



**A Review of JEANNE KORMINA, PALOMNIKI:
ETNOGRAFICHESKIE OCHERKI PRAVOSLAVNOGO NOMADIZMA
[PILGRIMS: ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCHES
OF ORTHODOX NOMADISM].**

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Abstract: This book draws attention to Orthodox religiosity in contemporary Russia in terms of the religious practices (lived religion) that take place outside the walls of the church and outside the Church as an institution. The study approaches the topic from an innovative theoretical frame, religious nomadism, and analyses such phenomena as pilgrimages, sacred sites, saints and Orthodox fairs. The book collects some of the main findings and theoretical insights from Jeanne Kormina's long experience in ethnographic fieldwork among Russian Orthodox Christians and is a welcome contribution to research on vernacular Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia.

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

This book draws attention to Orthodox religiosity in contemporary Russia in terms of the religious practices (lived religion) that take place outside the walls of the church and outside the Church as an institution. The study approaches the topic from an innovative theoretical frame, religious nomadism, and analyses such phenomena as pilgrimages, sacred sites, saints and Orthodox fairs. The book collects some of the main findings and theoretical insights from Jeanne Kormina's long experience in ethnographic fieldwork among Russian Orthodox Christians and is a welcome contribution to research on vernacular Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia.

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Traditionally, a practising Orthodox Christian in Russia is understood as a person who regularly attends the local church and looks to the local clergy for religious authority. However, as Jeanne Kormina establishes in this book, a substantial part of Orthodox religious practice in contemporary Russia takes place beyond one's immediate neighbourhood, in the form, say, of trips to sacred places and visits to revered elders (*startsy*) who do not have official positions within the Church. In addition to spatial mobility, this trend is connected to the fragmentation of religious authority and the transformation of believers in the perception of the community. In addressing this multiform phenomenon, Kormina introduces the term 'religious nomadism', which refers to carefully planned journeying between destinations in a religious landscape that the 'Orthodox nomads' have also themselves carefully planned. This nomadism is not connected to or regulated by any single hegemonic institution, but it has developed freely according to market forces (p. 19).

Kormina's book addresses four manifestations of contemporary Orthodox nomadism: the industry of bus tours to sacred places, sacred sites as the destinations of pilgrimages, spiritual authorities in the 'religious landscape' of modern nomads, and Orthodox fairs. Together, the chapters form a multifaceted and integrated icture, offering complementary outlooks

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on religious nomadism. The chapters describe these phenomena both generally, and through thought-provoking case studies, such as the sacred cave in the village of Trutnevo and the biography and varied, at times contradictory, representations of the revered elder Nikolay Guryanov. Occasionally, the detailed descriptions seem to diverge slightly from the main line of argumentation, especially as the short conclusion functions more as an epilogue than a concise presentation of the main arguments. However, overall, the cases well illustrate the multiplicity and diversity of Orthodox nomadism.

Kormina's long-term perspective and impressive fieldwork provide a solid base for the analysis. Her engagingly written book is full of anecdotes and details that are both informative and entertaining. With its grassroot perspective, the book contributes to the emerging literature on vernacular religion [Bowman, Valk 2012] and lived religion [Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008]. Though Kormina does not make use of these concepts and does not address the theoretical discussion about them, her research and these works have many methodological preferences and postulates in common. Both the 'vernacular religion' and 'lived religion' approaches focus on practice rather than doctrine, and they are typically applied to phenomena that are not confined to religious institutions such as the Church. In a similar manner Kormina's work opens up possibilities for taking a new look at Orthodox Christianity in Russia, the study of which is too often reduced to the attendance rate in churches, surveys on people's beliefs in one or another doctrine, and theological debates within the Church. Scholars of both vernacular and lived religion are critical of the tendency to pass value judgments on the basis of, for example, 'official' and 'unofficial' religiosity. In the context of extant study of Russian Orthodox Christianity, Kormina's non-evaluative approach that passes over the theological debates on Orthodoxy in favour of dispassionate analysis of religion as it is lived by church communities represents a contribution that is both significant and refreshing.

Though the book focuses on the twenty-first century, it also attests the dramatic changes that took place within Orthodox Christianity and in its public role from the beginning of the 1990s. As Kormina notes, while the Orthodox Church appeared to be an old-fashioned and even somewhat marginal institution soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in recent years religious behaviour has become a meeting ground for various elites and their 'demonstrative unity with the people' (p. 280). Religion has also penetrated the lower levels of society outside the Church, for many Russians still feel uncomfortable in church, even though they sincerely consider themselves Orthodox Christians. For this reason, such places and practices as Orthodox fairs or pilgrimages provide important avenues for religious socialisation.

Research on the doctrinal aspects of the faith or the Church as an institution often foregrounds the static character of Russian Orthodox Christianity and its immutability. Kormina's study, on the other hand, lays bare the dynamic forces within the confession. In the Russian context it is particularly interesting to observe the coexistence of new waves and the heritage of the Imperial and Soviet periods. For example, some places that are now known as sacred destinations of pilgrimages gained their reputation already in Soviet times; however, at that time, they were considered sites of natural or cultural, rather than religious, importance. The sacred sites also lay bare ongoing struggles in memory politics, especially with regard to the legacies of the Soviet era. For example, it is still an open question what should be remembered from the Soviet period — the crimes committed against the church or the self-sacrifice of Soviet soldiers. Kormina's book attests that, even in terms of religion, the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation was less a question of a drastic rupture than of the reconstruction of existing identities and the transferral of different forms of social capital into a new context. For example, Kormina's research confirms that former Soviet administrators, particularly from the cultural sphere, continue to play an active role in the restoration of Orthodox Christianity in post-Soviet Russia [Luehrmann 2011]. She shows that the management skills acquired in the Soviet tourist industry or trade union movement are used to organise pilgrimages or restore local shrines.

Some signs indicate that, since the beginning of the 1990s, the socioeconomic portrait of Orthodox Christian practitioners has undergone changes. Whereas twenty years ago it was mostly elderly women who went to church, now religion is becoming more and more fashionable, which means that it is spreading among the younger generations and also attracting men. It would have been interesting to hear whether Kormina's fieldwork lends support for this notion as well. Added to this, the analysis would have benefitted from a description of the dominant demographic and socioeconomic groups comprising the different forms of 'Orthodox nomadism' in Russia.

The concept of religious nomadism without doubt successfully defines the phenomena that Kormina addresses in the book. Yet it would have been good to consider how its application could be extended. It is understandable that Kormina's book only concerns physical travel and personal meetings, but in future research it would be interesting to apply the terminological apparatus proposed therein to the study of online communities and discussions. For example, Anastasia Mitrofanova's research [Mitrofanova 2016] shows that the Internet is now becoming a platform where people can discuss and reinterpret their Orthodox identity, forming communities that are

highly mutable and mobile. It would be interesting not only to find resemblances between offline and online nomadism, but also to see how the same people and communities circulate in physical and virtual space.

One of the main merits of Kormina's book is its reflexivity. Kormina explicates the development of her own thinking and uses it to make analytical insights. She also displays sensitivity towards her subjects' own interpretations, a quality that is particularly important in research into such a personal and delicate area as human religion. Indeed, as Kormina aptly writes, passions often rage in society around the topic of religion, and therefore researchers often display an instinctive caution in their publications. However, the risk of this sensitivity is that those who exercise it may hesitate to proceed beyond the limits of emic interpretations and the local language. In some sections of the book, Kormina seems to be on the brink of taking up the position of a defender of the Church, for example when she refuses to take seriously statements about the clericalisation of Russian society or evidence of financial malpractices and corruption inside the Church.

As Kormina notes, pilgrimage is, at one and the same time, an intensely personal experience and a communal one. Indeed, even though there are new kinds of online communities, these cannot replace actual face-to-face meetings. In answer to such important questions as how pilgrim communities are formed and how their boundaries are maintained or altered, Kormina has recourse to the literature on the ethnography of religious belonging. Unlike in traditional church communities or in 'structural Orthodoxy', in religious nomadism the community is not tied to any locality, but is composed of networks of people who meet in different places and share viewpoints and (esoteric) information. Like all communities, there are also internal hierarchies and boundaries. Kormina's in-depth analysis demonstrates how the world of religious nomadism has its own 'elites, currencies and celebrities' (p. 75).

It is not only the community of 'religious nomads' that is concerned to establish and maintain its borders. Similar processes are taking place within the Russian Orthodox Church, which, in particular, aspires to obtain a semiotic monopoly on Orthodox Christianity in Russia. Church representatives are ever more often expressing their concern about heretical practices among believers. As Kormina writes, at the lower level some priests consider one of their duties to be 'a sort of internal mission' (p. 146). Her research does indeed contain evidence that modern New Age religion is finding its way into everyday Orthodox practice, for example through such concepts as spiritual energy or references to medicine and science in search of legitimisation. However, while allegations of 'heresy' and

‘neopaganism’ might be justified in some cases, in others they are less so. As Kormina notes, these charges can also be used to warrant the increased control of the Church over grassroots religiosity.

