

Orthodox Icons of Mary Generating Transnational Space between Finland and Russia¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the socio-anthropological meanings of icons of Mary from a transnational perspective. It addresses the hitherto unexplored area of ethnographic reality surrounding Marian icons amongst Orthodox women of Russian and Finnish backgrounds residing in Finland. I build on transnational anthropology, which accentuates multi-sited lives and senses of belonging, and material religion, which emphasizes the holistic character of mind-body experiences. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork, I suggest that icons of Mary generate a transnational religious aesthetic space, in which geographical borders and rigid boundaries of national imaginaries can be transgressed. This space constructively generates connections between and across Finland and Russia, and manifests itself in women's narratives and experiences in at least two ways. Firstly, Marian icons enable experiences of "coming home" and journey in both metaphorical and literal dimensions. For many of my interlocutors, icons of Mary facilitated sensorial encounters with Orthodoxy as their spiritual home. Through icons of Mary, many Russian-speaking women developed their home-relatedness to Finland, at the same time retaining their sense of Russian belonging. Secondly, women's narratives and experiences converge in their engagement with icons of Mary in the space of spiritual mothering. "Tenderness" icons are especially important in channelling corporeal and emotional aspects of mothering.

Keywords: Mary, Orthodoxy, transnational anthropology, icons, Russia, Finland

Introduction

The word "icon" originates in the Greek word *eikon*, which can be translated as "image". Icons are usually two-dimensional religious paintings on wooden panels, which depict saints, angels, the

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Virgin, the Trinitarian God, Jesus, or important events (Cawthorne 2005). In Orthodox theology, icons have come to be seen as “windows on eternity”, an expression of divine presence and beauty in the created world (Munteanu 2013; Evdokimov 1990; Ouspensky 1997). Although icons are central to Orthodox practice, there is little scholarly understanding of the ethnographic reality that surrounds people’s everyday experiences of icons (Hann & Goltz 2010; Weaver 2011). In this paper, drawing on my long-term ethnographic fieldwork amongst Orthodox Christians in Finland, I address this unexplored area of research by analyzing how women of Russian and Finnish backgrounds engage with icons of Mary in their everyday lives, and what their experiences suggest. I focus exclusively on Finnish Orthodoxy as a site of multicultural and transnational interaction.

Similarly to vernacular Catholicism (Gemzöe 2010; Vuola 2010), the importance of Mary in church and individual practice in Orthodox Christianity is irrefutable (Schmemmann 1991; Seppälä 2010a). In Orthodoxy, Mary is usually referred to as the Mother of God or the Birthgiver of God (*Theotokos* in Greek, *Bogoroditsa* in Russian, *Jumalansynnyttäjä* in Finnish), which signifies that Mary gives birth to Jesus, who is both man and God (Logos, Second Person of the Trinitarian God). She often represents the unspoken and mystical aspect of Orthodoxy (Seppälä 2010a, 15). No single service or prayer is without reference to her, not to mention numerous hymns, akathists and icons (Schmemmann 1991). A number of folklore studies illustrate the significance of the figure of Mary in Russian and Finnish Karelian childbirth practices, traditional healing and “women’s epic” (Timonen 1994; Keinänen 2003). Ethnographic research is beginning to lay out the continued importance of Mary in the contemporary lived experiences of Orthodox Christianity, especially amongst women (Vuola 2010; Vuola 2016; Tiainen 2013). Icons of the Mother of God are usually amongst the most venerated religious objects in Orthodoxy (Weaver 2011). Mariological iconography is immensely rich, with approximately 700 different depictions in Russia alone (Yazykova 1995). These include more than 300 icons that have come to be known as “wonder-working” (Schmemmann 1991, 87). Given this importance of Marian icons in “women’s everyday religion” (Keinänen 2010), it is pertinent to ask: how do women actually face and engage with icons of Mary in their lives? What is the structure of the space that is generated through interaction and immediacy between the believer and the icon?

Most approaches to these important questions of lived religion are bound up within a methodological nationalist approach, restricted to describing belongings within a national Church environment. Moreover, they build on a cognitive approach to icons, which stresses how believers relate to the theological meaning of an image or appreciate its aesthetics in more or less theoretical

terms. However, my ethnographic fieldwork paints a different picture. In dialogue with my interlocutors, I find significant evidence of transnationalism, a multi-sited space seeping across national borders, and of sensorial, corporeal engagement. I therefore ground my findings in transnational anthropology, which challenges methodological nationalism and accentuates multi-sited histories, lives and senses of belonging (Appadurai 1996; Vertovec 2009; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002). Analyses that place Marian icons within national containers of *either Finland or Russia* obscure the multicultural complexity inscribed in people's experiences of icons. Methodological nationalism is also unable to address transnational and multicultural interaction within contemporary Finnish Orthodoxy. In contrast, a transnational anthropological approach helps to yield new interpretations of women's narratives and experiences, in which Mary and Marian icons are not bound to one national realm.

Another key theoretical axis of the paper is material religion, which emphasizes the holistic character of mind-body experiences (Meyer 2009; Morgan 2005). I employ the term religious aesthetics to address people's "embodied and embedded praxis" of religion, in which the process of making meanings and knowing is understood as a holistic experience of mind and bodily emotions and experiences (Meyer & Verrips 2008). Religious aesthetics enables us to see that women's experiences of icons are often sensorially and corporeally felt in addition to being consciously articulated and apprehended.

