversing with an ordained cleric at some point before officially converting to the church. In contrast to less sacramentally driven Christian confessions, for example, various Protestant charismatic and Pentecostal churches where rituals may be of a more fluid and affective nature rather than grounded in liturgical rubrics, a would-be convert to Orthodoxy simply cannot of her own will and choosing “make” herself an official member of the church, regardless of the emotional potency or theological ardency bringing her to this course of action.<sup>2</sup> The sacraments of the Orthodox Church are simply not available for self-administration and only in extreme cases, where death appears imminent and no priests are available, may the sacrament of baptism be performed by lay persons. Therefore, an appropriate church official, usually a parish priest, was an indispensable feature of these conversions and their resulting narratives.

Yet, the priests depicted in these narratives and with whom I spoke in interview played a much more substantive and expansive role in conversion processes than that of mere dispenser of required rituals. Beyond this necessary role of ritual enactment, they also assumed a pronounced “gatekeeping”<sup>3</sup> function in protecting the theological and social boundaries of Orthodox Christianity and its parish

communities and in ensuring that would-be converts were adequately prepared for and knowledgeable about a church whose doctrinal and ritual purity was touted as a key constituent of its present and past identities. Priests, therefore, became important regulators of conversion, directing its course once they came into contact with inquirers and nearly single-handedly, apart from hierarchical oversight, devising the structure and contents of the catechetical instruction would-be converts received. Priests assumed primary responsibility, apart from the inquirer herself in these instances, for educating the convert, scrutinizing motives and intentions for entering the Orthodox Church, and deciding *along with* the candidate whether and when conversion was, indeed, appropriate.

In assuming these functions, Orthodox clerics attempted to control the “traffic flow” of converts across ecclesial borders (although their influence was largely one-way since they could do precious little to prevent people from leaving the church) while at the same time sharing the language and conceptual framework of seeking and shopping with the converts discussed in chapter one as a matter of course. Clerical informants were not only officials of a church, but participants of a wider American culture for which seeking and choice-making were taken-for-granted components of religious life. Orthodox clerics and hierarchs, therefore, were keenly aware of the spiritual marketplace and eyed Orthodox Christianity’s increased profile within it, in the form of new media attention and evangelistic opportunities, with simultaneous measures of enthusiasm and caution. On the one hand, this seeking and its resulting conversions provided a sense of excitement and pride in highlighting Orthodoxy’s potential “arrival” on the American scene, as a viable option among the many to be perused and appropriated in the spiritual marketplace. With their high education levels and motivations to learn the historical and theological arcana of the Orthodox Church, converts were viewed as attractive additions to local communities. In a sense, converts and conversions raised Orthodoxy’s “spiritual capital,”<sup>4</sup> a phrase Wade Clark Roof and others scholars wield in conscious reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, to indicate the relative value different marketplace “goods” acquire in the course of social interaction.

On the other hand however, a desire on the part of the clergy emerged of maintaining ecclesial distinctness, of fortifying the church’s boundaries against the fickle, conversional faint of heart, the

perpetual seeker. In this way, clerics endeavored to set Orthodox Christianity apart from the crowded field of religious options, to ensure that the church was not cheapened and rendered as “just another church” in the raising of its visibility and attractiveness to religious seekers. This clerical ambivalence in assessing conversion and its seeker culture undergirded pastoral responses to and interactions with converts, especially during the critical pre-conversion stage when priest and convert had frequent conversational contact with one another in the course of catechetical instruction.

The present chapter, therefore, is a discussion of how these tensions played out in the process of educating and preparing would-be converts for official entry to the Orthodox Church. Clerics and other religious participants, such as lifelong church members, are almost uniformly absent in the handful of other studies thus far conducted on Orthodox converts. Certainly, the views of parish priests and hierarchs, since a local bishop was interviewed as well, are significant not only on account of the long-term relationships often established between clerics and (would-be) converts, but also for the far-ranging perspectives they have of trends and themes *across* conversions over the span of their respective pastorates. While the conversion narratives naturally tended to revolve around the singular biographies of the narrators, the capturing of their subjective experiences, the clerical interviews, including those of convert priests of whom there were three, focused more concertedly on tendencies across conversions and over time within their parishes. Therefore, drawing upon their work with varieties of would-be and eventual converts, clerics willingly generalized along motivational and experiential lines as apparent in their ready distinguishing between seeker and intermarriage converts as outlined in chapter three.

With these issues in mind, the present chapter proceeds in a threefold manner. First, the contents and structures of official catechesis in the Orthodox Church today as occurring at St. Michael’s and Ascension as well as within American Orthodoxy more broadly will receive an overview. Potential converts often require a certain amount of instruction and acculturation into new ecclesial environments as they cross boundaries and move from being strangers to familiars and even intimates, to learn about and appropriate its beliefs and practices and form social ties within the community. The interested inquirer on the parochial doorstep is perceived as entering into a relationship with the institutional context

of the Orthodox Church, a way of conceptualizing conversion that informs clerical views and processes of catechesis. Second, the ways in which clerics consider religious seeking and the wider context in which it is embedded will receive our analytical attention. In this section, we will examine how Orthodox Christian catechesis involves far more than the simple impartation of theological teachings to serve as a means for gauging convert commitment to Orthodoxy and tempering what are perceived as the more insidious aspects of the spiritual marketplace, unbridled choice-making and seeking within or beyond the newly adopted religious context. Finally, the post-conversion significance of clerical-convert relationships as a whole, forged in these early pre-conversion encounters on the “border” of Orthodoxy will conclude our discussion of the clerical roles and perspectives on these contemporary conversions.

## **4.2 METHODS AND CONTENTS OF CATECHESIS**

As in centuries past, the term “catechesis,” originally derived from the Greek meaning “to teach by word of mouth,” today refers to the process of educating would-be converts and preparing them for the official rituals of reception into the Orthodox Church. Yet, the traditions of catechizing would-be adult initiates, and adult converts certainly were the norm in the early centuries of the Christian religion, into the fundamentals of the Christian faith are ancient. Liturgical scholars generally agree that adult baptisms, preceded by formal ecclesial instruction, predominated in the early church between the first and fourth centuries, with the official requirements and rituals attendant with initiation becoming ever more elaborate and complex during this period.<sup>5</sup> A great many early church writers and teachers, figures such as Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) and John Chrysostom (fourth century) among others, composed sermons and treatises specifically for Christian instruction, a period that could stretch on for years, though a minimum of three years of study became the norm in many locales. Candidates, known as “catechumens,” were expected to produce witnesses to vouch for their characters and earnestness in desiring to join the church and creedal formulae were to be committed to memory. In his *Lectures on the*

*Christian Sacraments*, Cyril of Jerusalem admonishes clerics to take seriously their sacred catechetical tasks, which are likened to keeping the doors of the heavenly kingdom, in admitting only those of right intent and character and in like manner to the bridegroom of Jesus' parable in Matthew 22 tossing out the dross, "Bind his feet, which have daringly intruded,--bind his hands, which were not skilled to robe him in the bright garment; and cast him into the outer darkness; for he is unworthy of the wedding torches. Thou hast seen how he fared; then take heed to thyself."<sup>6</sup>

Officially recognizing catechumens as aspirants for its full membership, the church prescribed special prayers and litanies to be said on their behalf and structured its Eucharistic liturgies for their benefit and protection. During these early centuries, the first half of the liturgy, known even today in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches as the "liturgy of the word," featured scripture readings and homilies for catechetical instruction, to be followed by the "liturgy of the faithful" which featured the ushering out of catechumens from the ecclesial assembly to protect the uninitiated from the power of the Eucharistic gifts and likewise to protect the consecrated bread and wine from those not yet fully counted as believers.<sup>7</sup> These careful preparations in the early church culminated in dramatic, highly emotionalized baptismal rites administered at Easter, the feast commemorating Christ's Resurrection. To this day, the Holy Week, Paschal, and post-Paschal celebrations of the Orthodox Church retain strong allusions to this early entwinement of catechumen initiation and Easter. The period of Holy Week, between Lazarus and Holy Saturdays,<sup>8</sup> remains a favored time for bringing current American converts into the Orthodox Church, a timing consciously chosen by priests and converts to recall these ancient linkages.

Although the precise origins and timeframe for the establishment of infant baptism as normative within churches both East and West remains a contested issue among liturgists, most scholars agree that its rise eclipsed adult initiations and contributed to the overall decline in the catechumenate as an engrained aspect of annual liturgical life by the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Yet, adult converts continued to enter churches, both east and west, throughout the centuries and missionaries in various parts of the globe continued to be in need of texts and tactics for spreading the Christian message. However, even in these latter cases, as Leonel L. Mitchell maintains, missionaries in far flung corners of the globe tended to

baptize indigenous populations before providing them formal religious instruction, a practice in keeping with the generalized relocation of catechesis to the post-baptismal rather than pre-baptismal phase of Christian life.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, adult catechesis as a topic of more ardent concern for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches made something of a comeback in the twentieth century with the unfixing of individual ecclesial affiliations and the onslaught of “seeking” bringing adult inquirers to church doors. The late modern period has brought periodic waves of adult converts into these traditional Christian churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> Patrick Allitt has noted, for instance, that the Catholic Church became something of a magnet for adult Anglo-American converts, especially high-profile writers and intellectuals, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup> In response to the increased possibility and probability of conversions in the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church officially reinstated the catechumenate as a recognized steppingstone to church membership for adult converts at the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) and since the 1960s has been especially adept at developing standardized materials and procedures for instructing and initiating converts to the faith. Presently, most American Catholic parishes offer annual classes, often coordinated by specially trained laity, for what has become known as the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (R. C. I. A)*, with entry into the church usually coinciding with Easter as in centuries past.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, most mainline Protestant churches in the U.S., such as the Lutheran, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches have also become much more attentive to the processes by which adults are brought into their respective folds in hopes and readiness for ministering to the rather large numbers of unchurched American adults in their midst.<sup>14</sup>

Within contemporary American Orthodox churches, especially in the OCA and Antiochian archdioceses which have received the greater numbers of recent seeker converts, something of a revival of the catechumenate as a term and concept within parish life has occurred as well. At the present time, persons demonstrating serious interest in studying and learning about Orthodoxy may have special prayers said by the priest on their behalf effectively marking them thenceforth as “catechumens,” a practice that Fr. Mark of St. Michael’s, for example, has eagerly employed. Would-be converts



themselves often look upon this first step towards membership with great seriousness and readily wield “catechumen” as a label of self-description in their social dealings with other parishioners. When two young catechumens from a Kentucky parish visited St. Michael’s in the summer of 2005 thorough coffee-hour conversations ensued between the couple and other convert parishioners over the length and character of their respective pre-conversion statuses within the church. In addition to these church-prescribed prayers elevating one to the ranks of the catechumenate, which may or may not be used according to pastoral discretion, optional litanies on behalf of catechumens can be offered during the Divine Liturgy with actual usage today varying among American parishes. Churches with higher volumes of converts, for example, tend to employ the litanies with greater frequency than those where seeker converts are relatively rare. One phrase, however, “The doors, the doors” proclaimed at every liturgy, regardless of jurisdiction or presence of converts, is the ancient cue, retained intact, for catechumens to leave the church before the public presentation of the Eucharistic gifts, though the original meaning of this phrase remains obscure to many church members today and catechumens in the U. S. rarely depart after it is proclaimed.<sup>15</sup> That use of the term “catechumen” is something of a revival in local Orthodox communities is evidenced by the fact that lifelong church members are often unfamiliar with the term and request clerical explanation of its meanings and employments.

While priests and bishops have recognized the need for instructing and preparing adults for reception into the Orthodox faith, the Orthodox Church in the United States today, in contrast to the aforementioned churches, has no uniform, cross-jurisdictional program for instructing and bringing new adult members into its fold. Although in 1957 a pan-jurisdictional Orthodox Christian Education Commission was established in the U. S. to standardize and improve educational formats and materials, its efforts have focused on the needs of Sunday schools and the religious education of school-aged children to the exclusion of adults.<sup>16</sup> Even more fundamentally, the precise initiation rituals to be enacted in cases of adult conversions remain highly contested within Orthodox circles and can vary according to the former confession of the convert and the jurisdictional affiliation of the Orthodox parish where the conversion occurs, along with the personal attitudes of the parish priest.<sup>17</sup> The length, format, and

materials employed are usually determined by the parish priest often in consultation with the would-be convert, with virtually no hierarchical oversight. Great variation, therefore, exists between dioceses, parishes, and even individual converts as to how and in what topics converting persons are instructed. Yet, in nearly all cases including St. Michael's and Ascension, catechesis is primarily the responsibility of the parish priest, although lay persons, both convert and lifelong Orthodox, such as in the case of the street preacher Randy introduced in chapter one, may be quite heavily involved in educating and/or socializing catechumens more broadly into parish life.

Despite this overall lack of standardization, however, catechesis serves two generalized functions in contemporary American Orthodox churches. First, as in the case of the early church, catechesis involves a period of instruction into the formal tenets, doctrines, and practices of the religious community. In this instance, the parish priest ensures would-be convert knowledge of selected aspects of the Orthodox faith such as the creeds, the sacraments, and basic church history. Second, in addition to this overt pedagogical function, Orthodox catechesis also becomes a field for determining the spiritual state and preparedness of the catechumen, to gauge her overall commitment level to the Orthodox Church. Nearly all the clerics interviewed reported holding regularly scheduled one-to-one conversations with potential converts to discuss inquirers' past religious lives and experiences, motivations for possible conversion to Orthodoxy, family obstacles or objections for such a course of action, even personal problems and past traumas, religiously incurred or not. Through these conversations and observations of the catechumen in parish life (e.g., how often and consistently catechumens attend divine services, how well they develop social ties with others in the community and so forth), clerics attempted to discern the seriousness and depth of the individual's personal commitment to conversion as well as her overall spiritual development.

Given its largely decentralized nature as well as the emphasis placed on determining more interiorized religious states, catechetical preparation was consistently cast by clerics as a highly individualized endeavor, with length of time, format, and contents dependent upon the experiences, knowledge, study, and desire of each person standing at the "gate" of entry to the Orthodox Church. Rather than molding converts into well-established, institutional patterns of instruction, of conforming

converts to the processes of catechesis, the Orthodox priests usually tailored preparations for conversion to the needs and interests of each person. The instructional methods employed varied from person to person, but usually consisted of reading/studying, discussions, and on-the-ground living and worshipping in the local community--in effect, the same vehicles of information-gathering consulted by lone seekers as outlined in chapter one. Fr. Joseph of Ascension church mentioned drawing upon a variety of these approaches in introducing Orthodox Christianity to would-be converts in his parish, "We give them a period of time and then I give them a book to read and then they meet with me on a one-to-one basis over a period of months and then I see how things are going. I try to get them to meet other people in the parish who can more or less mentor them in some respects." A local Orthodox bishop with ample experience in catechizing converts in his over twenty years as a parish priest too employed a similar multi-sourced approach:

It was very individualized, but in most cases however there was a period of time that they would study and attend services of the church, get involved with the church in its completion, its totality, the total life of the church. I had one man who came to the church for twenty years and we didn't bring him into the church for twenty years. And there's people for a shorter period of time. Every case is separate--separate unto itself, depending on the needs of the person and the needs of the parish, but as I said, it does require that the person is able to do some reading, some studying, some counseling with the priest.

Fr. Mark too underscored the uniqueness of each convert and case of conversion, as he here explained, "In my experience, conversion is different for different people. . . I think everyone is on a different road in terms of conversion, they see different things and they experience different things. It's kind of like a diamond, a jewel, where people look at it and certain people see different colors, you know. They'll see certain blues or certain reds and I think the faith is like that." Fr. Mark kept this conversional variation in mind, while drawing upon the same grab bag of catechetical tools outlined by his clerical colleagues, "It's different for every person. Ideally, I would like to catechize someone for six months and that may not be a formal catechesis, but something more informal that would include discussions. I'm meeting them on a regular basis talking to them even if they're not a catechumen the whole time and I'd like to see that they're coming to church regularly."

Not only did clerics employ a number of different approaches in their instruction of converts, but

they varied in their expectations as to the length of time required for preparing a person for conversion. The clerics were decidedly disinterested in the “self-surrender type” of conversion favored by William James. While Fr. Mark “ideally” would like to catechize a person for six months he said, “A year would be better. I think most of our strongest converts probably have gone through that process for about a year.” Still, he offered the caveat “again, everyone is different and we have some people that did not have as long a catechesis. So, the model is going to be different for every single person.” Fr. Joseph usually expected, at a minimum, conversion instruction and preparation to last “over a period of months” but was willing to wait for years, if need be, to ensure a candidate’s “absolute readiness” for entry into the Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, Fr. Nicholas from a nearby Antiochian parish said, “I’m probably a little too eager to receive people. Uh, I don’t have particular inflexible rules about how long someone has to be studying. You know, it can be anywhere from four months to four years.” The local bishop was highly critical of all preconceived timeframes for catechesis, especially those borne of catechumen eagerness to embrace the faith, “I think it [conversion] is a gradual thing if you find sometimes people converting and their conversion is something that they want to do in three days, three months, even three years, they’ve got a timeframe on it, you become suspicious of that because as a matter of fact they do it in God’s time, not in their time. So, I think impatience is a definite concern and lack of preparation is a concern.”

Again, the choice of written materials used for catechetical instruction was variable and convert specific even within single parishes, with catechumen tastes, knowledge levels, and prior readings usually pointing the way to the selection of textual materials. Timothy Ware’s classic introduction, *The Orthodox Church*, was the most commonly cited catechetical text, although some priests favored the writings of the American Orthodox theologian Fr. Thomas Hopko and the wide expanse of convert-generated literature, the burgeoning array of English-language Orthodox apologetical writings and conversion narratives now available, as more accessible to the theological novice. While a number of converts, as noted in chapter one, reported reading the church fathers and other primary source materials related to early theology and

church history, priests themselves rarely assigned such materials relying more pointedly on secondary expositions of the Orthodox faith, though they by no means discouraged the personal perusal of these works for those so inclined.

Significantly, individual convert interest in readings and instructional contents was more important to priests than ensuring catechetical uniformity across converts. Although Fr. Mark often recommended *The Orthodox Church* to potential converts he was by no means categorically beholden to the text, for as he maintained, “It depends on the person. Some people, you know, don’t like history and that’s a big book on history or at least half of it is dedicated to history.” In instances where catechumens “don’t like history” or “they’re not a big reader,” Fr. Mark preferred to assign shorter articles or limit catechesis to discussions between the inquirer and himself alone, though he also observed, “We have some converts, like I’m thinking of someone like Karen [introduced in Section 2.4] who’s a voracious reader and you’re giving her books on theology and she’s just soaking everything up.” At the same time, Fr. Nicholas found the Bible, especially the Gospel of John, “to be the best catechetical resource,” but gave catechumens a great deal of leeway in directing their course of study, “I generally like to start with the scriptures. I have two separate libraries that I give them access to. But everybody’s different. But I’ll talk about whatever’s interesting to them.”

While in no way disparaging the more overtly intellectual elements of these conversion processes, the clerics generally agreed that reading alone was rarely sufficient for learning about the Orthodox Church and should, ideally, be coupled with a strong experiential component of entering into the life of parish communities and forming social bonds with parishioners. Clerics were consistently concerned that the individuals crossing into their parishes make the Orthodox Church a place and space of permanent ecclesial dwelling, a hoped-for outcome they felt to be much more reliably gauged through a catechumen’s physical engagement with the parish than the absorption of factual information. A British-born hieromonk<sup>18</sup> of a Ukrainian Orthodox church located in Ohio, who was himself a serial convert from Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, Fr. Nicetas prized catechumen church attendance and an overall willingness to participate in parish activities over systematic, book-derived studies of the faith:

For a start, I would want to see a person at church several times. I want to see a person regularly in church until I was prepared to receive them as a normal thing. . . . And you've got to be very careful not to give the impression that Christianity is the reward for those who pass the exam. There is a sense in which anybody who says, "I want to be part of the church." We should be able to say, "Yes, you're in." But, like I said, I like to see them in church and I'd consider that more important than the instructional course in the long run because then you know people are willing to do it, are willing to be part of it. If somebody's coming to church week after week after week and you suddenly discover that they're not Orthodox at all and that's why they haven't been coming to communion. I might be well prepared to take that person in very quickly, just go over a few things.

Again, emphasizing that "the model is going to be different for every single person," Fr. Mark said that he too looked upon church attendance as a favorable indicator of the seriousness of an inquirer's intentions, "I have a girl right now that's been coming for six months and I've been talking to her on and off. She's been coming every week, *every week*. She's not going anywhere else and this has been happening for six-eight months. We just made her a catechumen last week and she'll be chrismated on Holy Saturday. That's about a month away." Meanwhile, Fr. Joseph mentioned repeatedly in his interview the necessity of would-be converts putting "down roots" in his parish through the establishment of close friendships with other church members who could offer mentoring and encouragement to the inquirer.

In the end, "to come" was the answer most clerics offered when asked of the most effective means for interested persons to learn about the Orthodox faith. Fr. Nicholas responded to this question, "I think by coming, by talking to other converts who are perhaps a bit further along in the journey. I prefer those things to be focused on." The Orthodox bishop made a similar comment in his interview, "To come to it. To come to the Orthodox Church. To spend time in it and to have a spiritual father, a priest, a spiritual father that will care for you and love you and take care of your soul. I think that's the most important ingredients to having a direction in the Orthodox Church." Although the hierarch noted that "reading and taking classes are fine," these methods are "not the most effective ways and they don't do the job" for introducing an inquirer to what he consistently referred to as "Holy Orthodoxy." He flatly asserted, "Most people [converts] feel that they've just read enough and that's fine. No, it goes way beyond that. Just because you read a lot doesn't mean that you're going to be, you know, an Orthodox Christian" and reiterated what he did find essential, "And so having the person come to the church and

having them have a spiritual father who can direct them accordingly is the most effective, is really the only way.”

In addition to reading and studying and demonstrating a willingness “to come” and participate in the life of the parish, this “spiritual” mentoring of the priest for the convert, usually in the form of one-to-one conversations however brief or extensive in length or duration, was a ubiquitous feature of catechesis as outlined by clerical and convert informants. Certainly, notions of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood, where more religiously advanced and enlightened elders, usually known as the *geron* in Greek or *starets* in Russian,<sup>19</sup> take responsibility for and offer direction to novices in the religious life, especially in determining levels of interior consciousness and parceling out prayer rules, remain deeply engrained components of Eastern Christian piety. Arising in the desert monastic communities and hermitages of Egypt and Palestine in the second and fourth centuries, the tales of which are immortalized in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,<sup>20</sup> and continuing in various times, locales, and forms over the course of Eastern Orthodox history, “spiritual direction” found its most concerted home in monastic milieus, for which innumerable rules and directives for “spiritual fathers” were penned and deep traditions of obedience were culled. The famed eleventh-century mystic and abbot, St. Symeon the New Theologian, for instance, maintained that disciples should demonstrate the same absolute obedience to their spiritual fathers as they would to Christ himself, while at the same time warning inexperienced or prideful elders that the sins of their spiritual children would be accounted a tax on their own souls at the Last Judgment.<sup>21</sup> In this case, St. Symeon was only reflecting long-held, commonplace views of the tenor and import of the spiritual father/mother-child relationship.

Although many church fathers, for example John Chrysostom, were loathe to make sharp distinctions between monks and laity, for all were believed to be “simple Christians” from a divine perspective, the full rigors of such a relationship were much more difficult to sustain for persons living “in the world” than for those confined behind monastery walls.<sup>22</sup> Still, in the modern period famous monastic centers, such as the Optina *pustyn’* in nineteenth century Russia and Mt. Athos in the midst of its revival in the twentieth century, offered powerful images of spiritual fatherhood that informed popular

portrayals and views of Orthodox spirituality more generally. The Optina elders became a focal point of pilgrimage for lay Orthodox Christians in need of counsel, solace, or healing in late imperial Russia and served as the model for Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Elder Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Mt. Athos produced a string of powerful teachers throughout the twentieth century of whom Silouan the Athonite, a barely literate ascetic recognized in death as a celebrated saint, stands as an exemplar.<sup>24</sup> The ever-popular *The Way of a Pilgrim*, deeply influential on how people, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, have come to regard Orthodox spiritual practices such as the Jesus Prayer, features the anonymous narrator's agony over locating a spiritual father who can teach him to "pray ceaselessly." Even in death, the once-located elder continues to offer the narrator-pilgrim assistance from beyond the grave through dreams and other supernatural events.<sup>25</sup>

As in the case of the catechumenate itself, spiritual fatherhood and motherhood have experienced something of a revival in American Orthodox parishes in the last quarter of the twentieth century. While the notion never wholly disappeared among immigrant communities in the United States, clerical informants consistently attested that the idea of the priest as a spiritual father with whom one forged a psychologically intimate and confessionally open relationship remained foreign to the vast majority of their older lifelong parishioners. Younger lifelong Orthodox parishioners, with renewed interests in aspects of the spiritual life such as iconography, prayer practices, pilgrimages to monasteries and holy sites, have been more open to exploring the potentialities of such elderships, as have American converts to Orthodoxy. Often culling their initial views of Orthodox Christianity from rather romantically tinged figures and literatures such as those cited above, converts, in particular, appear eager to embrace their parish priests as spiritual fathers and anecdotes circulate in Orthodox periodicals of American converts restlessly searching for the "right" teacher for years.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, priests commented that converts can occasionally misconstrue the meanings and boundaries of these spiritual ties, a point to which we will return at the conclusion of this chapter.

In such a context, the one-to-one catechetical interplay between priest and catechumen, in the course of their developing relationship, bore no resemblance to the tightly scripted, thematically arranged



dialogues Helen recalled of her Sunday sessions with Miss Jean in chapter two.<sup>27</sup> Most of the convert informants reported having open access to and extensive communication, usually in the form of free-wheeling, wide-ranging, and open-ended conversations, with the parish priest both prior and subsequent to their entries into the Orthodox Church. The contouring of catechetical processes to individualized needs and interests was dependent upon a certain degree of personal familiarity between priest and convert. Also the relative formality of one-to-one encounters ranged considerably, with Fr. Joseph preferring to meet would-be converts across the shiny oak desk of his icon-clad, official-seal bedecked office and Fr. Mark just as likely to meet inquirers for informal lunches at a local greasy spoon.

Due to relatively low conversion volumes and/or pastoral preference, most of the interviewed clerics, including Frs. Mark and Joseph, reported catechizing converts solely through these one-to-one conversations. However, churches with consistently higher volumes of converts have devised more formal “inquirers’ classes” for the education of their converts, although such endeavors are organized solely on a local level according to the discretion of the parish priest. Catechized in an OCA parish with over fifty percent of its membership converts, along with the priest who was himself a former Episcopalian, Alex, for example, reported attending an on-going, weekly classes for would-be converts conducted by the parish priest where the basics of Orthodox doctrine and creedal formulae, such as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, were discussed. Meanwhile, Fr. Nicholas reported folding his catechetical instruction into his weekly Wednesday evening Bible studies, which were also attended by other convert and lifelong Orthodox parishioners and averaged about nine to ten people per week. He encouraged interaction amongst these groups, so “they [potential converts] hear not just from me, but from other people who are in various stages of internal development.” Although he liked to begin these studies with the Gospel of John, Fr. Nicholas allowed catechumens a relatively free rein over subject matters to be discussed. He said, “Everybody’s different. But we talk about whatever’s interesting to them, what their needs are and their needs are all so very different and for the most part the group that meets on Wednesday enjoys talking about whatever the new folks are interested in.” Yet, even in cases

where formal classes were implemented, these never stood alone, but were nearly always coupled with continued one-to-one contact between priest and individual catechumen.

Although it is not unheard of for individuals to encounter active pastoral discouragement from conversion to Orthodoxy as evidenced by written accounts (for example, Bishop Kallistos Ware recounts the many times Greek and Russian clerics tried to dissuade him from conversion in the 1950s claiming that the “Eastern-ness” of the Eastern church proved too wide a cultural gap for Western converts to bridge),<sup>28</sup> and experienced by two study informants in their pre-conversion dealings with *other* non-informant clerics, no convert informants reported encountering resistance or discouragement from conversion in the words or behaviors of Frs. Mark and Joseph. Rather, the interviewed clerics clearly welcomed and appreciated the converts who came to them and the converts, in their turn, generally reported having warm, genial relationships with the priests.

While converts appreciated receiving the sustained time and attention of the parish priest and the amplification of *their* personal queries and interests in regard to Orthodox Christianity or their lives more generally, this case-by-case, near episodic approach to catechizing inquirers practically ensured that the base knowledge converts possessed of Orthodoxy was uneven and wildly divergent from one person to the next. Although all priests certainly aimed to cover the “basics” of the faith with their catechumens, in the absence of general texts and standards and given the inherent historical richness and variability of Orthodoxy, what precisely the basics might be was open to some interpretation. For example, some converts, such as young Alex, reported enduring tedious line-by-line expositions of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in his inquirers’ class, while Carl from St. Michael’s mentioned having conversations with Fr. Mark at a local diner that occasionally touched upon Orthodox ascetic practices (Carl, for example, humorously recalled discussing Orthodox fasting rules over plates of buttered sausages and eggs) but were largely devoid of theological content. Some priests preferred to begin their instruction with rudimentary overviews of church history, while others considered knowledge of the sacraments, what they were or how they were carried out, or private prayer practices of critical importance.

Furthermore, priests relied heavily on catechumens' own motivations and abilities to read and study the faith and, in many cases, expected that converts discovering Orthodoxy over the course of respective searches had engaged in some amount of prior reading, for as one priest asserted, "You know, most often folks start having read two or three introductory books before I've ever even met them." Not only did clerics assume catechumens to be at least minimally self-directed in their explorations of Orthodox Christianity, but they also in some cases took into positive account the religious educations catechumens had received in other Christian settings. For example, Fr. Nicetas said of his experience, "Everybody I have received came from active involvement in another church. I haven't received anybody who's been completely unchurched. So, everybody had some fairly good understanding of the basics of the Christian religion." In fact, a few converts commented that clerics and other lifelong Orthodox parishioners recognized them as experts in religious matters based on their prior studies, especially former Protestants in familiarity with the Bible, and were occasionally drafted to teach Sunday school or serve other educational functions within the parish even *before* officially converting to the church.

Although as a former Roman Catholic priest Fr. Nicetas was the only informant to be thusly classified, it is important to note that ordained clergy of other Christian denominations who convert to the Orthodox Church are *not* required to be reeducated in Orthodox seminaries even if many choose to do so. Therefore, the fundamental grounding of pastoral education for increasing numbers of Orthodox priests in the United States today inadvertently occurs prior to clerical conversion within Roman Catholic and Protestant rather than Eastern Orthodox seminaries, of which there are eight in the U. S. One academic colleague, also an Orthodox priest, even went so far as to describe the relationship American Orthodoxy holds with non-Orthodox seminaries of Christian orientation to me as outright "parasitic" since it directly, at no financial cost to itself, benefits from the solid educations many Christian priests and pastors receive in other settings. Educated primarily in Rome in preparation for the Catholic priesthood, Fr. Nicetas himself underwent no formal Orthodox seminary training after his entry into the Orthodox Church in the early 1990s, but rather himself has taught in a number of Orthodox venues.<sup>29</sup>

### 4.3 SEEKING AND ITS DISCONTENTS: CLERICAL REFLECTIONS

Regardless of context, “gatekeepers” have a unique perspective in seeing simultaneously the outer terrains and pathways of individuals and their crossings as well as the inner forms and norms of potential dwellings. In this vein, Orthodox clerics have a keen awareness and knowledge of the pre-conversion religious, as well as in many cases the psychological, social, and familial, lives of the catechumens in their care since they normally require some recounting of them in the course of their catechetical discussions. Clerics were sensitive to the fact that deep religious dissatisfaction with other religions or churches and its resulting seeking and journeying are the precise vehicles bringing increased numbers of converts into their midst. In characterizing conversion processes, they wielded the same vocabularies of search and journey utilized by convert informants and deeply appreciated the time and effort such individuals expended in discovering their church. Some priests, most notably Fr. Mark of St. Michael’s, sought active engagement with this seeking culture by expanding evangelistic efforts in their parishes in an attempt to bring others to the Orthodox faith.

Regardless of the pressures of the spiritual marketplace and the near normative status of personal ecclesial shifts and mobility, Orthodox priests and bishops expected their church to be a place and space for *permanent* convert dwelling. While all religious groups certainly hope for the long-term retention of converts coming into their folds, the emphasis at my fieldsites was decidedly placed on the motivational and developmental *quality* of each convert over numeric *quantities* of persons entering the church. The Orthodox priests in this study repeatedly claimed that ensuring a “right fit” between convert and parish was far more important than allowing ill-prepared catechumens into the church. For priests, it was more important that converts, again to quote Fr. Nicetas, “be willing to be part of it,” be *committed* to Orthodoxy than possess textbook knowledge of the faith, although a convert with both was an especially coveted boon.

