Politics of Inclusion: Comparative Notes on the Centrality of Religion.
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To cite this version:

HAL Id: halshs-03091266
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03091266
Submitted on 16 Mar 2021

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Abstract: This discussion concerns certain important issues in the anthropology of religion. In recent decades, there have been claims in the social sciences that ‘religion’ has outlived its usefulness as a concept, with criticism coming from a range of disciplines. Thus it is reasonable to ask how significant and intellectually credible the term ‘religion’ may be, and how useful to our research and writing. Other questions that may be encountered when studying religion(s) are related to the confessional or non-confessional identities of researchers. In the anthropology of religion, there is particularly extensive attention paid to the personal standpoint of individual scholars and specifically to the extent of their involvement with a given religious tradition. On the other hand, among the specificities of religious fieldwork is the high degree of ‘agency’ of our informants, as expressed especially in the efforts made in a particular religious group to convert the observer to their own beliefs. The participants of the discussion accept the challenges of these difficult problems, and strive to analyze the processes of anthropological and sociological description and interpretation of religion(s).

Keywords: anthropology of religion, ethics of fieldwork, religious conversion, epistemology, critiques of the scholarly category of religion, politics of identity.


Politics of Inclusion: Comparative Notes on the Centrality of ‘Religion’

On kinds of interaction during fieldwork

Anthropologists of religion necessarily interact with members of the groups they study during ethnographic fieldwork. I propose to term as ‘politics of inclusion’ the large spectrum of views and actions that members of religious groups deploy in order to integrate the observer. ‘Politics of inclusion’ can be defined as a broad category that encompasses religious conversion.\(^1\)

Indeed, the agency of our informants is in some cases best defined as attempts to convert the observer to their religion, understood broadly as a system of ideas and practices that connect the humans to supra-human beings. In other cases, attempts at integration mobilise religion, but the objective of these politics is not religious conversion. During fieldwork in two different settings, I was faced alternately with each of these two kinds of politics of inclusion. I would like to compare them in order to try to understand the difference between them. I think that this difference lies in the degree to which ‘religion’ is a pivotal category for the self-definition of the two different groups among whom I worked.

In fact, anthropologists can follow multiple paths in analysing politics of inclusion. One of these paths can lead to introspective queries, another one to reflexive explorations of the scholarly field to which the anthropologists belong. A third one consists of considering these politics as part of the ethnographic data. I follow this third path. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among two groups of people practising religion in the postsocialist setting. The first group are Russian Orthodox Christians (Patriarchate of Moscow) in northwestern Russia.

\(^1\) A rich body of anthropological literature that I do not discuss in this brief notes demonstrates that religious conversion is a context-dependent and not necessarily self-evident concept, an approach to which I also subscribe.
Many of my interlocutors were actively involved in parishes. The second group are Bulgarian Sunni Muslims in southern Bulgaria, who mostly practise domestic and locality-based Islam, and who, however, do not put a strong stress on their practice as specifically religious.

A qualification is needed here in order to specify the way in which I use the term ‘comparison’. I do not aim to compare these two forms of Christianity and Islam in general terms. My ambition is more modest. I compare the two religious groups through the prism of my personal experience of interaction with them, with a specific focus on the respective politics of inclusion that I encountered. In spite of the fact that in both cases I was interested in religion and especially religious ritual in the second case, ‘religion’ was a central category in the politics of inclusion of my interlocutors in Russia and, conversely, it was not for my informants in Bulgaria. Yet, in this second case, I find it misleading to consider that ‘religion’ is a scholarly category forcefully imposed from the outside. Rather, for my interlocutors, ‘religion’ is not a central self-definitional lens. The difference in the centrality and vibrancy of ‘religion’ for these two groups is revelatory of specific ongoing transformations of religion, society and politics, as well as of the challenges with which the people are faced.

Before I get to the heart of my topic, I would like to bring some basic information about my personal national and religious background, since the two played a role for the politics of inclusion I encountered. I was born in Bulgaria to a Bulgarian-speaking non-practising Christian Orthodox family. I was baptised in my early childhood in the second half of the 1970s, that is, under late socialism, in the locally famous Rila monastery on the initiative of my grandmothers. I have no memories from this event. But I remember very well having been often told that this is a prestigious place and that very few of my schoolmates even had the chance to be baptised. In other words, my grandmothers made me understand that they had added this marker of prestige to my personal identity. There was no religious practice in my family. However, one of my grandmothers kept telling a few times per year that she went to light a candle in the church. She also loved mentioning that, as a schoolgirl, her favourite subject was catechism. My interest in religion grew out of my intellectual curiosity as a teenager and later as a student of anthropology; it is not the result of a personal religious commitment.

**Doing research among active Russian Orthodox parishioners**

I conducted one-year ethnographic fieldwork in Russian Orthodox parishes in a town located in the region of St Petersburg in 2006–7 and made shorter trips in the subsequent years. I have kept strong and friendly relationships with some of my informants to this day. For the contemporary actively practising Russian Orthodox,
‘religion’ is a central category of their engagement, a major definitional lens through which they see themselves individually and collectively, a lens through which they see their ritual and disciplinary practices. It is also often expressed as ‘faith’ (vera). The emphasis that my informants put on thinking of themselves as being religious played a central role in our relationships. It influenced their politics of inclusion in two major ways. A small part of them expected me to convert immediately; the penalty was the end of our conversations. The bigger part expected in a much more relaxed way that I start showing signs of conversion, but remained open and friendly although I did not show such signs.

The fact that I was baptised in an Orthodox church came out to be important for all of my informants. In their eyes, it made me potentially ‘integrable’ into their faith. Indeed, most of them expected that I would embrace their faith, and some still do expect me to do so to this day. In reality, having being a baptised Orthodox was a good start in their eyes. In a few cases, this marker of my personal identity proved largely insufficient even for continuing interviews or simple chat. For instance, a small part of my interlocutors began to question the legitimacy of my presence on the basis that I was not Orthodox in the way in which they expected me to be. What they expected me to do was to practise in their way: light candles, utter prayers, make the sign of the cross, kiss icons, take communion, ask the priest for his blessing and kiss his hand, bath in the holy springs and lakes during pilgrimage trips. Some informants laid down as an absolute prerequisite to the continuation of my ethnographic study among them that I bring clear evidence of the fact that I was embracing their religious commitment. I could not satisfy to their pressing expectations. The uncompromising attitudes that I encountered belong by now to a well-rooted trend among the Russian Orthodox faithful. The contemporary ROC has this intrinsic trend in common with proselytising movements.

However, the number of such people was limited. Their attitude did by no means preclude the possibility for me to continue doing fieldwork. I continued to have a friendly, empathic relationship with many other committed Orthodox. The majority of this part of my informants found it sufficient that I cover my head and wear a skirt while in a church. Even this was not laid down as an absolute requirement. It is rather part of a code that all women ethnographers usually find good to observe. Behaving otherwise may be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. The most important for the immense majority of my informants was shared empathy and the time we spent together speaking of our lives and views.

Yet my close informants always expected that I would start showing signs of adherence to their faith, especially through bodily practice.
This was suggested indirectly and gently, with no pressure. For instance, once I had tied my headscarf in a particularly tight way and had put a skirt which nearly touched the ground. A middle-aged woman who had a fascination for ascetic practices, and who was very kind and open with me, commented on my outlook with a large smile by saying that I looked ‘exactly like one of us’ (‘Ona pryamo kak nasha’). Her apparently insignificant and friendly words encapsulated the double perception that the expectation that I become ‘one of them’ was real, but that bodily attitudes, although largely valued, were not sufficient to make me ‘one of them’, but simply look ‘exactly like’ them.

One of the most common expressions of this expectation to convert appeared during pilgrimage trips. For instance, during a pilgrimage to the beautiful setting of Izborsk, where there is a lake and springs, and during another one to a church in Kamno, nearby Pskov, where there is spring with a chapel built on it, all the pilgrims immersed themselves. I did not do that; doing it would have meant giving misleading signs to my closer acquaintances, an equivalent to cheating on them. At other occasions, some informants gave me bread dipped in wine at the end of the Sunday service which I ate with them. Others offered me gifts such as icons and religious books with the double meaning of souvenirs and vehicles to conversion. Others invited me to come close to the relics of saints. My informants mobilised these soft, friendly politics of inclusion by encouraging my bodily participation and commensality, and always kept an eye on potential signs of conversion.

