



**PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION. AN ATTEMPT  
AT A READING OF ONE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE:  
A Review of JEANNE KORMINA, PALOMNIKI:  
ETNOGRAFIČESKIE OČERKI PRAVOSLAVNOGO  
NOMADIZMA [PILGRIMS: ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCHES  
OF ORTHODOX NOMADISM].**

**Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2019, 349 pp.**

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**Abstract:** The book under review is the result of many years' work by Jeanne Kormina among today's Orthodox believers in Russia. Using the methodological approaches of the anthropology of pilgrimage, and on the basis of extensive field material, the author describes the mobile way of life of modern pilgrims in North-West Russia. Contextualising the accepted approaches of English-language literature, Jeanne Kormina reveals the phenomenon of Orthodox nomadism, which is a completely unique form of religious sociality, not previously described. It should nevertheless be noted that the author does not define the terms she uses entirely clearly, and therefore she often applies her conclusions not only to 'holiday pilgrims', but to all the Orthodox. The tone of a number of the author's descriptions also raises questions, which allows us to continue the discussion of the peculiarities of the influence of a researcher's identity on his / her interpretations in the field of the anthropology of religion. The reviewer concludes that the book is not about modern pilgrimage in all its diversity of forms and practices, but only a particular institutional sphere of religious tourism.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, Orthodoxy, anthropology of religion, anthropology of Christianity.

**Acknowledgments:** This work was written as part of a project supported by the Russian Science Foundation, 'Church and Monastery Building in Russia in the 13th–17th Centuries as a Factor in the Development in Society and the State in the 13th–17th Centuries and the Beginning of the 21st Century: History, Culture, Architecture, Science' (grant no. 20-78-10060, Principal Investigator N. V. Bashnin).

**To cite:** Kudrin A., 'Problems of Translation. An Attempt at a Reading of One Interpretation of Religious Life: A Review of Jeanne Kormina, Palomniki: etnograficheskie ocherki pravoslavnogo nomadizma [Pilgrims: Ethnographic Sketches of Orthodox Nomadism]. Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2019, 349 pp.', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2022, no. 18, pp. 213–222.

**doi:** 10.31250/1815-8927-2022-18-18-213-222

**URL:** <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng018/kudrin.pdf>



**Jeanne Kormina**, *Palomniki: etnograficheskie очерki pravoslavnogo nomadizma* [Pilgrims: Ethnographic Sketches of Orthodox Nomadism]. Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2019, 349 pp.

The book under review is the result of many years' work by Jeanne Kormina among today's Orthodox believers in Russia. Using the methodological approaches of the anthropology of pilgrimage, and on the basis of extensive field material, the author describes the mobile way of life of modern pilgrims in North-West Russia. Contextualising the accepted approaches of English-language literature, Jeanne Kormina reveals the phenomenon of Orthodox nomadism, which is a completely unique form of religious sociality, not previously described. It should nevertheless be noted that the author does not define the terms she uses entirely clearly, and therefore she often applies her conclusions not only to 'holiday pilgrims', but to all the Orthodox. The tone of a number of the author's descriptions also raises questions, which allows us to continue the discussion of the peculiarities of the influence of a researcher's identity on his / her interpretations in the field of the anthropology of religion. The reviewer concludes that the book is not about modern pilgrimage in all its diversity of forms and practices, but only a particular institutional sphere of religious tourism.

Keywords: pilgrimage, Orthodoxy, anthropology of religion, anthropology of Christianity.

### **Problems of Translation. An Attempt at a Reading of One Interpretation of Religious Life**

Jeanne Kormina's book on pilgrims is the result of many years' work in the field of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy. The publication of any monograph on this topic, which has so far not been extensively explored, looks very promising, and sets down landmarks for the further development of new research programmes. The book consists of a preface, an introduction, four chapters describing modern pilgrims who travel by coach (so-called *avtobusniki*), their destinations and the concepts with which they interpret events, and a conclusion.

Kormina begins her immersion in the world of modern Orthodox nomadic practices with the history of the writing of the book. In her introduction, the author discusses the various forms of religious sociality within modern Orthodoxy, introduces the reader to the world of the basic concepts that modern 'pilgrims' use to describe the events that befall them, proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of Orthodox nomadism, and

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characterises the field itself by describing the specifics of working in the Orthodox milieu as such.