Kormina points out that neither worries about heresy nor suspicion of initiatives from below are by any means new phenomena; they were characteristic of the Church both in prerevolutionary and Soviet times. Recently, however, particularly under Patriarch Kirill, the centralisation of control over various forms of activity within the Church has intensified. Kormina gives several very interesting examples of this, but unfortunately says nothing about what this tendency looks like at the level of the institutional Church. The process of the centralisation of power within the Russian Orthodox Church could also have been examined within the framework of the political pressure that leads to the institutionalisation of religion. Whichever way, Kormina’s subtle observations indicate that grassroots activists devise various inventive methods of adapting or obviating the rules and restrictions without confronting them head on. In this way the book raises a series of interesting questions about the limits upon, and the very possibility of, a monopoly on Orthodox Christianity in modern Russia.

Some of the main themes of the book are agency and individualism; Kormina’s ability to make nuanced and analytically astute observations shines in her discussions about these topics in particular. Throughout the book, Kormina seems to advocate two contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, she argues that the ideal of relinquishing agency is central to modern Orthodox nomads. For this reason they try to construct the narrative of their spiritual journey, and of their whole life, as if they were directed by external forces such as circumstances or fate, and not by personal choice. This is not simply rhetoric: such values, and a pessimistic attitude towards the individual’s ability to determine his / her life, really do create a passive position for the believers, especially since in their religious practice they are guided by a tradition which they regard as very ancient, if not eternal.

At the same time, Kormina observes that every participant in pilgrimage, for example, aspires to take away from it their own individual experience. Individual religiosity is also constructed at Orthodox fairs in which people are able to employ their taste and religious savvy to select from multiple options. In their choices, the authority of the official Church is often secondary as Orthodox nomads may consider themselves to be a kind of elite that has acquired, with great effort and skill, knowledge and insight unavailable to the majority of adherents. Not only that — some of Kormina’s informants insist that in order to obtain religious experience they have no need of the Church or a priest. Kormina

considers that the Orthodox nomads have not mastered the language of self-development that is characteristic of Western spirituality. It is, however, an interesting question whether this assertion can be extended to all the various ways of being Orthodox in Russia. There is research that shows that contemporary Russian self-help literature, despite its typical neoliberal stress on individual responsibility, has absorbed elements of the Orthodox tradition [Tiaynen-Qadir, Salmenniemi 2017].

As she produces arguments and examples in support both of individualisation in Orthodox nomadism and its absence, Kormina proposes an original means of reconciling these two aspects. Though the main ideal of Orthodox nomadism is obedience and a renunciation of agency, Kormina shows that this idea creates a space for the liberty of individual self-expression. For example, holy elders do not as a rule give precise instructions. On the contrary, their words are often ambiguous and capable of multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations. The result is that when someone reveres an elder, (s)he can simultaneously express obedience (*poslushanie*) and give his / her own interpretations of his words (p. 220). The ideal of obedience is also manifested in the cultivation of an 'Orthodox body', which includes the ability to maintain the proper position (standing) throughout a long church service or tolerate the inconveniences characteristic of pilgrim journeys. At the same time Kormina writes that at Orthodox fairs religion is offered in 'a mild, inclusive form' (p. 301), so that Orthodox believers can participate 'in the role of a creative consumer' (p. 312).

Although Orthodox nomadism in contemporary Russia may be included in the context of religious commodification and even individualisation, it is also closely connected with the search for roots and authenticity. According to the classical work by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari [Deleuze, Guattari, Massumi 1986], nomadism presupposes a relationship with space which is different from the experience of migrants or the local population, and creates a new form of subjectivity. This conceptualisation is also suitable for Russian Orthodox nomads, whose actions may also be interpreted as an interest in their heritage and in their homeland in general. They aim for authenticity, even if this authenticity is often frankly artificial in character. The local inhabitants may not always be glad of these influxes of pilgrims, but at the same time religious tourism may play a very important role in the survival of isolated villages.

Kormina notes that contemporary Orthodox nomadism may be regarded as an example of root tourism or genealogical tourism, defined as 'a reflexive response to a sense of loss that underpins modern society, assisting in reaffirming both a generational sense of the self and a self-recognition that one has one's own perspective

on the world' [Santos, Yan 2010: 56]. The urge to inherit, to belong to one's tradition, is also the basis for Danièle Hervieu-Léger's conceptualisation of the relationship between memory and religion, to which Kormina also has recourse in her book. The native sacred places connect Orthodox nomads to the history of their own country, but engaging in the renovation and maintenance of these places makes people active carriers of the tradition as well (p. 125).

At the beginning of the book, Kormina insightfully comments on how the biases of Western approaches and theoretical frameworks often colour the analyses of Russian religiosity. Though I wonder if Kormina reproduces the narrative of the exceptionalism of Russia and the exoticisation of Russians in some sections, I readily admit that her criticism is astute. Therefore, not only because of the theoretical insights or the wealth of information, but also for the benefits of the insider perspectives that it sets out, the translation of this book into English would be a very welcome contribution to the study of Russian religiosity.

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