A strand of Bulgarian Sunni Islam: The weak vibrancy of ‘religion’

In Russia, the active Orthodox parishioners among whom I worked clearly claim that they engage religion. They think of themselves as religious persons in a self-assertive manner. In contrast to them, my Muslim interlocutors in Bulgaria, although they steadily perform religious rituals and think of themselves as an ethnoreligious minority, do not define their collective religious practice as being above all religious, but rather communal. The people among whom I worked knew well that I belong to the Bulgarian Orthodox Christian majority. One belongs to the Bulgarian Muslim group by birth, not by conversion, a fact that makes conversion meaningless. Indeed, my informants never expressed in any way an expectation that I share in their religious identity. Besides the fact that I am not of Muslim origin, what really explains the relative absence of the idea of ‘religion’ in our interactions is the fact that for them ‘religion’ has not the vibrancy it has for my Russian informants. The politics of inclusion that I experienced within this community clearly mobilised religion, but never aimed at my conversion.
I began fieldwork in the southern part of the Rhodope mountains, a rural area in southern Bulgaria, in 2009 and keep returning there every year. In Bulgaria, the Rhodope is known for the beauty of the landscapes, folkloric music and also for its ‘mixed’ population. A large number of localities are populated by Orthodox Christians, the majority religious group in the country, and by Sunni Muslims, a minority most of whom belong to the Hanafi tradition. The ancestors of the latter mostly converted from Christianity to Islam during the Ottoman period (fourteenth-nineteenth centuries). I lived in a ‘mixed village’, as the local people say, where the local Bulgarian-speaking Muslims\(^1\) clearly outnumber the Christians. As in the neighbouring localities, Islam is rather a domestic and village-level practice. The ritual specialists (singular hodja, plural hodji) who officiate at ritual events have no formal training and no affiliation with an Islamic authority. Mosque religiosity is related to old age and attendance is usually very low. There, exactly like elsewhere in the Rhodope, the economy has been crumbling since the beginning of the 1990s, resulting in stunningly high rates of outmigration. But there is no relationship of causality between people’s experience from this sharp economic downturn and engagement with newly imported forms of pious Salafism, in contrast to what an anthropologist has recently claimed about a neighbouring town [Ghodsee 2009].

I participated in home rituals and village-level kurban celebrations [Tocheva 2015]. These rituals are common and extremely widespread; they realise the symbolic integration of the people within domestic and local communities. The term kurban is of Muslim Turkish origin and means ‘sacrifice’. In this region, it designates both a Muslim and an Orthodox ritual comprising a blood sacrifice and a sacrificial meal shared among the participants. The word kurban spread in the Balkans during the Ottoman period, but it is not known when and under what circumstances it came to be applied to communal feasts with slaughtered animals at Orthodox churches. Different sorts of kurban provided an enduring frame for the continuation of religious practices under socialism, although they were not necessarily understood as religious by the participants. Kurban is practiced at Muslim religious celebrations, Orthodox saints’ days, village days, and at life-cycle rituals, and to commemorate personal events. ‘To slaughter kurban’ (koli se kurban) means that an animal is slaughtered, cooked, and shared as a free meal with kin, friends, acquaintances and other people. In the Rhodope it is commonly a sheep. The blood sacrifice constitutes the symbolic religious matrix of this ritual for Muslims and Christians.