Beginning with the statement that '[t]his book is about the religious life of modern Orthodox Christians' (p. 19), Kormina explains that most of them are 'parishioners' not of a church, but of 'parishes on wheels' — pilgrim coach trips, Orthodox fairs, and so on. It is suggested that this phenomenon should be called Orthodox nomadism, and the practices themselves, correspondingly, nomadic. The discovery of such a form of religious sociality is one of Jeanne Kormina's most interesting and significant findings, and it discloses a new object for observation, and allows the recording of a 'segment' of the religious practice of modern Russia hitherto largely overlooked by researchers. Specifying the concept of 'nomads', the author indicates that it means those people who seek authenticity and genuine experience outside their everyday modern life by moving physically through space and imaginatively through time to places of the genuine, unchanging past. Still, the assertion that the mode of religious life described by the author is predominant among modern Orthodox Christians is questionable.

As the author observes, the 'pilgrims' (the debatable nature of this term will be discussed separately at the end of the review) on their journeys are in a condition similar to 'liminality' as interpreted by Victor Turner (p. 21). Kormina examines recent works on that topic in detail (with particular attention to Simon Coleman's research), showing how the research approach to the description of pilgrimage has changed. However, the book unfortunately lacks any review of how the questions surrounding pilgrimage have been developed with regard to Russian material.

Also important on the theoretical level is the overall conceptualisation of the situation of pilgrimage as a tourist enterprise. The author mentions the work of Dean MacCannell, which describes how tourists aim for authenticity and prefer staged spectacle to routine reality, not having the time to immerse themselves in the latter [MacCannell 1999]. Jeanne Kormina does not, however, altogether equate pilgrims with tourists. Pilgrims do want to become 'local' and involve themselves in local life; they accept difficulties and are prepared for trials. Kormina asserts that the participants in these journeys are looking for 'little miracles', and aim to undergo an inner transformation. The author follows this thread throughout the book, making very interesting and valuable observations. Kormina also identifies particular tropes in pilgrim culture that allow her informants to speak of the authenticity of their experience, such as 'purity', 'simplicity' and 'prayerfulness'.

The realities described are placed in the context of the modern theory of secularisation, according to which religion does not disappear,

but adapts to people's changing needs. Jeanne Kormina shows that despite Grace Davie's concept of 'believing without belonging' [Davie 1994], which is widely accepted amongst sociologists of religion, believers create new groups in which to share their experiences. A temporary pilgrim group is an example of one such. For the believers this is an opportunity to identify themselves with Orthodoxy as such, without being controlled by church institutions.

In describing how the field material was collected, Kormina wittily calls the different means of collecting data the tactics of 'the hunter, the gatherer and the ploughman' (p. 22). In fact, the research was carried out all the year round. Mobile methods of research were actively practised on the several occasions when the author went on trips together with different pilgrim groups. Jeanne Kormina has worked mostly in the Leningrad, Novgorod and Pskov Oblasts, in St Petersburg and in Sverdlovsk Oblast. She does not explain why she includes material from the Urals in research that was mostly carried out in the North-Western region. The description of the field also lacks the bare facts: the number of journeys to any particular region, the number of Orthodox fairs and holy places visited, and even an approximate number of the people interviewed. Likewise, given the specifics of the object, one would expect of the book a more detailed description of mobile methods of ethnography, with references to the relevant literature.

The immediate ethnographical foundation of the work is two cases from Pskov Oblast, involving the village shrine of Peshcherka (Gdovsky District) in the first two chapters and the venerated site of the life and death of the elder Fr Nikolay Guryanov on the island of Zalita (in Lake Pskov). The author unfolds before the reader her experience of her research pilgrimage to these places: the first and third chapters describe in detail the process of her taking on the role of a coach pilgrim and her material attributes. The figure of the organiser of the trips receives special attention. Kormina shows how this sort of work (which has practically no limitations placed upon it by institutional frameworks) is organised, what practices are used to construct the atmosphere and the 'assembling' of the temporary 'parish on wheels', what rhetorical devices allow this atmosphere to be regulated and conflicts to be averted, and how, in the case of 'breakdowns', agency is delegated to God's will, or to devils.

In the first chapter ('Avtobusniki') there is a separate section on the bodily practices of participants in the journeys. The author approaches this question via the contextualisation of English-language literature on religious conversion, noting that such practices play a key role in the process of obtaining the special 'pilgrim' experience. For the pilgrims, it is not their presence at services (which they almost never attend) that is important for their

self-awareness as Orthodox Christians, but the inconveniences of the road, their irregular meals, etc. These practices become a sort of way into the community, both into the 'parish on wheels' (by means of their common experience) and into the Orthodox milieu as such (by means of the relationship of gift-exchange established with the local population).