My argument is that in women's everyday religion, Marian icons open up a transnational religious aesthetic space that constructively generates connections between and across Finland and Russia, in fact creating a common space between these two sites. This finding is also important given that mainstream public and political rhetoric continues to evolve around negative Othering of Russia and Russian-speakers in Finland (Paasi 1996; Jerman 2003). In contrast, in the space that comes to life between the icons and the believers, geographical borders as well as cultural and national imaginaries are transgressed. In this paper, I have focused on two ways in which this space of lived religion manifests itself in women's narratives and experiences: a space of home and journey, and a space of mothering.

Context

Where religion is evident in Finland, culturally or institutionally, that religion is Lutheranism. However, any attentive observer will be overwhelmed by the visibility of Eastern Orthodox icons in secular and religious sites alike. The contemporary visibility of Orthodox materiality reflects the

position and public perception of Finnish Orthodoxy. The Finnish Orthodox Church (FOC) succeeded in inscribing itself in the national space of Finland. Its popularity began to grow in the 1970s due to the “Romantic movement” that appreciated the Byzantine art of icon-painting (Husso 2011). The FOC has also become quite successful in incorporating migrants with Orthodox backgrounds, especially Russian-speakers, who are presently the largest migrant minority in Finland (numbering roughly 70 000). Official membership of the FOC is estimated at approximately 60 000 (1.1% of the population). However, there are many practitioners who, despite not being registered as members of the church, nevertheless attend services and maintain some form of Orthodox belief.

Before the FOC became an autonomous Finnish Orthodox archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1923, it was part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, many Orthodox cathedrals built in Finland in the 19th-century incorporate some features familiar from church architecture in Russia. For instance, the Uspenski Cathedral in Helsinki was designed by Russian architect Aleksey Gornostaev, and is an example of 19th-century National Romantic style; the cathedral combines elements from Byzantine and 15th-century Russian church architecture (Hanka 2008, 289). Likewise, many church interiors have combined various influences from Russia. As an example, the new iconostasis in the main church of the New Valaam Monastery discloses features of so called “Russian style”, evident in its grandness and heavy ornate style (Kotkavaara 2011, 63-64). Liturgical service in Finnish also inherited and creatively domesticated most elements of Church Slavic poetry and music, and continues to follow Russian liturgical colours (Honkavaara 1999, 54). Thus, this religious aesthetics is shared by the Russian Orthodox Church and the FOC in their practices, irrespective of the differences in their public faces and policies. Byzantine art, in terms of iconography and church singing, continues to retain its role in both churches.

According to the FOC, there are six wonder-working icons of Mary in Finland (Piispa Arseni 2011).² All these icons also used to be sacred objects of vernacular religiosity in pre-revolutionary Russia. In particular, the shared space of Orthodox materiality between Russia and Finland manifests itself in the Valaam icon of the Mother of God (Figure 1), in the multi-sited presence of this icon and transnational histories embedded in it. The original icon was “written” in 1878 by

² The Konevitsa Icon of the Mother of God, presently located in the New Valaam Monastery, is often considered to be Finland’s “most famous” and “historically” significant among these icons (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2015, 119). This icon was brought by St Arseny from Mount Athos in 1393 to become the main icon of the Konevsky Monastery on Konevets Island in the Ladoga Lake. The multiple entanglements surrounding this icon’s symbolism and style, histories of veneration and current practices require a separate account, which I plan to address in my future research.

Aleksey Konstantinov (who later became ordained as Father Alipy) at the Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga in Russian Karelia (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2015, 125). Soon after completion, the icon was placed in storage in the abandoned Church of St Nicholas, to be rediscovered in 1897. According to the story that was recorded by one of the monks in the monastery, an elderly woman with serious back problems had a series of visions and dreams of the Mother of God, “showing the way” and pointing to the exact location of the icon. After the icon was found, the elderly woman was cured of her illness, which had lasted twelve years, and the Valaam icon of the Mother of God became known for its miraculous powers. Due to the instabilities caused by Communist rule and World War II, the icon was transported to Eastern Finland, where the New Valaam Monastery was founded, and the icon has become one of the main treasures in the Church of the Transfiguration at the monastery.



Figure 1. The Valaam Icon of the Mother of God

This original icon of the Mother of God of Valaam (*Valamolainen Jumalanäiti-ikoni*) in the Monastery of New Valaam attracts many visitors and pilgrims to Eastern Finland. Similarly, a

hand-written copy of the Valaam icon (*Valaamskaya Bogoroditsa*) attracts many pilgrims to the Old Valaam Monastery in Lake Ladoga in Russian Karelia, where a church devoted to this icon was built and then consecrated in 2005 (Figure 2). With these transnational histories, the Valaam icon became a highly venerated image of the Virgin both in the North-Western part of Russia and in contemporary Finland.