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\(^1\) Bulgarian is the mother tongue of these Muslims who, therefore, differ from Turkish-speaking Muslims in Bulgaria, although both groups are Bulgarian citizens.
In the village where I lived, the large Bulgarian Muslim majority and the Bulgarian Christian minority organise some forms of *kurban* separately, others together. The village *kurban* there is a postsocialist invention inspired by an earlier spring *kurban* related to sheep breeding. It was initiated in 1992 by several villagers, most of them Muslim. The Muslim religious elements are easier to identify, but both Christians and Muslims see the spring *kurban* as a request for protection and prosperity that bridges the two religions. Most villagers spoke of the event in remotely religious terms, or drew no religious association at all: ‘This is good for the sheep, for the people, for the village.’ Some put a stronger emphasis on religion, without claiming an exclusive Christian or Muslim origin. Muslims may speak of protection from ‘Allah’ and the ‘Lord’; Christians would refer to the ‘Lord’ and ‘God’. A common practice of Muslims and Christians is to refer to ‘the one who is above’ or to ‘the one up there’. No one asserts *kurban* to be either Muslim or Christian. However, an elderly man reads Muslim prayers just before each sheep is slaughtered; he is the one who usually utters the prayers when the Muslim houses slaughter sheep for the feast of *Kurban Bairam*. Moreover, on the Friday morning before *kurban*, usually elderly men gather in the mosque for a prayer, without publicising the event. There is no gathering in the church before or after *kurban*. This different involvement of the two religions shows that a Muslim connotation is more noticeable. But no official Muslim authority takes part and the ritual is not the subject of claims over correct religious practice. At the key moment of the ritual meal neither religion is given prominence. On the contrary, in the preliminary phase Islam is noticeable but not publicised. This serves to soften the religious connotation, which is important in a region where the presocialist and socialist governments repressed Islam. Harsh policies obliged people to change Muslim names to Christian and punished Islamic practices more visibly than equivalent Christian practices.

In spring 2010, I spent the day of the village *kurban* serving plates of the ritual meal for the guests, talking with them and with the other people who came to help. In the evening, I came back to the house of my hosts completely exhausted. I have to specify here that I lived with a Muslim family. My hostess, who had seen me working and talking during more than eight hours, asked: ‘Did you eat from the common?’ By ‘the common’ she meant the *keshkek*, the ritual meal cooked from mutton and wheat only at *kurban* celebrations. I confessed that I had eaten only from the yoghurt, but not from the *keshkek*. Her face suddenly changed; I saw an expression of shock and confusion. She jumped from her chair and run to the fridge. She took out a bowl of *keshkek*. She had managed to take home some of ‘the common’. She quickly warmed it up. I had to eat a good portion of the meal in front of her and the other family members. This is
when I fully understood how commensality matters for this ritual. This meal resulting from a sacrificial slaughter must be consumed collectively on the spot. I had completely neglected the importance of this rule of commensality. When my mistaken behaviour became, I was given no possibility to refuse or even negotiate. I had to eat as everybody else. Consuming this food did not make of me a local Muslim or a local Christian. No one ever expected me to become one of them, of even to look ‘exactly like’ them. Religious sacrifice is instrumental to the ritual. Religion guarantees the validity of the ritual. But ritual commensality generates and reasserts a communal bond.

Final remarks

An important reason for the different emphasis on ‘religion’ in the two cases lies in their contrasting contemporary conditions. Russian Orthodoxy led by the Patriarchate of Moscow has been promoted as the most legitimate religion in Russia by the political authority in the Putin-Medvedev era. Thus, a hegemonic drive has developed among the actively practising people, that takes the form, among other expressions, of an expectation that it is normal for everyone to be Orthodox, especially for those of Slavic origin and who have already been baptised. For the local Islam in the central southern Rhodope, heavily affected by presocialist and socialist repressions, ‘religion’ has become a secondary category of self-definition. Today, much like in socialist times, this Islam is much less visible on the public arena than forms of Islam that claim to be more pious, or than those claiming a strong affiliation with an official Islamic authority. Yet, this Islam, nearly unassuming its religious character, lies at the heart of a rich set of rituals that continue to be actively practised in spite of the deepening economic outmigration in this region. The integrative impetus of local communities and the continuing transmission of ethnoreligious identity through domestic religious practice owe much to such rituals weakly infused with a sense of practising ‘religion’. This weak ‘religiousness’ also conditioned the specific politics of inclusion which I met there.

References