Another means of Orthodox socialisation for the *avtobusniki* is bathing in springs. Performing this act is in their milieu an indicator of the undergoing of a particular religious experience, the instrument for the attainment of which is the body. This area of practice formed by the *avtobusniki* is personal and supervised by no one; it does not require any external legitimisation of the experience, which is often not spoken about. Thus, the main thing in the efforts of the *avtobusniki* to be Orthodox is the fact of having personally undergone 'the correct experience', and not any motivation to join a church institution.

One of the author's most successful interpretations is connected, in our view, with how the Orthodox describe God's presence in their lives. As she listens to the believers' conversations, Jeanne Kormina notices that in their narratives there is a particular interpretative model that connects disparate life events. The recognition of various signs, hardly noticeable at first sight, allows them to give meaning to their routine and establish a personal relationship with God. The believer does not only discipline his / her body, (s)he is transformed into semiotician. The identification of a sign (even without an awareness of its content) can lead afterwards to its interpretation in a different context, which allows the event to be understood as a 'little miracle'. Such a view of the world, the author says, is a special semiotic ideology, in Webb Keane's terms [Keane 2003].

An important marker for the identification of a place as holy and special is that it is 'prayed over'. Kormina dissects this concept in her second chapter ('A Place of Prayer'), noting its connection with the pilgrims' experience of the authenticity of the place they visit and the shared experience of several generations. For a place to be recognised as full of prayer, there is no need for its particular history, since there is no institutional procedure for its affirmation, as there is for the recognition of miracles. In describing such places, Kormina follows the concept of John Eade and Michael Sallnow, who regard a venerated place as an area for the competing discourses of different groups of users [Eade, Sallnow 2000]. Thus, taking as her example the local shrine of Peshcherka in Pskov Oblast, she gives an extensive picture both of how the shrine came into being and of how it is today. The historical part of this chapter is based on field material, archival sources and data from the research literature. Applying the approach of Eade and Sallnow, she shows which social groups, and

with what motivation, fought for the sacred space to be recognised or not recognised. She demonstrates three contemporary ways of speaking about Peshcherka: the aetiological, which is supported by the local priest; stories of miraculous cures and small miracles, which are popular among the *avtobusniki* who visit the place; accounts of the punishment of the sacrilegious, which are significant for the local population but do not become part of the pilgrims' repertoire because of their local specifics. It is the third type that is described by Jeanne Kormina in the greatest detail, although it is the least relevant to the *avtobusniki* about whom the book is written.

The section on the shrine as used by the pilgrims and the locals together cannot be described as wholly successful. This subject is usually closely connected with pilgrim practices, and Kormina gives a detailed review of the research on this topic, questioning whether it is possible to apply it to the case of Peshcherka. It should be remarked, however, that she does not develop this topic further. The monograph says almost nothing about joint use, meetings between different groups of users, agreements, or differences in practice.

The next contentious subject is that of relics. Kormina makes very interesting observations about how the saint's burial place becomes an extension of his or her body, of the existence of a special olfactory argument in questions of establishing sanctity, and the particular significance of smell in Orthodox culture. Nevertheless, this section is the least ethnographic of Kormina's ethnographic sketches. It is mostly written using information from the literature and the mass media. Nor is the concept of the immanence of prayer, announced in the chapter's title, in fact developed in any way.

The third chapter ('The Saints') is devoted to the author's fieldwork on the island of Zalita in Lake Pskov, the place where Fr Nikolay Guryanov, who is revered by many as an elder,<sup>1</sup> was living until quite recently. Kormina shows that competing commemorative communities have formed around this figure. The chapter is full of interesting and picturesque ethnographical descriptions. The author gives a quick demonstration of how the actual journey to the island and the meeting between the *avtobusniki* and the inhabitants takes place, and how they perceive each other.