Even more fundamentally, it is important to note that awareness of religious crossings and dwellings of various sorts and the wider seeking culture contextualizing them was by no means

theoretical, but was an integral, experiential component of the clerical biographies themselves. Born and raised in the United States aside from Fr. Nicetas who is British though pastoring American flocks, the clerical informants could in no way be considered unversed in the thematic or terminological intricacies of American and world cultures. All of the priests, for example, had earned college degrees and all had traveled at least once outside the United States. Heavily involved in overseas Orthodox missionary efforts to this day, Fr. Joseph discussed his early years working in the slums of Rio de Janeiro for the Peace Corps as “shattering” and leading to a long reevaluation of his Christian faith, which was revitalized though wholly transformed in this light. Three of the priests interviewed were themselves converts to Orthodoxy, in turn, from Methodism, Byzantine Catholicism, and Anglicanism/Roman Catholicism.

Many of the clerical informants mentioned the changes in religious affiliation that had occurred among family members and friends. For example, Fr. Joseph candidly discussed the pain and disappointment wrought upon his family by a brother’s abandonment of Orthodoxy for Zen Buddhism. Having moved from Pittsburgh years earlier, the brother, whom Fr. Joseph pointedly described as a “seeker,” today practices Eastern meditation and claims membership at a Zen Buddhist temple in California. Fr. Joseph attributed his own sensitivity to the “religious struggles” and conflicts of converts to the necessity of confronting questions of religious change in his own life and family. Meanwhile, Fr. Nicholas mentioned that his mother and father each hailed from different Christian denominations, in this case Roman Catholicism and Presbyterianism, and consciously decided upon Orthodoxy as something of a compromise faith for their married life together, since each had ancestral ties to the Orthodox Church through immigrant grandparents.

Beyond this direct autobiographical cognizance of the presence and particularities of religious “seeking” and “choice-making,” Orthodox clerics too typically required some recounting from newcomers of the means by which they learned of Orthodox Christianity and had come to consider it a religious option worthy of their consideration. Certainly, in parish interactions, a common follow-up question from parishioners to Orthodox converts identifying themselves as such is “From what [former confession]? as if one’s religious past *matters* long after official entry into the church has occurred as a

means of understanding one's current life as an Orthodox Christian. In this vein, converts were frequently typecast by clerics and other parishioners according to their former confessions, with Roman Catholics and Protestants often perceived as bringing their own stylized strengths and weaknesses into their post-conversion Orthodox lives. Although admired for their Biblical astuteness, former Protestants, for example, were often considered overly cerebral in their approaches to the Orthodox faith. At the same time according to these typecasts, former Catholics easily accustomed themselves to the ritual accoutrements of Orthodox practice (e.g., Eucharist, veneration of saints and the Virgin Mary), while only with great difficulty relinquishing attachments to Catholic juridical models of sin and confession as well as the person and authority of the pope.

The pre-Orthodox lives of inquirers were the very grounds upon which catechetical processes came to be structured with former confessions frequently driving the specific books consulted and questions raised. Different texts were often used in catechizing former Roman Catholics and Protestants, for example. Also, the interiorized spiritual development and ultimate "readiness" for conversion was often determined by the intensity of earlier psychological experiences, the duration and topographies of past "journeys" and "searches," and the overall knowledge and desire for Orthodoxy already brought to the church door by the very first meeting between priest and inquirer. An individual's encounter with Orthodox Christianity alone did not encompass the entirety of one's conversion experience, but in the event of a successful conversion, served as its powerful culmination.

Certainly, this emphasis on convert biographies is by no means peculiar to American Orthodox clerics, but has long been a staple of Christian enactments of conversion, however they may be psychologically or institutionally defined, from the very origins of the religion itself. The Apostle Paul, for example, recounts his "on-the-road-to-Damascus" vision of the Risen Christ to various audiences in the Book of Acts and in his Epistle to the Galatians.<sup>30</sup> Public recitations of individuals' earlier, inevitably wretched and sin-ridden lives, as maps for the charting of divine providence in transforming and saving the narrators and humankind more generally, were a critical component of Puritan self-perception and understanding as historian Patricia Caldwell cogently notes in her study of Puritan conversion

narratives.<sup>31</sup> Orally recounted testimonials of encounters with the divine have long played a central role in the worship of many charismatic and Pentecostal churches.<sup>32</sup> Even more broadly, the public disclosure of personal autobiographical information finds its continued expression in contemporary American culture in the plethora of support groups, addressing misfortunes as diverse as alcohol and drug addiction to grief over the death of a pet, that regularly spring up like mushrooms in church basements and community halls throughout the land. Even talk shows focused on the telling of thematically arranged personal stories and “problems” (often presented in the vague, rather sad hope that show hosts or guest experts can find their solutions) bears strong resemblance to these deeply engrained traditions of public witnessing and confession.<sup>33</sup>

More historically sacramental churches, such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, have placed a much lesser emphasis on public testimonials as part of worship services or means of discerning church membership although they are by no means unknown in either form of Christianity. Certainly, in these churches, the sacrament of “confession” usually conducted privately between priest and parishioner is a ritual that should, ideally, prompt a certain degree of self-reflection in the penitent on one’s past life and misdeeds. Michel Foucault even goes so far as to describe “confession” as one of the most powerful regimes for the exercise of control, given that it requires an internalization of external norms and the continual checking of one’s own thought and behavior. In the modern absence of central ecclesial authority, confession has become normative, as illustrated in the examples above. For Foucault, “Western man has become a confessing animal.”<sup>34</sup>

Although as non-church members, Orthodox inquirers were barred from participation in this sacrament per se, the catechetical discussions held with parish priests were in many ways wholly indistinguishable from the formal ritual (apart from prayers of absolution), which in Orthodox churches was often enacted face-to-face in a very conversational manner between priest and penitent, with the latter’s overall past experience and “spiritual development” a topic of concern. Indeed, Orthodox manuals on confession tend to stress the sacrament’s *therapeutic* (as “medicine for the soul”) rather than punitive nature, an attitude that remains fully intact in pastoral discussions with inquirers over their pre-

Orthodox lives.<sup>35</sup> Fr. Mark, for instance, stressed the psychological quality of his pre-conversion conversations with inquirers, “Certainly I’m not a counselor in the sense of a licensed therapist, but there’s much discussion and talk that goes on outside the faith” to include, in his words, “prior emotional, spiritual issues” contextualizing and informing an individual’s present exploration of Orthodoxy. Most of the priests mentioned the personal intricacies of inquirer biographies, including topics “outside the faith,” as familiar ground covered in their discussions, since these served as the tea leaves for the reading of present conversion motives and discerning future compatibility between church and catechumen.

“Testimonials,” therefore, remained ever-present in Orthodox conversions, though more fully disclosed within the arena of priest-catechumen interaction than to the parish as a whole. Some converts mentioned revealing particularly painful or traumatic incidents from their early lives (these included among my informants issues of drug/alcohol abuse, marital infidelity, and the witnessing of violent crimes) to the priest alone, leaving such details out of the accounts they might provide to other parishioners curious about their conversions. Indeed, one convert informant expressed great enthusiasm to me about being interviewed for this study precisely because it afforded her an opportunity to revisit her life in its “entirety” something impossible from the truncated renditions she ordinarily was expected convey when most people asked of her conversion.

Clerics necessarily situated the present decision to embrace Orthodoxy within these wider biographical frames of reference, as a continuation rather than a negation of persons’ religious pasts, as the culmination of searches, journeys, and religious shopping. Orthodox clerics shared these vocabularies and notions with convert informants, though often imbuing them with a certain connotative distinctiveness. While converts, for example, often directly castigated “shopping” as an unsavory Protestant practice, clerics tended to view it as a moral neutral or more positively as the very vehicle bringing inquirers to their churches. Fr. Mark, for instance, used this language in assessing the reasons for the recent spike in the number of conversions in his parish, ‘I think that the interest in Orthodoxy has increased due to the liberalism in other faiths. There are certain issues that are going on in the Roman Catholic Church or the Episcopal Church. People start shopping. They start reading and discover



Orthodoxy and they never knew what it was.” In Fr. Mark’s estimation, this “shopping” and “seeking” has a clear teleological character as individuals move amongst contexts or ponder doing so, in an ardent attempt to find the “something missing,” theologically or experientially, from other churches encountered as he here observes, “I think that many times the people that come into the Orthodox faith feel something’s missing in their former confession. It’s not as deep or something’s wrong. Something’s missing and then they come to the Orthodox faith and they find whatever it was that they feel was missing.” Meanwhile, Fr. Nicholas of the Antiochian church forthrightly admitted, “Everyone comes with different experiences. Some people have been on a journey for more than ten years and just because they ended up here last week doesn’t mean that their journey began last week.”

In evoking this language of “searching” and “shopping,” clerics repeatedly stressed the significance of the knowledge and experience gained in the course of these processes. Converts in no way could be considered wholly reborn persons for whom entry into the church represented a radical departure from all previously learned ways. For example, the Orthodox bishop attributed what he considers to be the mental astuteness of converts to the self-reflexivity and knowledge-gathering inherent to religious shopping in the first place, “In some cases, some of the people that convert to Orthodoxy, as far as their mental knowledge of the church, it often supersedes the people that were born in the church, ‘cause these people have made a conscious effort to shop, to shop for a faith and deciding to come to Orthodoxy. They’ve gained knowledge and they’ve been able to achieve a certain mental maturity that you deal with them on a different level.” Another cleric commented favorably upon the “very sophisticated backgrounds” of many converts, “Many of the people come from very sophisticated backgrounds and they don’t come because of the [church] building or for the ambience. They come for the fact that they’ve studied and they’ve searched and God has led them to the Orthodox Church as a place for them to express their desire for tradition and traditional worship. Give thanks to God.” Although not directly involved in counseling converts or bringing them into the church since this remained the purview of Fr. Joseph, a deacon from Ascension discussed his “fascination” with converts since they were “serious” about Orthodoxy and took “their faith to heart,” characteristics directly resulting from the earnestness of

religious “searches,” as he explained, “By and large, people who convert to another faith do so because they’re making a very serious investment of themselves in the pursuit of truth and if they didn’t think that this was going to be the way they could advance that, they wouldn’t make that investment.”

Appreciative of the “serious investment of themselves in the pursuit of truth” that converts were believed to have made, priests encouraged converts to look favorably on their experiences in former confessions as enriching preludes finding their “fulfillment” in Orthodox Christianity. Certainly the language of “search” and “journey” provided narrative continuity between past and present, with Orthodox Christianity appearing as the natural endpoint. None of the clerics advocated “bridge burning”<sup>36</sup> or wholesale disavowals of religious pasts as can occur in other religious contexts where the severance of all earlier acquired social ties and ways of knowing and thinking about the world are central to conversion processes. Certainly, instances of so-called “brainwashing” and “bridge-burning” in other religious settings remains a controversial, much-discussed topic of conversion studies.<sup>37</sup> While Orthodox Christianity was consistently affirmed by the clerics as possessing the “fullness” of religious “truth,” they maintained that other religious confessions, though specifically Christian, too often served as venues for genuine religious insight. Fr. Mark said in this regard:

I encourage our converts here to be respectful of their past and to be thankful of their past because it formed them. It brought them *here* and the other thing is [that] converts tend to be extremely faithful. They have a deep love for God and they have a deep love of Jesus Christ. They want to worship in spirit and a lot of that was formed outside their experience of Orthodoxy. So how can you condemn that? It’s just that they realize the defects of the theology or the practice of their former confession. So, they just sort of forgive it and then they are thankful for their past and they move on.

The bishop too recognized that Orthodox Christianity rarely stood as the sole ecclesial context for significant encounter with the divine and that, as noted in chapter two, earlier conversions, awakenings, and renewals of individual consciousness regarding religious matters may prove fundamental to a person’s eventual embrace of the Orthodox faith. Again, in his words, Orthodoxy appeared as the epitome rather than the entirety of one’s experience, “If a person is from the Roman Catholic Church or one of the Protestant churches to Orthodoxy, I wouldn’t say that conversion is an introduction [to the divine]. I think they already have some sort of relationship with their maker and savior, but I think it’s a

culmination of their experience, their growth in their relationship with God that leads them to Orthodoxy.” Fr. Joseph echoes these sentiments in his assessment of the converts in his parish, “Most of those who come to us are very sincere and they really truly enter the faith in a much deeper way. They don’t come from darkness. I mean, they come from already having strong influences in their spiritual lives and they bring that here into the church and they’re very eager and anxious to embrace the faith.”

Convert informants themselves frequently commented on the marked generosity Orthodox priests demonstrated in exhorting them to honor and respect their religious pasts, an exhortation very similar to Helen’s (introduced in Section 2.1) assertion that in becoming Orthodox she was, in fact, “going towards” Anglicanism. One young man, Sam, an iconographer in his early thirties whom I met at an icon festival hosted at Ascension church, converted to Orthodoxy in 1998 and attended a large OCA parish near Cleveland when I interviewed him in the spring of 2006. Having once aspired to become a Catholic priest, Sam remained emotionally conflicted about converting to Orthodoxy even in the midst of its ritual enactment. Sam recalled his inner turmoil being assuaged by the kind words of the presiding priest:

Father gives me a big hug [after the chrismation] and he says to me, “You know, Sam, tonight you’re probably thinking of this as turning your back on your Catholic upbringing, on all the studies you’ve done.” And he says, “Please don’t think that way. Please view this as the fulfillment and completion of your Catholic faith.” And for some reason those words were the most comforting words I’d ever heard in the whole process and after that, you know, I was okay.

Not only did priests encourage converts to recall former ecclesial “dwellings” with fondness, but occasionally permitted post-conversion participation in selected religious activities and communities associated with them, albeit in a rather low key and/or highly modified way. For example, Fr. Joseph gave Helen his blessing to continue attending the monthly meetings of the Anglican prayer group (sessions composed primarily of praying, hymn singing, and a fellowship meal) that she and her husband founded years earlier. Such circumstances are by no means unheard of among other Orthodox converts. Beyond my study informants, another woman noted, in her published conversion account, receiving permission from her priest after becoming Orthodox to continue praying the Catholic rosary, a practice to which she had been particularly attached before her conversion.<sup>38</sup> Even the occasional historical and contemporary use of Western-rite liturgies in Orthodox churches, for example in the Antiochian

archdiocese today among some former Episcopalians (usually when entire parishes from this confession are brought into Orthodoxy *en masse*), represents a conscious effort to recognize religious pasts and make some post-conversion accommodation to them.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Orthodox clerics much preferred converts enter the Orthodox Church with warm memories than active participations in past faiths and none considered the taking of the Eucharist in other Christian settings appropriate under any circumstances.

Beyond utilization of the language of seeking and shopping and recognition of the significance of converts' religious pasts, a few priests sought a more proactive engagement of this "seeking culture" by adopting electronic media to reach larger populations of potential converts and encouraging parishioners to share Orthodox Christianity with others. Fr. Mark proved to be the most adept and eager of the interviewed clergy to actively evangelize the predominantly non-Orthodox world outside his parish walls. As part of this wider push to make Orthodoxy available to seekers, Fr. Mark blessed the evangelistic endeavors of two of his young convert parishioners, Alex and Paul, both of whom were former Protestants introduced to Orthodox Christianity through the efforts of Randy, the Pentecostal-cum-Orthodox "street preacher" briefly noted in chapter two. One chilly Saturday afternoon in March 2005, I accompanied the pair on an evangelistic stint at a nearby university campus that was chiefly comprised of the passing out of pamphlets introducing readers to Orthodox Christianity and the attempted engagement of passersby in conversation about the church.<sup>40</sup> In describing these efforts, Fr. Mark simultaneously emphasized Orthodoxy's place within a religiously diverse wider context by putting, in his words, "the *best* face on Orthodoxy," while at the same time divorcing the evangelistic style adopted by Alex and Paul from that of other Christian confessions, for as he maintained, "The important thing, for me, is that we are putting the *best* face on Orthodoxy that we're not borrowing a Protestant-what I would call sort of a Bible-thumper model, which I think is absolutely *not* our [Orthodox Christian] model." Still, Fr. Mark insisted that evangelizing others to the Orthodox faith was in no way incongruent with the essence of the church, "What they [Alex and Paul] are doing is they are engaging people in conversation, which I think is natural. I know that they're doing it in a very direct way 'cause they're sort of standing there [on the sidewalk in front of a campus library] to have those conversations. But I think God raised evangelists to

do what they're doing and I would not discourage them." Even if this direct evangelism produced few converts, for no one had been brought to the church from these street conversations during the time of my fieldwork, such pursuits were indicative of an overall pastorally directed desire to raise Orthodoxy's profile in the spiritual marketplace in attracting the attention of the sidewalk "everyman" and "everywoman."

While not a common practice, Fr. Mark's "blessing" of face-to-face, on-the-street evangelism of the Orthodox faith is by no means unknown within American Orthodoxy at large, where parishes, particularly in the OCA and Antiochian archdioceses, are increasingly willing to proselytize and recruit new members in ways similar to those found in other Christian denominations, especially evangelical Protestant churches, where public preaching, witnessing, and argumentation have long been accepted as evangelistic norms.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, many of the evangelical Protestant converts who entered the Orthodox Church in the late 1980s proclaimed a firm desire to evangelize America at large, as the former Campus Crusader Fr. Peter Gillquist wrote in his work *Becoming Orthodox*:

We want to be *the* Church for all seriously committed Christian people in the English-speaking world. Christians in North America, for example, have had the opportunity to decide if they want to be Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, or even Independent. Very few have been given the chance to decide if they would like to be Orthodox. We wish to make that choice available and to urge people to become part of this original Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Although rather low key in nature, St. Michael's two-man street evangelism was aimed precisely at making Orthodox Christianity a "choice available" to "the English-speaking world," an endeavor increasingly enacted in other churches as well. Parishes in Pennsylvania, Illinois, and parts of the southern U. S. too sport resident "street preachers" who publicly evangelize Orthodox Christianity with the full knowledge and support of their parish priests and local bishops. Despite Fr. Mark's avowal that such efforts were wholly in keeping with the history and spirit of Orthodox Christianity, other informants, most notably former Protestant converts, expressed discomfort with the practice as too accommodating to the surrounding culture, for as one convert informant asserted, "Truth be told, I don't like it-this kind of street evangelism. It gives the impression that Orthodoxy is just one more group of people trying to fill a church with bodies. That it's just one more little denomination to be tossed out into the soup."

While keeping one eye on the many benefits religious seeking can bestow upon their parishes especially in bringing the theologically versed to their ecclesial gates, priests did not unequivocally embrace this activity and context without reservation. In the general absence of external social and familial determinants for religious affiliation, priests were encumbered upon all the more to ensure some degree of “commitment” to the Orthodox faith from potential converts. The “spiritual marketplace” both brings converts to Orthodoxy and threatens to steal them away, for as the Orthodox bishop observed, “It’s difficult for people that live in a society where everything is instant. They have instant eggs. They have instant soup. They have instant this and instant that. They want their religion that way too.” A significant aspect of convert catechesis, therefore, was a determination of the inquirer’s staying power, whether Orthodoxy appeared on the person’s religious horizon as a permanent dwelling or simply as an icon-clad pit stop to future seeking. Fr. Joseph said as much in his interview, “I think that’s one thing we have to be aware of with any kind of conversion. They come in through the front door, but the question is how many of them are leaving through the back door. We have to make sure when they come that we can really engage them and let them get to know people in the parish.”

As in the case of converts themselves, conversion to Orthodoxy was commonly envisioned by clerics in terms of a relationship to be established and fostered between an inquirer and the Orthodox Church, a relationship that should be based on a “purity” of intent and measured by the spiritual intimacy and fulfillment it provides for the convert. Again, this view of conversion is analogous to sociologist Anthony Giddens’s assessment of personal human relationships under conditions of late modernity, where the meeting of individual needs and wants becomes *the* criterion upon which to enter into relationships with others.<sup>43</sup> In the end, individuals should become Orthodox because they *want* to be Orthodox out of an unalloyed emotional or theological affinity with the religion, not out of a sense of tired obligation or as a means of conforming to external circumstances. Even anger and disappointment with former religious confessions were considered suspect motives for conversion in many clerical eyes, for as the Orthodox bishop forthrightly declared in analogizing conversion to marriage:

If you're getting married, you don't marry somebody because you got dumped by somebody else, right? That's not a reason to get married. You get married with a person because you love them and you care for them. . . . You want to be married to Holy Orthodoxy, it's because you love Holy Orthodoxy, not because you're mad at the Episcopal Church or the Roman Catholic Church. It's because you love Holy Orthodoxy and you want it to be part of your life eternally. You want it to be your focus eternally. So, we have to be sure of that and we do everything we can to ensure that.

This analogy necessarily established a high bar for determining religious commitment. While perhaps acceptable for inaugurating respective searches, discontent with other religious venues was not, by and large, considered by clergy an appropriate reason for converting to Orthodoxy in and of itself. Rather, a kind of romantic ideal of 'love,' 'commitment,' and 'eternal fidelity' should propel converts into the church. In fact, commitment to Orthodoxy was even more highly valued than conversion itself, with the former's lack signaling that the latter should not be enacted. While they cheerfully and matter-of-factly embraced commitment as a positive grounding for these current conversions, clerics really had no choice but to do so, for commitment became the only anchor by which to tie religious seekers to specific contexts in the midst of a wanderlusting milieu.

In emphasizing commitment, priests were left with the thorny dilemma of ensuring that autonomous, self-taught seekers who had picked and chosen their way to Orthodox Christianity remained compliant church members holding their substantial, often valorized, choice-making skills in firm check. People endowed with the all-encompassing task of choosing a religious worldview in the first place, may feel entitled to choose specific tenets and practices by which to abide. Furthermore, if or when the ever-vague experience of post-conversion "fulfillment" waned, as it sometimes did even among the most initially well-intentioned, shopping either for new parishes or religions may become enticing once again.

In no sense are Orthodox clerics singular in expressing these concerns, for as Gauri Viswanathan points out in her study of modern conversions, *Outside the Fold*, unbridled, autonomous choice-making, especially that exercised by "strangers," always stands as a potential threat to established religious powers, since it embodies latent tendencies for deviance from authorized forms of teaching and governance. At its most extreme, personal choice-making poses threats of straying into "heresy" or, at the very least, precociousness as individuals crossing into new religious contexts marshal their knowledge

and experience to the rearrangement of interior decors.<sup>44</sup> In his characterization of the stranger, Bauman notes the deep unease newcomers arouse in communities since their ultimate allegiances can forever remain in question, “The episode of entry brands the ‘former stranger’ forever-as a *changeling*, a person who can pick and choose . . . whose status can never have the same degree of solidity, finality and irreversibility as that of the natives.”<sup>45</sup> In a similar fashion, Patrick Allitt notes the deep hierarchical suspicion awaiting Anglo-American converts to Roman Catholicism throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>46</sup> John Henry Newman, himself a convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, once announced that “all converts are dangerous”<sup>47</sup> since as Allitt continues in his characterization, “converts, intellectually adventurous and unused to clerical censorship, were likely to take speculative excursions that challenged orthodoxy rather than fortifying it.”<sup>48</sup>

In churches possessing an “orthodoxy” to maintain, such as in the case of Eastern Christianity, for which theological formulae retain their rigidity and ritual notions of inclusion/exclusion are paramount, clerical oversight over whom is entering their parishes and by what motives becomes all the more important. While “heresy,” at its most theologically technical, did not top the lists of concerns that Orthodox priests expressed regarding their converts, other examples of convert choice-making no less irksome or even dangerous in their view did. Priests, for example, often discussed the penchant for converts to try to effect change in aspects of parish life they felt deviated from Orthodoxy as it was “supposed to be,” usually as that found in other parishes of converts’ experience or through their reading and studying. Armed with their well-recognized “book knowledge” about the faith, some converts were in no way demure in offering priests unsolicited advice about the running of the parish or in complaining about ritual practices they considered incongruent with the traditions of the church, such as kneeling on Sunday or the use of icons painted in “Western” rather than “Eastern” iconographic styles.<sup>49</sup> While such post-conversion encounters often bemused parish priests, they were far more concerned about the selective appropriation of Orthodoxy by converts according to personal preference and their long-term retention within the faith. Rather than necessarily introducing “heresy” into the Orthodox Church, clerics worried that converts in their care may not have the desire or discipline to walk the straight line of



Orthodox Christianity and slowly fall into “heresy” themselves by leaving the church for other more enticing options. Pre-conversion inconsistency and fickleness were taken as indications that an individual may not have the adequate “commitment” for conversion. The notion of “commitment” carried particular weight, however, at two critical junctures in the processes of catechesis within Orthodox parishes: at its commencement and conclusion. Let us turn to a brief examination of each.

Although rather free-wheeling in regard to specific books to be read and catechetical topics to be discussed, priests were by no means open to meeting all convert demands and expectations, a point underscored from the very first meeting held between priest and would-be convert. For instance, no priest interviewed for this project allowed persons entry to the church solely on the basis of individual desire to convert. Enthusiastic inquirers, heretofore unknown to the priest, requesting on-the-spot administration of Orthodox initiation rites were almost always denied their requests except in extreme cases when therequester was critically ill or dying, as the Orthodox bishop noted in his interview. When asked if he had been approached by persons desiring immediate reception into the Orthodox Church over the course of his pastorate, Fr. Joseph responded:

Yes and I tell them to wait, get to know us a little bit better. See our negative side, all the warts so to speak, so they won't be scandalized. 'Cause there's always things you see. Well it's one thing in the books, but when I come I see something else. You've got to see all of it. I don't want you to think you'd be so enthusiastic you'd jump into this and then afterwards you feel regret about it because here you have to embrace the down side of it as well.

In slowing and gaining some control over an individual's initial enthusiasm to convert, Fr. Joseph, at the same time, emphasized the potential convert's choice-making capacity. He wanted converts to experience parish life in its entirety precisely so they could make decisions without regret, for as he further explained, “There have been a couple cases where I received them too quickly. I thought that they were ready but they weren't and then they fell away.”

Other clerics expressed similar views. In response to the same question of receiving requests for immediate conversion, Fr. Nicetas said, “Oh, yes and I've always said, ‘No, hang on.’ I always want to meet with the person and find out a little about them first and, of course, see them in church.” In a similar vein, the Orthodox bishop too emphasized the importance of delaying conversion by again analogizing its

preparations to that of marriage within the church, which too normally requires a period of clerical instruction and discernment of the commitment level of the couple involved:

There have been people who've come and say that they'd like to join right away and we explain to them that this is even more serious than marriage. If someone comes to us in the Orthodox Church and says, "We're gonna get married and we're gonna get married now." We don't do that. I mean, we do the same thing when we marry people in the Orthodox Church that we do when we bring them into the church. There's a long period of making sure they understand what this is in the context of the church. And so when people do come and there's some immediacy, unless it's a life and death situation, in most cases we do the best that we can to dial it down and make sure that it is a true conversion and not just a reaction, a reactionary movement. And many people are very upset with the church that they came from.

Here, the overall seriousness of joining the Orthodox Church is stressed along with the purity of convert intentions. Pastoral discernment of motivations becomes as important as the relaying of information in these proceedings, hence the intense scrutiny of candidate behavior and words, both of which are, in a sense, put on display for the priest however unconsciously so.

Needless to say this deliberate "dialing down" of convert enthusiasm could be frustrating to catechumens who may have spent several months or years on their own reading and learning about Orthodox theology and church history. Having already acquired a great deal of factual information about the Orthodox Church and recognizing it as doctrinally and sacramentally "true," such persons may be quite puzzled at these clerical hesitations. One informant who expressed these frustrations was Sandy, a nurse and mother of four in her mid-forties, who became intensely interested in Orthodox Christianity as a result of her teenage son's readings and investigations. He himself was introduced to Orthodoxy through a friend. Mother and son spent over a year reading and discussing the Orthodox faith, especially the ways in which it differed from their home confession of Roman Catholicism, before contacting Fr. Mark and visiting St. Michael's. By that time, Sandy and her son already had firm intentions of converting that were only confirmed through their initial conversations with him. Sandy admitted that they wanted to be received into the church right away without formal instruction, but, at Fr. Mark's insistence, met with him over a number of weeks for discussion and clarification of doctrinal points. With humor, Sandy recalled her mild impatience at the endeavor, "I think we kind of pushed him a little bit [to convert]. I know he [Fr. Mark] made a comment or something like, 'Bob [her son] wants to be

Orthodox today, but that's not possible.' Then I guess I was sort of like once you know it. Why do we need to wait? We know. Why can't we just do it right now?'" When asked why she thought Fr. Mark had insisted on delaying conversion, Sandy answered, "Well, I think he wanted us to wait to be sure that we weren't gonna change our minds." Not only do informants occasionally mention annoyance at being forced to wait for conversion, but this is common concern expressed in written forums as well.<sup>50</sup>

Not only did these conversions to Orthodoxy take place after active commitment had been demonstrated on the part of the catechumen, but the measured, deliberative quality of these preparations had the added psychological effect, in some cases, of enhancing Orthodoxy's overall desirability in the first place. In a cultural context where Christian denominational boundaries appear rather fluid and where with little preparation or serious intent, individuals can easily attach themselves to a telephone book's listing of different, competing Christian churches at will, this emphasis on spiritual and intellectual readiness coupled with the fact that conversion is not granted on demand heightens the "spiritual capital" of the Orthodox Church. With an already well-developed ecclesial self-perception of theological/historical singularity, the sole possessor of "truth," conveyed to the convert through books and conversations, the Orthodox Church appears that much more serious and distinct, amongst the array of religious options clamoring for attention. In delaying conversion, priests emphasized that the convert must be as "truthful" and pure in her motivations as the Orthodox Church presents itself to be in its doctrine and practices. Furthermore, a glimmer always remained, however faint, that despite the catechumen's best efforts, the conversion may in the end be denied at pastoral discretion. Orthodoxy appears in these accounts as something rare and hard-won, a "treasure" to be cherished and savored once one has been officially admitted into its membership ranks.

In a sense, the imposed waiting, spiritual examination and other accoutrements of the catechetical process, far beyond a memorization of facts, ideally conspired to enhance convert desire to become Orthodox, which priests consistently cited as *the* criterion for determining when someone was "ready" for conversion. An inquirer could not just want to be Orthodox, she had to *really* want it as demonstrated in her active engagement with the faith. When asked how he recognized this moment of "readiness"

concluding the process of catechesis, Fr. Joseph, again, framed it within the context of wider social integration into the parish:

I can just see that they're eager. It's just sort of a sense that they really want it now and they've been thirsting for it-the integration into the community. They're seeing people and meeting people. They are coming to the [Bible] studies. They're getting caught up in the enthusiasm of being part of the faith. And I think at a certain point you kind of have a sense that he or she is really ready now to make the big step.

Fr. Mark made a similar assessment of the “moment” of decision-making for both priest and catechumen, “I think they [the converts] have to be at the point where they have no other choice. This is what they want and they just see no other alternative. They have to *really* want it. So really it's not so much how I know, it's hearing what they're saying. Are they saying this is absolutely it? I'm not turning my back and this is what I want and you've seen their commitment coming to church. You've heard it in their answers and their discussions.” Meanwhile, the Orthodox bishop evoked his marriage analogy in addressing this issue of convert readiness:

I wouldn't be able to put that into words. It would be like asking you if you told me you were going to get married, for me to be able to say to you, how do you know that you're ready to get married? I wouldn't know unless I saw you with the person for a long period of time. That's why we make people go to counseling 'cause we don't marry people just because they ask us to. . . . I think that you can see that a person has really made the [Orthodox] Church their life, has made Christ their main focus and if you see that in their lives, then you think it's probably a good indication that they should become Orthodox. . . . If a person doesn't have a commitment to being immersed in it then you don't bring them in.

Although a joint decision is made in which both priest and catechumen assent to the next step of formal reception into the church, a significant thread coursing through these characterizations was precisely that of conversion as a *choice*, a *decision* to be made in the first place. While in no way discounting views of conversion premised on interiorized psychological shifts or divine intervention, as we shall see momentarily, the interviewed priests emphasized in their catechetical descriptions discursive methods for imparting information and determining catechumen readiness for conversion, all of which build to a climactic moment of making the reasoned *choice* to become Orthodox through the de facto elimination of all other religious options, hence, Fr. Mark's comment, “They have to be at a point where they don't have a choice.” Furthermore, the imperative of this choice, made visible through words and actions, did not

remain an interiorized event in the life of an isolated individual, but rather a communal experience of all parties, if mainly priest and catechumen, to see, study, and understand. In a sense, the catechetical process was one of setting convert decision-making on display, of making it available for pastoral and communal inspection and comment. Interestingly, even the bishop's analogy between marriage and conversion, in which mysterious qualities seemingly beyond articulation dictate their respective courses, only underscored their ultimate ability to be inspected and discursively understood. Observed over a "long period of time," both the suitability of marriage partners and a catechumen and her church can be pastorally determined and granted official seals of approval.

The notion that wider cultural views of religious seeking play a direct role in shaping the contours of catechesis and its resulting spiritual discernment is highlighted all the more by my observation that intermarriage converts as well as others accompanying a seeker convert into the church, a spouse or other family members for example, were generally subject to less rigorous standards for conversion than seekers themselves. A curious pattern emerged. The more purely theological and/or liturgical an interest an individual demonstrated in joining the church, the more rigorous became the requirements for entry, further reinforced by the largely informal, individualized nature of the catechetical proceedings in the first place. While clerics frequently insisted that seekers coming to their doors must wait months or even years before converting, as they attend the yearly round of services, read theological and historical works, and engage in lengthy conversations about their religious lives, converts through marriage were often admitted into the church *solely* on the basis of a stated desire to share in the spousal religion. Extensive, line-by-line explications of the Nicene Creed or expositions of the intricacies of early church history were jettisoned in these cases for much more abbreviated discussions of conversion intentions and family life. If, indeed, conversion occurs at the time of the nuptials, catechesis, in the form of brief overviews of ecclesial belief, may be conflated with general preparations, emphasizing the meanings and responsibilities attendant with marriage itself. Rarely, however, is conversion delayed or cancelled due to the supposed "casualness" of the candidate's attitudes. Indeed, Fr. Nicetas cited intermarriage conversion as a prime example of a situation where his criteria of regular church attendance and intellectual effort to

learn and study the faith came to take on a lesser significance for the sake of expediting marriage proceedings, “Exceptions are in cases of a marriage where somebody who had not been baptized at all needs to be hastily baptized in order to get married. In those circumstances, in marrying into Orthodoxy as it were, hopefully the person’s married someone who’s strong enough [in her faith] that he will pick it up afterwards.”

As already discussed in chapter three, individuals converting to Orthodox Christianity many years into their marriages certainly may experience a genuine affinity and admiration for the church, but most often apart from direct clerical influence and scrutiny as a matter of living and worshipping with their Orthodox families and other parishioners. Converts, in these cases, typically have had on-going post-marital, pre-conversion, relationships with the priest of the local parish they attended and may already have had religious discussions over the years, of varying formality, with the cleric about the possibility of entering the church at some point. Ken, for example, reported approaching Fr. Joseph with questions of church practice and belief years before his conversion. Priests and other parishioners asked non-Orthodox spouses for help with parish events and planning and certainly saw familial interaction within the church setting. When involvement evolved into a genuine desire to join the church, such intermarriage converts were usually contacting a clergyman with whom they were already quite familiar, with conversion itself formalizing long extant relationships. Based on the narratives of convert informants in these circumstances, conversion usually took place shortly after the non-Orthodox spouse’s decision had been made, with catechesis jettisoned altogether in favor of the quick administration of Orthodox initiation rites.

Meanwhile, the family members of ardent seekers entering the church to maintain familial unity or out of mild interest in Orthodoxy, were too commonly subjected to much less pastoral scrutiny. Although Sandy and her son, Bob, were expected to attend months of one-to-one instruction with Fr. Mark, the rest of the family, consisting of a husband and three daughters, had only two brief meetings with the priest shortly before the family together entered the church in the summer of 2003. The other family members had little to no active interest in Orthodoxy per se, but, as Sandy reported, her husband

remarked that conversion “sounded good to him” and two of the daughters (one was already an adult and living outside the parental home when the conversion occurred) decided they did not want to be “left out” of the conversion proceedings. In the wider catechetical gambit, pure seekers floating for years of their pre-conversion lives between religious contexts and tied to Orthodoxy with the single strand of “commitment” represented a higher risk than auxiliary family members and those “through marriage” possessing highly visible anchors to the Orthodox faith. Where commitment remained the primary linkage between a convert and her church, determinations of its strength and ardency become all the more vital, hence the need for greater pastoral rigor in these circumstances.

Finally, it is important to note that other more expansive definitions of the term “conversion” appeared in the clerical interviews as well. While certainly recognizing and focusing on the particularities involved in conversion as an official change in religious affiliation, nearly all the clerics mentioned that “conversion” should be more broadly conceived as an “awakening” or renewal of religious conviction experienced by *all* church members, including the Orthodox-born. Fr. Joseph, for instance, carefully differentiated “intellectual assent” of the tenets of Orthodoxy from a deeper “change of heart” in which “the inner self is touched and transformed by the Holy Spirit in such a way that it creates a kind of awakening of the soul to the reality of God in a much deeper and profound way.” Fr. Joseph here specifically referenced William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in stressing that this “conversion within a conversion” acted as a “second kind of rebirth” that should, ideally, be as much the purview of those born and raised within the church as those coming in from without as he observed, “I may have been baptized as a child, but I need to make the faith that I received as a child work in my life. I need to actualize it and I see that as a second conversion, where now the heart is brought into the faith and it is awakened to the reality of the Holy Spirit.”

This more universalized view of conversion as an interiorized “change of heart” expected of all church members was repeatedly affirmed in the clerical interviews. The Antiochian priest, for example, echoed these sentiments in admitting, “I have a little bit of a problem with the word ‘convert’ anyway. Everybody’s a convert. We all need to change our direction and embrace Christ even if we’re baptized as

infants.” The Orthodox bishop too characterized conversion in such terms, “In Orthodoxy somebody that converts becomes very intimate with God. So, that’s how I would identify the life of a convert . . . our process of conversion continues from the time that those such as myself that were baptized as infants throughout adult life, our conversion continues to blossom. Our intimacy with God, God willing, continues to blossom.” Meanwhile, Fr. Nicetas simply noted, “Strictly speaking conversion’s a change of life which, of course, is required of everybody even if they don’t change churches.”

In these definitions, the clerical informants traded specifically Orthodox Christian vocabularies for generic discussions of religious experience largely devoid of a clear theological orientation. For example, classical patristic terminology such as *metanoia* and *theosis*<sup>51</sup> as well as more general references to concepts such as “sin” and “salvation” along with the role of the church in effecting salvation was supplanted by discussions of the affective, personal “relationship” that should “blossom” or “grow” between a converted person and her God. This view that every church member should “embrace Christ” and foster an “intimacy with God,” simply projected the language of “commitment” and “relationship,” common currency among other religious groups within American culture at large, onto another frame of reference, as a means of defining the human/divine encounter rather than that of the believer and her church. One could easily imagine adherents of other religions and spiritualities wielding such rhetoric in their own characterizations of religious change. Certainly, as discussed earlier, the above descriptions reflect what Wade Clark Roof refers to as a general “leveling effect” that has occurred in the religious language utilized among many American denominations, in which the self appears as a prominent theme along with vague, psychological formulations (e.g., intimacy, actualization, awakening, language of growth) of the nature of its religious life.<sup>52</sup> Orthodox Christians in the United States today are in no way immune to this leveling and readily take for granted the primacy of individual experience and the growth of one’s relationship with the divine in their discussions of conversion and its aftermath. As we shall examine in greater detail in chapter five, this equation of conversion to Orthodoxy with notions of personal growth and self-improvement are pervasive in the conversion narratives as well.



#### 4.4 CLERICAL-CONVERT RELATIONSHIPS

These many months or years of priest-catechumen interaction and discussion have implications for the quality and depth of these relationships in parish life, since priests rarely instruct and/or engage in spiritual counseling of their lifelong parishioners in quite the same manner or degree. Brought into the church as infants and typically catechized, if at all, as children in some cases many years or decades before current pastors assumed their pastorates, many lifelong parishioners only contact their priests for in-depth discussion of their personal lives in times of crisis and tragedy and in many cases never at all. Even for lifelong Orthodox parishioners participating in Bible studies or catechetically designed inquirers' classes the same level of intense one-to-one discussion and scrutiny of individual spiritual life and motivation typically does not occur. Nearly all the priests interviewed remarked that the pastoral needs of converts (both before and after conversion) differed markedly from those of their lifelong church members. Priests often remarked that the intensity of convert interest in Orthodoxy and their own spiritual development made greater demands on their time and attention. Fr. Joseph here offered his perspective on the matter:

Because they [converts] have a better spiritual focus in many instances they expect more. They have to be fed and you have to give them the real thing. You can't just tell them, "You're a good kid." There has to be programs. They come to confession a lot so I have to be available when they come, which I'm happy to do. But you're engaging them on a different level, whereas the parishioners who are "cradle" Orthodox, some of them are just sort of laid back about it all and they don't expect much, as much, unless there's a crisis-a death in the family, marital problem, a sickness something like that in their lives, then they begin to open up a little more.

Fr. Mark maintained that the emotional and spiritual makeup of converts was often much more complex than that of lifelong members and in need of more sustained pastoral attention, "I think many times converts tend to have spiritual and even emotional issues that many times people that are Orthodox all their lives either don't have or have already dealt with. . . . So there's much discussion that goes on outside of just the faith, you know. I don't want to say bad experiences in their family lives and their school lives or social lives, but they do have certain issues sometimes that tends to lead them to a deeper experience of religion in general." In relating to persons whom they considered in possession of "a

deeper experience of religion” or a “better spiritual focus,” priests often felt that they could hold higher level theological discussions with well-read converts and more directly influence their spiritual/religious lives, in the classic sense of “spiritual fathers” with their children, than might be the case with either lifelong Orthodox or intermarriage convert parishioners. One priest, for instance, enthused that converts, as a rule, “elevate” the entire tenor of a parish with their religious knowledge and zeal. At the same time, Fr. Mark mentioned to me in casual conversation one coffee hour that he had long given up on trying to influence most of the older, lifelong members of his church, to change their long engrained, often erroneous, practices and notions of the church taught to them by “bubbis”<sup>53</sup> rather than priests. Rather than harboring hopes of substantially increasing the knowledge and interest levels of many of the elder members of his flock into the tenets of the Orthodox faith, Fr. Mark decided to concentrate his pedagogical and pastoral efforts almost exclusively on “the children and the converts” of his church, groups whom he considered the more malleable and receptive to his influence.

At the same time, converts, both in receiving this pastoral teaching and counseling and in gaining the priest’s consent for conversion, of necessity, were reliant on the parish priest to an extent not usually found among other lay parishioners. Stepping into a church perceived as liturgically and/or ethnically “foreign” and where worries about social acceptance can run high, converts often considered the priest a natural ally in the parish setting, a person to whom they could turn for advice and for introductions to others within the community. Converts commonly cited the approachability and attentiveness of the parish priest to their concerns and problems in converting to Orthodoxy as key to their choice of parish, even when other factors seem to indicate the “fit” between convert and parish may be less than ideal. For instance, informants such as Helen and Fred commented that churches of a Slavic orientation were more aesthetically appealing to them than the Greek (e.g., Helen admitted an unabashed fascination for all things Russian), but had developed such close ties with Fr. Joseph that neither considered abandoning Ascension for another church. Meanwhile, John, as a student without a car, endured a complicated, two-hour bus ride on Pittsburgh public transit each Sunday morning to attend St. Michael’s, even when other

Orthodox churches were closer at hand, out of a deep appreciation for the Fr. Mark's enthusiasm, effort, and teaching.

Converts frequently extolled the pastoral virtue of their priests and cast the friendly, caring attention they received from them as imperative to their eventual conversions. Karen, for example, respected the ways in which the parish priest and other members of St. Michael's "reach out" to those who are seeking. When discussing her reasons for joining this parish rather than the many other Orthodox parishes available in Pittsburgh, Karen immediately praised Fr. Mark's openness to converts, "I mean, Fr. Mark's online at a website answering questions from potential converts. He's an *involved* type of person who *cares* about people who are seeking. He himself being cradle Orthodox doesn't have that experience himself of converting, but he cares about converts and we [at St. Michael's] have a lot of them who chose to be Orthodox." By and large, converts, even "seekers of [objective and absolute] truth" such as Karen too desired a parochial context receptive to their personal, individualized needs, which came to be measured in clerical attempts to actively meet seekers at the ecclesial front door and "care about" their "experience of converting," to answer their questions and lessen the immediate sense of being a stranger in a strange church.

Mary and her husband, Fred, too searched for the "true church" in the early years of their marriage, with Fred concluding Orthodox Christianity to be its embodiment after an intense two-year immersion in the writings of Orthodox theologians such as Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff among others. Mary came to agree with her husband's assessment, however, over the course of a tragic miscarriage she suffered shortly after the couple began visiting Ascension parish. Lying in the hospital with the knowledge that little could be done to save her pregnancy, Mary recalled the visits Fr. Joseph made to her despite the fact that she was not yet Orthodox and had only attended the church twice before her five-week hospital confinement. She recounted being stunned at Fr. Joseph's attitude which was unlike anything she had witnessed among the Protestant clergy she knew:

I remember it hit me like a ton of bricks because my experience in the Protestant church is that they would *look* for you when you're down to get you in. And I couldn't have *been* anymore down than I was at that time and this man wasn't trying to convert me. He was there to care for

me. And he was there just to be with me. He just came and he sat and he prayed and he gave me an icon. It was just very, very sweet and it wasn't about him getting another number in his book at all.

Fr. Joseph's kindly, gentle attention stood out in sharp relief against the many churches Mary had moved between in the midst of her "journey" and signaled to her that it had reached an end. The "true church" of her and her husband's prayers materialized before her eyes in the midst of this personal crisis and the compassionate care she received from a near stranger of a priest, as she explained, "And I remember thinking to myself, 'This is the true church. This is it. This is the place because of his response, because it was just so foreign.' And we'd been to a lot of places before. I mean, we've seen a lot of things, a lot of different churches, lots of different kinds of denominations and that wasn't how it was done in other places." Having spent years in the marketplace of American religious life as an object of active recruitment among the Protestant churches she attended, Mary was impressed by a clergyman, who represented for her the entirety of Orthodoxy itself, seemingly more interested in her personal psychological and spiritual welfare than in bringing her into the Orthodox faith. As in the case of Karen and Fr. Mark, Mary and Fred have maintained very close spiritual ties with Fr. Joseph in their post-conversion lives within the church.

The emphasis placed on the likeability of the parish priest, however multifariously "likeability" may, in fact, be defined, is by no means unique among Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh, but reflects wider changes in how lay persons have come to consider and interact with clergy in late twentieth century America and elsewhere. Rather than standing as the mere public face of ecclesial authority, clerics are increasingly viewed as discrete persons, offering individualized perspectives on and approaches to religious faith and making attempts to "connect" on a personal level with their congregants.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, more than one commentator of contemporary American religions has noted how electronic media such as radio, television, and the internet have transformed religion itself into a realm of "personality" and "celebrity" where the individual quirks, foibles, and temperaments of religious leaders commonly take center stage over issues of doctrine and church practice in the lives of the laity. Grace Davie and Enzo Pace among others have noted that established clergy and religious leaders are increasingly expected to

fill the role of the “prophet,” in the classic Weberian sense of embodying charismatic energy and appealing to certain emotional states in their followers.<sup>55</sup> Pace, for instance, has noted that much of the intense popularity surrounding the late Pope John Paul II stems from his manner of communication, his charismatic delivery and the overall warmth and approachability of his personality, rather than the doctrinal contents of his message.<sup>56</sup>

On more local levels, as religious affiliation itself is now largely a matter of personal preference, so too clerical personalities are subject to scrutiny, with the overall compatibility between pastor and congregant a key factor in determining whether or when persons may engage in active religious seeking. For example, a number of my informants seemed to equate finding the “right church” with locating a pastor who was personable and demonstrated great concern over their needs and problems. While, as we shall see in chapter five, the motives for converting to Orthodoxy are numerous and complex, the “charisma” and care of the local priest, in the varied styles that clerics exhibited, was vital to encouraging conversions and ensuring that converts stayed in their parishes.

However, just as the plethora of ecclesial options appeal to varied consumer tastes, so too clerical personalities and approaches resonated with different constituencies of the laity. For example, each of the presiding clerics of my primary fieldsites, Frs. Mark and Joseph, exhibited quite different sets of qualities attractive to convert informants. Often standing outside the fray of daily parish activities, Fr. Joseph was described by a number of parishioners, both convert and lifelong Orthodox alike, as a “holy man” for his dedication to Orthodox prayer practices and his quiet, calm manner with others. A number of converts discussed the deep, penetrating insight he seemed to have into their psychological states and problems, an insight that seemed mildly tinged with near superhuman powers. For example, when Mary finally delivered her stillborn child she mentioned Fr. Joseph’s quick arrival at the hospital to be so “weird” and uncanny that she said, “He must have been carried there by the angels.” Meanwhile, Helen said of her first meeting with the man, “He was so generous, just so generous and I knew the minute I walked in and sat with him the first time and I told him a little bit about myself. . . . And I looked at those slacked eyes looking at me so intently and thought, ‘I’ve really come. I’ve been touch with the source here and I’m

gonna continue.”” Another woman said of Fr. Joseph that “he has no guile, absolutely no guile” and she was astonished at his kind and trusting nature, especially in agreeing to take her and her husband on a mission trip to the Holy Land slightly after their introduction to him and before the couple had converted to Orthodoxy.

The convert informants of St. Michael’s, on the other hand, were impressed by Fr. Mark’s “down to earth” quality, the fact that he lived in the midst of life’s everyday frays not above them and regularly spoke to their practical concerns. Ingrid, for instance, was impressed that Fr. Mark assumed the role of a “peer” more readily than that of an authority figure, “I think having Fr. Mark there [at St. Michael’s] really spoke to me on a lot of levels. So, here’s this guy who has three kids, a wife, had worked day jobs and so, I mean, even confession, I go in and I talk to Fr. Mark about marital problems or life problems or whatever, and you understand he knows what you’re talking about. He’s a peer, you know.” The formerly unchurched Christine was relieved that she had finally met a clergyman who was a “real person,” who never gave off priestly airs and who seemed interested in making Christian teaching practical and relevant, as she here enthused about his sermons, “And the first Sunday, we were there [at St. Michael’s], we were just blown away by Fr. Mark. I mean, I just had never heard a priest’s sermons like that before. I had only heard something very dry, you know. Whereas he weaves passages from the Bible into real life and he makes me understand the Bible better by doing that-making analogies of our real lives and the Bible.” In addition to his accessible teachings, Fr. Mark informally socialized with his young, mainly convert, parishioners, by organizing young adult outings that involved visits to ice cream parlors and movie nights showcasing popular flicks. He also tended to meet parishioners at coffee shops and restaurants rather than in his formal office.

Given the importance of the priest-convert relationship, formed and strengthened over the course of the catechetical process and well beyond, converts were often seen in the parish, through the prism of intra-parish power relations and struggles, as natural “allies” of the priest, although priests themselves rarely spoke of this dimension directly. While lifelong members with whom I spoke at both St. Michael’s and Ascension were generally excited about and encouraging of converts coming to their church, this

enthusiasm was by no means a universal sentiment, either in the fieldsites at hand or in other parishes. The starkest example of this came from the experience of Fr. Andrew of Ascension church who, although now a full-time social worker, had begun his clerical career as a young man successively in charge of what he referred to as two largely “geriatric parishes” both of which “would have accepted converts only because of the fact of what it meant to them financially.” When asked why the parishioners of these communities were not generally open to new, previously non-Orthodox, church members, Fr. Andrew forthrightly speculated, “I think they really felt threatened by it [conversion]. I think it threatened the power base to have new people come in who were in some sense loyal to the priest instead of the power base [of some lifelong parishioners]-itself being typically antagonistic to the priest. The converts would be seen as loyal to the priest rather than loyal to *them*, you know, the power base.”

While the long-extant “power bases” of St. Michael’s and Ascension churches, comprising the lifelong parishioners and church council members of St. Michael’s and Ascension were not generally antagonistic to either Frs. Mark or Joseph based on my fieldwork observations, the converts of both parishes were closely entwined to clerical authority in rather different ways. For example, Fr. Joseph was sensitive to the specific talents and expertise of his convert parishioners and was keen to place them in positions where these talents could be of benefit to the community as a whole. He regularly asked converts to run for parish council, where two study informants, Terence and Ken, served as president and treasurer respectively and he had undertaken a number of projects, such as the formation of a support group for new mothers and the founding of an Orthodox Christian day school chiefly with the initial support of converts. Meanwhile, Fr. Mark saw converts as conduits of revitalization in his demographically declining parish, with both he and the converts often expressing quite similar views on controversial issues within the parish. For instance, Fr. Mark along with a number of converts expressed a desire to relocate the parish to a nearby housing development from which they dreamed of repopulating St. Michael’s with hosts of new young families and converts, an eventuality vigorously opposed by the majority of the older, lifelong members of the parish.

Finally, as is the case with all categories of human endeavor, the relationships forged between priests and converts themselves were not always idyllic. While more than happy in most cases to offer counsel and assistance to their convert parishioners, priests often commented on the dangerous tendency exhibited in a few, rare converts to idolize the priest and look upon him as something of a “guru” to whom should be deferred all the major questions of their lives. In this sense, priests were careful to differentiate their “spiritual fatherhood” of lay parishioners from that of monks and nuns who were expected to maintain such intense relationships with the abbots or abbesses of their cloistered communities. Although converts may read of St. Symeon’s avowal that total obedience to one’s spiritual father could and should not be differentiated from that given to Christ, Orthodox clerics in Pittsburgh clearly did not subscribe to this ideal in their daily encounters with lay parishioners and tried to maintain some distance from the private lives of their flocks, a distance all the more difficult to ascertain and maintain given the great intimacy and openness these relations seemed to engender. Fr. Mark emphasized the dangers of converts interpreting their “spiritual fatherhood” in this way, “But where I am concerned sometimes is the tendency of some converts to place either in me or some other spiritual father a sort of guru-ship that is extremely dangerous and extremely harmful and extremely un-Orthodox. And it is dangerous in ways that they will never understand.” He further couples these warnings with concrete examples from his own pastoral experience:

If they [converts] come to me and say, “You know, I’m thinking of buying a car or something and I don’t know if I should really spend all this money”—It becomes—I mean, if it’s a truly spiritual issue, I think that’s all well and good and should be encouraged, but when it starts to seep over into their private life, into their social life, um, I want to step away from that as quickly as possible and sometimes they want to encourage that. Sometimes they want to have that type of a relationship on that level, which is certainly the level that an abbot would have with their spiritual children in the monastery, the monks in the monastery. But this is *not* appropriate at all for lay people to have this type of a relationship with their spiritual father. It’s simply not appropriate.

As a monk himself, Fr. Nicetas framed the issue of teacher-disciple relationships within the wider tableau of Orthodox religious life and counted their idealization a common problem found among converts to the faith, “A tendency to be unrealistic in expectations is probably the main problem I see. Certainly, I think I’ve seen this more in the Orthodox Church than anywhere else, but a tendency to idolize people. So, I



think this is a pitfall for converts in *any* church and I think particularly among the Orthodox there's this real expectation of the sanctity of certain people and they can feel awfully let down when their idols have feet of clay and most of us have, I'm afraid, in one way or another."

## 4.5 CONCLUSION

As a mainstay character of conversion narratives and lives, Orthodox clerics offer valuable insights into the processes of convert entry into the Orthodox Church. While observers of American Orthodoxy, such as Alexei D. Krindatch and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, generally place it on the margins of the American spiritual marketplace, the metaphors and actions of seeking and choice-making inform nearly every aspect of catechesis as implemented in the Pittsburgh Orthodox churches. Demonstrations of convert commitment to Orthodoxy are of far greater importance in these proceedings than the conveyance of doctrinal and ritual information from priest to catechumen. Deftly wielding the language of seeking and choice-making in their interviews, clerics, at once, valorize converts for consciously choosing Orthodoxy from the midst of competing options available, a sign of Orthodoxy's rising marketplace value, and wrest sole choice-making control from them through the pastoral "gatekeeping" function of ensuring the purity and earnestness of conversion motivations. At the same time, the potentiality of pastoral delay or denial of a catechumen's desire to become Orthodox can serve as a potent means of "branding" Orthodoxy, of distinguishing it from ecclesial competitors eager for new members.

The duration and personal intensity of these pre-conversion clerical-catechumen relationships frequently continue as part of converts' post-conversion experiences within the church and have important ramifications for the parish as a whole. Converts, like "children," are perceived as receptive to pastoral influence in a way that many lifelong members are not and converts can come to be readily seen and act as allies to the priest within the parish setting. More will be discussed on the intra-parish parsing of lifelong and convert church members in everyday parish life in chapter six. For now, let us turn to the

issue of conversion motives themselves, an issue of central concern to Orthodox parish insiders and observers alike.

#### 4.6 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The precise rituals employed for bringing adult converts into the Orthodox Church can vary considerably from diocese to diocese and even from parish to parish. Although all members of the Orthodox Church must be baptized and chrismated, the baptisms of other Christian confessions, with a few exceptions and upon the discretion of the bishop and priest, are generally considered valid. Some former Roman and Byzantine Catholics are brought into the Orthodox Church through confession alone. See John H. Erickson, "The Reception of Non-Orthodox Into the Orthodox Church: Contemporary Practice," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 41, no. 1 (1997): 1-17 for a critical treatment of these varied practices.

<sup>2</sup>M. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb, "Introduction: Conversion in a Plural World," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, edited by M. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (NY: Cassell, 1999), 18.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 7. Here, Bryant and Lamb discuss the "gatekeeping" function of the priest in Roman Catholicism. The priest plays a similar role in Eastern Orthodoxy.

<sup>4</sup>See Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 312; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); David Swartz, "Bridging the Study of Culture and Religion: Pierre Bourdieu's Political Economy of Symbolic Power," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 71-85.

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the development of the catechumenate in these early centuries see Robert M. Grant, "Development of the Christian Catechumenate," in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate*, Liturgical Studies from the Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 39-46.

<sup>6</sup>St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments: The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses*, ed., F. L. Cross (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), 42.

<sup>7</sup>Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, second edition (NY: Penguin Books, 1993), 280-281.

<sup>8</sup>Lazarus Saturday, commemorating Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead as recounted in the Gospel of John (chapter 11), directly precedes Palm Sunday, the first day of Eastern Orthodox Holy Week, finding its conclusion with the midnight services on Holy Saturday/Easter Sunday.

<sup>9</sup>Grant, 37.

<sup>10</sup>See Leonel L. Mitchell, “Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period,” in *Made, Not Born*, 83-97 for a discussion of post-baptismal catechesis in mission contexts and within Christian churches as a whole.

<sup>11</sup>The most significant series of mass conversions of adults to Eastern Orthodoxy in the United States occurred at the turn of the last century when entire Greek Catholic parishes entered the Russian church in North America under the direction of Fr. Alexis Toth. Yet, on account of the liturgical similarities between Greek Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole (indeed, these parishes left the Catholic fold in reaction against attempts made on the part of the Roman Catholic episcopate in North America to “Latinize” aspects of their rituals and church life), catechetical instruction did not appear as a central concern. Rather than entering an entirely new ecclesial context, these conversions were viewed by contemporaries and some subsequent historians as a return on the part of these immigrants to their “roots.” See John H. Erickson, *Orthodox Christians in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62-65. Also see James Jorgenson, “Father Alexis Toth and the Transition of the Greek Catholic Community in Minneapolis to the Russian Orthodox Church,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1988): 119-137.

<sup>12</sup>For a study of nineteenth and twentieth-century adult converts to Roman Catholicism see Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>See Article 64 of “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) in *The Documents of Vatican II* (NY: Guild Press, 1966), 159 for official Roman Catholic reinstatement of the catechumenate for adults.

<sup>14</sup>See Karen Ward, “Making Adult Disciples: Rite for Our Times-Adult Baptism,” *The Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (March 24, 1999): 348-350.

<sup>15</sup>Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>16</sup>Sophie Koulomzin, *Our Church and Our Children*, updated with a new foreword by Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 13-14.

<sup>17</sup>See note 1 of this chapter and John H. Erickson’s work regarding this issue in his article “The Reception of Non-Orthodox Into the Orthodox Church: Contemporary Practice.”

<sup>18</sup>A hieromonk is a monk who has been ordained to the priesthood in the Orthodox Church.

<sup>19</sup>Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 39.

<sup>20</sup>Irene Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 19. See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, rev. ed., trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984).

<sup>21</sup>Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: St. Symeon the New Theologian-Life, Spirituality, Doctrine* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 96-7.

<sup>22</sup>Hausherr, 308-309.

<sup>23</sup>Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 120-121.

<sup>24</sup>Archimandrite Sophrony, *St. Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999). Archimandrite Sophrony was a spiritual son of St. Silouan the Athonite.

<sup>25</sup>*The Way of a Pilgrim*, trans. Olga Savin (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 43-45.

<sup>26</sup>The American Orthodox online publication, *The Onion Dome*, a take on the satirical publication *The Onion*, often offers biting humor on this aspect of Eastern Orthodox convert culture [www.theoniondome.com]. A convert informant in this study, John, brought this website to my attention.

<sup>27</sup>The liturgical scholar Daniel B. Stevick offers a fascinating history of the development and proliferation of catechetical texts in post-Reformation Europe in "Christian Initiation: Post-Reformation to the Present Era," in *Made, Not Born*, 99-117. In discussing the supposedly "dialogical" nature of written catechetical texts, such as those of which Helen so fondly recalled, Stevick writes, "Another problem with the catechism as a style of teaching is that one voice, supplies both the questions and the answers. The form is dialogical, but no real dialogue takes place." (103)

<sup>28</sup>See Bishop Kallistos Ware, "Strange Yet Familiar: My Journey to the Orthodox Church," in *The Inner Kingdom*, vol 1 *The Collected Works* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>29</sup>Although formerly non-Orthodox clergy are not required to be reeducated in Orthodox seminaries, they, depending upon their previous ecclesial affiliation, may be required to be reordained. Again, there is wide jurisdictional and diocesan variation regarding this practice. Generally, the Orthodox Church accepts Roman Catholic and non-Chalcedonian ordinations (non-Chalcedonian churches are those that reject the fifth-century council of Chalcedon's pronouncements regarding the nature of Christ and include the Coptic and Armenian churches among others) valid. For a theological discussion of this issue see, John Erickson, "Reception of Non-Orthodox Clergy Into the Orthodox Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1985): 115-132.

<sup>30</sup>See Acts 22: 1-22; Acts 26: 1-24; Galatians 1: 11-24.

<sup>31</sup>Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 45-48.

<sup>32</sup>Meredith B. McGuire, "Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism in Catholic Pentecostal Prayer Groups," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 16, no. 2 (June 1977): 165-168.

<sup>33</sup>Again, Anthony Giddens notes the importance of narrative to the construction of the late modern self in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 76-77.

<sup>34</sup>Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Vintage Books, 1980), 59.

<sup>35</sup>See for example, Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev, *Forgotten Medicine: The Mystery of Repentance* (Platina, CA: St. Xenia Skete, 2008).

<sup>36</sup>Virginia Hine, "Bridge-Burners: Commitment and Participation in a Religious Movement," *Sociological Analysis* 31 (1970): 61-66

<sup>37</sup>Lorne L. Dawson, "Cult Conversions: Controversy and Clarification," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, 287-314; Martin Eggleton, "Belonging to a Cult or New Religious Movement: Act of Freewill or Form of Mind Control," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, 263-277.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, the conversion account of Susan Engelhardt, "From Rome to Home," in *Our Hearts' True Home: Fourteen Warm, Inspiring Stories of Women Discovering the Ancient Christian Faith*, ed. Virginia Nieuwsma (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>39</sup>For perspectives on the Western-rite liturgy within Eastern Orthodoxy see Gregory Woolfenden, "Western Rite Orthodoxy: Some Reflections on a Liturgical Question," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 45, no. 2 (2001): 163-192 and Paul Schneirla, "Western Rite Orthodoxy: A Brief Response From Within," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2001): 193-197.

<sup>40</sup>The pamphlet entitled "What on Earth is the Orthodox Church?" presents basic historical and doctrinal facts about the church. It was published by Conciliar Press an Orthodox publishing house in Ben Lomond, California established by Evangelical Protestant converts to Orthodox Christianity in the late 1980s.

<sup>41</sup>Ian Randall, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus: The Evangelical Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 146-164.

<sup>42</sup>Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, rev. and updated ed. (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992), 173.

<sup>43</sup>Giddens, 91-3.

<sup>44</sup>Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 244-6.

<sup>45</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 78.

<sup>46</sup>Allitt, 7.

<sup>47</sup>Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 473 as quoted in Allitt, 7.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>49</sup>See Section 2.6, note 44 regarding the issue of standing on Sunday in Orthodox churches. According to canonical Orthodox teaching kneeling on Sunday is prohibited, although many churches and parishioners do kneel at certain junctures of the Divine Liturgy in some Orthodox churches. For example, most parishioners knelt during the consecration of the bread and wine at Ascension church, while parishioners did not kneel at St. Michael's. Artistic realism is apparent in some of the iconography found in Orthodox churches in the United States, especially in older communities such as Pittsburgh. Some clergy and parishioners, particular converts, interpret this realism as a "western" influence alien to "traditional" Byzantine-style "eastern" iconography.

<sup>50</sup>One catechumen wrote of his frustration regarding the length of time he was required to wait before conversion in "Ask Father," a regular feature of the Orthodox periodical, *Again*. He writes, "I

decided to convert to Orthodoxy. I have been seeing a priest in a monastery. I am now a catechumen. The father said it could take six to twelve months. I have seen him three times now and there seems to be no formal approach, he asks me if I have questions and things go from there. . . . What troubles me is the length of time till I am baptized. . . . Why does this take so long?" In "Ask Father," *Again* 26, no. 4 (winter, 2004): 28.

<sup>51</sup>*Metanoia* is the Greek term for repentance or turning towards the divine. *Theosis* (or deification) refers to the process of salvation in Orthodox theology, whereby Christians can become partakers of the divine through grace. See Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 231-8.

<sup>52</sup>Roof, 101-103.

<sup>53</sup>"Bubbi" is a colloquial endearment for "grandmother" used in Slavic communities in Pittsburgh. The term is closely associated with the Russian word for grandmother, *babushka*.