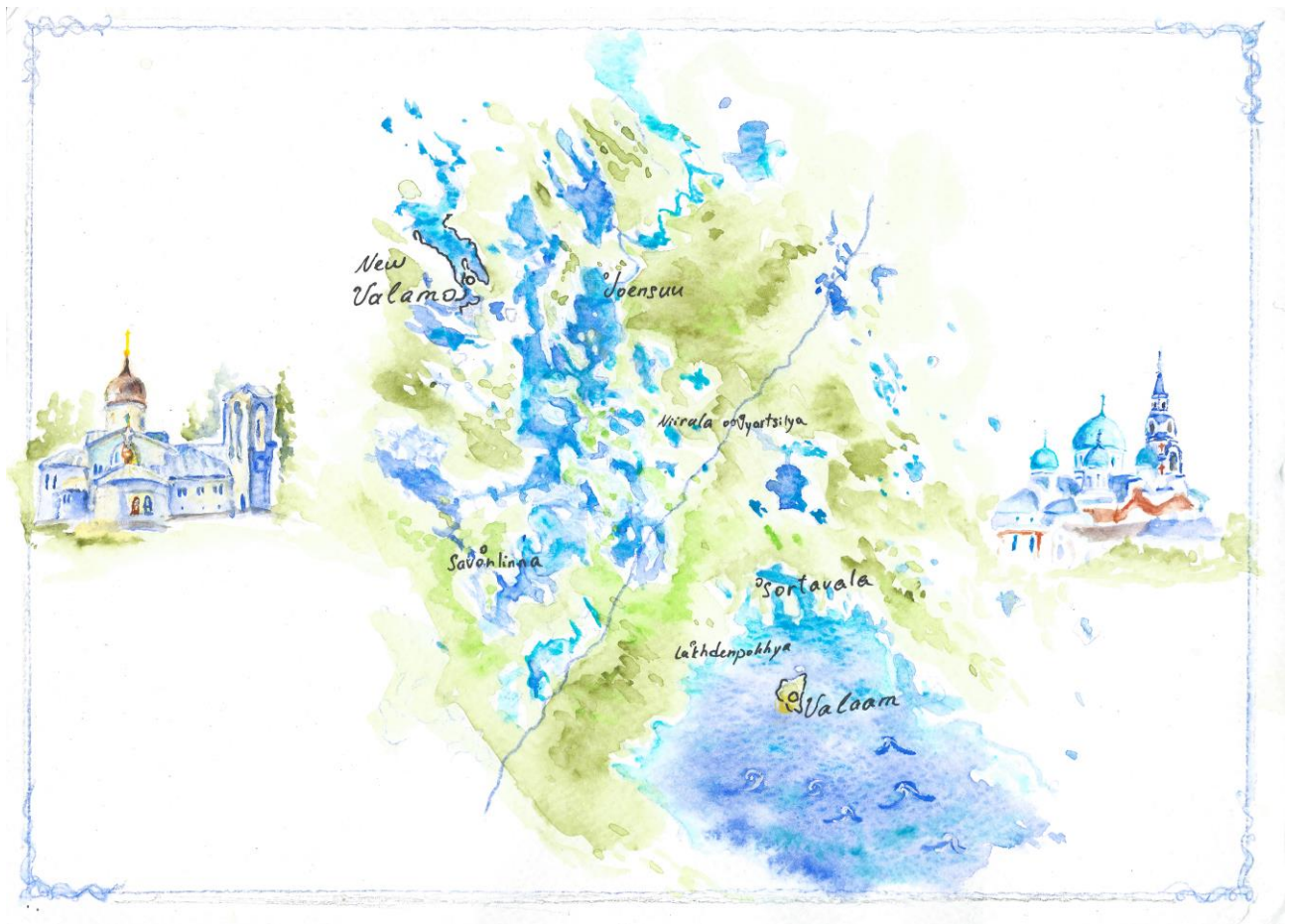


Figure 2. The figurative map of the Valaam Monasteries in Russia and Finland (by Irina Chernyuk)

The icon is often referred to as belonging to the Mariological type *Hodegetria* or *Odigitriia*, “She who shows the way”, pointing to the Child Christ. Mary’s regal posture, holding the Child, has a severe and majestic solemnity which resembles icons of Theotokos in the imperial court of Byzantium (Tradigo 2006, 166). The composition of the icon includes some features unusual for Orthodox icons such as the fact that Mary is depicted as a full-length figure standing barefoot on a cloud. The icon was painted using a technique that combined the use of tempera and oils, and represents dominant “academic classicism” in 19th-century Russian icon painting, influenced by Western art. For instance, most icons in the Tampere Orthodox Church, brought from St Petersburg in the 19th century, are painted in this “Western” style (Honkavaara 1999, 54). In particular, the

“Sistine icon” of Mary to the left from the Beautiful Gates of the iconostasis bears a striking stylistic resemblance to the Valaam icon. This “Western” style, which goes beyond canonical Byzantine iconographic art is sometimes considered to be less significant in its artistic and theological value (Husso 2011). Yet in lived experiences of Orthodox religion, believers value and venerate icons of this type as much as Byzantine and “old” Russian icons. For some of my interlocutors, encountering the Valaam icon became a turning point in their lives, when their Orthodox journey began.

Method and theory

The argument presented here draws on my long-term, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998; Falzon 2009), the methodology that I also applied in my earlier research (Tiaynen 2013). This method adapts the long-standing modes of ethnographic practices to more complex objects of study, drawing on multiple sites of observation with cross-cutting dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global” (Marcus 1995). Multi-sitedness does not necessarily mean moving between various places and interviewing people living in different national states, but telling one story may reveal the complexities of transnational life trajectories, family dispersal, reunion and transnational subjectivities (Vuorela 2002, 64).

I conducted my fieldwork research amongst Orthodox Christians in Finland (2014-2016), which included participant and non-participant observation in a church setting,³ as well as 17 ethnographic interviews. The church is located in a big urban center, and serves as a spiritual and social environment of vibrant multicultural community within the parish in Western Finland. Following the premises of transnational anthropology, my purpose in selecting my interlocutors was to interact and interview individuals with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including interlocutors of Russian, Finnish, and Greek origins.⁴ The interviewees were mostly women aged between 26 and 69, all but one had a university degree, and most were teachers, university lecturers, accountants, researchers, and doctors. I conducted the interviews in Russian, Finnish and English. The findings presented here should be seen as the result of my long-term engagement with the interlocutors.

Multi-sited ethnography is a key method in transnational anthropology, which challenges methodological nationalism by illustrating how contemporary social phenomena are increasingly

³ I do not mention the location, to maintain the anonymity of my interlocutors.

⁴ My fieldwork research is ongoing, and I plan to interview individuals with Swedish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Serbian, and Eritrean backgrounds.

globally interconnected (Appadurai 1996; Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Vertovec 2009). Transnational studies have convincingly illustrated that people may maintain multiple senses of national, cultural and ethnic belonging, as well as maintaining multiple family linkages across borders (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Baldassar 2007). Transnational families with Russian connections are the most common type of cross-border families in Finland (Pöllänen 2013; Tiainen 2013). Many Russian-speakers share some form of commitment to Orthodoxy, especially as a result of Orthodox resurgence in post-Soviet Russia (Hann & Goltz 2010). From a transnational perspective, Orthodox Christianity can be seen as a transnational space in itself, institutionally, structurally, and (trans)culturally, weaving various geographical, ethnic, linguistic and national areas and influences (Roudometof 2014).

I approach Orthodox Christianity as a lived experience through the lens of “vernacular religion” that emphasizes “human artistry”, creativity and “the experiential component of people’s religious lives” (Primiano 1995, 43). As my interest is in the ethnographic reality around icons, my theoretical focus is on material religion. Material religion theorist Birgit Meyer suggests the notion of sensational form, which is meant to explore how exactly religious objects (including images) and mediations through these objects bind and bond believers with each other, and with the transcendental (Meyer 2009, 13). These forms are transmitted and shared, and are best understood as a “condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas” that shape religious experiences and religious subjects in a particular manner. Such forms are “part and parcel of a particular religious aesthetics, which governs a sensory engagement of humans with the divine and each other and generates particular sensibilities” that are not something purely cognitive, but are grounded in the body as “the matrix of human experience” (Meyer 2009; Morgan 2005). Thus, icons can be seen as a sensational form that engenders links amongst believers on a cognitive, intuitive and bodily level.

In this paper, I continue to develop the line of argument presented by anthropologist Dorothy Weaver in her ethnographic research on icons in the Russian and US contexts (Weaver 2011). She emphasizes that icons figure prominently, not just as symbols but as agents. Icons “hear” prayers, “pray with and for believers”, grant miracles, provide protections, and convey messages from the divine (Weaver 2011, 407). They are discursively the same as the divine figures they depict, and “as such could act with the same authority” (Weaver 2011, 397), as veneration of icons is directed to the “archetype” (Hann & Goltz 2010) or “prototype” of the painted icon (Florensky, 1994).⁵

⁵ In AD 787 the Second Council of Nicaea confirmed the use of icons, stating that the veneration is devoted to a prototype of a holy image.

Synchronizing insights from transnational anthropology and material religion with Weaver's and my empirical findings, I suggest approaching icons as entities that may potentially generate a space which goes beyond the borders of their wooden frames, formalized rituals and rigid national boundaries. I adopt the notion of transnational space from transnational anthropology to "encompass global, transnational, and translocal spatial transformations" with a focus on people's everyday lives (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003, 25). In my earlier research, I applied this term to address the diversity, complexity and multi-sited dynamic of transnational families, whose members maintain familyhood across national borders (Tiaynen 2013). The notion of space also connects to the experiential element of Orthodoxy that assumes not only understanding but participation in the space of divine beauty (Seppälä 2010b, 155). It enables a "thick description" of practices and meanings around the icons of Mary, without putting limits on the richness of Mariological iconography or the multiple qualities and powers embedded in the figure of Mary. This notion also captures the social and religious dynamics of icons, which facilitate the immediacy of experiences of the transcendental (Meyer 2009). The agency of icons and believers is equally important in creation of this space, in which women symbolically and literally encounter Mary herself. As 20th-century Russian philosopher and theologian Pavel Florensky expressed it:

I look at the icon and tell myself: "This is She", not the image of Her, but She Herself, contemplated through mediation, with the help of icon writing art. As if through the window, I see the Mother of God, the Mother of God Herself, and I pray to Her, face to face, not to the image. There is no image in my conscious: there is a board with paints, and there is the Mother of God Herself. (Florensky 1994)

Space of home and journey

The common feature of my Russian and Finnish interlocutors is that none of them for various reasons could be seen as "cradle" Orthodox. Despite all the differences between the cultural and political situations of the Orthodox Churches in Finland and Russia, there are some evident parallels in their interrelated histories. Due to the decades of Soviet suppression of religion, Orthodoxy was rather passively present in people's lives, and transferred mainly through elderly women or *babushkas* (Kizenko 2013; Tiaynen 2013). In Finland, Orthodoxy has been the religion of a "stigmatized minority" up to the 1970s (Kupari 2011), and in this sense my Finnish interlocutors also had only passive experiences of Orthodoxy. This tangible experience of Orthodoxy formed a

“latent religious affiliation” (Johnson, Stepaniants & Forest 2005) that many women built on in their rediscovery of Orthodox spirituality in their adult lives.

For instance, Marja pointed out that her grandmother was Orthodox, and therefore Orthodoxy has always been present in her life. Her grandparents were among the Karelian Orthodox evacuees who were resettled as part of the Finnish population when the Finnish region of Karelia was ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944 after two wars between Finland and the Soviet Union (Armstrong 2004; Kupari 2011). Her grandfather painted an icon of the Mother of God on Marja’s birthday. This icon remained the main tangible piece of Orthodoxy in Marja’s life from her childhood until she joined the Finnish Orthodox church in her earlier thirties. She mentioned that although she was “raised as Lutheran”, joining the Orthodox Church was like “coming home” (Interview with Marja, aged 36, 2016).

Similarly, Johanna recollected that her first trip to the Valaam Monastery, which she undertook in her earlier twenties, made her feel as if she was at “home”:

...and the Valaam Monastery is at the same level as my hometown, where I was born. Yes, that’s true, that winter’s day, it felt exactly like in my home area. I started thinking that I would like to join the Church, but there were a lot of unknown [tuntematonta] about it. And I thought that because there was so much unknown, that I don’t know about, I might just be excited for a while and then it would be over. It’s not worth joining just because of that feeling of that moment, but after seven years had passed, I dared to join. Because I had realized that my knowledge of Orthodoxy will never be perfect. (Interview with Johanna, aged 50, 2016)

As I have discussed elsewhere, there are multiple meanings of home, ranging from a place that one physically inhabits to various subjective experiences of home (Tiaynen-Qadir 2016). Various situated and changing experiences of home(s) reveal that being at home is always a matter of “how one feels or how one might fail to feel” (Ahmed 1999, 341). Johanna draws a parallel between her actual hometown, where she was born, and the Valaam Monastery, where she felt at home. In this sense, the Orthodox space of religious aesthetics, with flickering candles, icons, incense, and choir singing, was experienced as welcoming, home-like. Thus, she also metaphorically refers to Orthodoxy as her spiritual home. In other women’s narratives too, the first encounters of Orthodox materiality were experienced on a sensory and intuitional level, connecting to something familiar

and seemingly known that one had been longing for. Yet discovery of this spiritual home also signified the beginning of yet another journey of “spiritual transformation” (Gothoni 1994, 190).

Applying Sara Ahmed’s theorizing on shifting experiences of home, this journey can be seen as “movement within the constitution of home” (Ahmed 1999, 341). “To be on a journey”, according to Bishop Kallistos Ware, is metaphorically applicable to each Orthodox Christian as it emphasizes the practical character and spiritual depth of the living tradition, through the “inward space of the heart” (Ware 1995, 7). Durre Ahmed points to the archetypal significance of the journey as “a symbolic trope signifying discovery or knowledge, not only of the physical world but more so, of the psychological and spiritual” (Ahmed 2011, 3). It took Johanna seven years before she “dared” to join the church, yet her journey as exploration and movement within the space of Orthodoxy as her spiritual home started from her first trip to the monastery, when she started singing in a church choir.

The repertoires of home and journey, both literal and symbolic, vividly reoccur in other women’s narratives. In some cases, Marian icons opened the “door” to this journey. For instance, an intriguing parallel can be traced between the narratives of Victoria and Maija, in which vernacular experiences of the Valaam icon accompanied their first encounter with Orthodoxy. Victoria, of Russian and Ingrian Finnish origins⁶, made her journey to the Old Valaam Monastery in Ladoga Karelia, while Maija, of Finnish background, undertook a similar trip to the New Valaam Monastery in Eastern Finland:

My father and I went to the Valaam Monastery as part of a work-related trip of his. I was twenty years old at the time... As it turned out later, that was an important trip for both of us. It was a sunny and warm day, and I felt calm and peaceful... I still remember that I was touched by a men’s choir singing there. Both of us were given a copy of the Valaam icon of the Mother of God as a present. At that time, I just thought that it was a beautiful icon. But over time Bogoroditsa and this icon became very close to me, especially when I became a mother... I also took that icon with me when I came to Finland for the first time. It was a short visit. When I went to church in Finland, I was surprised and happy to see the same icon

⁶ Ingrian Finns are an ethnic and social group from Leningradskaya oblast’ in Russia. After the chain of discriminatory and voluntary moves during Stalinism, many Ingrian Finns came to reside in Russian Karelia. After the Soviet collapse, approximately 30 000 Ingrian Finns moved to Finland. Most Ingrian Finns belong to the Russian-speaking minority in Finland (Tiaynen 2013).

there. I felt like I was at home, and she has been with me everywhere... Later the icon also became important for my father who did not really believe in God before. Some years after the trip, he got very ill, and it changed him a lot. He recovered from that illness, and started praying. When he comes to visit us in Finland, he always says: "I have the same icon. Do you remember our trip? I talk to the icon. I always pray for you. (Interview with Victoria, aged 37, 2015)

I found Orthodoxy after I finished high school. I went to the Valaam Monastery, and it was more about how I felt there during the liturgy, and the monks singing. When I came home and went to the service [at the Free Church of Finland], it was not the same. Yes, it was a liturgy in a parish, and all the elements were there, but I was thinking that it was not the same as in Valaam. The service [in Valaam] was very intense, and it was alive, and this affected me. Many people say that there is a powerful energy in the Valaam Monastery... And there was something very moving in that icon [the Valaam icon of the Mother of God]. I felt it that very first time I went there. When I was close to the icon, I felt peace inside, and it stayed deeply in my memories. When I went to study in Joensuu, there was a woman – she was in her fifties and she had cancer – and she was healed from it through that icon... She said that she got a warm feeling when she stood near the icon. (Interview with Maija, aged 42, 2016)

The actual existence of two Valaam Monasteries and two Valaam icons in Russia and Finland (for whatever historical reasons) is an interesting example of Orthodox materiality that weaves these two sites. Victoria and Maija's narratives disclose repertoires of home, journey and some elements of miraculous recovery in relation to the Valaam icon. Both women undertook their respective journeys when they were in their early twenties. In both cases, these journeys resulted in transition from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy. Victoria was baptized at the age of twelve in a Lutheran church in Russian Karelia by her Ingrian Finnish grandparents, but never practiced this religion as such. Maija has been an active member of the Free Church in Finland since her childhood, but after her encounter with Orthodoxy, particularly the Valaam icon, did not feel that it could be her spiritual home any longer. In both cases, it was a somewhat sensorial experience of Orthodoxy which triggered an interest in and pursuit of this religious path. The importance and immediacy of the Valaam icon were more sensorially and bodily felt than cognitively articulated. This shows how this icon and other Marian icons emerge as a sensational form. For both Victoria and Maija, their physical journey signified a turning point in their life journey, the discovery of a spiritual home and the beginning of the Orthodox way.

For my Russian-speaking interlocutors, the migration to Finland could be also seen as an actual journey to the unknown, a new place of abode and habitus. It was often Orthodoxy, including Mariological iconography, which stood for the emerging feeling of being at home in Finland. Victoria's narratives also illustrate this aspect: she felt as if she was at home when seeing the Valaam icon in the church in Finland. This is how Anastasiya describes how she felt when she came to that Orthodox cathedral in Finland:

I liked the church immediately as I came in. It reminded me of the Krestovozdvizhenskiy church [The Holy Cross Church in Russian Karelia] where I was baptized. It was great to perceive Finland through the church. As if I lived not in Finland, but in this place with this church and these people. (Interview with Anastasiya, aged 33, 2015)

Another interlocutor, Elena, told me that it was like her “very home” (*rodnoi dom*) when she first came to the church in Finland (Interview with Elena, aged 35, 2014). Both Anastasiya and Elena have copies of the Valaam icon in their homes and venerate this and other icons of Mary. They are active in parish life involving multicultural and multilinguistic interaction, particularly in Russian-speaking clubs for adults and children. My Finnish and Russian interlocutors pointed out that they appreciated this cultural and linguistic diversity, or as Johanna puts it, “it is great that one can hear many languages spoken” (Interview with Johanna, aged 50, 2016). This is indeed a particular feature of Finnish Orthodoxy in urban centers, in contrast to diasporic Orthodox churches in neighboring Sweden or the USA, which are organized along ethnic and national lines (Roudometof 2014). In this sense, Russian speakers can maintain multiple senses of home and belonging, connecting to Russia as their home and developing their home-relatedness to Finland.

Yet prior to or alongside these cognitive practices, the importance of sensorial and embodied experiences of Orthodox materiality is indispensable for my interlocutors. The feeling of being at home is not necessarily rationally apprehended, but connects to the corporeal experiences and senses of “joy”, “solemnity” (*torzhestvo*), “peace”, “calmness”, and “the sublime” (*vozvyshennoe*). This mysterious aspect of Orthodoxy, as mentioned above, is also embodied in the figure of Mary. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Mariological iconography emerges as a sensational form that organizes access to the experiences of the transcendental amongst believers of Russian and Finnish backgrounds, and enables links between them. In the space of this interaction between the icons and the women, the national and cultural contexts of Russia and Finland become interwoven.

This space incorporates and transgresses geographical borders, and rigid boundaries of national imaginaries. It enables multiple senses of belonging, negotiations between real and imagined, literal and metaphorical homes, and journeys.

Space of mothering and family-making

Like in the lived practices of Catholicism, veneration of Mary is embedded in everyday practices and spiritualities of mothering and caring for families (Gemzöe 2010, 175; Vuola 2010). Icons of Mary are easily accessible and affordable, particularly due to the mass production of cheap colored prints simply glued on a wooden board (Cawthorne 2005, 92). For believers, it is not that important whether it is a hand-drawn copy of an original icon or its printed copy (Weaver 2011). The omnipotent presence of Mary is recreated through the placing of her icons in a home altar or sometimes several home altars, or by keeping them in a pocket or a purse.

As I have discussed elsewhere, a home altar with a multitude of Marian icons can actually generate a space of transnational family-making, channeling a grandmother's care – signifying motherly love in a broader sense – across the Russian-Finnish border (Tiaynen-Qadir 2016). In this practice, Mary emerges as a divine member of the transnational family through a grandmother's prayer. Victoria's narratives, discussed in the previous section, also show the importance of the Valaam icon in family bonding across borders, strengthening emotional linkages between the daughter and the father. Consider also this extract from my interview with Elena, where she describes how her family gathers in a kitchen and prays in front of the Valaam icon before their evening meal (Figure 3):

... the day goes on. Life goes very quickly. There are a lot of everyday things taking place. But when you gather with your family to eat in the evening... when we pray before eating, we hug each other at the same time. I don't know, but it just happens instinctively. For instance, Maria, our daughter, can't just stay separately and pray. She would come and embrace me, and then we all stand together. And this prayer before we eat seems to be a small thing, but at that moment, when we're hugging each other, praying, I feel that we are a family and we are strong. Whatever happens, we are together and have each other... I look at the icon [the Valaam icon of the Mother of God], and it is like an unconditioned reflex of calmness.
(Interview with Elena, aged 35, 2014)

This quotation discloses corporeal experiences of an individual and family participation in the space of the Valaam icon. In this practice, Elena's family grows into one body, one corporeal unit,

brought under the protection of invincible powers. Family bonding takes place not only as a spiritual unit, but family members literally bond, becoming one body. Thus, not only does a sensational form shape people's bodies in certain ways (Meyer and Verrips 2008, 28), but in this case it enables sensorial transcendence of an individual body. As I got to know Elena over a number of years, I learnt that their family had to experience a great deal of uncertainty due to Finnish residence permit procedures and their precarious job situation. In these narratives, the icon emerges as an anchor of family belonging, security and "calmness" in the midst of transnational changes and the challenges of adjustment in Finland.



Figure 3. The Valaam icon of the Mother of God in Elena's kitchen

Most of my interlocutors mentioned that their prayers for their children are addressed to the Mother of God. Mary, being a mother herself, is approached as the one who understands a mother's pain, sorrow, worries and joy. In this sense, her presence is close, immediate, and corporeally felt. Yet as the Mother of God, she has invincible powers and is approached as the "Merciful Intercessor" (*Vsemilostivaya zastupnitsa*) and Helper (*Pomoschnitsa*) (also discussed by Vuola 2010, 161; Keinänen 2003). For instance, Marja, a mother from a Finnish background, told me that when her son got sick and she had to leave him in the hospital, she prayed with the icon of Mary in her hands for his recovery. Upon her return to the hospital, Marja was told that her son was fine, and could be taken home. For her, it was a miracle that made her feel the presence and power of the Virgin (Interview with Marja, aged 36, 2016).

In her research on everyday experiences of Mary, Elina Vuola points out the significance of the Virgin, particularly the Valaam icon, in women's mothering practices and self-identifications, especially amongst "cradle" Orthodox Christians (Vuola 2016). For many of my interlocutors too, Mary and Marian icons emerge as a source of spiritual mothering and self-transformation:

When I look at the Valaam icon, I see Bogorodista being calm and joyful, serene and full of life, soft and firm, the qualities that I want to develop in myself as a mother. When I look at the Vladimirskaya icon [The Vladimir icon of the Mother of God], I feel that just the gentle embracing of your child with love and calmness, touching his cheeks, is the eternal power, power beyond any words. (Interview with Victoria, aged 37, 2015)

The story of Olga, a woman of Russian-Finnish origins, is another example of how Marian icons emerge as a space of mothering, and as a source of individual empowerment. While the benefits of long-term breast-feeding are supposedly recognized in Finland, the practice is not always supported in professional and everyday life (Aittokoski, Huitti-Malka & Salokoski 2009). Olga was advised at a local maternity clinic to stop breastfeeding her son when he was one year old. At the same time, she felt increased pressure from her husband to stop breastfeeding their son. Yet Olga thought that the child was not ready for that separation. Juggling her studies, work and childcare, Olga succeeded in breastfeeding her son until he was four. She told me that she had kept the Milk-bearer icon of the Mother of God (*Mlekopitel'nitsa*) with her at all times since the maternity clinic, and she would often show it to her son, saying: "Look, it is like us". Praying in front of the icon and simply having the icon of the nursing Mary present gave her the strength to overcome social pressure.

Some women particularly appreciated those icons of Mary in which the emotional intensity of the love between the Mother and the Child is fully expressed. Most of these icons belong to the Mariological iconographic type "Tenderness" (*Eleousa* in Greek, *Umilenie* in Russia, *Hellyyden Jumalanäiti* in Finnish), in which Mary is depicted with the Christ Child nestled against her cheek and grabbing her cloak (Cawthorne 2005, 52). Icons of this type underline the intensity of affectionate relationship between the Mother and the Christ Child (Tradigo 2006, 177). The love between Jesus and Mary symbolizes the mystical union between Christ and the Church (Tradigo 2006, 178); its deep mystical meanings stand for the closeness in relationship between God and the human soul (Yazykova 1995). The Vladimir icon, mentioned in Victoria's narratives above, is the best known and most venerated "Tenderness" icon, especially in Russia. For instance, Anastasiya

has Vladimir icons of the Mother of God in all three of the bedrooms in her apartment in Finland (Figure 4). She told me that this icon had been dear to her since she was fifteen years old, when she first painted a copy of the Vladimir icon in an icon workshop organized by her school in Petrozavodsk in Russian Karelia. That was a “powerful experience” and a corporeally felt practice: “... of course, painting the Mother of God, I felt a trembling feeling inside”. Now this icon is not only a space of her mothering efforts, but the very embodiment of her transnational life trajectory and memories, connecting Finland and Russia in one common space.

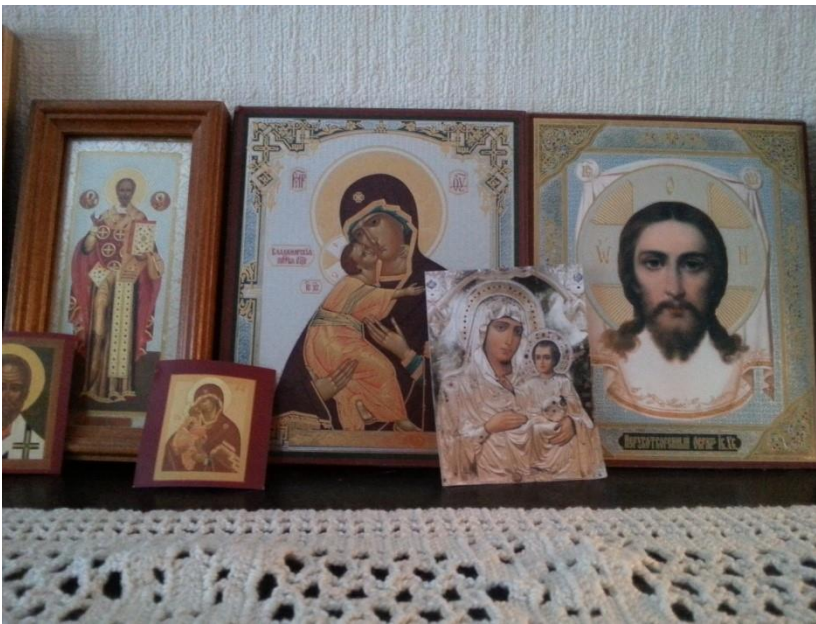


Figure 4. The Vladimir icon of the Mother of God at the center of Anastasiya’s home altar

The importance of the icon of Mary as an anchor of multi-sited belonging and a space of mothering is also evident in Elena’s story. Prior to migration to Finland, Elena made a trip to the Pokrovo-Tervenicheskii women’s monastery in Leningradskaya oblast’ to offer her prayers in front of the Tervenicheskaya icon of the Virgin (Figure 5). This icon, considered to be a wonder-working icon, belongs to the iconographic type of “Tenderness” discussed above. Elena told me that she had prayed to “*have a good family*”, and soon after her pilgrimage she met her future husband, with whom she later moved to Finland. Her first years of adjustment in Finland were quite difficult:

... it was stressful: a small child, work. For some reason, I wanted to go to an icon-painting course. I don’t remember why, probably because I missed something Orthodox... so I enrolled on that course. There were only Finns there, grannies [babushkas] ... I started attending the course, and it was such a joy for my soul [otdushina], two hours once a week. I attended only

one part of the course, half a year. I only painted one icon... On the one hand, it was also a little bit stressful, as my vocabulary in Finnish was very limited. Everything was in Finnish. But on the other hand, there was such a calm atmosphere. First, I would listen, but then I would fully concentrate on painting. And the process was very interesting, the old customs.



Figure 5. The Tervenicheskaya icon of the Mother of God

When Elena showed me the icon that she painted during the course (Figure 6), I noticed that “*it seems that the icon that you painted is very much like the one you prayed to*”, to which she replied:

Yes, indeed. I hadn't thought of that before. It was an unconscious choice. I really like that they're touching each other's cheeks, and that the child is hugging her. I love this tactility, that the cheeks are touching, and that the Jesus Child is embracing her. (Interview with Elena, aged 35, 2014)



Figure 6. The icon of the Mother of God painted by Elena

Thus, the Tervenicheskaya icon became a “window” through which Elena encountered and prayed to the Mother of God for her family. This happened in Russia, prior to her move to Finland. This divine image became so immediate to her that she “unconsciously” recreated almost an exact copy of the icon in her icon-painting class in Finland. By doing so, Elena symbolically and literally wove together her Russian and Finnish senses of belonging in the space of the icon of Mary. Similarly to others, especially Russian-speaking women, the corporeal and emotional intensity of motherly love evident in the icon was something that Elena could relate to and cultivate in her mothering practices. Elena kept telling me how important it was for her just to be with her daughter, to hold her in her lap, to embrace and kiss her. As a doctor (Elena eventually made a successful professional career in Finland), she mentioned that sometimes children get sick simply because they seek their parents’ attention, longing for contact. When Elena shared with me her photos, depicting her and her new-born child, I could not help noticing a striking similarity with the posture of the Mother and the Child in the Tervenicheskaya icon. This also speaks for the often unarticulated or unconscious connections that women may establish in relations to the icons of Mary in their mothering practices. Women of both Russian and Finnish backgrounds emphasized the importance of love, corporal togetherness and “warmth” in being a mother and in family relations. Suvi, who became Orthodox in her late fifties, told me that she was especially moved by the “warmth” and “closeness” of the icon of the Virgin of the Sweet Kiss (*Jumalanäidin Suloisesti Suuteleva* in

Finnish, *Glykophilousa* in Greek, *Sladkoe lobzanie* in Russian), another wonder-working Marian icon of the New Valaam Monastery.

Towards a Conclusion

My conclusion is that the interaction between the Marian icons and the women interviewed creates a space in which the geographical borders and rigid boundaries of national imaginaries between Russia and Finland can be transgressed. This space is a space of the religious aesthetics of lived spirituality that constructively generates connections between and across these two sites. It manifests itself in Russian and Finnish women's narratives and experiences in two particular ways. Firstly, Marian icons enable experiences of "coming home" and journey in both metaphorical and literal dimensions. For many of my interlocutors, icons of Mary emerged as sensational form that organized their sensual experiences of Orthodoxy and yielded the realization that this was their spiritual home. Through icons of Mary, many Russian-speaking women developed their home-relatedness to Finland, at the same time retaining their sense of Russian belonging. Both aspects are evident in vernacular engagements with the Valaam icon. Secondly, women's narratives and experiences converge in their engagement with icons of Mary in the space of spiritual mothering. "Tenderness" icons are especially important in channeling corporeal and emotional aspects of mothering. The agency of the icons and of the believers is equally important in the creation of this space, in which women symbolically and literally encounter Mary herself.

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