Separately, Kormina examines the role of the institution of eldership in modern Orthodoxy. Using the example of Fr Nikolay Guryanov, she explains the principles of how such phenomena arise. To this end she uses an analysis of competing discourses. The living saint becomes part of the sacral landscape, a special infrastructure grows up around him / her, and 'guardians' appear. In practice this

<sup>1</sup> In the sense of starets, or a figure offering spiritual guidance, rather than the leader of a congregation [Eds.].

methodological position denies the holiness or charismatic character of the personality: they become the discursive operation of the people around him / her. However, in setting out her argument, the author goes into far too much detail in describing one of the discursive positions, namely the views of the *tsarebozhniki*<sup>1</sup> who have established themselves in Fr Nikolay's house. They are evidently not the main users of the place and are a somewhat marginal group against the background of Orthodoxy as a whole (see, for example: [Knorre 2006; Akhmetova 2010]).

In the fourth and final chapter, on Orthodox fairs, Kormina describes the process whereby these came into being and how their conceptual and material content and framework has gradually been transformed. From having been the sort of event with free practices where the presence of unsupervised religious behaviour was permissible, and differing views of Orthodoxy were represented, the fairs are gradually drifting towards institutional legitimisation where the Church hierarchy is concerned. The chapter discusses in detail the attitude towards money and financial operations, both among the participants in the fairs and among their external critics, who often expect to find within the Church a space where only free gifts are offered. The last section is devoted to practices of delegated prayer, by means of notes, and strategies for finding someone to perform occasional offices, depending on the degree to which the believer is integrated into the Church.

Despite all its merits, the fourth chapter has one substantial defect: it seems the least logical in the context of the overall structure of a book on pilgrims. In the author's opinion, visitors to the fair set out on virtual pilgrimages, since the wide regional representation of vendors allows one to undertake an imaginary journey through various sacred places (p. 284). This is an interesting observation, but it still does not look very convincing as an explanation of why the subject of fairs has found its way into a book on pilgrims. Kormina puts fairs into the category of nomadic religious practices, although the only limitation that she puts on the concept of 'pilgrimage' itself — Turner's break with the structure — is absent here (p. 306). The fair is more like a simple meeting place for the non-churchgoing Orthodox, and also for people who are integrated into the Church to a greater or lesser degree, as the author herself remarks (pp. 304, 306).

The topic of the materiality of religion is represented by a whole series of interesting observations scattered throughout the whole book (particularly the chapter on fairs). It is important, given the special attention that is paid to material objects in Orthodoxy.

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<sup>1</sup> A heretical group devoted to the 'tsar-redeemer' Nicholas II [Trans.].

Appealing to the theoretical constructs of John Urry, Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell, Kormina demonstrates that things are direct participants in Orthodox social networks. Using a series of small subjects and references, the book opens the discussion on the objects of the Orthodox world within the framework of research on the new materiality.

One striking feature is that in a book entitled *Pilgrims*, Kormina all the same never defines the key terms of ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘pilgrims’, and this materially affects the clarity of the conclusions at the end of the book. In effect, the author describes a particular case of mobile Orthodox, ‘holiday pilgrimages’, as she herself specifies (p. 68). Participants in such trips are called by the emic term of *avtobusniki*, borrowed from one of the informants, but unfortunately almost unused in the rest of the book after it is first noted. This results in the extension of conclusions reached from very specific material to all Orthodox pilgrims, and to believers in general. It becomes clear from the text that the author does not take account of phenomena such as religious processions, organised parish excursions, and the private pilgrimage initiatives of individual believers: if these are mentioned at all, then only very briefly and in passing. Of course, the author recognises that people must be called the way they call themselves, otherwise we are categorising them according to our own criteria, which we have ourselves invented or borrowed from the doctrine of the Church. The essence of an anthropologist’s work is not to assign a person to a group, but to observe what (s)he does in order to play a particular social role (p. 54). The question nevertheless remains, why informants’ self-identification is accepted ‘as it is’, and borrowed unchanged for description, while their experience is translated into analytical language, and the behaviour of the *avtobusniki* is extrapolated to a wider group (the Orthodox in general). Nor is any attention paid to the external identification of the *avtobusniki* by other representatives of the Church who do not take part in such trips.