<sup>54</sup>Wuthnow discusses the changing models and meanings of clerical life in contemporary America in *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 266-68.

<sup>55</sup>Grace Davie, "Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge," in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 29-30 and Enzo Pace, "Religion as Communication: The Changing Shape of Catholicism in Europe," in *Everyday Religion*, 46-48.

<sup>56</sup>Pace, 46-48.

## **5.0 MEANINGS AND MOTIVATIONS OF CONVERSION TO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

At the precise instant that I captured informants' lives and experiences through tape recording and notetaking, a clear destination, the Orthodox Church, had been reached and transformed from an unknown ecclesial terrain into a place and space of long-term dwelling. While the permanence of this dwelling in individual informant lives remains to be seen, the Orthodox Church was presented, especially in the narratives of seeker converts, as the answer to a pre-conversion life of religious restlessness, questioning, and dissatisfaction. Among convert informants in Pittsburgh, the discovery that Orthodoxy was the "something missing" following years or decades of 'searching,' 'journeying' or 'questing' became the critical mark dividing pre-from post-conversion lives. From narrators' post-conversion standpoints, personal, though quite concrete tangible, religious needs and desires provided the momentum to these searches and served as the rationale for rejecting or adopting one or another religious option along the way.

Certainly, more broadly, the question of why people change religions remains a ubiquitous, if rather murky and controversial, issue in conversion studies. Apart from circumstances where individuals may be directly impelled by external force to cast off old religions for new, as in cases of so-called conversion "by the sword," religious conversion is frequently considered by its observers as a singular, strange, and spectacular phenomenon that defies empirical understanding and calls for deeper analyses of mind or soul. Talal Asad has suggested that the academic preoccupation with explaining conversion itself

betrays a suspicion of its ultimate irrationality.<sup>1</sup> Still, the question of motivation is significant in highlighting what converts feel they have gained and/or achieved in the process of changing religions or in this case of entering the Orthodox Church. Motivations give insight into informants' meanings and perceptions of Orthodox Christianity. A person, for example, converting out of a desire to escape pluralism or consumerism must somehow envision Orthodoxy as holding these traits in check. Yet, convert responses to motivational queries are manifold rather than singular, thus furnishing competing visions of what Orthodoxy might be and how it affects individual lives. Just as a plethora of choices stand side-by side for individual perusal and appropriation in contemporary American life, so converts form or choose their own definitional and experiential conceptions of Orthodoxy.

Other scholars who have studied converts to Orthodox Christianity have commented on the multiplicity of attractions the Orthodox faith may hold for inquirers. Philip Charles Lucas, for example, records the many conversion motives he has observed, "These conversions include both individuals and communities drawn to the rich liturgies, firm moral theology, mystical spirituality, and claims of apostolic continuity offered by Orthodoxy."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Richard P. Cimino has noted the "different visions of the church"<sup>3</sup> conveyed by the young converts and reverts of his study in their discussions of why they had become Orthodox, "Just when I thought I could pinpoint a common tendency of thought among most of the young adults, there were usually several exceptions that would break the rules."<sup>4</sup> Cimino attributes this finding to the natural variability found within Orthodox Christianity as a religious system, in its expanse of ritual and conceptual offerings.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Orthodox Christianity provides converts a rich "cultural repertoire" to investigate and appropriate at will. At the same time, sociologists H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant maintained in their study of Orthodox converts in Boston that such individuals were "not simply robotic followers of a rigid faith" but persons who in bouncing "their individual, implicit feelings off the traditions of the Orthodox faith,"<sup>6</sup> often held different interpretations regarding the nature and meaning of their newfound church.

While I too found motivational and conceptual variation in the views expressed by convert informants in Pittsburgh, their stated reasons for embracing Orthodox Christianity generally fell into two



categories, each of which provided distinct, if entwined and mutually informed, perspectives on Eastern Orthodoxy. These two categories represented fundamental aspects of Orthodoxy's "cultural repertoire" that are set in potent interplay to, rather than remaining distinct from, the concepts and language of the American marketplace in the narratives. First, in direct, explicit reaction *against* America's marketplace culture, informants were often profoundly interested in Eastern Orthodoxy as a staid, doctrinally and historically conservative form of Christianity offering its members a profound sense of stability and continuity with imagined pasts. Many informants affirmed a strong attraction to the external, institutional qualities of the Orthodox Church as a preserver of doctrinal formulae, hierarchical (and, I daresay, patriarchal) structures, and absolute, exclusivist notions of "truth" and "tradition." In this regard, Orthodoxy was frequently valorized as a church offering the strong doses of moral and epistemological certainty and senses of community needed to assuage the social isolation and existential uncertainty of contemporary existence.

Yet, these very same informants commonly described Orthodox Christianity as liberating in providing new arenas for individual self-expression, growth, and transformation, all of which were usually gauged in terms of positive personality change or a heightened awareness of divine workings in their lives. The Orthodox Church, especially in offering its adherents a menu of ritual and ascetic practices to appropriate, was depicted as a powerful platform and context for individual self-discovery. Even informants with an avowed interest in Orthodoxy's supposed unchanged and unchanging "truth" did not want to remain unchanged themselves in their encounters with and lives within the church, but freely wielded the theologically indistinct language of "growth" and "fulfillment" in describing their desires for an ecclesial context to call their own. However one may want to interpret moralist Philip Rieff's assertions regarding the modern "triumph of the therapeutic,"<sup>7</sup> convert informants regularly took for granted the notion that religion, and the Orthodox Church in particular, should provide vaguely formulated psychological benefits such as comfort, happiness, and satisfaction. They fully expected to exercise their choice-making skills within the church setting and to formulate self-expressive and individualized post-conversion identities within Orthodoxy.

Indeed, parallel to Cavalcanti and Chalfant's assessment of their Bostonian informants, Pittsburgh converts were certainly projecting "implicit feelings" onto the icon-clad walls of their newer Orthodox faith, but, I maintain, "implicit feelings" and expectations of individualism and choice-making carefully culled and reinforced over the course of their pre-conversion lives. Even in the midst of their conversions to Orthodox Christianity, converts in no way fully shed the habits and expectations of the marketplace, but come, in many ways, to depict the Orthodox Church in its very guise. Yet, these implicit assumptions are vitally entwined with explicit concerns about the marketplace itself and visions of Orthodoxy, at least at its most pristine ideal, as existing radically beyond its reach. At an initial glance, we might expect these two visions of Orthodoxy to appear as contentious poles, creating high drama and existential conflict in individuals confronted with simultaneous needs to attain epistemological security and personal religious self-expression. Yet, such a conflict almost never materialized in the narratives. Rather, once inside the Orthodox Church as converted members, informants considered the more formal, external aspects of the Orthodox Church, its doctrinal, authoritative, and ritual structures, as providing the very interpretive spaces and ambiguities necessary for the personal growth and transformation they so often sought.

Whether as a point of opposition or continuity with Orthodox Christianity, the marketplace still furnished a powerful and expansive "toolkit" (in Ann Swidler's sense) of conceptual materials for convert understandings and discussions of their entries into the Orthodox Church. Yet, the marketplace is by no means all-encompassing, but is simply one "model of and for" reality among others available for appropriation and combination. Certainly, another cultural model among converts remains the Orthodox Church itself, its theologies, histories, and rituals, which they intellectually imbibe and consciously practice. Thus, as a musician combines different musical styles and influences in a composition, so too these narratives reflect different aspects of informants' experiences.

Whereas the discussions of the previous chapters have focused on the kinesthetic crossing portion of conversion processes, this chapter is devoted to the differing visions informants hold of Orthodoxy Christianity as a place and space of post-conversion dwelling. Our discussion will proceed in a threefold manner. First, we will begin our discussion with a brief overview of the overall mode of comparison and

contrast so frequently evoked in contextualizing and conveying conversion motives, for the merits of the Orthodox Church rarely stand alone in the collected narratives. They appear in sharp relief against the perceived deficiencies of former religious confessions as well as the spiritual marketplace and a broader American culture of seemingly limitless possibility. Second, we will explore one aspect of Orthodoxy's "cultural toolkit," wielded by informants in their narratives, the church as a venue of moral and epistemological stability as well as a sense of community and belonging to its new adherents. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an examination of informant considerations of Orthodoxy as a context for personal spiritual growth and development, with special attention paid to three specific ways in which the external, institutional features of Orthodoxy, its absolute "truth" and "tradition," are featured as promoting such endeavors in the narratives. This last discussion will allow us to chart the improvisational interplay of the two visions of Orthodoxy that emerge in the narratives.

## **5.2 NARRATIVE STRUCTURES OF COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**

Through her evocation of C. S. Lewis' introduction to *Mere Christianity*, Helen, we may recall from chapter one, stressed the largely contiguous nature of her lifelong Anglicanism with her much more recent embrace of Orthodox Christianity. An overarching "mere Christianity" of shared doctrine and history, expressed through the Christian creeds and semblances of liturgical worship, brought unity to these two halves of her life and left Helen at once grateful for her new Orthodox faith and comfortable with her husband's continued affiliation with the Anglican church. She forthrightly maintained that Orthodoxy was the fulfillment of her Anglican faith. Certainly, as discussed in chapter four, many Orthodox clerics themselves encouraged converts to consider their conversions in such a way. However, not all informants embraced this conversion *topos*, minimizing the differences between pre-and-post-conversion lives, but rather stressed Orthodoxy's distinctness through an intense narrative contrasting of the Orthodox Church with the other religions and churches of their pre-conversion experience. Instead of

valorizing a common heritage of “mere Christianity” supposedly uniting different Christian forms, convert narrators were far more likely to highlight the profound, often irreconcilable differences they saw setting Orthodoxy from other churches. These apparent differences lent narrative shape to the interviews and provided a clear framework for informant articulation of conversion motives.

Comparison and contrast between Orthodox Christianity and other religious options appeared in the informant narratives in two fundamental ways. First, comparing and contrasting different churches were potent and effective *methods* of religious investigation. Informants regularly described how they carefully weighed the various external features exhibited by the different faiths about which they read or visited. They evaluated personal needs and preferences and scrutinized each option in their light, for as Ken, the intermarriage convert from Catholicism at Ascension Greek church, recalled of his own pre-conversion experience, “I didn’t convert [to Orthodoxy] right away. I had a period to sit back and kind of reflect and do the old compare-contrast kind of thing....I was doing a lot of compare and contrast and the more I compared and contrasted, the more I felt that I’m not getting what I should be getting as a Catholic....During the six-seven year period [preceding his conversion] there was a lot of comparing and contrasting.” It should be remembered that such modes of comparison and contrast are in no way peculiar to Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh, but are integral, as Gauri Viswanathan claims, to the “knowledge-production” inherent to modern conversion itself.<sup>8</sup>

Second, comparison/contrast appeared as a *narrative structure* conveying conversion motives and highlighting Orthodoxy’s attractive features. Informants devoted considerable time in their interviews both to detailing their searches and to recounting how different churches failed to meet personal needs and expectations. Former seekers often commented extensively on how *something* was lacking or wrong in their encounters with other religions even if this was only recognized in post-conversion retrospect.<sup>9</sup> Comparison and contrast allowed the narrator to at once underscore the deficiencies of non-Orthodox churches and American society as a whole, which were commonly conflated in the interviews, as well as highlight the perceptual superiority of the Orthodox Church in fulfilling informant needs and notions of the religious life. In a sense, this contrast supplanted the before/after scenario of the sinner/saved divide

of classic Christian conversion.<sup>10</sup> Convert informants were not among the “lost” who were now “found” by some divine power, but once dissatisfied persons, now “satisfied,” in having themselves found the “right” faith.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that Orthodox converts in Pittsburgh were not alone in their utilization of comparison/contrast as a means of investigating religious options and discussing their conversions to the Orthodox Church, for it remains a popular mainstay of American Orthodox conversion literature as well. Today, published Orthodox conversion narratives and convert-authored apologetics in the U.S. regularly feature extensive doctrinal, ritual, and historical comparisons and contrasts between Orthodox Christianity and other Christian confessions, usually, those of the author’s former experience.<sup>12</sup> The former evangelical Protestant Campus Crusader now Orthodox priest, Peter E. Gillquist, for example, offers lengthy discussions of how Protestants differ from the Orthodox in their interpretations of such fundamental categories of the Christian life and experience as ecclesiology, scriptural interpretation, worship, Marian veneration, and so forth in his popular work *Becoming Orthodox*.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, another cited convert author, Clark Carlton, penned two books, in which he compared Orthodox Christianity, in turn, with both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Each possessed subtitles proclaiming that the book contained “What Every Protestant [Roman Catholic] Should Know about the Orthodox Church.”<sup>14</sup> The aim of these works was to introduce Eastern Orthodoxy to inquirers by answering questions and objections they may have regarding the faith, invariably portrayed in a favorable light. Attempting to understand Orthodoxy vis-à-vis their onetime or serial encounters with other churches, would-be converts naturally gravitated to these formulae, which provided quick and succinct distillations on how Orthodox Christianity regards such topics as the Catholic papacy and Protestant reliance on *sola scriptura*. For instance, study informants in Pittsburgh, coming from Roman Catholic backgrounds, consulted Orthodox internet materials with titles such as “What are the Differences Between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism?” and “A Roman Catholic Abbe who Became an Orthodox Priest.”

These structures for learning about and discussing the Orthodox Church, in which Orthodoxy was

set in opposition to various ecclesial “others,” are so ubiquitous that at least one Orthodox priest, from Birmingham, Alabama, has recently suggested they become catechetical standards for adult converts. He writes in a 2006 issue of *The Dawn*, a diocesan newsletter published by the OCA:

Orthodoxy’s struggle to maintain its unique identity in distinction to Western faiths is a real factor in presenting the Faith to Catechumens in the West. The approach which minimizes the differences between Orthodoxy and the rest leads precisely to the muddling of Orthodox identity and witness that we have been fighting to overcome. To start, we must recognize that each person approaching the Church has his or her own unique spiritual odyssey and own particular questions which are seeking answers....So it is plain to see that a catechetical program needs to be a comparative study. Orthodoxy is to be presented positively while highlighting significantly the points on which it differs from Western Christianity, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. Indeed, the student should be impressed upon to value highly those differences, inasmuch as they clarify Truth from falsehood.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, this passage suggests a keen awareness of the spiritual marketplace and the attempts needed to differentiate Orthodoxy from the mass of other Christianities in its midst. Whether in print or electronic literatures or in verbal catechetical instruction, Orthodoxy must, according to this view, be “compared” and “presented positively,” as possessor of the “Truth,” in its stark contradistinction to other religions. Whether “Truth” is the stated motive for conversion or rather a sense of community or admiration for the personal “openness” Orthodoxy provides, this contrastive format becomes the primary means for discussing these motives. Thus, the motivations for converting to Orthodoxy among Pittsburgh informants are closely entwined with those for rejecting other religious options as well as aspects of American culture. Let us now explore one of the more common reasons, already suggested in the above quote, informants cite for becoming Orthodox-the supposed doctrinal verity and historical immutability of the Orthodox Church.

### **5.3 ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AS SOURCE OF TRUTH AND IMMUTABILITY**

If conversion motives to Orthodox Christianity are highlighted in the narratives through a contrast to what other religions and worldview options lack, then “truth,” as an object of informant desire, appears particularly well suited to this narrative structure. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, observes that “truth” is

fundamentally a notion of disputation and refutation and that its marshalling signals an unambiguous parsing of “rights” from “wrongs.” He observes, “The idea of truth belongs to the rhetoric of power. It makes no sense unless in the context of opposition-it comes into its own only in the situation of disagreement; when different people come to hold different views and when it becomes the matter of dispute *who is in the right and who in the wrong*-and when for certain reasons it is important to some or all adversaries to demonstrate or insinuate that it is *the other side* which is in the wrong [emphasis in the original].”<sup>16</sup> Certainly, as the clerical quote above underscores, “truth” comes naturally paired with its “falsehood” with inquirers standing in deep need of ecclesially guided learning to differentiate between the two. The “theory of truth,” as Bauman continues, is never willy-nilly but is fundamentally “systemic” in providing its adherents “a certain procedure” that at its endpoint assures the “*constant and secure* superiority of certain kinds of beliefs [emphasis in the original].”<sup>17</sup>

In this vein, informants commonly responded to the question of why they had converted to the Orthodox Church with the rather simple answer that it was “true.” Orthodoxy was described in informant narratives as the “true church” or the “true faith,” not in the sense of a church or faith adequately suited to personal liking, as if it was “true” just for the informant alone, but as an objective, universalized reality, a fact of the world, against which other worldview options could be measured and deemed inadequate or false. This image of the Orthodox Church as the “true church” was also forged in narrative opposition to a variety of cultural “isms,” the very engines of the spiritual marketplace itself -pluralism, multiculturalism, relativism, individualism, consumerism. These many, often quite interchangeable concepts were generally considered by informants as detrimental to the integrity and viability of Christianity and the moral fiber of American society in general. The varied “isms” were believed not only to limit Christianity’s influence over American culture and society as a whole, but also, perhaps more insidiously, weaken Christianity from within by creating a climate where ecclesial fragmentation, religious/spiritual individualism, and doctrinal/liturgical innovation, rather than unshaken and unshakeable authority and belief, had become normative to contemporary Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Certainly, contemporary American converts to Orthodox Christianity are not alone in holding suspicions of these trends and tendencies believed in many quarters to contribute to the existential uncertainty and insecurity of late modern life. Across the span of world religions, fundamentalisms of various sorts have arisen in negative reaction to these late modern tendencies and throughout the twentieth century, individuals have actively sought adherence to various conservative movements and churches as a way of escaping the vicissitudes of modern and late modern life.<sup>18</sup> As Patrick Allitt and Adam Schwartz observe in their respective studies of nineteenth and twentieth-century British and American converts to Roman Catholicism, especially writers and other members of the intellectual elite, many individuals converted to the Roman church for precisely the same reason claimed by Orthodox converts today; they found the “true church” in this case, naturally, the Roman Catholic Church. In characterizing the conversion motives and later apologetics of a number of British converts of this period such as G. K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, and the like, Allitt writes:

Why should anyone want to become a Catholic? Because it is the one true religion. They took doctrine seriously and identified the Catholic Church as doctrinally right.... All [the converts] shared the view that human beings without a dogmatic teaching church and a definite principle of religious authority were too vulnerable to their passions, prone to idolatry....A dogmatic church would protect them-first, spiritually and, by extension, politically-from the chaotic forces loose in the twentieth-century world.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Schwartz has argued in his more recent portrait of the four Roman Catholic converts, G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones that these and other early-twentieth-century newcomers to the faith were particularly interested in “the Italianate model” of Catholicism that stressed the “definitive authority”<sup>20</sup> of the church. Schwartz maintains that this model of Catholicism was the most appealing because “it accented those elements of its ancient body of beliefs that their age lacked but needed most, especially a strong sense of authority.”<sup>21</sup>

Convert informants in Pittsburgh made regular reference to the “chaotic forces,” the many “isms,” they felt endangered contemporary moral life and Christian teaching. The self-styled “seeker of truth,” Karen, for example, repeatedly referenced her disdain for cultural and religious pluralism and considered most of contemporary Christianity, apart from the Orthodox Church of course, as rife with



dangerous relativistic tendencies. From the very outset of her interview, Karen forthrightly maintained, “Pluralism doesn’t work within Christianity although many people try to make it that way. That’s an invention. Pluralism is not Christianity in my opinion.” Yet, “pluralism” masquerading as Christianity is precisely what Karen felt she encountered in the wide swath of Protestant churches, ranging from Pentecostal/charismatic to high-church Anglican, she attended beginning in college and continuing throughout her twenties. Raised Roman Catholic, Karen attributed her long-held respect for singular, patriarchal authority to her upbringing and family life, “To me, the concept of ‘one person, one vote’ is so foreign, especially, you know, having an authoritative father-an authoritative, paternal sort of church upbringing with God the Father and having the priest-calling him ‘Father’ and having a father with a very strong personality. I never questioned authority.” Certainly, these notions of authority were deeply engrained and habitualized for Karen forming as they did consistent aspects of her cultural repertoire.

Imbued with this clear instinct and affinity for patriarchal authority, Karen found the many Protestant churches she frequented falling far short of this ideal in their ecclesial governance and doctrinal certitude. Karen, for instance, reported the serious misgivings she had with a Congregationalist church she attended while living in Boston for a time, “They were sort of democratic, every member got a vote. So, if you wanted to change something in the church, everyone voted and if it passed, it passed, and if it didn’t, it didn’t....It just seemed very strange to me that they would say this is the way you run a church.” This “democratic” ecclesiology was in no sense peculiar to Congregationalism, but appeared, in Karen’s view, to be the general principle behind most Protestant polity, even in the episcopally governed Anglican church. Far more disturbing for Karen, however, were the competing theologies and practices she encountered in the many churches she visited and in the theology and church history books she began reading in earnest:

But I decided I was on a mission. I was going to figure it out, you know. But I just got theology books and there would be a man who wrote this book and he’d talk about his theology and my question would be, “Well is that his opinion or is that truth?” Because then I’d have another book on the same topic and it would give different information so if you wanted to learn something on prayer, you could have a thousand different opinions- this is how your pray and this is how you pray and they’re different. So, how do I know how to pray? And this is what the church is-no, no-

they're wrong this is what the church is-no, no-they're wrong-this is what the church is. Well, either they're contradicting each other or one of them's right or they're all wrong because this doesn't make any sense.

In contrast to Alex, as discussed in chapter two, who simply took as normative this plethora of Christian interpretation and practice and for whom the “truth” of Orthodox Christianity appeared as a foreign, highly problematic concept to be initially resisted, Karen evinced a pronounced discomfort with this intra-Christian “pluralism” from the very start of her search. Over time, Karen claimed to discover an objective measure by which to parse competing teachings and theologies-the writings of the early church fathers and historians as related in chapter one.

While Karen vaguely referred to the “liberalism” of most Protestant churches today, in attempting to accommodate personal tastes and temperaments, Fred, who forthrightly proclaimed himself a “social conservative,” offered more extensive and detailed critiques of what he perceived to be America’s social and religious ills. Casting his concerns within a starkly dichotomous frame of clear right and wrong, Fred mentioned the deep fear and insecurity he felt growing up amidst the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Although generally suspicious of American popular culture and attempts made on the part of religious groups to be “relevant,” Fred, rather interestingly, dotted his discussions with colorful references to once-popular television programs and movies. For example, he maintained, “I started to become vaguely aware of it [the “cultural upheaval”] in sort of ’68 or ’69 and it scared the beejeebers out of me. It looked like the world was falling apart....So, the sixties, the wildness of it-no matter how it was filtered out or watered down. I mean, even *The Brady Bunch* was still kind of scary. I didn’t like the social destruction and upheaval. I didn’t like the defiance and the anger. Um, I didn’t trust a lot of the drug culture that started to become manifest on T.V.”

Meanwhile, Fred described his childhood neighborhood as the very opposite of this ‘wildness’ and ‘destruction,’ “I grew up in these nice suburban neighborhoods that weren’t as scrubbed up as Mayberry [the fictional town of the 1960s television program *The Andy Griffith Show*] but they weren’t completely dissociated from it....We were wholesome people, regular ol’ folks. It was a very safe, very warm and embracing environment.” In a similar vein, Fred also mentioned his admiration for John Wayne

as a figure embodying American virtue, “Kids should know history and I would argue if they just sit down and watch four or five John Wayne movies, they get what it means to be an American very quickly. You know, fair play, doing what’s right, being willing to sacrifice. All these things were inculcated through John Wayne movies, which were sort of a surrogate parent for me growing up.”

These moral and cultural distinctions between “wholesomeness” and “upheaval” course through Fred’s narrative descriptions of his life at nearly every turn. In recalling his college days, for instance, he mentioned his initial experience, in attending a large state university in Ohio where there was “a bar on every corner and two in between,” as “shocking.” He immediately felt out of place amidst the drug and sexual experimentation of his fellow students and a semester later transferred to a small, Christian college in Western Pennsylvania which he affectionately referred to as “Richie Cunningham U,” a school so conservative that, in Fred’s words, “Rush Limbaugh wouldn’t have been noticed there.” Raised Roman Catholic before becoming Protestant while in college, he was also highly critical of attempts within Roman Catholicism to contemporize the faith, “I just hated going to CCD.<sup>22</sup> There wasn’t anything to it. I remember priests teaching us based on popular songs because they thought they were being ‘relevant.’ And that’s when I learned to despise the word ‘relevant.’ It was just sort of, gee, we’re trying to be hip. And I’m looking at the priest going, ‘You’re embracing a culture, I don’t really embrace already.’” Fred’s early disaffection extended beyond his CCD classes to include liturgical changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council, “They were giving up their timeless, wonderful liturgy that they had had for hundreds of years at least and they were replacing it with this garbage that they came up with on the spur of the moment.”

Fred too expressed serious reservations about what he considered to be the rampant consumerism, individualism, and ecclesial fragmentation characterizing contemporary Protestantism. Indeed, of all the study informants, Fred offered the most pointed analysis of the relationships between American consumer/popular culture, of which he was highly critical, and the “egoism” he felt infected many American Protestant churches:

We're a consumer society. America is structured that way. It's wonderfully productive on an economic level but the danger is that you can take that category and it can become formative. Let's face it, six days out of the week that's how you live. I'm a consumer. I want what I want as I want it. I have a hard time accepting if I can't get what I want at the price I want. Most people seem to. I mean, what are these shows on T.V., *Extreme Makeovers*? Why can't I be like *this*? I expect to be like this and I expect it to be within a reasonable price....But then go to church, which does not live that way. As I've said before, if you're a Protestant you go, what's in it for *me*? I mean, church should bless you, but really it's not about you it's about God.

For Fred, the entwinements between (especially evangelical) Protestantism and American market mindsets and strategies weakened Christian teachings and made them increasingly susceptible to individual whim and desires for economic gain. Fred explained of his experience, "Every year, somebody would come down the pike with this new thing that will open up your eyes and change your life and we're only going to charge you 'X' dollars. And I'd think, 'How dare you? If this is actually the gospel of Christ you have an obligation to give it away freely. You have no right to turn it into a product and franchise it.' What I saw in most of these was just marketing. Just another selling scheme." Even beyond the realm of motivational seminars and Christian book tours, Fred concluded that most Protestant clergy were "natural salesmen or women" hawking an ecclesial good that "in retrospect turns out to be a billboard. Look, here's the message but there's nothing behind it." An underlying premise of these critiques, similar to that of Karen's, is the malleability of late modern Christian culture. In these narrative depictions, Christianity appears grounded in ever-shifting sands of cultural change, rather than as a stalwart of invariability; it follows rather than directs culture and is, in the end, little more than the purview of whimsy, novelty, and personal ego. In this way, informants deftly identified the marketplace precisely as a Geertzian "model of and for reality," but *only* in its infiltration of *other* Christian confessions, not, as we shall see, in its possible influence on Orthodox Christianity.

In addition to "pluralism" and "consumerism," other informants found the general "relativism" of knowledge, especially as fomented in academia, worrisome. When asked what was meant by the term "modernism," the constantly evoked bane of another conversion narrative, the informant replied, "It's this questioning that's going on in academia of anything that even strikes of being ancient or standard. Like nowadays they're questioning whether or not Christ actually lived. Of course, he lived. It's like why are

you guys always trying to reinvent the wheel?” On the verge of completing a master’s degree, John noted his general disdain for the “intellect worship” of university life, premised as it was on the accumulation of degrees and the constant questioning of once certain truths, “Well, you’re questioning everything all the time and you’ve got to be bringing in every single perspective possible to a subject. I don’t like the way that a lot of people around here at the university will think that a person’s entire value can be measured by their ability to think and their ability to accumulate degrees and-and it’s intellect worship and I just don’t like the idea that the university embodies civilization and that it is all good. I just don’t really see that.”

While these cultural tendencies, especially in their impacts upon Protestantism were key emergent themes from the collected narratives, former Roman Catholics often lamented the doctrinal and liturgical changes wrought upon the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council (1962-5).<sup>23</sup> Catholicism came to be regarded, in many informants’ eyes, less the venerable preserver and conveyer of objective “truth” than an institution losing its bearings in attempting to appear “modern” and “relevant.” Although many former Protestants had simply come to expect ecclesial fragmentation and doctrinal debate as part and parcel of their religious worlds, however distasteful it appeared to them, informants who grew up under pre-Vatican II Catholicism recalled the council as a jolt precisely because they considered the church beyond the reach of widespread cultural change. As their Protestant counterparts, former Roman Catholics reiterated similar questions of the reconcilability of historical change and “truth” and more often than not concluded them to be mutually exclusive. Here, again Orthodoxy was substantiated through a kind a narrative negation.

Growing up in a family that was firmly “entrenched in the Catholic faith,” Kay, who eventually became Orthodox nearly twenty years into her marriage to a lifelong parishioner of Ascension church, found the changes effected in local parish life by Vatican II confusing and disconcerting. She explained how the ritual and doctrinal ground seemed to shift on a near weekly basis beneath her feet:

I just couldn’t imagine every Sunday you went to church and something new was happening. One Sunday, they turned the altar around and the next Sunday they got out the guitars and they had a folk mass and there were just so many changes. And St. Christopher wasn’t considered a saint anymore and, you know, St. Christopher for protection. Everybody had a St. Christopher medal. Well, get rid of that. That didn’t count anymore. And there were so many changes. I was *very*

disillusioned....I went to a Catholic college and we had nuns and they had the habits what-have-you, then all of a sudden they [the habits] were all gone.

This constant change created a sense of alienation so pronounced that she enrolled in a conversion class offered by the Pittsburgh Catholic diocese at the time in an attempt to “relearn” her Catholic faith, to acquire some understanding of the new practices constantly confronting her. In the end, however, Kay only found her deep childhood love and respect for the Catholic Church decidedly eroded, for as she explained, “I wanted something steadfast and pure and real and I didn’t feel that anymore in the Catholic Church. I felt that it had been adulterated.” Another informant echoed these sentiments, “It seemed like it was the style to have mass *anywhere* but church, whether it was out in the woods, the top of a tower, just anything new and exciting and I just never understood. We have these beautiful chapels and churches. Why don’t we have mass where we always did? It was just common practices that were always changing and being relatively conservative, it was just hard for me to accept.”

Some former Roman Catholics took longer views of doctrinal and liturgical changes within the Catholic Church. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council was in no way unprecedented in introducing innovation, but simply the most spectacular of a long line of moves away from the “early church” as it supposedly had been. James, who grew up in an Italian Catholic parish before converting to Orthodoxy in the 1970’s, found the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception<sup>24</sup> indicative of the church’s overall penchant for change:

Most Catholics don’t have a clue, as you can imagine, about the Immaculate Conception. It’s one of my favorite things to say, “What is the Immaculate Conception?” Ninety-nine percent of them say, “It means Mary has immaculately conceived Jesus Christ.” No, it does not. When I explain to them, they go, “Can’t be.” Then I say to them, “Okay, wait, I’m gonna do one better. Do you know how long Catholics have had to believe this for salvation? Less than 150 years.” And they’re like, “You’re kidding.” I say, “No, do you understand what I’m saying to you? Your great-grandmother did not believe in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Yet, you’re told you must or you ain’t going to heaven. Explain that to me.

Another informant declared, “The Catholic Church changed so many things. They did away with the use of incense and incense is supposed to lift your prayers to God and they’ve done away with so many things and added things, like the change in the Creed and a lot of those things.”<sup>25</sup> I just feel like, well it’s not

really what it originally was. And not that they're bad people, but people who try to change things and make it their own are not following what God intended it to be."

Against this backdrop of constant flux, Orthodox Christianity appeared attractive in offering potential newcomers moral and epistemological stability, in remaining, in their eyes at least, historically and doctrinally unchanged and unchanging. Orthodoxy was "true" because it possessed a "Tradition," one that could be empirically verified rather than just accepted "on faith" in an almost scientific manner through informant reading and studying of Christian history and theology. As already mentioned, reading and studying, either privately or in formal educational settings, were commonly cited channels for informant discovery of and investigations into the Orthodox Church. Two types of consulted literatures, in particular, initially introduced informants to fundamental "tools" of the Orthodox "toolkit" and profoundly influenced convert considerations of it. First, English-language translations of patristic materials, especially the writings of the early apostolic fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyons, as well as later theologians such as the Cappadocian fathers, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, and Gregory Palamas were the frequent objects of informant reading and studying. Second, the writings of more recent figures such as Fr. Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Alexander Schmemmann, and John Meyendorff shaped convert perceptions of the nature of the Orthodox Church.<sup>26</sup>

These more recent authors and theologians are formulators and expounders of what historian Paul Valliere refers to as the twentieth-century Neopatristic revival in Orthodoxy, which has dominated Orthodox theology in the West since the 1930s. According to Valliere, "Tradition" was *the* "hegemonic concept,"<sup>27</sup> the organizing and guiding principle of the church for Neopatristic theologians, who generally cast it as singular and homogenous in its equation to a harmonized "mind of the [church] fathers."<sup>28</sup> For these theologians, "Tradition" only could change in its occasional surface appearance, but never *in essence*, although the distinction between unchanged Tradition and culturally/historically malleable "traditions" provided some degree of theological flexibility while retaining the ultimate immutability of "Tradition" intact.<sup>29</sup> Though posited as existing beyond the processes of historical change, the "Tradition"

of Neopatristic thought was an eminently historical reality, for as John Meyendorff writes, “Tradition is the sacramental continuity in history of the communion of saints; in a way, it is the Church itself.”<sup>30</sup>

Coupled with this Neopatristic interpretation of the Orthodox Church as “Tradition” was the long-held reverence many informants, especially those from avowedly Christian backgrounds, held for Christian origins, to find the early church or the church as described in the New Testament, a perennial theme of Christian self-reflections as noted earlier.<sup>31</sup> In a contemporary context marked by pluralism and relativism, the notion of a church impervious to historical change was attractive to many informants, especially given the supposed “empirical” nature of this interpretation available through a comparison of present-day Orthodoxy with the early church as described in the consulted literatures. Informants rapidly catalogued the similarities: the early church had bishops and priests, so does the Orthodox Church; the early church had a liturgy, as does Orthodoxy; veneration of Mary, saints, and images was documented in the early literatures and has remained significant in the present-day Orthodox Church. No other Christian confessions, informants maintained, fit this mold between past and present so neatly, for various Protestant churches had discarded these structures and practices and Roman Catholicism had adulterated them by introducing the aforementioned “innovations.”

In stark contrast to the “pluralism” masquerading as Christianity that Karen encountered in Protestant circles, Orthodox Christianity represented temporal singularity. Karen also demonstrated a keen awareness of the relationship between her private reading and studying and the conclusions she came to draw about the nature of the Orthodox Church, “I came [to Orthodoxy] because of the doctrines that I read in the [church] fathers didn’t match up with *any* other church on the planet. And I believe if Christ truly taught his disciples these things or this is what the *church* led by the Holy Spirit believed then and what it believes now....The closer you get your doctrines to match those of the early church, the closer you’re going to get to the truth.” For Karen, the discovery of this “truth” ensured that she would no longer inhabit the hinterlands of uncertainty for as she noted, “Finally it [Orthodox Christianity] answered all of my questions. I was just stunned. I couldn’t believe it. In fact, I would have converted a lot earlier but I think I was waiting for my husband to convert along with me.”



Significantly, Karen considered Orthodoxy as “truth” to transcend cultural or individual particularity. The eternally “true” does not cater to personal preferences, temperaments, or cultural nuance, but rather demands individual and cultural conformity to its teachings and practices, for as Karen maintained, “That people have different temperaments and personalities and you can go to the church that matches up best with your personality seems so odd to me because the early church didn’t have different churches to match up with everyone’s different temperaments.” Karen illustrated the cultural singularity of Orthodox Christianity in offering her own interpretation of the early church’s encounters with pagan cultures:

They had one church, one Divine Liturgy...and, in fact, when they went to plant the church in a different culture, like where there were pagans everywhere, they weren’t sensitive to these people’s culture. They planted the church. They painted icons. The priests put on robes and they had Holy Communion. They did everything the [same] way they did it in all the churches. So, it was like you had to change to be Orthodox. Your culture had to change to be Orthodox. You did not have a seeker-friendly service, which is what some Protestant churches try to do.

At certain junctures in her narrative, Karen applied this imperative of conformity to Orthodoxy and its “truth” to herself. In mentioning lingering doubts that occasionally arose about church practice and teaching, such as veneration of Mary and the saints, Karen hastened to add, “I accept the authority of the [Orthodox] church to make these decisions and I accept that they are the ones who are right and that I’m wrong. And I’ve just gotten to that point because I trust the Orthodox Church so much. I’m not gonna say that, perhaps, I’m the one that’s right. It’s just not true. The Orthodox Church is correct and I’m wrong.”

Fred too engaged in, in his words, a “ten to twelve-year process where I would stay up to two in the morning studying everything I could, the best I had access to on the New Testament, the early church, theological critiques of the church, processes of transformation.” Eventually, in Fred’s words, “a friend introduced me to a couple of Orthodox writers. I started reading Orthodox theology. I remember sitting in my in-laws kitchen table late at night reading Orthodox theology.” From these readings, Fred could discern how the ever-shifting sands of ecclesial changeability, as evidenced by the consumer-driven Protestantism he despised, stood in sharp contrast to Orthodox Christianity, conflated in Fred’s narrative with notions of substantive, objective ‘truth’ and ‘tradition.’ Fred described what he meant by “tradition,”

so frequently evoked in his narrative, “Tradition is, well, literally is the Latin ‘what’s been handed over.’ God doesn’t just sort of drop truth in on you from outside” but it finds its expression in “the votes, as G. K. Chesterton said, ‘tradition is the vote of the dead.’” In evoking Orthodox Christianity, Fred appealed to the depths of an unchanging historical past, whether real or imagined. As Karen was “convicted by these ancient people [the church fathers],” Fred too argued that the closer one came to the “original” teachings of the early church, the closer one came to the unadulterated “truth” taught by Christ. Fred felt that he could trace these teachings from Christ through chains of apostolic tradition, to the modern Orthodox theologians (Lossky and Meyendorff) he found so compelling, “If it’s been handed by Christ it’s not gonna change. Look, I can read St Ignatius, I can read St. Maximus, I can read St. Symeon the New Theologian. I can read St. Tikhon or St. Theophan and I can read John Meyendorff and they’re all speaking the same language. Here you see a family resemblance. Um and, of course, if you’re at Ignatius, you’re right next to the Apostles anyway and that’s as good as you get.”<sup>32</sup>

Not only did various Orthodox writers, regardless of time and place, bear a “family resemblance” to one another, but different theological questions and themes merged into a single, totalizing voice that transcended individual particularity and divergence of experience or opinion. Fred recalled the moment he discovered this, “And I remember sitting and reading [John] Meyendorff and going, ‘This is beautiful. It was one seamless garment.’ It didn’t matter where you stepped in. It was all-Christology, spirituality-it was all one.” Fred claimed to find nothing resembling this in Western Christianity, “I don’t have that experience in Catholicism or Protestantism. It’s a different language and there’s a huge translation that has to occur if I want to read Calvin. I have to study his context. Then if I go back, there’s no connection between Calvin and let’s say St. Bernard of Clairveaux,<sup>33</sup> there’s none.” It is this doctrinal and experiential continuity, where the “votes” or experiences of the past (the dead) held sway over the thought and action of the present and future, that confirmed “this is an alive tradition. And not only an alive tradition, but a living connection to this ancient church. To me that is what tradition is-being part of that living family that has faithfully maintained it.”

The historical demonstrability of the supposed uniqueness of the Orthodox Church was a common theme of the collected narratives. Paul, a young man in his early twenties who joined St. Michael's church after college, repeatedly discussed how the notion of Orthodoxy as "truth" altered his understanding of Christianity:

There is one true Christian faith that is a hundred percent correct in beliefs and doctrines and it puts the whole world of Christianity in a different perspective. I mean, at one point you think that no matter what you believe everybody's okay and in the next second you believe that there are people out there who call themselves Christians, but still don't have the true faith and they should have [it]. And so it just puts a whole new light on the entire world and a lot of people just don't want to accept it.

Clearly in this deep divide between the "true Christian" and those "who call themselves Christians," Paul felt that, in becoming Orthodox, he had aligned himself with the former category, for as he remarked, "I was converting because I knew it was the true faith from the Apostles being passed down. To officially be part of the people who wrote the Bible, to be a part of people you could read about in history books and things like that it was just so overwhelming." Alex echoed these sentiments, "The Orthodox Church has all the proper teachings, the same teachings as the early church and they're correct versus other churches who are incorrect on certain issues. The Orthodox Church is always correct on all doctrine. It's almost too good to be true."

Significantly, in all of the above cases, the discernment of religious "truth" did not belong to the category of divine revelation, but to that of human effort and reason. Living in a late modern age lacking clear authorities and external guides for choice-making, nearly all of the informants in this study took for granted their own self-sufficiency and ability to discover "truth" through empirical investigation, reading, and comparison. In her very trust that Orthodoxy was "correct," especially over and above any post-conversion religious doubts she may have, Karen underscored all the more that "truth" cannot be extricated from subjective determinants of its constituents and worth, for as Karen maintained, "I don't need those theology books anymore. You know, Orthodoxy has been tried, it has been tested by me and I've been basically to all sorts of Protestant churches. I've been Catholic and I can see that Orthodoxy is where I need to be and where most people of a Protestant background need to be." When pressed for an

explanation of what she meant by “trying” Orthodoxy, Karen continued, “Well, I tried it by learning that they are the ones to whom the church fathers belong. And I trusted those ancient men who wrote theology and in a sense, I tried it by reading the theology books and looking at what the [Orthodox] church teachings and compared. And I did that with so many different churches and Orthodoxy is the only one that falls in line with everything, with what the early church believed.”

Fred took it upon himself to distinguish the supposed immutability of the church and to become personally “convinced” of its claims through intellectual effort. Fred stressed that he and his wife did not visit an actual Orthodox church (eventually Ascension) for two years as he read and compared and stood in “awe” of the beauty of Orthodox theology as it unfolded before his eyes on the printed page, “I wasn’t gonna step foot in there-in the church until I was convinced this was the truth. I can go nowhere else. When I got to that point and I said, ‘I’m convinced. This is the truth.’ We went to Ascension.” Fred offered a rather dramatic account of the couple’s first visit to the church later in his interview, “I think it was a full two years of study [before he and Mary paid a visit to the church]. I remember, as I said, walking up the hill to Ascension holding my wife’s hand just saying, ‘This is where we need to be. This is the truth. I am convinced of it. Regardless of what that means, we’re here. I was coming to embrace the tradition.’”

One informant asserted that he had concluded Orthodoxy to be the “true faith” based on the “very concrete research” he had conducted, “It was about reading scriptures and reading the church fathers too. I was getting answers from an Orthodox perspective of the very concrete research I did that this is what the church fathers believed.” Characterizing himself as a “very black and white person” in regard to beliefs and issues of morality, this informant maintained “research” as fundamental to his approach to the religious life, “So, I tend to think that I try to research what I believe and research what I think and research what I do in order to make sure that I am doing the right thing and not to just go through with it just like a carefree attitude about things that I do.” Recalling the “point in time” when he decided to become Orthodox, Alex asserted, “There came a point in time when I said, ‘I’ve searched for almost two years now the Orthodox Christian faith and I haven’t found anything that seems not to be the message of

the scriptures,’ that I can point at and say, ‘The Orthodox Church is wrong here.’ I found nothing in Orthodox doctrine that was inconsistent with the early Christian church. I also didn’t learn anything in that time period that was counter to my own reasoning, what I thought made sense.”

By and large most of the extended discussions of the Orthodox Church as the embodiment of absolute truth are found in the narratives of those who claim an avid theological and liturgical interest in Orthodox Christianity and who turn to print materials, especially the church fathers, as the primary sources of information. While by no means completely nonexistent, references to “truth” are much rarer among individuals first introduced to Orthodoxy by a future spouse. Converts through marriage certainly compared Orthodoxy to their former confession and often sincerely preferred it, but not usually because it was the “truth.”

#### **5.4 ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AS COMMUNITY**

In addition to the temporal dimension of community encapsulated and conveyed in the narratives through notions of “truth” and “tradition,” many informants discussed the deep yearnings for a like-minded network of believers where they could find concrete social acceptance and belonging. Here, the spatial dimension of establishing one’s current place in relationship to others, took precedence.<sup>34</sup> Again, Orthodoxy as “community” was presented as a point of contrast to what some informants identified as a trenchant American “individualism” that left persons with few resources beyond the singular self. Other converts, however, simply saw “community” within the framework of their own lives as providing a love and support woefully missing in their encounters with other churches or within their families.<sup>35</sup>

An informant for whom community was a constantly evoked motivation for becoming Orthodox was John, a young graduate student who became interested in finding a church after attending his great-uncle’s funeral and realizing that his relative was divinely “taken care of” and “that everything you wanted to do you couldn’t just straighten your own back and say, ‘Well, I’ll do it. I’ll be strong. I’ll

believe in myself.’ You needed to have God’s help.” Themes of being “taken care of,” of finding divine and communal support for problems, coursed through his narrative and contributed to the rather dim view he held of “individualism” in American life. Here, he sharply contrasted this mindset from that found, in his view, within Orthodox Christianity, “Yep, self-reliance, we [the Orthodox] just don’t do that. That seems to be the common belief that out of any strand that [American] people believe in is that you just put your mind to it. You just be independent. You just get up and do it. It’s the stuff they’re teaching in the public schools these days, ‘Believe in yourself and you can do the math assignment. Have self-confidence. Build up your self-esteem’ which isn’t always a bad thing....But when you just leave it there at self-esteem you’re going to end up at the end of the day pretty sad, I think.”

At another point in his interview, John qualified these remarks slightly while at the same time underscoring the difficulties this “self-reliance” can engender for the religious life, “I guess I should also add I mean not *all* Americans believe in this extreme self-reliance thing. But if you’re a believer in this kind of self-reliance, ‘I’ll figure it out all myself. I’ll believe in myself.’ That’s an obstacle to conversion. You have to get over that.” For John, this “self-reliance” also had profound social and moral consequences for modern America, “It’s hard to live according to Christ’s commandments in this society. I mean, just as regards to a number of things that society views as basically acceptable. ‘You know, well, you’re not hurting anybody. It’s your right.’ Despite the fact that they’re wrong, society says, ‘Oh, it’s okay, just as long as you take care to keep the HIV rate from going up or whatever whether it’s sex or intravenous drug use or whatever.’ They’ll say, ‘What’s wrong with that as long as you’re not hurting anybody?’ And you just have to stop the conversation right there.”

Despite John’s deep longings for community, he did not, from his brief encounters with Orthodoxy, immediately see the Orthodox Church as the direct fulfillment of these desires. Indeed, as he repeatedly remarked, he found the church’s ritual practices “just too strange” even after multiple visits to grant it serious consideration although he did find the church’s theology rich and agreeable. However, his attitude and course of religious direction “changed very abruptly” as he delivered a paper to a professor

one spring afternoon his senior year of college. John described the events that unfolded precipitating his immediate desire to join the Orthodox Church:

I'm just walking across campus and about seventy-five feet behind me was this music professor. He was walking in the same direction I was. I had no idea he was there, seventy-five feet behind me. Seventy-five feet in front of me was this crazy guy with a gun and I didn't see him either. But I walked into the building to take the article to the professor. And this angry guy walked up to the music professor, took the gun, and shot him four times and then he shot himself and I came out of the building and there were these two guys lying there and the music professor died on the scene. Um, crazy guy died later that night at the hospital. So, I was just standing there watching the nursing students try to save the professor and I just thought to myself, "So, I'm going to be one of those eternal guests [to the various churches he was visiting at the time]?" And I said, "The hell I will." I decided right then and there I was going to be Orthodox and I said the "Our Father" over and over again. I couldn't really believe I was saying that I was going to be Orthodox. But I just wanted it so bad at that moment.

Against the backdrop of these harrowing circumstances, Orthodoxy immediately sprang to John's mind as an ecclesial dwelling, a place of safety and stability for him to inhabit and "be taken care of" in the midst of an unpredictable and dangerous world. Faced by an event that, in John's words, "didn't make any sense at all," the young man did not cling to false fortitude but at once looked for "God's help" in repeating the Lord's Prayer and in making the surprise decision (to himself anyway) of converting to Orthodoxy, which was carried out in fairly quick order, as John related, "From there I went to church throughout the course of the summer and in the fall I was baptized."

When asked what his conversion personally meant to him, John responded by contrasting Orthodox Christianity with the Protestant denominations he had briefly explored:

It [Orthodox Christianity] represented community. That was the most important part. Um, 'cause one of the central tenets of Unitarianism and of a great portion of Protestantism in this country is that you can invent your own way of believing and then you do that and you'll be fine. And nobody can tell you that you're wrong. And if anybody tells you that you're wrong then they're being judgmental and they're bigoted or whatever. So that you just sort of invented yourself and make it work for yourself and you'll be okay. Not only you'll be okay but that's the ideal, that you're living out your independence. You're living out your bodily freedom which apparently is something to be worshiped in itself. Um, so I wanted to have a community of believers, together repenting, helping each other, supporting each other in a common tradition....And I was brought into that community. That is what I was really looking for.

Echoing earlier sentiments, John maintained that one of the greatest difficulties he continued to face as an Orthodox Christian was the ability to negotiate the vast differences that existed between secularized "self reliance" and a religiously informed attitude of dependence on divine help, "When you talk with your

friends about how you get through a problem and this secular idealistic view that everybody seems to be able to agree on, ‘Well, you just have to believe in yourself.’ And when it comes time around to you to say how do you get through such-and-such problem and you have to say, ‘I put my faith in God.’ And they think, ‘Oh, weak person. I mean why can’t he believe in himself?’ that’s some of the more difficult parts of being Orthodox.” However, in spite of his consideration of Orthodoxy as a “community” standing apart from American society and attitudes, John concluded that an interface between Orthodoxy and the “world” was still necessary, “Being Orthodox does not give you the right to declare open war on the world we’re in. I mean, we’re part of it and we have to minister to it and we can’t just reject it and say it’s all a load of baloney. We have to do the best with what we have.”

Having investigated Orthodox Christianity through the interpersonally remote means of the internet, Carl too framed his conversion to the church primarily as an entering into community. Less concerned with the wider societal implications of an emphasized “individualism” as was John, Carl found in Orthodoxy a place of personal acceptance and love that, according to his own assessment, had made him more confident and comfortable with himself and caring of others. Orthodoxy was all the more important for Carl since his eventual conversion occurred against a childhood backdrop of parental indifference and alienating early church experiences. Of the latter he remarked, “When I was a kid, I guess it was a sense of wanting to belong to something. When I was a kid my mom would always take me by the hand and sort of drag me to church, to these people that I didn’t really know. These kids I didn’t really know. Like why do I have to come here?” Meanwhile, his mother offered Carl little emotional support as he was growing up, for as he said of her, “She’s typical nineteen-fifties, you know. I’m sure you can imagine the type. She’s very set in her ways. She doesn’t show very much emotion. She doesn’t show very much affection. To me it was like if you’re going to live in a cardboard box just go live in a cardboard box. She always seemed to be unhappy no matter what I did.”

As he entered adulthood this need for a place to belong only grew stronger for Carl who tried to fill it by performing in music ensembles (he plays and teaches wind instruments) over the years, “I wanted to stay in bed on Sundays. But I guess as I grew up I realized that I needed someplace that I could



go where I could feel like I was a part of it, a part of something. And I had done that through performing, through the groups I performed with and such, but it wasn't the same as like when you go to church." As Carl moved from the internet to face-to-face encounters with St. Michael's priest and parishioners, he became increasingly convinced that, in his words, "Somebody's [God] telling me this is where you belong." He wielded the same language of "belonging" in describing his first visit to Sunday liturgy at St. Michael's, "Fr. Mark was actually sick that Sunday so Fr. Seraphim [Fr. Mark's father] was covering for him. I don't know if you'd heard Fr. Seraphim's voice before but he opened the Royal Doors<sup>36</sup> and came in and said, 'Blessed is the Kingdom.'<sup>37</sup> [Carl imitates the voice here as deep and booming] And I went, 'Aaah, okay, this is where I belong.' That was the exact moment. All is right. All is good."

Carl was also impressed by the high level of kind personal attention and friendliness he received from the parishioners from the first day he walked through the church doors. This attention only confirmed for Carl that Orthodoxy was where he 'belonged,' "The first day I came to St. Michael's, we [he and his girlfriend] went down to coffee hour. It wasn't just one person who said, 'Hi.' It was about twenty or thirty [parishioners] who came over to me and they were new people, old people, young people. They made it a point to come and see me. Um, I guess I had this sign that flashed on my forehead that said, 'Non-Orthodox. Non-Orthodox' in flashing green neon." Shortly thereafter he attended the annual church picnic about which he recalled, "That year it rained so there were a lot of people that came towards me and sat down and we started talking about things. That's where I started making connections with people. It was like, wow, this is great. Okay."

In his post-conversion life as an Orthodox Christian, Carl had come to see the church community of St. Michael's as meeting emotional needs of acceptance and care that his birth family had been unable to provide. Carl shared none of John's concern for American notions of "self reliance," but rather set Orthodoxy as "community" in sharp contrast to his biological family with the former functionally supplanting the latter. He recalled with gratitude how fellow parishioners remembered his birthday and asked his advice on fixing their car engines and encouraged him to eventually join the church choir of which he remains an enthusiastic member today. Carl also sadly remarked, "They've welcomed me in

with open arms and it's something my family never did. My family was never affectionate. I got more affection from the dog than I did from my mom. You know how the people are at St. Michael's. They come up and give you a hug. She's not that kind of person." In the light of this newfound "affection," Carl affirmed that he was a less angry and judgmental person. The Orthodox Church, in his words, "has made me much more comfortable with who I am" while at the same time allowing him to make a "commitment" to "something much bigger" than himself.

Although disillusioned by Vatican II liturgical changes, Kay all the more attributed her eventual conversion to her husband's Orthodox faith to the positive bonds of love and friendship formed at Ascension church, "It's just very pleasant. You're greeted. People reach out to you. The liturgy's always the same, the message of love." Again, she said, "I've met such wonderful people here. It's a very loving atmosphere and forgiving and it's unchanging. It's so nice." In a similar vein, another former Catholic and intermarriage convert, Andrea remarked of former confession, "There were a lot of things about the Catholic faith I didn't agree with. I didn't feel like it was a loving church, an open church."

In a powerful expression of her own sense of being "grounded" in the physical place and space of daily/weekly parish life at Ascension, Andrea admitted that she wondered about individuals who regularly attended Orthodox services there, usually with Orthodox spouse in tow, without ever converting to the faith. Knowing that she and her husband will one day be buried near other parishioners in ground blessed for Orthodox Christian burial, Andrea mused, "If you come to our church, but you're not a convert, do you belong to another church? I always think about that, do they ever think about where they're gonna be buried? You have to feel like a family. You have to feel like you're part of something, but here you're part of something, but you're not part of something. So, I always say things like that to my husband, 'Where will they bury them?'"

## 5.5 ORTHODOXY AS SOURCE INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND DYNAMISM

As reiterated over the course of this study, religious adherence in the United States, Western Europe, and increasingly in other globalized settings no longer involves a simple assent to given doctrines and authorities.<sup>38</sup> Rather, with increased contemporary focus on the “self,” necessarily understood in highly psychologized ways, religion as *process*, as providing sets of strategies for the care, fostering, and growth of one’s inner life (soul or self) has taken center stage. Even convert informants who spent years at intense intellectual labors in attempting to find the “true church,” wielded theologically vague and fluid terms such as ‘growth,’ ‘transformation,’ ‘fulfillment,’ ‘betterment,’ ‘integration,’ and ‘illumination’ in describing the “goals” of their religious lives. In this regard, convert informants, I argue, were readily borrowing vocabularies and concepts found more broadly within American culture where religious seeking is as much about “finding oneself” as it is about locating appropriate worldview or religious options. Significantly, this language of “growth” and “betterment” almost wholly supplanted classic Christian themes of sin, repentance, and salvation in the narratives.<sup>39</sup>

Fred, for instance, remarked that his years of searching for the “right church” were fueled by an ultimate desire to “be deeply transformed,” a process he described as the following, “There had to be some insight into how people were transformed. I couldn’t find it. There had to be some way to implement the promises of Christ in such a way that your life can be deeply transformed-not just transformed through momentary emotional conversions that frankly do dissipate over time. But transformations that are borne out in some deep fundamental restructuring of the personality and its issues....first and foremost, how is this transformation effected by Christ?” As an Orthodox Christian, Fred felt assured that he was now on the proper path to “transformation.” In his view, this path to transformation remained firmly within the structures of Orthodoxy’s “ancient Tradition” while at the same time retaining the dynamism necessary for bringing about a “changed heart.” It was precisely this “changed heart” that Fred so long sought to assuage the disappointment he felt in his life, “Yeah, it’s, you know, a changed heart and seeing the pain and suffering in my own life, how important that change was.”

Employing the language of developmental psychology, Helen realized in converting to Orthodoxy that she had been “too disintegrated” in her pre-conversion life, in being “so concentrated in my mind in the intellectual side of things” and that she “had to work toward integration.” Helen described how this process had impacted her life, “Integrating the intellectual approach with the actual guts of the faith really feels like an enormous transformation taking place. It’s been such a change, but a joy too, you know.” Meanwhile, Carl appreciated how the Orthodox Church provided insight in becoming ‘a better person,’ “One of the things I always say is, ‘If you stop learning, you’re dead. You’re gonna die.’ I’ve been in it [the Orthodox Church] for three years. It’s a continual cycle of just learning new things about being a better person.”

Significantly, this dynamic personal growth and changeability in no way stood in opposition to the supposed authoritative and doctrinal immutability of the Orthodox Church but remained vitally connected to these structures. Indeed, as mentioned, these two strands of Orthodoxy’s rich “toolkit” were vitally entwined in informant narratives in a number of striking ways. A number of ethnographers have observed that individuals who assent to external religious doctrines or authorities (or to absolute “truths” and “traditions”), even in contexts that might be deemed as “fundamentalist,” frequently do not consider this in any way an act of limitation or restriction.<sup>40</sup> In her study of Southside Gospel Church, for instance, Nancy Ammerman maintained as such and quoted Frederick Bird who found the same phenomenon in his investigations of converts to New Religious Movements. As quoted by Ammerman, Bird wrote, “By acknowledging these [religious] authorities, they gain thereby a kind of license, a derived sense of personal authority, which authorizes them to ignore or to count as of only relative importance the claims made by various other secular authorities.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the interpretive space and ambiguity necessary for the dynamic personal growth and transformation Orthodox converts so often sought in no way stood in opposition to the view of Orthodox Christianity as an upholder of unchanged and unchanging “truth” and “tradition,” but, rather, these two poles of Orthodoxy’s “cultural repertoire” were mutually reinforced by convert informants in three fundamental ways. I will devote the remainder of this chapter to an exploration of this interplay within the narratives.

First, in the case of converts to Orthodox Christianity, a reliance on the doctrinal and authoritative verity of Orthodoxy allowed informants to shift their attention and energies away from general, “big canvas” questions such as the nature and location of “truth” and the “true church,” ecclesial polity, the nature of the divine and so forth to focus more concertedly on personal development. No longer encumbered upon to parse through competing theologies and churches, converts were now free to devote themselves with greater verve to the “spiritual life,” by appropriating and experimenting with the ritual practices of the church (a point to which we will return a bit later), reading devotional literatures (such as books on prayer or saints’ *Lives*), and developing relationships with religious teachers and other members of their local parish communities. Not only could informants dedicate themselves to such activities, but they said they could do so with the *security* and *certainty* that the Orthodox Church would never lead them astray through the impartation of inaccurate teachings. They could move about and explore their new ecclesial world uninhibited by concerns that what they might be heading in the wrong direction in their “search” for God. In this way, converts could selectively filter out of the range of their immediate concern not only the many modern cultural ills (the aforementioned “isms”) stirring beyond the ecclesial boundaries of the Orthodox Church, but weighty theological concerns that appeared contested in other Christian confessions. With the belief that the matter had been settled at the Council of Chalcedon,<sup>42</sup> for instance, informants no longer had to devote their time to mulling over the nature of Christ.

Alex, for instance, described his post-conversion religious life as a highly personalized deepening of intimacy with the divine, an intimacy he likened to the dynamic love that could develop between persons. He said, “In the relationships we have in life we’re meant to get to know each other better and better, deeper and deeper, more intimately....And so the better you know that person, the better you know how to care for that person. And this analogy I applied to my mindset in the sense that you’re always going to be learning about another person.” From this, Alex continued with his analogy, “So, if it’s possible to always live the rest of your life learning more about another person, then how much more is it that we can spend the rest of our lives learning more about God, learning about who God is, what he desires for us.” This personal human-divine relationship for Alex, however, found its proper outlet within

the Orthodox Church, “I’ve learned so much from the Orthodox Church about God, so much from the writings of the church fathers, the traditions of the faith and that they all make sense to me and they’ve all moved me closer to God.” Alex reiterated his appreciation for the church, “And I’ve just grown so greatly and I know that if I continue in the Orthodox faith, becoming deeper and deeper in my relationship with God if I so choose, that I could spend the rest of my life learning about God and how I should live my life through the Orthodox faith.”

Orthodox Christianity, as “Tradition,” lent this “growth” a firm foundation in providing concrete frameworks for understanding and relating to the divine, but in ways that allowed for a fair degree of relational freedom. In this way, Alex’s analogy is certainly apt, for the same is found in human relationships, which allow for multiple, at times quite idiosyncratic, strategies within wider social/cultural norms. Within Orthodoxy, Alex could both explore the divine and do so with the certainty (a rare commodity of the “spiritual marketplace”) that, provided he remained within the church’s normative frames, he would never learn or encounter “incorrect” teachings that might cause him to misunderstand or misapprehend the divine he sought to know. The young man concluded as such in his narrative, “I had complete confidence that I would never learn anything that would be incorrect in the Orthodox faith. I had complete confidence in that. That’s how I knew that it [conversion] was the right decision to make.”

Former Protestant converts to Orthodox Christianity, in particular, counted the church’s authoritative structures a far more reliable and preferable alternative to the pastoral opinion often masquerading as the “voice of God” espoused in many of their former denominations. To illustrate this point, Brad recounted a traumatic visit to a Baptist church he made in his early twenties where the minister railed against alcohol consumption in such an adamant and hateful manner that the young men fled the church in tears (a particularly sensitive issue for this informant since his mother had died of alcoholism when he was a boy). Brad explained his intense reaction, “I mean, that’s so presumptuous. This man was presuming to speak for God in this authoritative fashion and it was really his own opinion.” He contrasted what he considered to be a Protestant propensity to cast opinion as teaching with the traditional safeguards of Orthodox Christianity, “You don’t find that in Orthodoxy. I mean, you’ll find

strong personalities and firebrands, but they're always held in check by something else-by some hierarchical authority, by some ecclesiology or something traditional that's gonna keep them in check."

In addition to envisioning ecclesial authority itself as a form of liberation in keeping inaccurate doctrines or the tyrannies of personal opinions at bay, informants also introduced another category, "legalism," into their narratives against which Orthodox Christianity was routinely and positively compared. Informants asserted that Orthodox Christianity had firm moral and doctrinal frameworks, to be sure, but that it was *not* legalistic, especially as compared with other Christian confessions like Roman Catholicism or the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church of one woman's childhood. These latter churches were characterized as possessing inflexible rules that made little sense and offered little to no "real life" applicability as well as punitive measures for their enforcement (usually in the form of accounting church members as "sinners" and readily assigning "guilt"). By contrast, Orthodox Christianity was described as 'natural,' 'organic,' 'healthy,' and 'understanding' of human foibles, in recognizing the individual need to experiment, question, and doubt as well as in providing ample conceptual terrain, in the form of mysteries and miracles, for their exercise.<sup>43</sup> Years after entering the Orthodox Church, Fred found the relaxed attitudes of his Orthodox Christian friends a welcome change from, in his words, the morally "neurotic," fundamentalist Protestants with whom he had associated before, "These were people we could just be people with and never worry we were violating our faith. It was wonderful. We could just sit down and chat and laugh and have a great time and talk about family and friends and seeing movies and stuff like that. You know, the worst of the Nazarenes and the Baptists are you don't drink, dance, or chew or go with girls that do....Anyway, they're just real people and we [he and his wife] both looked at each other and thought, 'These people are *real* and Christian and dedicated. They're sort of normal healthy. And healthy is the best word for it.'"

Sam, a convert and professional iconographer, from a Cleveland-area OCA parish who entered the Orthodox Church in the mid-1990s and alternately characterized himself before his conversion as a "pope-loving" and "hard-nosed traditionalist" Catholic, quickly became discouraged by the "legalism" he found guiding the one year of Roman Catholic seminary training he undertook, "Something started to

happen when I was there. I started to become disgusted with legalism. You know, we could be discussing in class silly things, like at what point is a person married during the marriage ceremony? At what point are you really forgiven for your sins? Really stupid things...This can't be the way God is. He can't be this legalistic. He can't be sitting up there with a scorecard keeping score on me and every other billion persons alive."

The "legalism" that appeared in this narrative is fundamentally a practical and conceptual precision with which the sacraments and other components of Christian theology (such as sin) were measured and defined over the course of Sam's seminary coursework. He came to question not only the efficacy of knowing these measurements for one's spiritual life, but their overall accuracy in providing an adequate view of the divine and its power. An early admirer of Thomas Aquinas from his parochial school and early college days, Sam acquired a profound distaste for the theologian by the time he reached the second semester of his seminary studies, "I didn't want to go to classes. I took this class on Thomistic philosophy. I used to be a big fan of Aquinas and I was so looking forward to this class and then I started looking at this and saying, 'He's too legalistic.' You know, we don't need to dissect *how* the Eucharist happens, you just need to believe it does."<sup>44</sup>

From his current post-conversion vantage, Sam found the apophaticism<sup>45</sup> of certain strands of Orthodox theology preferable to the "legalism" of Roman Catholicism, a difference he cut along geographical lines, "The West is very legalistic or at least Rome is. They've very legalistic. I mean, if you read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, they explain everything. The East follows a line of thought called apophatic theology, which basically says God is a giant mystery....And so they basically, the East will say, 'We don't know what God is, but we can pretty much pin him down by what we know he's not and then the rest of that is mystery.' And the East is rather content with letting God be a mystery. I mean, if you ask a [Orthodox] priest, he will tell you, 'I don't know how the Eucharist becomes the Eucharist, it just does.'...They don't pretend to understand things that the human can't understand. The human mind can't understand these things, so I'm a lot more comfortable with that. Because you'll get to heaven and then God will laugh at you and say, 'You're wrong.'"



The position that Eastern Orthodox theology is essentially apophatic in nature too, it is important to point out, is a key theme of the aforementioned Neopatristic revival explained and popularized in works such as Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944).<sup>46</sup> In Sam's estimation, Orthodoxy presented a divinity that transcended rules and measurements and appeared as "much more loving, more understanding, a more personal type of being" on his religious horizon. Rather than experiencing God as an authoritative, rule-enforcing deity bent on judging the errant, Sam, now as an Orthodox Christian, saw sin and his entire relationship with God much differently, "The Orthodox understanding [of sin] is you get back up. You do whatever you can to repair and you go on with life....And that idea's so different than [the one with which] I was raised. It's actually liberating, because it makes God much more personal. It makes it much more like this friend who had done everything for you and he's given me all of this and I failed a little bit."

These issues were in no way abstractions, but had a direct, self-confessed bearing on Sam's mental outlook regarding religious matters and life in general. In discussing his earlier view on the necessity of "symbols of authority," for example, he remarks, "It's so funny because as I've become Orthodox, I've become a little more loose on some of these things. When I was Catholic, I was a very hard-lined Catholic, but now I'm more relaxed." Again, drawing an analogy from his work on iconography, he said, "The funny thing is that I'm not so much a hard-core person anymore. I used to be labeled 'rigid' when I was in seminary and I'm hardly rigid now because, God forbid, I paint icons in acrylic and you can't be rigid if you do that. Because the hard-core Orthodox would tell you that you can only paint using egg tempera. So, yeah, I guess I've changed a lot."<sup>47</sup>

While Sam considered Roman Catholicism too detailed and technical in its theological expositions, another convert, Olivia, found it too vague and unresponsive as nuns and priests ignored the many questions that materialized in the course of her parochial school training. By way of contrast, querying seemed encouraged within the Orthodox Church, for as she asserted, "In Orthodoxy, you're encouraged to read your Bible. We've got a ton of books here [in her house]. You're encouraged to read the church fathers, the ecumenical councils. Orthodoxy wasn't afraid to share everything with me."

Another man noted of his early amazement that Orthodoxy was a Christianity for ‘thinking people,’ “Every time I ask a question in Orthodoxy, there’s an answer. It’s like a religion for thinking people. It’s like a religion that believes God gave you a brain. He *expects* you to ask the questions.” Although the Orthodox Christianity of this characterization certainly provided answers as well as a conceptual framework by which to understand them, the questions posed by this and other converts arose from the contingencies of human existence, the specificities of context and individual perspective, all of which were embraced and fostered by the Orthodox Church.

In the eyes of many informants, the verity and universality of the Orthodox Church was demonstrated all the more through its ability to move beyond the staid, crystalline “ideal” of the history books into the “real” of everyday life, to answer questions through alternate strategies instead of unyielding laws. One informant evoked the example of abortion to wax enthusiastic about Orthodoxy’s “real life” applicability:

Orthodoxy looks more at the human being as a human who has faults. And I love the fact as I studied it more and more that Orthodoxy believed in *gray*. You know, so let’s deal with the issue of abortion . . . Despite the fact that in Orthodoxy we have a fervent love affair with life, there is no taboo in Orthodoxy that under *no* circumstances abortion. It is, you consult the priest and the bishop to find out what to do if a woman’s been raped or if there are risks to health in particular. Orthodoxy allows for the exception ‘cause Orthodoxy isn’t legalistic in the way the Roman church is. And I always found that so attractive, because it’s like a religion made for real people, people who make mistakes.

As illustrated in this passage, the interpretative spaces to be culled within Orthodoxy in no way curtail or abrogate the authoritative structures of the church (i.e., the priests and bishops are to be consulted in the above example), but serve as the very arena for their exercise.

Although in many cases not initially seeking to change religious affiliation, converts through marriage too expressed an appreciation for the “deeper spirituality” they felt they have encountered within the Orthodox faith. In fact, this sense of coming into greater immediate contact with the divine often played an important role in fostering these later conversions. Still, in these instances, the notion that Orthodox Christianity can act as the setting for such encounters often came as an unexpected *surprise*, a

pleasant byproduct of accompanying one's spouse and in-laws to church rather than an actively sought goal.

Given the near paradigmatic place the aesthetically driven conversion of Prince Vladimir and Kievan Rus' occupies in both popular and scholarly imaginations,<sup>48</sup> one of the most frequently commented upon features of Eastern Orthodoxy is the sensuality and elaborateness of its ritual forms. In characterizing what they consider to be the historically consistent traits of the Orthodox Church, historians Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, for instance, have argued that, at least in the Russian context, "Orthodoxy valued altars, relics, and icons over complex theological argument. The material realm quite literally embodied the incandescent presence of the divine. The sensory and experiential dominated over the textual."<sup>49</sup> Certainly, both seeker and intermarriage converts shared a pronounced fascination with the ritual and aesthetic components of Orthodox Christianity and considered this aspect of church life a significant arena for personal interpretive freedom, for as one informant affirmed, Orthodox Christianity furnished "an opportunity for emotional expression of your faith." Despite the intellectualized nature of many searches, American converts are in no sense modern gnostics eschewing the sensual and immanent for a religion of mental abstractions. Even in cases where an appreciation for Orthodox liturgy and aesthetics was slowly acquired rather than immediate, informants considered the ritual and aesthetic as well as ascetic offerings of the faith as critical to their "spiritual lives". Aside from Orthodoxy's more conceptual aspects, ritual practice stood as a fundamental arena for post-conversion experimentation and self-expression. Again, as in the case of the church's teachings, the assurance that Orthodoxy was theologically "true" only confirmed, for many informants, that its ritual and practical prescriptions for "growth" and "transformation" de facto were wholesome and efficacious. At the same time, informants appreciated the fact that Orthodox worship seemed "interactive" in appealing to all their physical senses and in providing strategic options for the forging of their own quite individualized post-conversion identities within the church. Indeed, Cimino too comments on the significance of ritual flexibility in the lives of young Orthodox converts and reverts. Writing directly about the Orthodox liturgy rather than other ritual practices, he notes, "The Orthodox liturgy, the central

and sometimes only function of many parishes, also illustrates and may even help explain the ‘loose-fitting,’ flexible nature of the faith. . . . The sense of individual freedom allowed in the liturgy seems to be carried over by the subjects into other parts of their lives.”<sup>50</sup>

Yet, this is not a flexibility wholly without structure or “method.” Karen, for instance, declared that as a Protestant she had remained spiritually “stagnant” after many years of dedicated Christian living. She felt left “alone to flounder” in her Christian practice, which included, in her view, little more than Bible study attendance and being told to just “try to be a good person.” She complained that in Protestantism “there was no method,” a situation quite unlike her experience of Orthodox Christianity, which provided a rich plate of different ritual actions for individual appropriation and self-improvement, as she observed, “Being an Orthodox [Christian] we have fasting. We have services. We have reception of the Holy Communion. We have repentance. We have Pascha. We have Lent. You know, we have Bright Week.”<sup>51</sup> I mean, we have a method, a clear method for becoming more Christ-like and for me these are the paths you take when you’re in the faith. And I never had that before.”

Again, Karen drew a sharp distinction between the two Christian confessions, “But nobody tells you [as a Protestant] how to become more Christ-like, how to reform yourself and change your life and become more humble and become a better person and become a better mother. Nobody teaches you how to become more like Christ.” While Karen’s search for the “truth” of Orthodoxy was primarily driven by an intellectual need to understand theological differences and make sense of the ecclesial pluralism around her, it had resulted in a greater appreciation for ritualized, embodied ways of apprehending the world. Orthodox Christianity had not only transformed Karen’s theological understanding, but had ritually imprinted itself into the very cells of her body for as she related:

Orthodoxy says, ‘Say these prayers and this is how you can say them. And this why you say them and this is going to be the result in your life. Read these [church] fathers, attend this liturgy, receive the Body of Christ [in the Eucharist] and *become* the Body of Christ. It’s assimilated into your very cells and you are *joined* with everybody else, *physically* joined with other communicants. And you confess your sins. You admit your faults. You try to do better. You walk on this path. You walk the rocky road and this is how you walk it.

Another informant insisted that the elaborate preparations of prayer and fasting he undertook before partaking of the Eucharist in the Orthodox Church enhanced his overall sense of the “holiness” of the occasion in ensuring that it was never “a mechanical thing” as it once had been during his Roman Catholic days. In describing his overall attraction to the Orthodox Church the man maintained, “And I felt myself drawn to the spirituality, the actual physical awareness I was sensing with the Orthodox faith. The Orthodox faith up close is very interactive whether it be through sight with the icons, through your sense of smell with the incense, just through communion with actually tasting the Body and Blood of Christ. It is a very interactive, physical experience and I like that.” Another informant declared:

You can find something for everyone. If you’re very cerebral and want to look at theology, there’s no end to it. And yet, it’s often simply enough to go and just listen to the hymns and look at the ornateness and the iconography and sense that there’s another world and I know it’s right here and it’s here now and even though I can’t see it, I am in it. So that depth never has disappointed and I can’t get to the bottom of it, where I did very soon and quickly in all those other experiences I had [as a Protestant]. I found them wanting in some way or another.

In this way, Orthodox Christianity appeared “democratic” in offering its adherents a host of different “methods” for accessing the divine.

Informants not only appreciated the ‘interactive,’ ‘participatory’ nature of the church’s public worship, but the portable physical accoutrements, the icons, prayer ropes, and momentary gestures such as making the sign of the cross, they could carry about, perform, and use in personal spaces at home or work, sometimes in quite innovative “unorthodox” ways. Shortly after beginning his inquiries into the Orthodox faith, Carl, longing to have an icon of his own, placed an image of Christ as a screensaver on his computer before which he experimented saying written prayers. When Fr. Mark learned of this practice, he advised Carl to acquire some “real icons,” which he duly did in the hopes that he “will get more.” Karen discussed her love for the saints of the church even exclaiming at one point when I interviewed her at her home, “Saints are family, you know. They’re part of my spiritual family. And, oh, I’m so unworthy to even call them part of my family, but they are. They’re still alive. The scriptures are clear that people who die are still alive in Christ.” This declaration had its visual counterpart in the many icons interspersed with family photos that lined her living room mantel. She excitedly identified for me

the family members posed in the photos as well as the “meanings” the interspersed saints held for her. Even her still Protestant, German-born husband was represented in the saintly panoply by an image of the Russian New Martyr, the former Grand Duchess Elizabeth,<sup>52</sup> who too, the informant reminded me, had once been both German and Protestant and, thus perhaps, would act as a worthy superhuman aid to effecting her husband’s conversion. At the conclusion of her in-home interview, Sandy showed me an icon she had recently commissioned of the Virgin bordered by saints. Each saint had a special meaning for the family, as patron saints or figures who were believed to have provided intercession at times of illness or crisis.

On a couple of occasions, even my interview sessions with informants inadvertently became arenas for prayer and worship. One woman, who admitted a fascination with Orthodox prayer and has since our interview entered an Orthodox monastic community, constantly fingered the wooden knots of her black prayer rope during the course of our conversation. Meanwhile, when I interviewed informants over meals at restaurants, informants occasionally began the session with a prayer of thanks for the food, of which we were about to partake, as well as our “fellowship” together.

The centrality of the ritual practices of the church for converts is evidenced by the fact that fasting, the keeping of the fasts of the Orthodox Church,<sup>53</sup> was one of the most common informant responses when I asked whether they had encountered any difficulties in becoming or being Orthodox Christians. While many, especially lifelong and intermarriage convert church members admitted to regularly ignoring these prescriptions, seeker converts, even when holding serious reservations about the spiritual or practical efficacy of fasting, seemed to consider it integral to becoming fully Orthodox. Sandy declared, for instance, “Fasting was so hard for me to accept at first because I was just used to, like, giving up candy for Lent, you know. That’s the only fasting I ever did. [She laughs] I’m like what do you mean we can’t have meat or dairy for, like, days or months? But then I find out later, it’s for my own benefit, you know, to make me realize how much I need God and, you know, I find out things are different than I actually thought they were, you know. And it’s not so bad after you start doing it.” Carl echoed these pre-conversion concerns in his narrative, “The biggest concern on my part was fasting . .

.Oh, my Lord, you know-my mom being the typical Irish-Italian cook, you know, there has to be more meat than anything else on the dish. How am I gonna do that?” Already a vegetarian, Karen eagerly took to the practice, even asking Fr. Mark to give her a custom-designed “fasting rule” for Lent long before her conversion. Other practices with which convert informants experimented included the wearing of distinctive clothing (especially head coverings for women), pilgrimages to monasteries and holy sites, everyday usage of baptismal for given names, and the learning and practice of sacred arts (iconography, choral singing, and hymnography).

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

As we will recall, Jean and John Comaroff refer to conversion as a “long conversation,” one that not only involves the different voices and perspectives of social actors, but the utilization of disparate cultural elements in the formulation and advancement of these “conversations.” An investigation of conversion motives to Orthodox Christianity on the part of convert informants allows us to chart both the interplay of marketplace and Orthodox idioms in narrative formulae *and* the varied cultural strands provided by Orthodoxy itself. Although each conversion narrative affords its own improvisation on these themes, patterns across narratives can be clearly discerned as well.

For one thing, Orthodox Christianity never appears alone in the narratives, but always in opposition to *something* else, previous religious confessions or the American marketplace, which, in their inadequacy, shapes how Orthodoxy comes to be considered fulfilling and right. At the same time, informants often carry into their post-conversion lives many of the same very same expectations, albeit in transmuted forms, held previous to their entries into the Orthodox Church. In rejecting the “individualism” of American culture, they remain individualists within the Orthodox Church. While rejecting “pluralism,” they expect Orthodoxy to provide a plurality of strategies by which to cope with the specificities of their individual lives. In a sense, these informants expect Orthodox Christianity, even as a

venue of “absolute truth,” to conform to the marketplace habits and assumptions they so often claim to have left behind through conversion. In providing a variety of psychological, though theologically indistinct, benefits, the Orthodox Church is largely portrayed as something of a “handmaiden” to the self,<sup>54</sup> a vehicle for personal betterment and life enhancement, rather than a religion demanding the wholesale overcoming of individual needs and desires.

Still, the interplay of Orthodoxy and the marketplace, through the lens of conversion motives, is not the sole “conversation” that emerges, for Orthodoxy itself possesses a multitude of voices and dimensions, in providing its adherents theological justifications for considering it, at once, a vessel for “absolute truth” and organic, natural “shades of gray.” Although informants often demonstrate a keen interest in historically immutable “truth” and “tradition,” they also want a church with “real life” applicability that allows them to forge, quite distinct, post-conversion identities within the church. In providing epistemological and moral certitude allowing for concerted focus on the “spiritual life,” rich ritual offerings, and hierarchical and doctrinal structures that are described as less “legalistic” than those of other religious confessions, Orthodoxy, even at its most doctrinaire, appears malleable and strategic in everyday life. Orthodox Christianity furnishes its adherents a cultural repertoire of such richness and intricacy that it, at once within a single narrative, can appear the most stalwart and flexible of religious options. This is confirmed by Cimino in his study, who too writes of his young adults, “They were searching for a faith that offered them an ideal vision of spiritual truth (through liturgy and church traditions and teachings) and the tools (through spiritual disciplines) by which they could find such a reality in their own lives.”<sup>55</sup>

## 5.7 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Talal Asad, “Comments on Conversion,” in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (NY: Routledge, 1996), 263-4.



<sup>2</sup>Philip Charles Lucas, "Enfants Terribles: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2002): 5.

<sup>3</sup>Richard P. Cimino, *Against the Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faith by Young Adults* (NY: Religion Watch/University Press of America, Inc., 1997), 81.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>6</sup>H. B. Cavalcanti and H. Paul Chalfant, "Collective Life as the Ground of Implicit Religion: The Case of American Converts to Russian Orthodoxy," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 453.

<sup>7</sup>Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (NY: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>8</sup>Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43.

<sup>9</sup>Cavalcanti and Chalfant make a similar observation, 449.

<sup>10</sup>See Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 37 (April 1986): 5.

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Liesen Brereton makes a similar assessment of changes wrought in twentieth-century evangelical Protestant conversion narratives (versus their nineteenth-century counterparts) in *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey Into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), xiii-xxii.

<sup>13</sup>Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*. rev. and updated ed. (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992), 61-117.

<sup>14</sup>Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1997); Clark Carlton, *The Truth: What Every Roman Catholic Should Know About the Orthodox Church* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup>Archpriest Alexander Fecanin, "Converting or Merely Adjusting?" *The Dawn: Quarterly Published by the Diocese of the South-Orthodox Church in America* 28, no. 3 (fall 2006): 9.

<sup>16</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 112.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against*

*the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989). For an ethnographic case study, see Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup>Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 162-63.

<sup>20</sup>Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>CCD refers to special classes for school-age children designed for the impartation of Roman Catholic doctrine. The initials stand for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.

<sup>23</sup>The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) reevaluated Roman Catholic belief and practice in light of modernity. The Council revised the mass and replaced the traditional Latin in which it had been celebrated with local vernacular languages. Richard P. McBrien, "Vatican Council II," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, edited by Richard P. McBrien (NY: HarperCollins, 1995): 1299-1306.

<sup>24</sup>The Immaculate Conception is the Roman Catholic dogma officially set forth by Pope Pius IX in the papal bull, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), affirming that the Virgin Mary was conceived without original sin. Elizabeth Johnson, "Immaculate Conception," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 655-656.

<sup>25</sup>The informant is referring to the *filioque*, a Latin phrase for "and the Son," which refers to the procession of the Holy Spirit, as proceeding from the Father and the Son of the Christian Trinity rather than from the Father alone, as found in the Roman Catholic rendition of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The phrase first appeared in Spain in the ninth century and later spread to other parts of Western Christendom. The phrase is absent from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as used in Eastern Orthodox churches, which claim it an unnecessary innovation. Inclusion of the phrase has been a source of much theological dispute between the two churches over the centuries. See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, revised edition (NY: Penguin Books, 1997), 54-58.

<sup>26</sup>Ignatius of Antioch (1<sup>st</sup> century), Irenaeus of Lyons (2<sup>nd</sup> century); the Cappadocian Fathers Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus (4<sup>th</sup> century); John of Damascus (8<sup>th</sup> century); Gregory Palamas (14<sup>th</sup> century). The theologians largely responsible for what has become known as the Neopatristic revival of the twentieth century (Fr. Georges Florovsky [1893-1979], Vladimir Lossky [1903-1958]) were Russian émigrés who had settled in Western Europe and the United States in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Developing their theological frameworks for the first time in predominantly non-Orthodox environments, these thinkers endeavored to return to what they considered the unvarnished "roots" of Orthodox Tradition, the abovementioned church fathers, rather than draw upon Western philosophical trends, such as German idealism, as had those of the "Russian school," represented by figures such as Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882-1937?), Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) and Fr. Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944). Although interested in the theological singularity and purity of Orthodox Christianity, the Neopatristic theologians were also involved in many of the wider social and religious currents of their day. For example, they were heavily involved in ecumenical dialogues and movements. See Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology, Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 373-403 for a fuller discussion of these issues and distinctions.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 377.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 376.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Valliere, "Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition," in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity: On Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr and Frank S. Alexander (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>30</sup>John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978): 16, quoted in Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 377.

<sup>31</sup>See Section 2.6, note 31.

<sup>32</sup>Symeon the New Theologian is a church father of the Eastern church from the tenth century. St. Tikhon (of Zadonsk) lived in Russia in the eighteenth century as did St. Theophan (the Recluse) in the nineteenth.

<sup>33</sup>The informant is referring to the early Protestant Reformation leader John Calvin (1509-1564) and the twelfth-century Cistercian monk, St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

<sup>34</sup>A number of important academic studies have noted the continued importance of community and communities to modern religious seekers and adherents. See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Richard P. Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping For Faith: American Religion and the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 55-94.

<sup>35</sup>Cavalcanti and Chalfant, 441-454 and Richard Cimino, *Against the Stream*, 71-76 discuss the importance of community to Orthodox converts.

<sup>36</sup>The Royal Doors are the central doors on the icon screen separating the sanctuary and altar from the nave in Eastern Orthodox churches.

<sup>37</sup>"Blessed is the Kingdom" are the opening words of the first litany of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy.

<sup>38</sup>See Section 1.2.

<sup>39</sup>Wade Clark Roof discusses the roles and importance of this "process-oriented" language in contemporary American culture in *Spiritual Marketplace*, 101-103; Cimino makes a similar observation of Orthodox converts and reverts in *Against the Stream*, 82.

<sup>40</sup>See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 196; R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 1-23.

<sup>41</sup>Frederick Bird, "The Pursuit of Innocence: New Religious Movements and Moral Accountability," *Sociological Analysis* 40: no page number provided, quoted in Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, 196.

<sup>42</sup>Church council held in Asia Minor in 451 that declared Christ to be both fully human and divine.

<sup>43</sup>Cimino makes a similar observation of the language used by the young people in his study in *Against the Stream*, 82.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 82-83. Cimino affirms that the young people he interviewed were also fascinated by the “mystery” and indistinctness with which Orthodox theology often considers the divine.

<sup>45</sup>In apophatic theology, also known as negative theology, the basic incomprehensibility of the divine to human thought is emphasized. This variety of theologizing is considered by some commentators, such as Vladimir Lossky, to be more pronounced in Eastern than Western Christianity. See Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 299-300.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>47</sup>Debates rage among Orthodox iconographers over the appropriate materials to use in painting icons. Acrylics are considered to be a modern innovation ill suited for creating sacred objects such as icons.

<sup>48</sup>See Section 2.4 and Section 2.6, note 42.

<sup>49</sup>Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, “Introduction,” in *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>50</sup>Cimino, 96.

<sup>51</sup>Pascha is Orthodox Easter and Bright Week is the celebratory week following Easter in the Orthodox Church.

<sup>52</sup>The Grand Duchess Elizabeth was originally a German princess and sister to the eventual last empress of Russia, Alexandra, who married into the Russian imperial family and converted from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodoxy. She became a nun after her husband’s assassination in 1905 and was herself murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. She was glorified as a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992.

<sup>53</sup>Orthodox fasting, at its most rigorous, requires abstention from meat and dairy products. Wednesdays and Fridays are weekly fast days while the church recognizes four major fasting periods over the course of its liturgical year.

<sup>54</sup>I borrow the word “handmaiden” in this instance from Professor Gregory Freeze who uses the term in a wholly unrelated context in reference to the role the Orthodox Church was typically assumed to hold in relation to the state in Imperial Russia. See Gregory Freeze, “Handmaiden of the State? The Church in Imperial Russia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36, no. 1 (January 1985): 82-102.

<sup>55</sup>Cimino, *Against the Stream*. 96-7.

## **6.0 “THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VEIL”: POST-CONVERSION DWELLING IN AN ETHNIC CHURCH**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

In accepting the Orthodox Church as a place and space for dwelling, converts were required to come to terms with more than the theological and liturgical peculiarities of a new faith. They were also called upon to embrace the realities and relationships of everyday parish life, including its ethnic components and the forging of ties with lifelong church members. No less than the aesthetic and sensual aspects of its worship, Eastern Orthodoxy's close association with various ethnic groups from Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Middle East has remained central to its popular and scholarly characterizations.<sup>1</sup> Not only are American Orthodox churches organized and divided along ethnic lines (i.e., Greek, Ukrainian, Antiochian, Carpatho-Rusyn and the like), but easily consumable expressions of these ethnic affiliations, in the form of foreign cuisines and folk customs (e.g., “Old World” dancing, costumes, and arts often put on community display and sale during various food and folk festivals) continue to be key means by which the general public identifies Orthodox churches.

Even though Orthodox Christianity is typically coupled with these expressions of ethnicity, the majority of persons populating many Pittsburgh-area Orthodox churches are the second, third, and fourth-generation descendents of immigrants, especially the “new immigrants” who settled in the industrial centers of North America at the turn of the last century.<sup>2</sup> Given this demographic fact, the above examples of ethnic identity and expression more appropriately reflect what sociologist Herbert J. Gans famously described as “symbolic ethnicity,” abstracted signs pulled from their original contexts and

reinterpreted as representing a culture as a whole.<sup>3</sup> My own fieldsites were in no way exempt from such activities. Ascension Church, for example, regularly held a community-wide Greek food festival each June and St. Michael's hosted an annual blini (Russian pancakes) breakfast before Orthodox Lent and offered church-made pierogies, as edible symbols of the parish's Slavic origins, for sale throughout the year.

Symbolic or otherwise, ethnicity stands as a central organizing principle among contemporary American Orthodox churches and informs the ways in which converts and their experiences are conceptualized. In recent academic studies, a line has often been drawn between so-called "ethnic" Orthodox Christians, lifelong Orthodox church members who supposedly claim fealty to parochial ethnic affiliations, and converts who are portrayed as lacking ethnic ties and interests. Scholars commonly describe these as distinct groups standing in opposition, even antagonism, to one another. Philip Charles Lucas, for example, has focused on the challenge "non-ethnic" converts pose to "ethnic Orthodox parishes" and Paisios Bukowy Whitesides explores the tensions wrought between the "evangelical," former Protestant converts, and "ethnic" Orthodox in his 1997 article.<sup>4</sup>

The categories of "convert" and "ethnic" Orthodox Christians are potent precisely in presenting a narrative of ordinary Americans embracing an exotic, immigrant form of Christianity, of encountering a foreign "other" in their own backyard. Furthermore, choice-making and its relative instrumentality in establishing ecclesial affiliation were coded into the very usage of these categories in everyday life. Converts were not simply or even primarily considered transformed persons or new church members, but individual choice-makers who had *consciously* studied and "read their way to the Orthodox Church"<sup>5</sup> and, in the end, freely chosen apart from familial or social constraints, to become Orthodox Christians. The convert, as a category of person, thus provided an alternate vision of Orthodox identity in which an individual's choice to become Orthodox took precedence over church affiliation through one's birth or heritage. By and large, lifelong Orthodox church members, both clerical and lay, appreciated these efforts and considered them indicative of Orthodoxy's increased "capital" in the spiritual marketplace.

Significantly, the categories of convert and ethnic Orthodox Christian do not represent reified groups, but boundaries of recognized similarity and difference constantly created and recreated in the course of social interaction.<sup>6</sup> For one thing, fully aware of and engaged with contemporary American culture including its spiritual marketplace, lifelong Orthodox Christians too engaged in religious choice-making, especially in exercising the option to abandon Orthodoxy for other denominations and religions. Yet, the choice-making of ethnic Orthodox Christians either received little recognition in parish discussions or was negatively perceived as representing a net population loss for local communities. Additionally, distinctions between convert and ethnic Orthodox Christians were only relevant at certain junctures of parish life. While they were a staple of informal social interaction, readily wielded during coffee hours or after-church-meet-and-greets, they carried no official sacramental import. During confession or distribution of the Eucharist, converts and their fellow lifelong parishioners were wholly indistinguishable from one another, though converts' stories of discovering and entering the Orthodox church were occasionally mentioned by priests in Sunday homilies as means of inspiring the faithful.

Additionally, ethnicity and its parochial expressions cannot be considered attributes of lifelong Orthodox church members alone, for they too appear as significant aspects of converts' self-perceptions and experiences. Indeed, as scholars of ethnicity have maintained, beginning with Fredrik Barth's landmark introduction to the essay collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), ethnicity is malleable and situational in its everyday deployments in social interaction rather than objectively residing in external features such as language and custom.<sup>7</sup> In the case at hand, Orthodox converts demonstrated a heightened awareness of ethnicity as an attribute of the self and wielded symbols of ethnicity in their post-conversion lives in three significant ways. First, as intimated though left unexplored, in Whitesides' article, converts often exhibited powerful ethnic feelings and inclinations that were thrown into sharp relief during the self-reflexivity and perceptual shifts accompanying conversion processes. No less than in the ritual, practical, and intellectual dimensions of their post-conversion lives, convert informants considered the ethnic components of their parishes as vital arenas of choice-making and self-expression, rather than as inert, externalized features of the church to be resisted. Similar to ritual enactment itself,

convert informants in Pittsburgh readily experimented with and appropriated the ethnic trappings (languages, customs, cuisines) reflective of their local parishes. They could also develop a heightened awareness of their own ethnic backgrounds as situated in tandem with or as distinct from that of their new parish communities. In these ways, converts aptly and readily transformed Orthodoxy's ethnic "otherness" into a ground of familiarity, a critical reference point for post-conversion identity formation within the Orthodox Church.

My concluding discussion of the Orthodox Church as a venue for convert dwelling will focus on two fundamental issues. First, I will explore the ways in which distinctions in ecclesial affiliation (choice versus birth) shape the ways clerics, converts, and lifelong church members consider the roles and contributions of converts and lifelong, ethnic Orthodox Christians in church life. Second, the varied ways in which ethnic identity and expression, as arenas for convert choice-making, appear as salient, creative features in informants' post-conversion lives will receive our attention.

## **6.2 CONVERT AND LIFELONG PARISHIONERS IN ORTHODOX CHURCH LIFE**

If, as discussed in chapter three, pre-conversion seeking appeared as a marker differentiating types of converts from one another, intermarriage from theologically/liturgically driven converts, choice and choice-making served as key activities separating the convert from the lifelong church member. Furthermore, these pre-conversion activities were frequently entwined with notions of convert commitment to the Orthodox Church. Although some sociologists have questioned whether converts necessarily make the most committed religious adherents,<sup>8</sup> the perception persists that they do. Yet, the specific interpretations and meanings attached to this supposed "convert zeal" vary enormously from one religious venue to another and among adherents within a single tradition or locale. Some religious movements, such as Guru Maharaj Ji's Divine Light Mission of James V. Downton's 1979 study, attempt to consciously cultivate and enhance neophyte commitment through social enclosure and the making of



substantial demands on convert time and material resources.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Andrew Buckser observes in his study of Jewish converts in Denmark that the enthusiasm and exactitude with which intermarriage converts to Judaism often undertake Jewish ritual practices can be met with bewilderment and consternation on the part of less observant spouses and community members.<sup>10</sup> As previously mentioned, Patrick Allitt notes in his historical treatment of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century converts to Catholicism that its hierarchs regarded their new charges with as much hostility and suspicion as hospitality and labored to temper their polemical enthusiasm given the large numbers of Anglo-American intellectuals entering the Catholic church at that time.<sup>11</sup>

As previously discussed in chapter four, Orthodox clerics expressed an overriding concern that would-be converts demonstrate commitment to the Orthodox Church over the course of pre-conversion catechetical instruction and counseling, processes, we may recall, through which clerics wrested full decision making control from converts. Yet, this commitment was valued precisely as an action freely enacted, similar to the “pure relationship” ideal of modern marital and other romantic attachments, apart from external clerical and communal pressure and grounded in the intellectual and choice-making acumen of the convert herself. Rather than considered disadvantaged in parish life on account of their neophyte status, converts *as converts*, as experienced seekers and avid choice-makers, were often valorized in Orthodox parish life. The significance of converts did not reside alone in the fact that they were now Orthodox, but also in the ways and means by which they had come to the church. Converts were positively described in parish life as self-propelled, religious entrepreneurs who had worked their way, through intense private study, comparison, and prayer to a discovery and embrace of the Orthodox Church. As reiterated in Sunday homilies and in parish conversations both formal and casual, converts were cast as dynamic social actors who counted their Orthodox affiliation as the hard won fruit of labors undertaken and time expended. By point of contrast, lifelong Orthodox Christians, raised in the church from birth and perceived as defining their ecclesial relations primarily through the predetermined channels of family and ethnicity, were often considered persons for whom Orthodox affiliation simply occurred as a matter of course rather than as an identity actively acquired. Converts had made the effort to

investigate and “cross” ecclesial terrains, while lifelong Orthodox Christians supposedly counted affiliation as the easy, unconscious, and easily taken for granted inheritance of ethnic forebears.

Not only did these differences inform the manner of ecclesial affiliation attributed to these groups, but also the nature of their on-going relationships and contributions to daily parish life, which tended to be rather starkly delineated between the “committed convert” and the “apathetic lifelong parishioner.” Pre-conversion efforts substantiated the view, almost irrespective of actual post-conversion engagement or behavior, that converts were necessarily more dedicated church members who could single handedly, in the words of one priest, “raise the intellectual and spiritual level of the entire parish.” Certainly, with their panoramic vantage of parish life and the many personalities abiding therein, Orthodox clerics, in particular, drew the sharpest and most consistent distinctions between their convert and lifelong church members, with the former usually described in favorable terms as important additions to the community from their very first step into the Orthodox parochial midst.

In providing an overview of his five years as priest of St. Michael’s, for example, Fr. Mark repeatedly characterized his lifelong parishioners, many of whom were quite elderly versus the much younger twenty to thirty-something converts, as suffering from religious malaise, apathy, and parochialism. These lifelong Orthodox attitudes were readily set apart from those of converts, who regularly espoused “a zeal for things of the faith” as well as “a deeper understanding and a deeper experience of Christ in their lives.” For his part, Fr. Mark considered his main pastoral challenge to be revitalizing the internal, spiritual lives of the Orthodox-born, who demonstrated little interest in learning about their Orthodox faith, at least in contrast to the ever-studious converts who delved, at least in his view, into deeper levels of religious experience, “The people who have been here all their lives often lack a desiring to have a deeper understanding of the faith. That’s a great frustration, I think, for priests. You know, there’s a lot of, I think, misconceptions about the doctrines of the faith, about what the church believes and there’s simply many times no desire to understand that. Our Orthodox people tend to get themselves into a rut. They just do what they do and know what they know and that’s that.”

Significantly, Fr. Mark attributed the disinterested, “parochial” visions of the church he found among many lifelong church members to their lack of experience with other religions or Orthodox parishes, which he considered vital to spiritual and intellectual maturity. Naturally, such encounters with inter-religious and even intra-Orthodox diversity were the hallmarks of converts’ pre-conversion lives as seekers. He remarked, “There’s sort of a parochialism where they [the lifelong parishioners] measure their faith by their experience within the confines of the parish, but to them that is Orthodoxy and there’s no experience outside of literally the four walls of the church. I can name many people who have *never* been to another Orthodox church in their life, let alone a different denomination. They’ve never been to another Orthodox church, so they measure everything by their experience here or by what one priest has told them or whatever.”

Other priests made similar observations. Fr. Nicholas, for example, contrasted converts and lifelong Orthodox church members in precisely the same manner as did Fr. Mark. Not only were converts “often times more fervent, more excited” about Orthodoxy than non-converts, but their encounters with the apathy of lifelong parishioners could prove disheartening. Fr. Nicholas identified this potential disappointment as a danger lurking in converts’ post-conversion lives within the church, “Sometimes they [converts] have trouble judging the lukewarm Orthodox who are just taking everything for granted and so sometimes we have struggles in that area.” He again commented, “A common theme among converts is frustration that the other Orthodox are not as fervent in their desire to grow.” On a personal level, he found these “lukewarm” attitudes one of the most difficult to accept and work through, “I think the most frustrating thing is wanting more for parishioners than what they want for themselves. People just not understanding how important the church is. Kinda the apathy, I think that’s the most difficult.”

Yet, while Fr. Mark attributed the religious malaise of his lifelong parishioners to a lack of experience with the wider spiritual marketplace, Fr. Nicholas, conversely, blamed the widespread infiltration of religious pluralistic and relativistic attitudes in parish life for the problem, “I think that the truth is that most people in the pews aren’t Orthodox yet and that if you did an inventory of what people believed you would find many of the folks in the pews are Calvinists or New Agers or agnostics or

something else without even really having the knowledge or experience to identify themselves as Orthodox.” In his view, the general paucity and low level of religious education within the church over the years only exacerbated this situation and left entire segments of the ecclesial population, those supposedly without the motivation like converts to seek out such knowledge for themselves, without clear bases from which to develop a sense of themselves as Orthodox Christians. Based on his experience, Fr. Andrew of Ascension concurred that the overall level of dogmatic literacy among the Orthodoxy laity was “abysmally low” with very few of the faithful knowing and understanding even the fundamentals of Orthodox belief and practice. Although admittedly responsible for shepherding their flocks, priests rarely attributed this lacuna in lay education to pastoral failings, but rather to the personal lack of motivation and responsibility demonstrated on the part of lifelong parishioners.

Priests were not alone in underscoring religious activity/passivity, cut along the lines of church affiliation as choice versus that acquired through familial or ethnic ties, as significant for categorizing convert and lifelong church members, for converts did as well. Dee, of Ascension Greek church, described the unrelenting, self-propelled nature of convert labors to understand and gain entry to a church the Orthodox-born effortlessly inhabited each day of their lives. She said in this regard, “Converts tend to want to know all the underpinnings and with cradle Orthodox it’s just the life they’ve lived. You just gotta keep knocking. Ask and it shall be given to you, knock and it shall be open and I just kept knocking patiently at the door.”<sup>12</sup> Dee continued with a discussion of what this “knocking patiently” required of her, “It [life in the Orthodox church] can be overwhelming. But it gets much easier over the years because before you’re Orthodox, it seems like such an effort to stand there and it seems endless.” Despite the struggles of these early days, Dee affirmed, “Your understanding grows and you have the grace and you build stamina. Rome wasn’t built in a day.” She contrasted this building of convert “stamina” and “effort” with what she observed of the religious lives of the lifelong Orthodox in the two Greek churches with which she had been affiliated over the years initially as an inquirer in Wisconsin and, later, as a convert at Ascension. Dee began by describing the lifelong members she knew of the Wisconsin parish before expanding her discussion to include those whom she met later at Ascension:

They were really ethnic. I didn't meet a lot of people who were real self aware. I think they grow up with the faith and it's just the way it is and their family and feasting and their lives are so full and rich and that's the one thing I really always saw-it's the same thing I saw here [at Ascension]. I felt like there was this invisible veil around these people-that they were so blessed and they were just used to living this huge blessing and they didn't understand what it was like to be on the other side of the veil and I felt like it was this protection for them and they didn't understand....They don't quite understand because they've always lived it and then I walk across. Like I said, I got that bridge through to the other side. I came into that too.

The notion that the conversion process conferred a wider, more far-ranging vision into the internal circumstances of the Orthodox Church and the condition of the Orthodox-born was a common narrative theme. Here, based on her panoramic experience of having lived outside the Orthodox Church and having “struggled” to attain its membership, Dee, specifically *as a convert*, situated herself in a narrative position of seeing and identifying the “invisible veil” surrounding her fellow, ethnic Orthodox Christians whose experience of the church rather cozily resided in “family and feasting” rather than movement into new ecclesial terrains. In this way, converts regularly and unhesitatingly moved beyond their own biographical circumstances to furnish authoritative versions of the collective life of the Orthodox-born. As persons who had negotiated and mastered what they believed to be the disparate idioms and epistemologies of a former non-Orthodox confession (or perhaps several over the years), the American religious marketplace, and Orthodox Christianity, converts often considered themselves as religiously multi-lingual, the ready articulators, translators, and interpreters of experiences that were, by their own admission, difficult to comprehend and foreign from their own.<sup>13</sup>

The notion that convert and lifelong church members possessed different ways of knowing their Orthodox faith, one conscious and discursive and the other tacit and embodied, with the latter so often devalued in informants' eyes as to hardly qualify as knowing at all, emerged over the course of these clerical and convert discussions. Like Dee, converts frequently recounted the profound difficulties they encountered in understanding the corporate rituals and social intricacies of their new church. Without the habitually inscribed ritual knowledge and understanding that accompanies “family and feasting,” converts, in a sense, could only begin to comprehend their new environments in highly structured and intellectualized ways. Drawing again upon the theorizing of sociologist Ann Swidler, I argue that converts

and lifelong church members, in this regard, represent two patterns of cultural action and strategizing, what Swidler refers to as “settled” and “unsettled” lives, in regard to the same cultural repertoire.<sup>14</sup> In their ardent attempts to transform Orthodox Christianity into a place of familiarity and social comfort, converts, at least for a time, possess what Swidler refers to as “unsettled lives” as they come into contact with new cultural elements. Until unfamiliar norms and habits are essentially practiced into familiarity, “unsettled” persons rely heavily on “ideologies” or “explicit, articulated, highly organized meaning systems”<sup>15</sup> grounded in discursive understandings of doctrine and ritual. Not only are converts themselves choice-makers thus, arriving on the parochial scene with a swirl of dynamic, process-driven experience, but they simply *must* exert more intellectual and practical effort than their lifelong Orthodox brethren in gaining competency in their new environment. Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman makes a similar claim of his “stranger,” for he writes, “Being a stranger means, first and foremost, that nothing is *natural*; nothing is given of right, nothing comes free. . . . In all these respects the stranger’s stance differs drastically from the native way of life, with far-reaching consequences.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, lifelong church members stand as exemplars of “settled lives” grounded in habit and taken-for-granted practices often diffuse, difficult to identify, and implicit in daily social interaction.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, lifelong church members may appear to clerics and converts as simply less engaged in church life, as exemplified by the common assessment that they take the church for granted, because they possess more implicit, habitualized rather than explicit, ideological knowledge of the faith. Based on my fieldwork observations at both fieldsites, I did not find that converts were necessarily more “committed” or involved in parish activities than lifelong church members. In fact, given their numeric predominance in the studied parishes, lifelong Orthodox Christians were the participatory backbone of nearly all parish activities and functions. The difference existed primarily in the types of activities favored by each group. At both Ascension and St. Michael’s, converts tended to gravitate to parish activities that centered upon the conveyance of discursive, intellectual knowledge such as Bible studies, lectures, Sunday schools, study groups, while lifelong church members participated in the long-established

“traditions” of the church such as food festivals, church picnics, altar societies/men’s clubs with greater verve.

For their part, most of the lifelong members whom I met, both in formal interviews and in casual conversations conducted at coffee hours or other church functions, regarded converts in a positive light. Lifelong Orthodox Christians commented that they appreciated hearing the converts’ stories of discovering and embracing the Orthodox faith and many times consulted the convert literature so prevalent on the American Orthodox scene today for inspiration. They found periodicals such as *Again* magazine and *The Handmaiden* as well as convert authored primers on the Orthodox Church informative,<sup>18</sup> and were generally impressed by the intellectual astuteness of converts, whom they frequently considered as informal experts on and expounders of Orthodox theology. As we will recall, Orthodox converts swiftly assumed educational and authoritative roles within their communities, a circumstance paralleled in other religious contexts as well, such as in the case of western converts to Islam as the Islamic scholar Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad has observed in her work.<sup>19</sup>

Lifelong Orthodox Christians considered converts beneficial to their communities both in adding extra pairs of hands to parish tasks and in infusing their churches with a sense of spiritual renewal and enthusiasm. Brad recalled the expectations of renewal he heard from lifelong parishioners upon his conversion to Orthodoxy at Ascension parish in the mid-1970s, “I had people coming up to me and saying, ‘You’re gonna be a light here. I’m like going, ‘Stop. I’m looking for the light. I’m no light myself.’ They think that you’re gonna be the life changing force here and I’m not.” Thus, parish clergy were not alone in considering converts more zealous and fervent for “things of the faith,” for lifelong lay parishioners, who often expressed to me a genuine personal interest in converts and looked for ways to reach out to them, did as well. Deacon Morris, of Ascension church, described his own “fascination” with the “otherness” of converts. He noted, “I’m curious. I’m just fascinated from the standpoint of converts because I mean I’m cradle Orthodox. I’ve never really known what it’s like to be not [Orthodox].” At both St. Michael’s and Ascension, lifelong members regularly stood as sponsors<sup>20</sup> for converts and established deep emotional, family-like ties with them. In the aftermath of her miscarriage, for example,

Mary discussed the support and informal counseling she received from a lifelong Orthodox Christian couple of Ascension who had lost a child many years before. This couple stood as sponsors at Mary and her husband's chrismation and their families typically share in one another's Easter celebrations.

A nurse and mother of four children in her mid-fifties, Sarah of St. Michael's church was a lifelong Orthodox church member whose parents and grandparents were devout, practicing Orthodox Christians. To emphasize the "innate" quality of her church affiliation, Sarah described herself as an "Orthodox thoroughbred," who nonetheless developed a deep attachment to the church of her childhood, for as she recalled, "I somehow fell in love with the church and at an early age I knew I would never leave the church. It was just something that I always knew." Sarah admitted to having a keen interest in the converts of her parish and observed that the motivations for conversion to Orthodoxy had changed radically over the course of her life within Pittsburgh-area Orthodox churches. In decades past, Sarah observed, individuals rarely entered the church as the result of "epiphanies" or out of deeply held convictions about the theological and liturgical verity of the Orthodox Church, but did so in the course of marrying Orthodox spouses. Of converts, Sarah observed, "Everybody's story is really different. I don't think you get so much of the 'I converted because my spouse is here' anymore. That's a difference. I don't see that around so much anymore."

Despite her pride at having been born and raised in the Orthodox church, for as she stated, "I've never been anything else," Sarah carefully distanced herself from other lifelong Orthodox Christians who stressed ethnicity rather than the "truth of the faith," the latter of which she had tried to instill in her own children. She discussed the pre-conscious, habitual church affiliation that marked the words and actions of her fellow lifelong parishioners, "They just do what they do. They do what they do because they're Greek or this is what Baba<sup>21</sup> told them or whatever, not because it's the teaching of the church or because it's Orthodoxy." As a point of contrast, Sarah said of her own family, "Like in my family, we try to put the religion, the faith, the dogma first-the teachings of Christ, being connected to Christ, God and Christ and so forth." She continued with emphasizing this distinction between herself and the other lifelong Orthodox:



And in all of these [Orthodox] churches people are there not because of Christ or the teachings of the church, but because this is my ethnic background. This is where my parents went, this is what I've always been. This is the way it is. And that's first and not the teachings of the church. So they don't understand the church.

Rather than seeing the Orthodox church in exclusivist terms, as indicative of "my ethnic background," Sarah emphasized the universality of the Orthodox faith, "You need to put the beauty of the faith first-the teachings of Christ. You need to say, 'This is the church from its inception, this is the Ancient Church.' Therefore, everybody should embrace it."

In assessing conversion from her "Orthodox thoroughbred" standpoint, Sarah admired the effort inquirers expended in discovering and investigating the church. Just as vehemently as any clerical informant, Sarah emphasized the care and deliberateness interested individuals must take in deciding whether conversion to Orthodoxy was, indeed, the right course of action. She maintained that conversion to Orthodoxy involved the inculcation of an entire way of life, for in her words, Orthodoxy "is not a religion, it's not joining a church or a country club. I think of the Amish and if you understand the Amish, it's their way of life. And that's really what Orthodoxy is if you're really willing to accept it as your life. A lifestyle is what it is." In Sarah's view, the complexity and richness of this Orthodox "lifestyle" could only be understood by potential converts through rigorous, deliberate study and experience far outpacing the general education expected from and granted to the Orthodox-born, for as she continued:

I think converts should really experience a whole life cycle of the church for a complete year, you know, really learn and study and read and have questions answered and not just on Sunday, but really understand these fasting periods and these holy days and what we do. Be here for this holy day and understand this and grasp the catechism. *Then*, after all this make the decision if this is what you want.

Sarah remarked that she often held her breath when reading the published narratives of Orthodox converts out of concern that the protagonist might embrace the faith without adequate preparation, "As I said, I like to read [conversion] stories and sometimes I'm thinking, Woooh, stop. Wait, wait, wait, this is something you really have to think about, not just for you, but if they have a spouse or whatever. They have to really think about this." Despite the innumerable caveats surrounding conversion articulated by priests in their narratives, Sarah worried that lack of pastoral vigilance and oversight might result in persons entering the

church ill prepared to embrace its ‘lifestyle,’ “I think some clergy have the way of thinking that it’s like a fishnet. You just throw it out there and catch and bring everybody in maybe prematurely. I think it’s really a danger when you jump in too quickly before you understand what you’re getting into.”

Another lifelong Orthodox Christian, Marguerite, a woman in her early twenties who worked in Pittsburgh as an engineer and attended St. Michael’s parish, had had substantial experience interacting with converts in the many different Orthodox churches (Greek and OCA) she had attended in Pennsylvania and her native Wisconsin. She had stood as godparent to a number of converts entering the Orthodox church and counted them among her closest friends. Marguerite too maintained that lifelong Orthodox Christians (with their Swidlerian “settled lives”) easily took the church for granted without seriously reflecting upon its teachings and practices. She explained, “A lot of times people who grow up in the faith, myself included, take for granted all the mysteries of our faith, everything that surrounds Orthodoxy. It just becomes something that our parents did or something that our grandparents did or something that the Russian people did. And it can get lost in a culture real quick if you’re not careful.” Moving from the predominantly “ethnic” Greek parish of her childhood to an OCA “convert” parish in college, Marguerite attributed her own renewed interest in the church to the enthusiasm she witnessed among the converts:

When you see new people come in and they’re interested in learning about the faith, you start wondering yourself why would somebody want to leave the Catholic church or the Protestant church and come here? You see people who are so interested in learning more about this faith and I’ve kind of taken this for granted my whole life and they’re asking questions that I don’t know the answers to. You get to a point yourself where you just want to learn more. I wanted to read more about my faith. I wanted to have more discussions with people. I remember one day, I just went in to talk to Fr. Edward [the priest of her college parish] because I felt like I couldn’t answer people’s questions.

Significantly, rather than dismissing herself and other lifelong Orthodox Christians as ignorant or lazy when compared to the supposed industriousness of converts, Marguerite maintained that convert and lifelong Orthodox Christians simply possessed different ways of knowing about and understanding their faith, representative of the “settled” and “unsettled” lives outlined above, “Some of my friends were looking into Orthodoxy and I didn’t know how to express in words everything that I believed and that

was something that he [Fr. Edward] helped me with a little bit. He made me realize that some things, when you grow up in the faith, they're just kinda imprinted on your heart, engrained in you and you may not necessarily know how to express them in words." Conversely, converts possessed more discursive, intellectualized knowledge of the church, "Sometimes people who've converted to the faith are really good about pinpointing everything exactly in words to what they believe, but you notice it takes a little more time for that to be truly imprinted on their hearts." Still, Marguerite saw a gradual merging of these two ways of "knowing" over time, "So, while I have to learn more so I can express it, with them being in the Orthodox Church longer, it will just become more a natural part of them. They can express it, but then it has to come inside yet."

Marguerite provided concrete examples of how these different types of knowledge played themselves out. She recalled how (would-be) converts distinguished finely pointed ritual differences that she simply took as a matter of course, "It always fascinated me that they [converts] were concerned with the order in which things were done. While it is important, it's these little traditions<sup>22</sup> they would focus on. In a Greek parish, the priest will give out bread at the end of the service instead of kissing the cross [as in Russian churches]. They're really concerned with these little differences, these little traditions." Marguerite admitted that she rarely thought about such issues, "For me, that's just the way that developed. It's just always done that way. I didn't really ask any questions about that. This is the ways the Russians do it. Okay, and that's the end of the subject, you know, if the question was coming from a Greek person. I think that would just kind of be the end of it 'cause they [the lifelong Orthodox] understand more that's kind of just the little tradition."

Fr. Nicetas, himself a convert and today a priest in the Ukrainian Orthodox church, maintained a deep belief that liturgical attendance, as intuitive, habitualized knowledge, trumped reading and studying as the most effective channels for learning about the church, for convert and lifelong Orthodox Christians alike. He stressed that persons develop an instinct for liturgical performance and come to unconsciously know what to expect from moment to moment without necessarily possessing the ability to verbalize it. They, like Marguerite, just *know*. Fr. Nicetas explained, "Stay there and simply take it all in. That's the

traditional way of attending liturgy-to take it in and people often know it very, very well indeed and have a sense of ownership.” Fr. Nicetas offered his own illustration of this intuitive liturgical knowledge and its resulting sense of lay ownership, in recounting a visit he once made to a weekday Lenten service in Moscow:

There was a small choir of maybe three old women and there was a priest and a deacon serving and at one stage, somewhere in the middle of Matins or something like that the priest and deacon must have been in deep conversation with each other in the sanctuary because nothing happened. I mean, there was a pause and you were expecting a little litany, “Again and again let us pray to the Lord.” There was a pause. The lady leading the choir said, “*Paki, Paki*,” you know, “Again and Again.” Still no reply. So the woman standing nearest the [icon] screen went and knocked on it. Suddenly there was “*Paki, paki*.” [He laughs] Now that to me very much illustrated that the Orthodox know exactly what’s going to happen next even if they’re not saying a word. And if you do something out of the ordinary, they say, “Hey,” There is that sense of ownership.

Both convert and lifelong Orthodox Christians expressed concerns over ritual purity and correctness (this was by no means the purview of converts alone), though the ideals and measurements of “purity” and “correctness” differed between the two groups. While converts expressed a desire for their churches to conform to the Orthodoxy encountered in the pages of their theology and history books, lifelong members insisted that their parishes carry on the forms and norms of their childhoods and ancestors. Avidly citing their theological readings, converts of St. Michael’s, for instance, regularly complained to Fr. Mark (and to me) about the “western” style of the church’s interior icons and advocated that they be replaced by others painted in a more appropriately Orthodox “eastern” fashion. Yet, when the parish *did* commission and acquire two new “eastern” icons to adorn its sanctuary, one elderly lifelong church member, took me aside and asked, with clear alarm, about the unfamiliar iconographic depiction of the Mother of God newly set before her in the church.<sup>23</sup> With her intuitive, habitualized way of apprehending her faith, the woman had never before seen the Mother of God depicted without the Christ Child and, thus, expressed concern that the icon was spiritually “wrong” or “tainted” in the same way I had heard converts descry the remaining “western” icons surrounding the new image.

Finally, beyond the more tacit knowledge lifelong members seemed to possess of their Orthodox faith, it is important to keep in mind that many lifelong church members could and did have highly conscious, passion-filled connections and relationships to the Orthodox Church. Indeed, Ann Swidler

underscores in her work that the attributes characterizing “settled” and “unsettled” lives are never absolute, but blurred and ever-shifting.<sup>24</sup> Some lifelong Orthodox informants recalled periods in their youth when they had drifted away from Orthodoxy in disavowals of church attendance or to investigate other religious options. They also described “conversions” of their own in which the Orthodox Church came into prominence once again in their lives and to which they dedicated themselves with renewed zeal to its practices and tenets.

Interestingly, one of the most intense accounts of youthful lifelong Orthodox disenchantment with the church was relayed in the life history of Father Joseph, the primary pastor today of Ascension Greek Church, the church in which he was raised. In 1966, to the consternation of his family and nearly everyone at Ascension apart from the parish priest, he and his wife joined the Peace Corps, for which they spent two and a half years working in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. Fr. Joseph and his wife embarked upon their own crossing in moving from their Greek Orthodox family and church in Pittsburgh to face the “terrible poverty” of the Rio slums, a course of action that, Fr. Joseph maintained, had never been undertaken in the parish, “It was unheard of for anyone who was Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, to do anything like this. To go out-to go out and save the world, so to speak....So, we were sort of like breaking new ground by going out there and doing something.”

Having broken beyond the pronounced insularity of his childhood community, Fr. Joseph returned to Pittsburgh two years later as a man whose “faith had been shattered into a million pieces.” Thus, for a time, Fr. Joseph recalled, “I fell away from the church in the sense of a spiritual crisis ‘cause I felt that the faith of my youth was really not meeting the challenge of what was going on in the world. And even questioning about God. So that when I returned I went through a long period of doubt.” The young, pre-ordained Fr. Joseph became so “disaffected” with the church at this time that he quit attending services altogether and, upon the birth of his first child, advocated postponing the baptism indefinitely.

With reluctance, Fr. Joseph and his wife began attending services at Ascension once again, in the midst of which a self-described “religious awakening” erupted into their lives. He explained:

But we ended up returning to the community, seeing the enthusiasm of the people-resisting it at first and then ultimately being caught up in it ourselves. And then finally we ended up then going the whole nine yards, as they say. You resist and resist and then when you finally let go, you go the other way and that's what happened to me. Yeah, there was no middle ground. Either it [the Church] was true and I was going to embrace it a hundred percent and if it wasn't true, at least I would know by really checking it out.

In his narrative, Fr. Joseph referred to his changed view of and relationship to the Orthodox Church precisely as a "conversion experience," an interiorized event of "awakening" leading to his rededication to the Orthodox faith and subsequent decision to enter the priesthood.

Even lifelong Orthodox Christians who had never broken with the church described their continued affiliation precisely in terms of personal choice-making. Although born and raised in a solidly Orthodox family, Sarah, the "Orthodox thoroughbred," in no way exhibited an ignorance of other religious options or presented her church affiliation as an outgrowth of cultural compulsion or segregation. She explained:

I somehow fell in love with the church at a very early age. I knew I would never leave the church. Just something that I always knew. It's not anything that anyone made me do or told me to do or whatever. It was my own choice and it just felt very, very rich inside the church. It was home and I just knew I would never leave it because there was just-growing up even as a child, and um, well, you start having older friends and I was never prevented from going to any other church. In fact, I probably attended services of one kind or another in most of the churches in my community as your friends change. So, I had a lot of Catholic experience and some various Protestant experiences growing up with friends for different occasions, different reasons and I just always was glad to get back home. I just always knew at least in my experience growing up that there was nothing else that I would go to. There was no grass greener than what I had.

Although she related no wider narrative of abandonment and return to the church precipitated through "spiritual crises" or collegiate "questioning," as did other lifelong informants, Sarah clearly framed her Orthodox affiliation in terms of personal decision-making, one based on feelings for love of "home" and informed comparison with other churches. Certainly, in this pluralistic context, to remain, to dwell within the boundaries of one's birth religion is as much a volitional exercise as the undertaking of innumerable crossings.

### 6.3 CONVERT AWARENESS AND EXPRESSIONS OF ETHNICITY

If lifelong Orthodox Christian choice-making could blur distinctions between social groups, so too could convert expressions of ethnic affiliation in the course of Orthodox parish life. While “ethnic Orthodox Christian” served as something of a code phrase among study informants for the tacit, taken-for-granted knowledge and habits outlined in the previous section, ethnicity and its expressions could be wielded by informants in consciously innovative ways after entry to the Orthodox Church. Rather than appearing solely as an obstacle to conversion, ethnicity also proved to be a powerful form of marketplace “branding” attracting new members to the Orthodox Church. Informants reported choosing specific Orthodox parishes based on ethnic affinities or attractions and readily appropriated features of parochial “ethnic” expression in the same experimental fashion as they did the official rituals of the church.

Most recent theorizing on ethnic identity, such as that exemplified in the work of Fredrik Barth, stresses its contingency and malleability, its process-oriented rather than reified character, for as Stuart Hall writes, “Cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’....Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past [it is] subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Miri Song maintains in her work *Choosing Ethnic Identity*, “Every group’s culture is complex, diverse, and constitutive of a wide variety of practices and . . . traditions, which may espouse different values and positions. . . . We need to see [individuals] as agents who negotiate their . . . ethnic identities in relation to both insiders and outsiders in a variety of contexts.”<sup>26</sup> Given this social constructionist view of it as “boundary maintenance,”<sup>27</sup> ethnic identity remains as ever-shifting and malleable as the social encounters that engender it.

Among convert informants, the provisional, ever-flexible nature of ethnic identity, emerging through social interaction and the manipulation of ethnic symbols was made manifest in informant words and actions in at least three ways. First, some converts became more intensely aware of their own familial ethnic heritage as existing, at least nominally, in contrast to that supposedly represented by the parish. Second, individuals sometimes recognized an affinity between their own pre-conversion ethnic identity

and Orthodox Christianity, such as individuals with East European backgrounds raised in non-Orthodox environments, a fairly common situation in Pittsburgh. Finally, a few converts, regardless of background or sense of ethnic affiliation, adopted the material effects, behaviors, or symbols believed to be emblematic of the ethnic identity of the wider Orthodox parish. In each of these instances, the labels “convert” and “ethnic” Orthodox Christians do not indicate distinct social groupings within the parish, as suggested in other studies of American converts, but overlapping categories, arising through “on the ground” circumstance and relationship.

### **6.3.1 Differentiation**

Entering a context perceived as “ethnic,” the Pittsburgh Orthodox converts at both St. Michael’s and Ascension churches commonly reported and demonstrated a heightened awareness of and sensitivity towards this aspect of Orthodox church life. From their pre-conversion readings and studies of the Orthodox Church, informants often reported delaying their initial visits to local parishes out of concern that they would not understand its ethnic features, especially foreign liturgical languages, or that they would be shunned by xenophobic parishioners. Karen, for instance, only ventured a visit to St. Michael’s after receiving Fr. Mark’s emailed assurance that his parish was, indeed, “seeker friendly,” especially given the predominance of English in its worship services. Meanwhile, despite his early acquaintanceship with Fr. Joseph and ardent self-propelled studies of Orthodox theology, Fred refused to attend a Sunday service at Ascension for over two years plagued as he was by fears of how he and his wife would be received. He recalled his apprehension at the time, “I knew it was going to be hyper-ethnic, because that’s the way the understanding is. I expected a fairly hostile return.” Yet, these initial pre-visit fears of ethnic hostility often proved to be unfounded once contact with actual parishes and parishioners was established. Karen reported being greeted and welcomed by parishioners, both convert and lifelong, from her initial visit to St. Michael’s as was fellow convert, Carl, to his great delight. In contrast to his expectations, Fred too found Ascension to be, in his words, “very friendly to converts, which I was surprised. I got better



than I deserved is the best way to put it. I expected hostility. I not only did not get hostility, I got real warmth and acceptance.”

However, general acceptance of converts on the part of “ethnic” lifelong church members did not directly translate into a disavowal or whitewashing of ethnicity from parish life. Rather, a kind of “ethnic parsing,” whereby external features such as surnames or physical characteristics act as signposts of Orthodox identity, is a staple of church life. As one example upon the many to be cited of this phenomenon, Sarah, of St. Michael’s church, recalled her disappointment in learning her future husband was Roman Catholic rather than Eastern Orthodox, an assumption she had initially made given his “very Ukrainian last name.” Certainly, converts learned these “signs” and the larger taxonomy of ethnic stereotyping to which they pointed from lifelong church members, for whom such features could prove significant for intra- and inter-parish boundary maintenance. Significantly, this tacit, habitualized knowledge could only be gained through the everyday experience of parish life-books do not convey such information. Upon my own arrival at these research sites, converts, as well as lifelong members, attempted to discern my own “ethnic identity” as indicative of possible Orthodox affiliation or not. For example, Alex, to whom I was introduced on my very first visit to St. Michael’s for a Saturday vesper’s service, immediately asked if I myself was an Orthodox Christian, quickly adding, “You look Greek” as rationale for the question.

Converts at Ascension, in particular, appealed to physical features in articulating their distinctness from the surrounding “ethnic” community. Although Mary agreed with her husband, Fred, that she and her family had been warmly welcomed to Ascension, she also evinced a keen awareness that they would always remain somewhat apart from the community. For Mary, this point was underscored by her sense of being “one of the blonds” of the parish, “I don’t feel excluded but at the same time I don’t have expectations that I’m a real Greek here. I know I’m not. I know I’m blond and I don’t fit and that’s okay....We’re fairly integrated into the community. I feel like we are to a certain degree and maybe this is my paranoia, but I guess I’m aware that I’m one of the blonds.” When asked if she had encountered any difficulties in becoming or being an Orthodox Christian, Helen promptly answered in a similar vein,

“Difficulties? Um, well, I guess the only one I could, perhaps think of is [short pause] in the early days, I think when I came back from communion and looked out into a sea of Greek faces and I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh what am I doing here?’ [She chuckles] But those were momentary and when I got talking to the individual people it was okay.”

In a context where ethnic identity exerts such a powerful role in convert imaginings and experiences of Orthodox church life, many converts, perhaps not surprisingly, come to a heightened awareness of their own ethnicity as standing in contradistinction to those historically associated with their parishes and Orthodox Christianity more generally in the United States. Expressions of convert ethnic and familial heritages, as points of differentiation, frequently emerged in the course of social interactions and were significant means by which the lines between convert and ethnic identities became blurred and porous. During the course of my fieldwork at St. Michael’s in the spring of 2005, I attended a luncheon held in honor of a visiting OCA church official. After lunch, the honored priest made his way among the parishioners making introductions and engaging them in conversation. When he happened upon a convert family, the father spontaneously exclaimed in the course of their short exchange, “We’re Italian” to which, with a conspiratorial look, Kondratich laughed and responded, “I’m fifty-one percent Italian.” In the midst of this lighthearted exchange, the convert wielded nominal ethnic identity as a boundary, a mark of differentiation between himself and a wider “Slavic” parish community perceived as ethnically “other.” Significantly, in the above instance, the creation and fomentation of such an ethnic boundary in no way placed the convert outside the Orthodox Church itself, but further substantiated his place *within* it by expanding Eastern Orthodoxy’s traditional ethnic orbits to include his own.

While some converts were interested in asserting their own familial ethnic affiliations as valuable and worthy of note in parish life, others occasionally considered their own ethnic distinctiveness as less attractive than expressions they observed in Eastern Orthodox and other Christian contexts. Brad of Ascension parish, for instance, observed that the closely knit character of ethnic churches only underscored the relative social and relational poverty of his own fragmented “WASP-ish” identity, “I was as much drawn by the ethnic part of it as anything. I mean, I remember even being in grade school and

admiring the Italians because they had this familial bond and this strong sense of the Old World that I didn't have any of. I was a WASP and a fractured one at that. So there were lots of elements that drew me and I found my niche in many ways." Brad's admiration for the ethnic "otherness" of his parish was so strong that he defended this component of church life from its many detractors, "When people say, 'Well, we shouldn't be so ethnic.' I say, 'Well, let's be careful about that because sometimes that's the richest part of the church, the family and everything. You can't just separate one without ripping out these other good things, I don't think.'"

Another parish convert, a woman who embraced Orthodox Christianity through intermarriage, expressed a heightened awareness of her own ethnic background given the wider context of having married a man whom she considered an "ethnic" Orthodox Christian, given his Greek heritage. In casual conversation during church coffee hour, the woman described her background as "very Anglo-Saxon" since her ancestors had emigrated from England to America in the seventeenth century and she had spent her early childhood in Massachusetts. Although never a practitioner of the religion itself, for her parents were avid religious skeptics, this woman also counted a number of New England Christian Scientists among her ancestors and present relations. The informant teasingly noted, "Here I am an Anglo-Saxon and I go off and marry this Greek man." A further point of joking in her family revolved around the fact that her own maternal grandfather was both Greek and Orthodox, hence the observation that she was indeed, "a quarter Greek."

### **6.3.2 Affinity**

This last remark provides a glimpse into a second way in which ethnic identity was significant to Orthodox converts. Rather than experiencing a sense of disparity, however good-naturedly framed, between the convert's own family background and the parish context, many converts reported a wider convergence between the two. Given the historical significance of Pittsburgh as a center attracting central, eastern, and southeastern European immigrants and the relative ease with which these immigrants and

their descendents drifted from Eastern Christianity, in either its Eastern Orthodox or Greek Catholic varieties to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, it is not surprising that a handful of convert informants, especially native Pittsburghers of central and east European descent, considered their conversions an affirmation of these familial and ethnic heritages.

While clearly attributing her eventual conversion to the Orthodox Church to an intellectual desire for patristically formulated, absolute “truth,” Karen also considered her embrace of Orthodoxy as a positive expression of her Slovak heritage. Although Karen maintained that her Byzantine Catholic, Slovak-born grandmother had “really pushed Roman Catholicism” on her as a child, the woman had also been a positive influence on the young girl’s sense of “Slovak-ness.” Not only did she fondly recall Slovak Christmas traditions celebrated in her grandmother’s home but her grandmother would often verbally identify her as “Slovak.” Karen recalled these moments as points of gentle contention between her father and grandmother:

In fact, my grandmother would say to me, she’d tell me that, “You’re Slovak.” And my dad would say, “Mom! Karen, you’re an American. Just stop having this conversation right now.” And then my grandmother would say, “It’s O.K., honey” and she’d pat my hands with her hand and she’d say, “You know that you’re Slovak, don’t you?” And I’d go, “Oh, yes.” It’s almost like a conspiracy between me and grandma. We’re going to ignore Dad. If he wants to be an American, he can be an American, but I’m Slovak. So really, my grandmother’s a tremendous influence on me.

Such exchanges only strengthened Karen’s sense of self as indeed possessing a strong ethnic component, which continued in adulthood and found a religious outlet in her embrace of Orthodox Christianity. Karen discussed the significance of ethnic self-identity as a factor motivating her attendance at St. Michael’s:

Why would I choose this particular church as opposed to a Greek church? Well, I would choose a church that was Russian because I have Slavic background, you know as opposed to choosing to go to an Antiochian church. Of course, if the Greek or Antiochian church were the only church in town I would go there. So, it mainly has to do with the doctrine. Then my choice of Orthodox churches has to do with my heritage.

Her initial concerns about finding a “seeker friendly,” English-speaking parish notwithstanding, Karen was able to experience a comfortable convergence between her Slovak identity and what she perceived as the “Russian/Slavic” character of St. Michael’s church.

Other convert informants too framed their conversions to Orthodoxy as a return to their ethnic “roots.” Of self-proclaimed “Carpatho-Russian” heritage, Fr. Andrew of Ascension parish, for instance, considered Eastern Orthodoxy to be a more original and authentic expression of his “roots” than the Byzantine Catholicism in which he was raised, “All my family were Byzantine Catholics, although if you go back far enough as a Carpatho-Russian there’s always at some point, way back, there is a familial split between Orthodoxy and the Byzantine Catholic church and I was interested in that.” Although aware of this “split” from childhood, Fr. Andrew did not begin his “search” for Orthodoxy until briefly attending a Byzantine Catholic seminary, where he described himself “as a part of those individuals who really wanted to learn more about their Orthodox roots.” Yet, this desire to learn more about their “Orthodox roots” only aroused the suspicions of the seminary faculty, “Now, during the time that I was a student there [in the mid-1970s] it was very much frowned upon for individuals to search out their Orthodox roots, to learn more about the Byzantine Catholic church vis-à-vis Orthodoxy, so I left [the seminary].” Within two years, Fr. Andrew sought out a local Orthodox priest and was received into the Orthodox Church.

James and Olivia too found a resonance between their ethnic heritages and the Orthodox Church they had each come to embrace. Although his paternal grandparents hailed from Italy, James admitted having a far greater interest in the “Carpatho-Rusyn and Slovak heritage” of his maternal relations and begged his still-Eastern Orthodox maternal grandfather (most of his other relations had converted to Roman Catholicism) to take him to church. Despite his dismay at the liturgical changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council, James also situated his late adolescent embrace of Eastern Orthodoxy within the general “roots fever” that he took to be part of the general milieu of the mid-seventies. From his first exposure to church life, James related the general enthusiasm he felt for Orthodoxy’s ethnic attributes, “Boy, if you want to be ethnic, go get yourself attached to an Orthodox Church. My hometown had a great big, four-day ethnic festival. So, you could feel you were a part of something. But even then I think that was one of the things I’ve always found to be such a strength of Orthodoxy. Forget the fact that

people will criticize its ethnicity, but with that ethnicity comes a set of values which are so focused on valuing the individual and making people inclusive that if you want to be part of us, we take you.”

Even James’ wife, Olivia, who described herself as “Irish and German,” considered the Orthodox Church a significant venue for exploring aspects of her background in its historical light. Conducting research at a local Episcopal seminary in preparation for her Sunday school class, Olivia mentioned her delight in the many books on “Celtic things, Celtic history and St. Patrick” the seminary library possessed and in discovering “that although they [the early Celts] did not call themselves Orthodox... Their practices were eastern. They were not western. They were not Roman Catholic practices.”<sup>28</sup> Convinced that “the original Irish faith wasn’t even like Roman Catholicism,” Olivia and her husband established an informal three-member “Celtic Orthodox Society” and staffed a booth at a local Irish festival to pass out literature and engage passersby in historical and theological discussion. Under the watchful eyes of Irish Saints Patrick and Brigit, Orthodox icons of whom adorned the dining room where our interview took place, Olivia explained, “We never tried to like change people’s minds. We just offered them information. But, we blew up a little icon of St. Patrick and had it there, you know, in the booth so that people could see it. And we explained how, you know, if they [the Celts] were always Roman Catholic, then how is it that this and this and this changed them to be more Roman in their rite than eastern? And people were amazed.” Whereas James embraced Orthodox Christianity with the conscious knowledge that in doing so he was hearkening back to his ethnic “roots,” Olivia was clearly pleased years after her conversion to stumble upon an Orthodox affirmation of and affinity with her own background, which only further substantiated an already deep devotion to her adopted faith.

### **6.3.3 Appropriation**

A third pattern of overlapping convert and ethnic identities emerged through convert appropriation of the material effects or behaviors thought emblematic of the church’s “ethnic” identity. Simultaneously, the adoption of such emblems, Gans’ symbols of ethnicity, underscored the permeability

of ethnic boundaries and substantiated the perception of the Orthodox Church as, indeed, fundamentally Slavic, Greek or more generally “ethnic.” Additionally, in a context where ethnicity serves as a fundamental organizing principle of ecclesial life, converts, without familial or ethnic ties to the said groups, often expressed preferences for one ethnic affiliation over another in their choice of parishes. For example, informants with pre-conversion exposure to elements of Russian or Greek cultures, through formal language or historical study not infrequently gravitated to parishes with these affiliations. Having spent two years working in the Ukraine for the Peace Corps, John noted his strong affinity for “Slavic” Orthodox churches since his return to the United States. At the same time, over the course of my fieldwork, one convert family had departed St. Michael’s to join a nearby Greek Orthodox parish, a move taken partly in response to the son’s fervent desire to learn liturgical Greek as a supplement to the Ancient Greek he was already studying as a university classics major.

Convert informants, again, often admitted a fascination with exploring the emblematic and physical accoutrements of ethnicity accompanying their entry into local Orthodox parish life. Rather than shunning such trappings as “un-Orthodox” or “anti-Orthodox,” converts often embraced these elements as significant channels for post-conversion experimentation and identity formation. With particular relish, some informants set upon exploring “folk” customs believed indicative of the ethnic particularity of their parishes such as painting *pysanky*,<sup>29</sup> preparing Greek or Slavic foods, or learning “Old World” dances for festivals or cultural events. From his high school study of Russian and deep admiration for Russian liturgical music, Carl evinced an enthusiasm for all things Russian at St. Michael’s and rather comically considered vodka an important means of demonstrating his support for the supposed “Russian character” of his beloved parish. Since his conversion, he noted that he customarily includes three bottles of vodka in his “Easter basket,” to be blessed by the priest after the Paschal liturgy. Afterwards, he shares a bottle with other male parishioners in the church meeting hall to celebrate the feast, an occasion that arouses general amusement in the community. In this practice, the convert simultaneously substantiated a view of this church as “Russian” and extended the boundaries of this identity to include himself.

Even in instances where they were unable to access or understand expressions of ethnic identity within their communities, especially with the continued usage of foreign liturgical languages, converts could appear as their most fervent supporters and defenders. Much less an immediate issue at St. Michael's where over ninety percent of regular Sunday liturgies were served in English (with Slavonic was used for the remaining ten percent), convert informants at Ascension commented more extensively and frequently on the liturgical use of Greek, comprising as it did fifty to sixty percent of regular Sunday worship. Some converts, such as Mary, complained about the liturgical use of Greek, "We're not Greek and when they're saying the Greek in the liturgy, I've no clue. But you know what? Half the people there don't either and that's the sad thing. And none of the kids know what's being said." However, many converts defended liturgical Greek as a vital link to ancient Christian traditions. Brad, for example, was wary of parting with the Greek language precisely for this reason, "I didn't find Greek to be the hurdle some do. I mean, some part of me was drawn to the Greek. It just seemed a more holy language or something. Remember, it's the language of the New Testament. It just had an appeal to me. It was a beautiful language so that didn't give me hurdles and I think we need to be careful when we talk about replacing it." Meanwhile, fellow convert and parishioner, Kay, considered the specific language (whether Greek or English) used in prayer and worship irrelevant given that, in her view, these were activities that ultimately transcended language and discursive understanding, for as she observed, "I understand quite a bit and I know keywords and if I don't know everything that's going on in the liturgy, I know that it's all just praising God, so you don't have to know all the Greek in order to comprehend it." From his vantage as a lifelong member of the church, Deacon Morris maintained that converts could be just as "Greek" and "ethnic" as any of the Orthodox-born, "I am sensitive to people in the community who are uncomfortable with the ethnicity and have a sense that they don't fit in. But, you know, there are also a lot of converts who have just embraced it and are probably more Greek than a lot of the people who were born with the ethnic pedigree as it were."



## 6.4 CONCLUSION

One of the most important issues confronting converts in their pre- and post conversion encounters with the Orthodox Church is that of ethnicity, which potently informs and circumscribes the meanings and experiences of their entry into the Orthodox faith. Indeed, within intra-parish discourse and interaction, the “convert” appears in certain situations and contexts as a category of person utterly distinct from the “ethnic” lifelong Orthodox church member, with the latter forming the numeric majority of Pittsburgh churches. Not surprisingly, Orthodox insiders typically consider converts, especially those of the former seeker variety, as more zealous and committed to the church than those raised in the faith. I have argued in this chapter that converts are *not* necessarily the most committed participants of the communities I studied, but are perceived as such due to the active, conscious seeking and choice-making effecting their entry to the Orthodox Church. Converts possess exciting stories of pre-conversion seeking and are associated with dynamic, self-propelled movement in studying and embracing a church that lifelong members are believed to unconsciously inherit. Significantly, in a contemporary context where religious affiliation has become increasingly divorced from familial and ethnic heritage and expectation, the valorization of the convert as choice-maker demonstrating “pure commitment” to the church serves as a measurement for the taken-for-granted status of these wider American ideals in Orthodox parish life.

Yet, in no way are lifelong church members disengaged from or unfamiliar with the spiritual marketplace, for they too engage in critical choice-making regarding religious affiliation. However, their choices to remain Orthodox or to leave in an embrace of religious alternatives receive little to negative parochial attention. Although some lifelong members may consider being Orthodox the natural inheritance of forebears, even those, such as Sarah, who do often stress their own choice-making abilities in remaining Orthodoxy and recount a deep awareness and experience of other worldview options over the course of their lives.

Although the religious choice-making of lifelong members may blur the conceptual boundaries between convert and “ethnic” Orthodox Christians, the two categories do differ in their respective use of

and relationship to Orthodox practice as a cultural repertoire, with converts initially relying on explicit, articulated knowledge of Orthodoxy while their fellow lifelong members possess more implicit, habitualized knowledge of the faith. This distinction too contributes to the notion that converts are more “committed” and “zealous” since they must labor and consciously acquire information that the Orthodox-born simply command in the course of their daily lives.

Finally, in keeping with the situational, socially constructed character of ethnicity, as formulated in recent theories, converts also choose, appropriate, or acquire a heightened awareness of ethnicity as a fundamental expression of post-conversion identity in the church. Through the three patterns of ethnic differentiation, affinity and appropriation, converts play with cultural elements, thus blurring and expanding the boundaries of American Orthodoxy’s ethnic categories. As this case study illustrates, ethnic identity is not the simple domain of a supposedly immigrant church but a powerful vehicle for self-reflection among American-born converts eager to position themselves within it. Thus, the standard categories of “convert” and “ethnic” Orthodox Christian, so often held as distinct in scholarly and popular literatures, can appear as fluid, overlapping identities when viewed through an ethnographic lens.

## 6.5 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For scholarly renditions, see Section 1.1 and note 8 of section 1.7. One recent popular portrayal necessarily linking Orthodox Christianity with ethnicity is Joel Zwick’s *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Hollywood, CA: Warner Brothers, 2002). In the film, the main character, who is Greek-American, marries a non-Greek man who converts to the Orthodox faith. Much of the film’s comedic line surrounds the cultural misunderstandings that ensue between the man and his new Greek community.

<sup>2</sup>According to Fr. Joseph of Ascension Greek church, there had been no major flow of immigration from Greece to Pittsburgh since the 1950s. While St. Michael’s had experience a new wave of immigration since the 1990s of persons arriving from Russia and the Ukraine, only about ten percent of the parish’s membership was comprised of these immigrants.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, edited by Werner Sollors (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 435.

<sup>4</sup>Philip Charles Lucas, "Enfants Terribles: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternatives and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003), 5-23; Paisios Bukowy Whitesides, "Ethnics and Evangelicals: Theological Tensions Within American Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997), 19-35. While Whitesides footnotes an awareness that "evangelicals" (former Protestants) too may have familial ethnic attachments, he never explores this in his work.

<sup>5</sup>As Richard P. Cimino, *Against the Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faiths By Young Adults* (NY: Religion Watch and University Press of America, Inc., 1997), 69.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4

<sup>7</sup>Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, reissued (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1998), 9-38.

<sup>8</sup>Irwin R. Barker and Raymond F. Currie, "Do Converts Always Make the Most Committed Members?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24, no. 3 (1985): 305-313, for example, question this assumption in their work.

<sup>9</sup>James V. Downton Jr., *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to Divine Light Mission* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1979), 171-2.

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Buckser, "Social Conversion and Group Definition in Jewish Copenhagen," in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littleman Publishers, Inc., 2003), 75.

<sup>11</sup>Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>12</sup>Here, Dee is making an allusion to a verse from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7).

<sup>13</sup>Zygmunt Bauman makes a similar observation of the "stranger" who, in the course of her homelessness, too acquires wide-ranging, panoramic knowledge often trumping that of the "native-born." Bauman writes, "A non-counterfeit universality may be born only of homelessness. 'As long as the truth is sought by the settled men—the apple of the Tree of Knowledge won't be eaten. The task can be performed only by homeless adventurers, by natural nomads. . . . The table has been turned. It is now the stranger who can find the truth the natives are looking for in vain. Far from being a mark of shame, the incurable foreignness of the stranger is now the sign of distinction. The power of the homeowners is but, a sham. The powerlessness of the homeless is but an illusion.'" In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 82.

<sup>14</sup>Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986), 278-279.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 278.

<sup>16</sup>Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 75.

<sup>17</sup>Swidler, 279.

<sup>18</sup>*Again* and *The Handmaiden* are periodicals published by Conciliar Press, an Orthodox Christian publishing house established by former evangelical Protestant converts to Orthodoxy in the mid-1980s.

<sup>19</sup>Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam,” in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 38-39.

<sup>20</sup>See Section 3.6, note 32 .

<sup>21</sup>”Baba” is another Slavic term of endearment for grandmother closely related to “bubbi.” See Section 4.5, note 53.

<sup>22</sup>Among Orthodox Christians the phrase “little traditions” refers to rituals and gestures that are culturally predicated and determined and, therefore, not considered essential to the historically unchanged “Tradition” of the Orthodox faith. See Paul Valliere, “Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition, in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (NY: Columbia University press, 2007), 17.

<sup>23</sup>The icon that was installed in the church is known as the “Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow” and depicts the Virgin surrounded by angels and people in need. This is an image of specifically Russian, rather than Greek Byzantine, provenance.

<sup>24</sup>Swidler, 278-279.

<sup>25</sup>*Identity, Community, and Cultural Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

<sup>26</sup>Miri Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 42-3 as quoted in Christian Karner, *Ethnicity and Everyday Life* (NY: Routledge, 2007), 21-22

<sup>27</sup>Barth, 24.

<sup>28</sup>The notion that early Celtic Christianity was essentially “Eastern” in its practices has been a common point of discussion among modern Orthodox Christians in the West. A number of church practices are cited in support of this view, for example, that early Celtic Christians calculated the date for Easter in the same manner as did the Greek East. Thomas O’Loughlin, however, disputes that a distinctive “Celtic church” radically departing from the rest of Latin Christendom existed. See Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World, and God in Early Irish Writings* (NY: Continuum, 2000), 17-21.

<sup>29</sup>*Pysanky* are especially decorated keepsake eggs usually given at Easter. The painting of these eggs is a Ukrainian folk tradition.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

In surveying the terrain of our own “crossings” through these six chapters, it is important to conclude with reflections on where this study has come to “dwell” in its present contributions to our understanding of conversion and American religion, especially in regard to issues of wider religious identity and ethnicity. The questions of the methods and meanings of conversion and convert identity among American converts to Eastern Orthodoxy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that have driven this ethnographic exploration, reverberate in their importance far beyond the icon-clad walls of the parishes featured here. As stated from the outset, this study is fundamentally geared to illuminating conversion processes as well as contextualizing them within early twenty-first-century American religious life. Let us examine the contributions of this research to these scholarly endeavors.

If scholars, including Lewis Rambo, Andrew Buckser, and Diane Austin-Broos, take seriously the recent casting of conversion as a process rather than as an all-in-a-moment event then attention must be paid to what remains unchanged over the course of shifts in religious affiliation. My research, therefore, presents a critical case study into an aspect of religious conversion that receives relatively little treatment. As an example of what William James might have identified as a “volitional type” rather than a “self-surrender type” of conversion, Helen’s embrace of Orthodoxy as well as those of the other converts featured in this work, cannot be encapsulated in a single moment, despite the lights “blazing” forth from metaphoric rooms. Therefore, informants’ readiness to formulate and situate their conversions within the language and expectations of the American spiritual marketplace, a metaphor invoked by Peter Berger, Robert Wuthnow and Wade Clark Roof to describe contemporary American religious life, in their opportunities and imperatives to seek and make religious choices, provides a means of gauging the

continued significance of pre-conversion habits and languages to the formulation of post-conversion religious lives.

As Peter G. Stromberg reminds us the stories converts tell about themselves remain vital means of solidifying and furthering attachments to new contexts or, as argued in this study, supposedly old or overlapping ones as well. Informant emphasis, in the course of casual conversations and coffee-house interviews as discussed in chapter two, on personal choice-making and seeking is all the more striking given the high level of religious engagement and knowledge these informants possessed within decidedly Christian contexts. Many informants had served as Bible-school teachers and had acquired seminary degrees and most considered themselves “committed” Christians, yet in the end they spun narratives grounded in marketplace action and imagery. While many of these converts were explicitly aware of Orthodox theology, through their readings and studies, they did not wield this discursively acquired knowledge in the habitualized, everyday ways in which they discussed their religious lives. Certainly, many informants, as discussed in chapter five, remained highly critical of the marketplace and situated their conversions to Orthodoxy in direct, negative reaction against it. Before converting to Orthodoxy, these informants considered themselves in the thick midst of America’s “seeking” culture, whereas from a post-conversion perspective they lived beyond its fray. Yet, the marketplace remained a potent repertoire of words and actions spanning the pre-and post-conversion divide of informants’ experiences.

The diversity of my study sample, as recounted in chapters three, four, and six, leads to a conclusion other than the simple attribution of the persistence of marketplace formulae and actions to an early conversion stage out of which converts will naturally “outgrow” in their lives within the Orthodox Church. This was a cultural orientation so entrenched that it was constantly reinforced in the course of everyday parish life. It was not simply new converts who wielded these words and actions in describing their pre-conversion lives and post-conversion expectations of Orthodoxy (hence, a post-conversion view of Orthodoxy that in some respects mirrors the American “spiritual marketplace”), but converts who had spent decades living and working within the Orthodox Church as well as Orthodox clerics and lifelong church members. We may recall that Orthodox clerics positively wielded the “shopping” metaphor as

descriptive of activities bringing new members to their ecclesial doors and sought to reassure their internet inquirers that their parishes were, indeed, “seeker friendly.” Priests valued converts, as persons who had freely *chosen* the Orthodox faith, both as potential sources of inspiration to their communities and as indicators that Orthodox Christianity’s marketplace “capital” was, indeed, on the rise. As modern American suburbanites rather than “immigrants” huddled in “self-imposed” ethnic isolation, lifelong church members not only regularly left (and sometimes returned to) the churches of their youth as part of their own independent religious quests, but expected converts to carefully weigh their options and enter Orthodoxy as a concluding act to lengthy study and deliberations. Even intermarriage converts, so often cast by others in their communities as constrained in their religious choices, considered themselves active, independent “choice-makers” embracing Orthodoxy after conscious comparison and in response to personal, subjective needs.

Although this study has focused exclusively on converts to Orthodox Christianity, the continued presence and utilization of pre-conversion “tools” in the shaping of post-conversion lives has resonance with conversion in other religious contexts. Different religions certainly offer new devotees different spiritual flavors and connotations. However, the morphology of conversion here outlined, grounded in modern choice-making and the continued utilization of pre-conversion skills and languages, as Gauri Viswanathan and Diane Austin-Broos point out, has further cross-contextual application.

While reflective of the “spiritual marketplace,” a concept that has so powerfully influenced how scholars have come to conceptualize and discuss American religions, the significance of this research to our understanding of this field cannot be limited to the “marketplace” alone. Despite the subjectivity and individualism driving these conversions to Orthodoxy, we must never lose sight that they are fundamentally about the finding of community, as an ecclesial dwelling and nexus of complex social relationships. Robert Bellah’s fears of an American landscape comprised solely of Sheila Larsons practicing their “Sheilaisms” has in no way come to pass if one takes into account this case study of Pittsburgh Orthodox converts, a group bent on finding concrete brick-and-mortar, flesh-and-blood communities for the enactment of their religious lives. While much has been made of the “spiritual, but

not religious” model of individuals eschewing organized religion in favor of a fluid bricolage of self-appropriated beliefs and practices, these converts exemplify an alternate pattern of what we may consider “spiritual *and* religious,” persons who consider religious institutions, even those with robed, jewel-bedecked bishops and dogmatic formulae, the vehicles for personal growth and transformation as discussed in chapter four. They desire truth and epistemological/moral certainty *and* opportunities for personal self-expression and on-the-ground strategizing. With two intermarriage exceptions (Ingrid and Christine), few informants questioned the importance of organized, institutional religion to their spiritual lives and even the most ardent of seeker converts described concrete churches, in the form of denominations and congregations, as the objects of their sundry searches. Whether propelled by dorm-room conversations or encounters with electrifying Franciscan preachers (as was Fred) to begin “searching” for deeper meaning in their lives, however vaguely this was defined, nearly all informants began and ended their searches rather soberly with church on Sunday morning. This work, thus, offers a valuable glimpse into the continued presence and power of institutional, organized religion as an outlet for “spiritual” interests.

In a similar vein, as a grassroots examination of the meanings of conversion and convert identity in local parish life and social interaction, my research, also, contributes and speaks to the burgeoning field of congregational studies, which as James Wind and James Lewis point out in their work, *American Congregations*, have become the focus of much more concerted scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The shift in units of analysis from the denomination as a whole (Eastern Orthodoxy) to the local parish (St. Michael’s and Ascension) brings to light fundamental processes of religious change that are barely perceptible from the perspective of theological discourse or hierarchical pronouncements alone. It was only by living and working in local Orthodox churches that I came into contact with converts proselytized by Orthodox “street preachers,” priests heavily engaged in techno-evangelism, and parishioners eager in (near) equal measure to attend morning liturgies and afternoon Steeler games (or as one parishioner declared, the “church of St. Art”-for the franchise owner, Art Rooney). Congregations are the sites where competing religious and secular interests are at their most acute, where the ideal of theological formulae



gives way to the real of human interaction and the messiness of actual lives lived.<sup>2</sup> They are where variability of form, norm, and openness to change and transformation far outstrip that of the ecclesial entity as a whole. St. Michael's and Ascension are peculiar in their histories and demographic compositions, but so too is each Orthodox parish in the United States. It is through the lens of the local, a concerted examination of "lived" religion that one sees Orthodox Christianities rather than Orthodox Christianity, multiplicity rather than singularity. R. Stephen Warner has noted that change, the waxing and waning of ecclesial fortunes and vicissitudes, affect congregations more speedily and frequently than denominations.<sup>3</sup> While the Orthodoxy "of the books" may seem impervious to historical change, its parishes decidedly are not.

As a vital component of such change, this study also reflects how the meanings and bases of communal religious affiliation have shifted from ascription to achievement, as reflected in the "new paradigm" of American religions that R. Stephen Warner describes as a move from "tribalism" to "voluntarism," a shift emphasized in the work of Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow among others as well.<sup>4</sup> If religious communities have not been rendered obsolete under the conditions of late modernity, the motives for individual affiliation with them have altered. With a population on the geographical move and the weakening of old familial and religious bonds, American congregations, including Orthodox churches, are voluntary communities, that must strategize to retain and attract membership, hence the new significance of Orthodox evangelism and technological acumen in reaching inquirers. The perceptual faultlines between "convert" and "ethnic" Orthodox Christians as well as the categories of intermarriage and seeker converts in parish life provide a lens by which to observe the shift in these meanings within a community that continues to be cast as "ethnic" and marginal to the American religious mainstream. The clerical valorization of seeker converts as model Orthodox Christians worthy of emulation by the community as a whole signals an intra-parish acceptance of rather than a resistance to this voluntarism. In essence, ecclesial membership by birth, nature, familial or national heritages, as ideals of church affiliation, have been supplanted by voluntary, conscious, and emotionally driven associations, such as those represented by seeker converts. Clerics wanted all their parishioners, regardless of birth-affiliations,

to become the functional equivalents of seeker converts, to be Orthodox church members by choice rather than through natal or familial tradition or accident.

Not only does this case study furnish a gauge for measuring achievement as an ideal for church membership, but also of ethnicity itself, as an optional category to be appropriated and shed at will. As Mary Waters maintains in her work, *Ethnic Options*, ethnicity too is an aspect of American life readily open for individual choice-making, but one, like that of old-fashioned churchgoing, with communal overtones.<sup>5</sup> I argue that ethnicity has not waned in these communities, but remains a highly contextualized “toolkit” of cultural materials utilized by converts and lifelong church members alike. While the church communities as a whole selected the times and places for what Herbert Gans would consider symbolic ethnic display (usually those that were the most financially lucrative such as festivals or the selling of foreign cuisines), the converts “shopped” for ethnic parishes that suited their tastes and whimsies and clad their post-conversion identities with its most enticing accoutrements. In this way, ethnicity did not remain an obstacle to post-conversion dwelling in the studied parishes, but provided a powerful bridge for entering into its life, for convert demonstrations of solidarity with their new communities and as potent means of exploring self and other.

The multivocal nature of this project on the themes of conversion and convert identity within the complex matrices of contemporary American religious life, in my taking into account the perspectives of converts, clerics, and lifelong church members, has not resulted in cacophony, but in a rather coherent storytelling sound-portrait. The story of these conversions is not that of a tension-filled encounter between “ordinary Americans” and an exotic, immigrant religion, but that of ordinary Americans meeting other ordinary Americans and finding common ground in the mallways of contemporary consumer culture.

## 7.1 ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations*, vol. 1, *Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) and James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Introduction," in *American Congregations*, vol. 1, *Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities*, 7.

<sup>3</sup>R. Stephen Warner, *Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 148.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW GUIDES

#### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CONVERT INFORMANTS

##### I. *Demographic Information*

Age, birthplace, education, current occupation, marital status (if married, divorced, separated-how long?), children (sex and age), siblings (sex, age, birth order), how long member of current parish, other Orthodox parish affiliations.

##### II.. *Pre-conversion religious life.*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your religious life growing up?
2. What was your previous religious affiliation?
3. How would you characterize the religious life of your family while growing up?
4. With what other religious groups have you been affiliated in adulthood?
5. (If a number of different groups-serial convert) Why did you join these groups? Why did you leave?

##### III. *Conversion to Orthodoxy.*

1. Please tell me about your conversion to Orthodox Christianity.
2. When did you convert to Orthodoxy?
3. Where, when and how did you first learn about Orthodoxy? (If any literary sources-what are they? books, periodicals, church pamphlets, non-Orthodox literature) What originally attracted you to the Orthodox Church?
4. Could you describe for me your first visit to an Orthodox Church? Where was the church? What did you (dis)-like about the service?
5. How did you learn about Orthodox doctrine and practice?
6. What ultimately convinced you to convert? What did it mean for you to convert?  
Did anything in your life change as a result of your conversion?
7. What has been the most difficult thing for you in converting to Orthodoxy?

IV. *Conversion narrative (self-reflection)*

Have you ever discussed your conversion before? To whom? Where? Through what media: written or oral accounts?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

INTERVIEW GUIDES FOR CLERICAL INFORMANTS

I. *Demographic information*

Age, birthplace, education, marital status, children (ages and sexes), length of time in the priesthood, number of parishes served, length of time as pastor of the current parish.

II. *Spiritual/vocational life of the priest.*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your religious life growing up?
2. Who or what influenced you to become a priest? Why did you enter the priesthood?
3. What have you found most difficult/most fulfilling about your life as a priest?

III. *Conversion*

1. In your view, what is conversion? What is its role in the life of the Orthodox Church?
2. What are the key motivating factors leading individuals to come to the Orthodox Church? Have you identified any patterns in conversion experiences and/or processes?
3. When individuals come to you interested in the Orthodox Church, what advice/suggestions do you provide? How do you guide interested individuals in their exploration of Orthodoxy?
4. What are the most effective ways for converts to learn about and experience the Church?
5. In your experience, what is most difficult for converts to accept about Orthodoxy? Can you identify any common pitfalls that emerge among converts as they begin and continue their lives within the Church?

IV. *Conversion within individual parish.*

1. What is the history of conversion within your parish? Has it changed over the past two decades?
2. Have conversions affected your parish and its life in any way? If so, how?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR LIFELONG CHURCH MEMBERS

I. *Demographic Information*

Age, birthplace, educational background, current occupation, current marital status (if married, divorced, separated-how long?), children (sex and age), siblings (sex, age, birth order). How long have you lived in Pittsburgh? How long have you been a member of your current parish? What other parishes have you been a member? How long were you a member of each of these parishes?

II. *Religious life in childhood and early adulthood.*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your religious life growing up?
2. How would you characterize the religious life of your family growing up?

3. What events, persons, or ideas were significant in your early religious development?
4. Have you ever questioned the Orthodox Church or your religious faith?
5. Did you ever consider joining another religion (Christian or non-Christian)? If yes, which ones and why?
6. How many members of your immediate family (the family in which you grew up) have remained Orthodox?

III. *Parishioner's life in and opinion of the Orthodox Church today.*

1. Is there anything you find difficult about being an Orthodox Christian?
2. Do you read books on Orthodoxy? Attend Bible study? Visit Orthodox websites?
3. Have you visited many other Orthodox churches?
4. Why have you continued to stay at St. Nicholas' church? (Or if the individual came from another parish) What attracted you to St. Nicholas'?
5. Over the course of time you have been affiliated with this parish, do you think parish life or the character of the parish has changed in any way? If so, how?
6. Overall, how has the Orthodox Church changed since you were a kid?
7. (If the informant has children) Do you expect your children to be Orthodox? (If so) How have you tried to pass the Orthodox faith down to them?
8. What does the Orthodox Church mean to you and to your life?

Thank you for speaking with me today.

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