The book is rich in autoethnographic references, which is extremely valuable and allows a more balanced attitude to the conclusions that Kormina draws. One of the main questions in the introduction, which her colleagues and informants put to her, is whether a person who does not believe is able to engage in the study of religion. She can, and will do it better than anyone else, the author assures us.<sup>1</sup> For Jeanne Kormina, the main ethical question lies in the possibility of the ‘intellectual productivity’ of her own and society’s irritation with the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (pp. 44–46). Unfortunately, this irritation is frequently manifested in the text,

<sup>1</sup> On the difficulties and advantages of the other, insider, position, see: [Levkievskaya 2015].



which inclines one to a more cautious attitude towards a whole range of the author's interpretations. Evident in some of Kormina's expressions and descriptions is that authorial alienation under a cloak of objectivity that Elena Levkievskaya has noticed in Nikolay Mitrokhin's well-known work on the Russian Orthodox Church [Levkievskaya 2015: 17], and this also manifests itself in the severity with which certain phenomena are evaluated and treated. All this takes us back to an earlier discussion of the influence of the researcher's identity on the character of fieldwork and the interpretation of the material obtained [Kormina et al. 2017: 151–156]. In characterising her field, Kormina notes that it is 'extremely difficult' for her to carry out an ethnographic study of Orthodoxy (p. 46).

In places the author's style could be called one of justified bias. As she writes, 'working in the field, that is, doing ethnography, we try to "grasp" the categories and concepts wherewith our informants articulate and explain their world, and afterwards we engage in the complex process of translating the knowledge that we have obtained into academic language' (p. 51). It may be imagined that a really essential problem for anthropology is how this translation can adequately be effected. Do we not start to substitute our own theories, based on other material from other places, for the theories of our informants and the doctrines of the institutions to which they belong or to which they subscribe? Why do we not allow the latter to speak? What is in fact happening is a new objectivisation, even though the author proclaims its rejection.

The author acknowledges in her conclusion that an anthropologist's work resembles quasidocumentary cinema: 'It contains both the truth of life, and its poetry. It uses the magical device of montage and deforms ethnographic material with interpretative intrusions with which the characters of the work would probably not agree' (p. 313). It may be supposed that freedom of description and 'poetry' are admissible in the style of writing and in descriptions. Yet, considering that the informants' behaviour is often explained by the author without reference to their own interpretation, the 'poetry' intrudes into the analysis itself.

This is often expressed in not altogether permissible comparisons and in the carelessness of certain formulations. In the author's vocabulary venerated places sometimes turn into 'containers for the accumulation of grace' (p. 23), pilgrimages become 'forays for the consumption of charisma' (p. 36), and the saints and those with whom miracles take place 'the superheroes of Orthodox films' (p. 106). Such phrases may be read as somewhat disdainful. In a number of cases, Kormina distances 'the pilgrims' and some other heroes of her book from herself, and, essentially, acknowledges their actions as not simply 'other', but as peculiar (see, for example, pp. 95, 172).

Not all those summarising statements of the author that do not arise directly from the analysis of field material have references to works on the topic under discussion. Describing the retrospective situation, Kormina mostly cites the book by Alexander Panchenko [Panchenko 1998], an article by Tatiana Shchepanskaya [Shchepanskaya 1995], and works by Vera Shevtsova [Shevtsova 2010] and Laura Stark [Stark 2002]. Unfortunately, these references are, for the most part, given only in the context of a discussion of questions of motivation and the reasons for pilgrimage, without giving a comprehensive picture of what it was in the past. It is not easy to understand why Tatyana Bernshtam's fundamental work on parish life in the Russian village [Bernshtam 2007: 316–350], in which there is a whole section devoted to the phenomenon of 'pilgrimage', is completely ignored. It is also worth mentioning that the book does not engage deeply with sources. Jeanne Kormina mostly cites other works in order to confirm her own words or to give examples from other regions. In this context one might note that material from the mass media is sometimes used uncritically.

In practice, this book is about pilgrimage as it is understood (or used as a brand) by certain people involved in the sphere of the institutional frameworks of religious tourism (as organisers or clients), but not about pilgrims and pilgrimage as such. Nevertheless, a researcher into contemporary Russian religion will be able to find many valuable observations in the book. It is also important that Kormina has undertaken a Russian contextualisation of modern works in English. One would like to hope that attempts to understand the phenomenon of contemporary Orthodox pilgrimage are only just beginning, and that the book under review will be an important step in the right direction.

### Acknowledgments

This work was written as part of a project supported by the Russian Science Foundation, 'Church and Monastery Building in Russia in the 13th–17th Centuries as a Factor in the Development in Society and the State in the 13th–17th Centuries and the Beginning of the 21st Century: History, Culture, Architecture, Science' (grant no. 20-78-10060, Principal Investigator N. V. Bashnin).

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson