

## Introductory Essay

# Stained Glasses and Coloured Lenses: The Pussy Riot Case as a Critical Issue for Multidisciplinary Scholarly Investigations<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The Pussy Riot performance and the ensuing case posed a challenge not only to power structures in Russia, but also to scholars studying post-traumatic post-Soviet Russia. The case exposed the complex of ideology, image- and myth-forming on all societal levels, not least regarding the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and church-state relations. This essay proposes a kaleidoscopic approach in order to ask how to get to the real persons beyond the images. At the same time it discusses epistemological limits of scholarly engagement with the 'other' by scrutinising the question of objectivity and normativity in the humanities and the deficit of approaches like the insider/outsider dichotomy and the linguistic and narrative turns. Given the heterogeneity of present-day Orthodoxy, there is no identifiable Orthodox 'other' or 'insider'; and this leads to the question how to define 'Orthodoxy' itself. The essay thus identifies a paradox which is yet to be solved.

### Keywords

Pussy Riot; Russia; Orthodoxy.

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Directed against Putin's re-election as president and the moneygrubbing and political servility of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Moscow Patriarchate, the Pussy Riot performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral, and the ensuing lawsuit led to major tensions in society. In manifold ways these events served as a litmus paper for divergent societal and scholarly positions and for religious and secular claims, and elicited divergent reactions. For the state the case involved framing the 'right' relation between state, church and individual, whereas the acting women, while engaging with religious symbols and sacred space, claimed political and artistic freedom. For the broader public audience in Russia and in the Western world, the widely reported events served mainly to confirm varied views on matters like freedom of expression, democracy, the role of religion, blasphemy, church-state relations, and feminist and gender issues. In particular, the Pussy Riot case challenged scholars to study Russia as a (post-)traumatic society, to explore the ambiguous societal and spiritual role of the ROC, the functioning of ideology, the heterogeneity of Orthodoxy, the merging of politics and religion, and not least, to determine their own scholarly position towards the case. This multi-layered case has elicited a growing number of academic and non-academic publications from a variety of disciplines, and prompted interdisciplinary research.

In the following I will discuss the case via several interconnected aspects: methodology, scholarly engagement and distance, the post-traumatic state of post-Soviet Russia, the phenomenon of imagology, and the question of how to define 'Orthodoxy'. I will refer to some as yet under-addressed methodological issues: to implicit assumptions and aspects of the academic climate which prelude actual academic publication.

The NOSTER<sup>2</sup> research group and this special issue emerged out of interest and, in part, out of concern over the Church-state alliance in contemporary Russia, but also out of solidarity with the young women who dared to expose the diseases of this alliance. Thus, a certain 'engagement' is present from the outset in the approach of all the articles in this journal issue.

For me personally, born in Russia but having left very young twenty-five years ago, and being academically formed in the Netherlands, this case seemed to be a perfect fit, first and foremost because of my theological and methodological interest in the merging of theology, ideology (including imagology,

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<sup>2</sup> NOSTER is the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, a major platform for research and training in the fields of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands and Flanders in which twelve research institutes participate.

propaganda and myth-forming) and politics in the current ROC. The image of a turning kaleidoscope helps me to approach the dynamics and interconnections of the political, religious, ethical and emotional aspects and connotations involved in this case, and the different ways in which it can be dealt with. The coherence between the coloured glass fragments in a turning kaleidoscope cannot be fixed; if one stops its movement, one sees a static pattern. One may describe or analyse this pattern, but the original coherence is in the concurrent movement of all glass fragments. To take one glass fragment from a kaleidoscope is to disrupt the coherence. Often it is impossible to perceive all the glass fragments of a kaleidoscope simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

This kaleidoscopic principle is useful not only because it requires us to acknowledge the dynamics of social, political, religious, individual and other factors shaping the case, but also the permanent elusiveness of the 'other'. In the Pussy Riot case, which is dominated by images, myths and ideologies, recognising this elusiveness should be part of the methodological framework in order to prevent us perceiving individuals as mere images – even when they present themselves as such.

Because of my awareness of the kaleidoscopic elusiveness of the persons involved, both those wearing balaclavas and those with other kinds of masks, I could not call myself emotionalised nor even unambiguously 'engaged'. I was, though, well aware that my personal and professional origins created certain 'coloured lenses' through which I perceived the case. It struck me how often colleagues both at Western universities as well as in Orthodox countries took our NOSTER-group occupation with the case to immediately imply a *political* stance, long before I had the time to seriously and academically consider the possibilities of a position, let alone be ready to take an academically accountable stance, as I am doing while writing this essay.

Below I take some steps to demonstrate why academic interest should not *a priori* be assumed to imply a scholar's political statement or emotional attitude toward the research 'object', and conversely, that taking a normative stance – for example when above I spoke of concern over the Russian Church-State alliance – does not *a priori* exclude an objective or reasoned inquiry. Such precipitate assumptions might lead to hesitancy or unwillingness in identifying the fundamental normative problems and 'sensitive' questions, making the issues that really matter non-debatable. Eventually, this hinders the process of societal reconciliation as well as academic understanding. Within the setting of the Pussy Riot case, I will challenge the 'insider/outsider' and 'subject/object' dichotomies from methodological, philosophical and formal-logical considerations.

## Emotions and the Unprocessed Past in Post-Soviet Studies

Given the provocative character of the Pussy Riot performance, each of the reactions mentioned above presupposes not only epistemological assumptions, but also the emotional involvement of the respondents. For if the Pussy Riot case has made one thing clear, it is the emotionalised climate of political and

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<sup>3</sup> See further [www.in-a-sec.com/method](http://www.in-a-sec.com/method); Tolstaya 2013.

religious issues in post-Soviet Russia. Conversely, almost any societal issue in this context is made into a political issue, making any discussion inherently politicised. In other words, in Russia everything which is societally controversial is political, and politics is emotional. So in addition to the general question of the scholar's position towards her or his research 'object', s/he has to deal with the impact of this climate. Considering its emotional fever pitch, a scholar researching the Pussy Riot case has to identify the presuppositions and motivations of individuals or groups s/he is focusing on (see the article of Anna Agaltsova in this issue).

The Pussy Riot case has led to conflicts between generations and brought friendships to an end. From the outset the case was framed in emotional terms, as is evident already from the court verdict of 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred'. The framing from 'above' can be read in numerous aspects. For example, the statement that the court 'takes into account the opinion of the victims, who did not insist on a too harsh [*na strogom*] punishment for the defendants, leaving the matter to the court' (Court Sentence Pussy Riot 2012: 40) might be seen as a direct reference not to the 'insulted' eyewitnesses ('victims') of the performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral, but to Putin's utterance: 'I don't think the girls should be punished for this too harshly [*tak strogo*]' (Putin 2012). Furthermore, Patriarch Kirill contributed to stipulating the opinion of his flock by condemnations of the Pussy Riot performance (explicitly: for example, NewsTube 2012; Suzdaltseva 2012; implicitly: for example, Pravmir 2012). Until recently many manifestations of hatred towards the members of Pussy Riot, including (death) threats and physical violence, came from representatives of those parties that positioned themselves or were positioned as insulted (the Russian state and ecclesial authorities, and subsequently numerous Russian Orthodox believers; cf. for example, Bernstein 2013; Korostelina 2014). Very soon Ekaterina, Nadezhda and Maria were portrayed – amongst other things – as blasphemers, provocateurs and witches (cf. Yablokov 2014: 628). Conversely, although the sympathisers in Russia were outnumbered, their engagement grew with the absurdity of state persecution. The women were conceived as martyrs, Christ-like figures, fools for Christ, and became icons, literally and figuratively.

Whether this emotionalised climate is caused by the unprocessed Soviet legacy or is sustained by its persisting forms requires further inquiry; that the past is unprocessed and heavily impacts on the present is clear. This is one of the issues the convicted women themselves addressed; Maria Alekhina, for example, stated in court that '...people are acting as if there was never any Great Terror nor any attempts to resist it. I believe that we are being accused by people without memory' (Alekhina 2012, quoted in Smyth and Soboleva 2014: 264). As is typical for (post-)traumatic areas, there is no real institutional and societal reflection on the Soviet legacy (Merridale 2010; Mink and Neumayer 2013). Obviously, neither the necessary reflection nor any healthy model of coming to terms with the past can be expected in a country where the institutional heirs of the 'perpetrators' (the KGB and other power structures) and 'collaborators' (including representatives from the then-curtailed ROC) are still at the helm, and continue to use Soviet ideological mechanisms. Putin propagates the view that 'there is no need for Russia to be ashamed of its past' (Putin 2007). The direct extension of this position is that Stalin can be equated to an 'effective manager' in high school history textbooks and voted in a 2008 TV-show as the

'third greatest Russian of all time' (Imya Rossiya n.d.).<sup>4</sup> That 83% of the Russians support the annexation of Crimea and interference in Ukraine (Levada-Centre 2014) is another very real implication of adaptations of sophisticated Soviet propaganda and ideology. The high level of emotions accompanying the Ukraine-conflict on both sides, testifies to the inseparability of politics and emotion in the post-Soviet area of unprocessed traumatic experience.

This ideologising discourse is not limited to the state, but is actively applied by the ROC as well. The 're-invention' of Orthodox tradition after *perestroika* is, certainly on the hierarchical level, at least partly an ideological enterprise, connected to shaping a national 'Orthodox' identity (cf. Verkhovsky 2014). This is reinforced by the ROC's appealing to 'Orthodox Tradition' without profound reflection either on the Orthodox or the Soviet past, which again reinforces the societal trauma. For self-identification, each Orthodox faction and individual believer appeals to Orthodox Tradition as normative. At the same time there are numerous different, even contradictory narratives of 'Orthodoxy' and 'Tradition'. The heterogeneity of Orthodoxy is one of the main challenges for scholarly endeavour (Tolstaya 2014). This heterogeneity also facilitates power claims, as in the recent increasing revival of myths like 'Russia as the Third Rome' or the doctrine of 'Russkii mir', with accompanying ecclesial-territorial claims on, for example, Ukraine (cf. Lunkin 2014).

The complex motives and power claims at work within the post-Soviet (re) invention of Orthodox Tradition are further exemplified by the ROC's lobbying for laws against 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' (passed by the State Duma 11 June 2013) and against the insulting of believers' feelings (passed 1 July 2013). They are visible, too, in the framing of mass media 'events' such as the Pussy Riot case in state controlled media. Such framing of the case also influences the formation of different collective identities (cf. the article of Anna Agaltsova in this issue). The failure of State and Church to openly address the past may be perceived in the way the media processes such events.

The accusation of blasphemy, raised by ROC representatives soon after the performance, illustrates the meshing of unreflected religious, political, juridical, axiological and emotional categories. As a result of this accusation, the Pussy Riot case relates to core disputes about religious identity and meaning in contemporary societies, as it reveals a clash between various understandings of what is deemed sacred (Korte, forthcoming). The socio-political-religious dimension of the Pussy Riot case deserves further in-depth inquiry in regard to the use of theological dogmatic notions during the trial (from the Church councils of Laodicea 363 and of Trullo 692; cf. for example, Prozorov 2013: 5). Under what conditions do authorities resort to accusations of blasphemy? What mechanisms made the word 'blasphemy' a juridical category during a trial in a post-atheist country with a constitutional division between church and state (Constitution of the Russian Federation, art. 14; cf. SOVA 2012)? Which factors made the Pussy Riot performance a catalyst for latent tensions between the ROC and society? (See some excellent answers in the article by Vera Shevzov in this issue.)

The choice of location for Pussy Riot's performance was meant to connect the personal and the institutional, questioning the accountability of the ROC in the

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<sup>4</sup> In Ukraine, the leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, Stepan Bandera, made it to second place (Nikolayenko 2011: 51).

person of her representative, Patriarch Kirill. (The Patriarch is the prior of the Cathedral: see below for a discussion of some major scandals he was involved in just before the Pussy Riot performance.) Pussy Riot felt the sacred space of the Cathedral had been desecrated. Destroyed under Stalin's atheistic campaign in 1931, the Christ the Saviour Cathedral was rebuilt in 1994–1997, and currently hosts a car-wash alongside several other commercial enterprises (cf. Knox and Mitrofanova 2014).

To touch upon one of the most delicate post-traumatic aspects relating to the ROC, the lack of a 'Theology after Gulag' similar to 'Theologie nach Auschwitz' makes academic/theological approaches to the ROC difficult. Precisely because the past is unprocessed and the present keeps adding new traumas, the most noble intentions for methodological accountability and normativity in post-Holocaust reflection can prove problematic when applied to post-Soviet (post-) traumatic contexts. For example, Björn Krondorfer appeals to the third and fourth generations of after-Auschwitz theologians (including himself) to explicitly account for their belonging to families of the perpetrators, bystanders, or victims (Krondorfer 2001: 17). Given the tendency of 'post-Soviet' issues to get emotionalised, alongside the equally difficult problem of Russia still being a 'land of perpetrators' (cf. Von Kellenbach et al. 2001) where the entire society is complicit in guilt – see for example the discussion by Cécile Vaissié in this issue – there is a long way to go before such approaches may be usefully applied to post-Soviet societies.

## Academic Neutrality, Engagement, Distance and Normativity

In this emotionalised and sensitive climate – reinforced by the current conflict in Ukraine and Russia's dubious role therein – it is essential for scholars of post-Soviet phenomena, not least those living on post-Soviet territory, to balance their personal engagement with distance and objectivity in their approach. From the perspective of ethnography, Johannes Fabian formulated that 'critically understood, autobiography is a *condition* of ethnographic objectivity' (Fabian 2001: 12). This can be expanded to other humanities disciplines. 'Critically' is the crucial word here (also implying self-critical), in order not to slip into psychological or theoretical aspects which mar methodology rather than support it. This is, of course, not to oblige a scholar to tell his or her life-story in each academic piece of writing, but to evoke a methodological consideration of his or her personal engagement on a case by case basis.

Broadly speaking, there are two levels of academic 'objectivity', 'normativity', 'neutrality' and 'distance'. One is that of general anthropology: no scholar is without prejudices or bias, and science is never 'value-free' (Kincaid et al. 2007). Since there is a consensus that a strictly objective or neutral approach is not possible within the humanities, speaking of subjectivity, bias or normativity on this level easily becomes a conversation stopper, since this applies to any scholar. Obviously there is a similar consensus that a subjective or normative approach, which modifies or interprets data to serve one's preference or bias, is 'not done'.

The other level is that of practical application; how a scholar deals with (and gives a reasoned account of) her or his stance in respect to the concrete case s/he is investigating. It is at this level where discussing and distinguishing objectivity,

neutrality, distance and engagement makes sense, that is, where these have their *situational* value, and where normativity becomes a real issue. Thus, the question is not: do we have (implicit) norms, but: how do we apply and account for them in academic practice? So where, for example, Peter Donovan gives the following working definition of academic neutrality: 'To be neutral is to stand in relation to two or more parties which are themselves in tension, in such a way that the respective interests of those parties are not thereby materially affected' (Donovan 1999: 235; cf. Byrne 1999), this applies to the second level. However, a discrepancy often arises between theory and practice, particularly in the more theoretical research fields (like some sub-disciplines within theology, philosophy, literature studies). Here the consensus on non-normativity is still so normative that scholars are reluctant to allow for a certain normativity, or to account for the epistemological and normative assumptions from which they approach another culture, person, religion, and so on, because these assumptions might interfere with the basics of scientific work (cf. Kincaid et al. 2007: 5, who aim to nuance Hume's classic – and still valid – argument that 'ought cannot be derived from is'; cf. also Fabian 2001: 16; Lewis 2012). Becoming something of a Freudian repression, this neglect of normativity can impede academic endeavour, especially in interdisciplinary research.

Examples of questioning supposed academic neutrality and non-normativity are the increasing criticisms of a Western or colonialist 'gaze' in much of humanities; evidently, feminist and gender studies; but also recent scholarship on Eastern Orthodoxy, which highlights the marginalisation of Orthodoxy in models based on Western understandings (for example, Hann and Goltz 2010).

However, such critics do not solve the question of normativity, as they would have to account for their epistemological and normative position as well, or in the words of Thomas Lewis, be 'willing to offer justification for the norms that [they] invoke' (Lewis 2012: 170). Put simply, for such justification academia is committed to a sense of argumentative normativity, that is on 'what counts as offering an argument' (Lewis 2012: 179). Each researcher operates at least within the rules of his or her discipline, and has to meet the 'norm' of scholarly standards.

Allowing for a more positive role for 'engagement' in research requires us to delineate 'norms' or criteria of legitimate academic appeal to, or suspension of, engagement. This becomes increasingly evident with the societal explosiveness of a case (for example, like that of Pussy Riot, gender- and war-related issues). Indeed, debates on exact terminological differences between 'engagement', 'objectivity', 'emotion', 'bias' and so on are themselves often implicitly fraught with emotions and sensibilities. Given that research topics are often chosen as a result of a researcher's personal interest, a conflict of interest is a fact by definition. Scholars are trapped between the need not to let their engagement slip into emotionality, and at the same time not to block out engagement and normative commitment under the guise of 'neutrality'. This scholarly condition of being neutral, engaged and normative and at the same time not being neutral, engaged and normative is paradoxical. Later I will address it from a formal-logic perspective. Here I can delineate the difference between neutrality, engagement and normativity as follows: neutrality is fair judgment, engagement is being involved in a research case, and normativity is the way in which the researcher applies judgment and engagement in the concrete elaboration of her or his case.

## Insider/Outsider, Subject/Object Oppositions and the 'Other'

Obviously, many 'iconoclashes' (Latour 2010) were elicited by the Pussy Riot performance and by the interpretations of the event in different communities. For an academic approach, this question of a clash of narratives or 'icons' directly relates to the insider/outsider opposition, which not only implies identity issues, but also questions standards of academic neutrality, engagement and normativity. The case challenges the notions of (religious) 'expert' and 'insider', since these are useful only when dealing with someone who is clearly identifiable and accountable. In this regard, scholars should beware of lapsing into the same formal 'West-East' dichotomy that many representatives of the ROC adhere to – even in their official statements – on ill-considered grounds.<sup>5</sup> As I will argue below, 'the Orthodox insider' simply does not exist.

In this issue, the contributions of Vera Shevzov and of Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld show that positing and contesting such dichotomies must take place on methodological, and not on political, ideological, or even emotional grounds, as often they are not relevant to the research question at stake, and tend to blur rather than clarify it (cf. Jensen 2011). And, to make a kaleidoscopic turn, in this it seems crucial to *academically* consider the plain fact that we never 'have' a full understanding of the other (or even of ourselves).

Various scholars propose what has recently been called a '*radical empiricism* – namely, a position that refuses the epistemological cut between subject and object' (Davies 2010: 3) in a plea to allow for the epistemological relevance of a researcher's emotions during anthropological field work. Such discussion of 'epistemic locatedness' in the subject-object relation is, of course, familiar to field-research oriented disciplines and to gender theory and philosophy of religion (for example, Anderson 2012). However, this immediately raises questions of standards of normativity and judgment, as it is subject to blurring epistemology, ontology and personal emotion (as is already discussed in the previous paragraph). In other words, the researcher has to account for and explain why and in what concrete constellation (s)he does, or does not, posit an epistemological cut between subject and object.

Johannes Fabian – himself an advocate of 'inter-subjectivity' in ethnography – voices a proper reservation against a stress on engagement and crossing subject-object boundaries:

I must confess that reports of ethnographers embracing either the religion of those they study or some other religious faith (...) make me uneasy. As a certified Catholic agnostic I would not for a moment deny the importance of religious knowledge, especially of the kind of bodily experience that comes from participating in ritual, in ethnographic inquiries of religion – as long as this does not make us ignore the fact that the discipline that got us to where we are now had its beginnings during the Enlightenment as part of a movement of emancipation from religion. (Fabian 2007: xi)

This reminder is constituent of the account the scholar has to give. Besides calling for a researcher's accountability of his engagement, a kaleidoscopic approach

<sup>5</sup> For example, a quick search on the Official website of the ROC (<https://mospat.ru/en/>) gives many relevant entries.

profits from two premises: the researcher's awareness of coherence and inner dynamics of the notions and topics involved, and awareness that these dynamics make a comprehensive overview impossible. It is very apt to state that while "reality" tends to unfold in response to the particular set of methods by which it is studied, our formal understandings of the "real" are always somewhat bound by the limits of the methods we employ' (Davies 2010: 13). It is then correct to consider methodology, in a kaleidoscopic motion, 'as open-ended and incomplete' (Cook 2010: 239).

But we should ascertain the grounds for such epistemological statements by pursuing this line a step further. To resume the above-stated point: much confusion can be avoided in the humanities if we found normativity in the consensus that on the ontological, or more precisely, on the existential level one cannot fully grasp the 'reality' of, or 'know', the other – primarily another person, but also another culture, religion, and so on. This is a truism, but exactly because it is a truism it may have become a blind spot of humanities. Here a friction seems to be persistent: while on the theoretical level most scholars might endorse the insight that we cannot fully understand the 'other', in *practical* scholarly application and discourse the implications of this insight are not fully recognised and thought through. For the genesis of this persistent reasoning as if the scholar 'grasps' the other, one is redirected to the history of the humanities, that developed by adopting the positivist tendency in exact sciences when these (naively) assumed to be able to grasp 'reality' (cf. Agazzi 2014; Benton and Craib 2011<sup>2</sup>).<sup>6</sup>

The Pussy Riot case perfectly illustrates this inability to fully comprehend the 'other' and the mechanisms and motivations behind 'reality'.

## Images and Reality

One of the key aspects of the case is what can be called the 'imagological' aspect (cf. Rutten et al. 2013; Taylor and Saarinen 1994).<sup>7</sup> This is intimately connected with the post-traumatic character of Russian society and the continuation and adaptation of Soviet ideological mechanisms. As is confirmed by all contributions in this issue, in the Pussy Riot case we are confronted with a mass of images, framing, and myth-making and -forming. The immense media attention to the case itself can serve as scientific data, but at the same time, both by its sheer mass and its form and content, it hinders real access to the persons speaking and spoken about. Furthermore, if one takes the statements from different parties (the journalists, the lawyers, the ROC officials), the overall impression is one of randomness. In Russia, except for the occasional researcher and/or

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<sup>6</sup> I give extensive close-readings and discussions for the discipline of theology in Tolstaya 2013.

<sup>7</sup> While 'imagology' as a scholarly term is usually restricted to the mutual literary (mis) perception of the national 'other' (Beller and Leerssen 2007; Perner 2013), the term can perfectly be extended to comprise 'image studies'. In this sense, 'imagology' is a discipline yet to be developed. It could benefit from reflecting on Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality* (Kundera 1991), in which the characters seek to exceed death by creating images of reality and of the other, and at the same time are subjected to the image-forming of the other(s).

sympathiser (like Elena Volkova; cf. her article in this issue, and other publications), no one seemed to really enter into the case itself or the underlying questions. Consequently the debate generally did not surpass the level of images and image-building of the other or of oneself. On this level of imagology, one does not know the other and does not really care to do so. This poses a challenge to our (academic) understanding of the case and the actors involved: how can we get beyond the images?

The limitations of our knowledge in the Pussy Riot case may be illustrated by some of the countless responses the case elicited, for example the support action of the artist Petr Pavlenskii, who on the 25 July 2012 stood before the Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg with his mouth sewn with thick thread, holding a banner reading 'Pussy Riot's performance was a replay of the famous act by Jesus Christ (Mat. 21: 12–13)'.<sup>8</sup> As such, the action seems clear and suggestive: Pavlenskii supports Pussy Riot, is against the blasphemy the official church itself commits, and the stitched mouth speaks volumes. But in the media and through the Internet, all sorts of questions arose. Why does he appeal to the Gospel of Matthew? Is this a religiously motivated protest? Is he really interested in Pussy Riot or just working on his own 'Pussy Riot'?

To give another illustration, at the beginning of August 2012 news appeared on the Internet that the famous conductor Valerii Gergiev cancelled the Covent Garden performance of 'Carmen' as an act of support for Pussy Riot. The Russian report gave a translation of Gergiev's animated speech in which he threatened to quit as head of the Mariinskii Theatre, and even to renounce his Russian citizenship, unless the girl-band Pussy Riot trial defendants were released:

I apologise for such a vulgar comparison, but the Russian state is acting like a dominant male in a group of monkeys, compelled to show off his genitals to make the others fear him. And he does not care whether anyone wants to look at this or not. So, respected Russian state: We are not monkeys. You cannot do with us as you please. We represent our country's culture beyond its borders, and we do not want to be made to feel ashamed of you. I am a musician. I have conducted virtually all of the world's orchestras. I know that those girls' performance has nothing to do with music. Nor does it have anything to do with art. It has to do with freedom, without which culture, art, and music are impossible. (FogNews 2012)

The next day Gergiev hastily took to Twitter to declare his sincere loyalty to the state and to stress that he never said anything like that. The whole issue appeared to have been a hoax by the Internet news agency FogNews.ru. What was the aim of this hoax? Whereas the social function of satire and protest seems clear, the person(s) behind the jest remain hidden. It is telling that one version suggested the Kremlin was paying the bloggers to draw public attention away from the issues that really matter by such supposed sensations.

Several months later, at the beginning of March 2013, *The Guardian* online published a very similar text by one of the most prominent Russian writers. The article title is telling: 'Mikhail Shishkin refuses to represent "criminal" Russian regime'. Strikingly, Shishkin's intention and even his style and idiom resemble the Gergiev forgery:

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<sup>8</sup> This performance is also mentioned in the articles of Elena Volkova and Vera Shevzov in this issue.

Russia's political development, and the events of last year in particular, have created a situation in the country that is absolutely unacceptable and demeaning for its people and its great culture. (...) What is happening in my country makes me, as a Russian and a citizen of Russia, ashamed. (...) [Russia is] a country where power has been seized by a corrupt, criminal regime, where the state is a pyramid of thieves, where elections have become farce, where courts serve the authorities, not the law, where there are political prisoners, where state television has become a prostitute, where packs of impostors pass insane laws that are returning everyone to the Middle Ages – such a country cannot be my Russia. (Shishkin 2013)

To be sure, the motivations of Mikhail Shishkin and of the anonymous writers of the Gergiev hoax, as also their genre and political views, are incomparable. Yet for those who want to know the realities behind such statements, the question remains, was Shishkin familiar with and could he have been inspired by the Fog-News text? And if so, how does it impact on our perception of his statement?

This fundamental hermeneutical challenge of understanding or knowing the 'other', revealed among other things in the way the case is framed and developed in the media and by individuals, can be applied to the Pussy Riot performers as well. How do their philosophically eloquent statements relate to their 'performance', artistically as well as in regard to content? Where does the act end, and the real person begin? There is a paradox at stake here: with their balaclavas and dresses the Pussy Riot artists wanted to create a counter-image, and at the same time through their balaclavas and dresses, to some degree, they became hostages of image and myth-forming themselves. There were hardly any serious reactions to their appeals for dialogue in Russia even when they gave up their anonymity and gained real faces, voices and names: 'Listen to our words and not to what [pro-Putin television journalist] Arkadii Mamontov says about us. Do not distort and falsify everything we say (...)' (Tolokonnikova 2012; see also my questions in the interview with Ekaterina Samutsevich in this issue.)

These are just a few examples of countless instances in which opinions, images and associations create a web of images in which the researcher may be caught. In our context, such image-forming becomes particularly complex when it concerns the religious aspects of the case. From the side of clergy, there were few voices of support, among whom was the late Fr Pavel Adelgeim. One exceptionally loud voice of protest was the open letter to Patriarch Kirill from the Dean of Tambov eparchy and final-year law student, Fr Sergii Baranov, requesting his release from the priesthood. In this letter Fr Sergii comments on the use of dogmatic categories in the legal proceedings:

the court applied the entire reasoning of internal church documents – of the Council of Laodicea, of the 2011 Council of Bishops, the letter of the sacristan of Christ the Saviour Cathedral, and the memo for behaviour in the church – and on the basis of all this, a sentence was awarded 'in the name of the Russian Federation'. As a lawyer, I understand that this is real obscurantism [мракобесие] and an illegal sentence, from a legal point of view, it is simply an impossible one. And as a priest I am ashamed and sad that the Church has contributed to and has initiated this process. (Maetnaya 2012)

However, most ROC clergy and representatives gave disavowing statements. One may serve as example, from Vsevolod Chaplin, the head of the Synodal

Department for Church-Society Relations of the ROC, in an interview of September 2013 on Alekhina and Tolokonnikova:

[Journalist:] And what about 'forgiving your enemies', 'turn the other cheek'?  
[Chaplin:] — We must forgive our personal enemies, that's what Church tradition says, but the same sacred tradition, which is the voice of God, says that you must defend the faith, the sacred, among others with weapons in one's hands. It is no coincidence that the Church has sanctified, sanctifies, and will sanctify weapons ...  
(Chaplin 2012)

We should beware of framing 'Orthodoxy' by associating the term with statements like this, but at the same time, Chaplin – like many others – himself frames 'Church Tradition' here, clearly considering himself an 'insider'. The phrase about weapons, incidentally, also reflects the unprocessed past, pointing to the reasons for the mass support for Russia's annexation of Crimea and dubious position in the current armed conflict in Ukraine.

Correlating to this lack of reflection and knowledge is a certain randomness of motivations for the transformation and (re-)invention of Orthodox Tradition. In the Pussy Riot case conspiracy theories propose diverse and random motivations. To give one example, one prominent Orthodox representative, Deacon Andrei Kuraev, suggested the Pussy Riot performance might have been staged in order to win sympathy among believers for Putin, as their performance preceded his re-election as president. The emergence of countless conspiracy theories – partly a residue of Soviet ideology – is another aspect of imagology, implying a certain helplessness in grasping 'reality' (cf. Ortmann and Heather-shaw 2012; Yablokov 2014).

But even among the more thoughtful 'secular' commentators in Russia, religious matters tend to become framed and ideologised. A series of scandals involving the higher echelons of the ROC forms an important background to Pussy Riot's performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral (cf. Scandals around Patriarch Kirill 2012).

The beginning of the commotion around Pussy Riot coincided with two major scandals in which Patriarch Kirill was embroiled: the story of his apartment and that of his watch. The apartment story was a continuation of earlier discussions of Kirill's real estate possessions, for example the building of his new residence at the Black Sea (cf. Devochenko 2011). It concerned a claim against his neighbour, ex-healthcare minister Yurii Shevchenko, brought on Kirill's behalf by Lidiya Leonova, who is sometimes described as the patriarch's second cousin and sometimes as his old friend. Shevchenko was made to pay approximately 20 million roubles (appr. €503,700) in compensation for 'nanodust damage' to the patriarch's library, caused during the renovation of Shevchenko's flat (Alexandrova 2012; Maksimov 2012; Nikitina 2012).

The culmination was a Breguet watch worth about \$30,000 which the patriarch could be seen wearing in several photos. When explicitly asked, Kirill denied possession of this watch, and the Patriarchate denounced several photos as Photoshop falsifications. However, journalists discovered that Kirill's watch had been airbrushed in a photo on the official website of the Patriarchate, while its reflection remained visible on the polished table. The press service of the Patriarchate then acknowledged that it had, in fact, used Photoshop.

Inspired by these scandals, critical journalist Yuliya Latinina undertook an 'anthropologic investigation' in August 2012, based on what she calls 'field research' of the canons and moral rules of the contemporary ROC. In her view, in their authorisation of the conviction and condemnation of Pussy Riot Putin and Patriarch Kirill were misled by a small group of radicalised Orthodox believers who identified themselves with those insulted by the performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral. It follows implicitly from her argumentation that she considers Patriarch Kirill himself as belonging to this group. She discerns four features concerning the 'conception of God' and the belief system of this group, illustrating the implicit opposite expectation (the norm) of an ideal image of Orthodoxy: among other things, she observes there is no Forgiveness in this God, and addresses the theme of the ROC's collaboration with the communist authorities (Latinina 2012).

The above quotes and standpoints may be considered as samples of the terms and vocabulary in which the case has been addressed in the public sphere. It reflects one of the points Pussy Riot wanted to make with their performance: Russian society is dominated by masks and images, and new kinds of mythologising (cf. Prozorov 2013: 8 f.). As may be clear from the media discussions sketched above, a public figure, in this case Patriarch Kirill or Putin, functions societally merely as an appearance, an image, and they obviously give occasion for and even stimulate myth-forming. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova articulates this as follows: 'Putin is the face of all bad, evil, immoral, that there is in modern Russian sub politics. (...) Kirill is a real media star in the synodal pavilion of the Christ the Savior Cathedral' (Masyuk 2012).<sup>9</sup>

And then, of course, there are the allusions and appeals to religious and Orthodox notions and symbols as used by Pussy Riot themselves. These, from the plea to Mary in their Punk Prayer to their quoting biblical passages in their closing statements before court, also remain equivocal and have elicited divergent interpretations (cf. Alekhina 2012; Tolokonnikova 2012).

## Who Claims Orthodox Tradition?

We have now reached a deeper level, which connects again to methodology. As was illustrated by the quotes from Baranov, Chaplin, Latinina and Pussy Riot, but also by acts such as Pavlenskii's, 'Orthodoxy' and religious allusions have themselves become labels/myths to which anyone can appeal, since there is no uniform definition of what is 'Orthodox': as has been indicated, lived Orthodoxy is heterogeneous to the point of randomness. This was one of the key evidentialities in the Pussy Riot case. Clearly, among Orthodox representatives, most reactions were negative and critical, though even among Orthodox they cover the whole spectrum from affirmation to condemnation. The articles of Vera Shevzov and Elena Volkova confirm this observation, and during my own field research to Russian Orthodox monasteries in 2012 I found Orthodox clergy and believers voicing drastically opposing positions. This is partly explicable from the fact that in the Pussy Riot case, the media communication of church

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<sup>9</sup> There is, of course, a large academic and journalistic library on the figure of Putin; e.g. recently Goscilo 2013.

representatives was opaque and 'random'. As long we do not know deeper motivations or the exact content of these different reactions, they all – as well as acts in support of Pussy Riot – remain in the sphere of myth- and image-forming.

A more important aspect as regards the Orthodox 'insiders' (clergy and lay people) is the gap between the claim on the authority of Orthodox Tradition and actual reflection on (and knowledge of) Tradition. In part, this gap is related to the same identifiable general factors hindering reflection: the communist legacy, the links between church and state, and inner theological grounds. This is naively captured in a statement by Patriarch Kirill on Pussy Riot in March 2012: 'My heart breaks from bitterness that amongst these people there are those who call themselves Orthodox' (Amos 2012). This one sentence brings together the complex of authority, normativity, religion, identity and emotionality which made the Pussy Riot performance into a case.

The lack of reflection on and coming to terms with the past, including the religious 'Orthodox' past, also has direct implications for the 'Western' academic scholar studying current Orthodoxy and Russia. One of the concrete implications for our context is: if the insider 'Orthodox' are heterogeneous, and largely fail to reflect both on their tradition (which – for the academic theologian – is a precept) and on their recent past, how can a scholar posit 'Orthodox' as a feasible identity, position, or even religious term? Who can the scholar then 'engage' with? And not least, what religious 'other' is there to be understood?

## **Narratives, Language Games, Formal-logical Paradoxes and the Real 'Other'**

It is at this point that the question of how to posit the religious 'other' or community one studies leads to tensions in current methodology. I will approach this kaleidoscopic turn from a specific angle, the basic philosophical question which underlies the study of religion since its beginnings: does man give sense to reality, including the divine, or does reality, including the divine, give sense to man? In most study of religion the answer to this question is neglected, leading to methodological problems in regard of the scholar's position and to the believers s/he is describing. I do not raise the question to answer it, but to indicate that there is a methodological missing link when dealing with matters of religion and religious identity – which is also a key issue in the Pussy Riot case. Above, this was implicit in the points that we never 'have' a full understanding of the other, and the ensuing imperative to pursue the research and not to consider a case 'closed' in respect to the individuals involved. I indicated the paradox that this, more or less, requires a 'kaleidoscopic' approach, as the scholar is always neutral, normative and engaged at the same time. I will now connect this paradoxical situation to the insider/outsider question, the question of normativity of Orthodox Tradition, and illustrate it with an example from formal logic.

Even scholars who problematise 'objectivity' and account for their stance towards the religious 'other' like Tina Beattie (taking her as one of the exceptionally sensitive examples) have to offer an alternative approach for doing justice to this other. Beattie explicitly links her reflection on the need to respect the religious 'other' to reflection on her positioning herself as a

Catholic scholar in regard to her research 'object': 'As a Roman Catholic feminist theologian, I try to sustain a creative tension between the intellectual rigour and integrity demanded by academic scholarship, and my loyalty to a faith community that has occupied complex positions of power and persecution (...)' (Beattie 2005: 65).

This inherently requires reflection on her own Catholic tradition or religious commitment (as she recognises; cf. Beattie 2005: 68), and even more fundamentally, on the scholar's own (theological) anthropology. In the passage preceding this quote, Beattie argues for deconstructing

[t]he *sui generis* model of 'religion' (...) in order to acknowledge a plurality of historical, geographical and cultural narratives marked by the play of sometimes irreducible and possibly irreconcilable differences. A failure to recognize this leads to the homogenization of religion, the erasure of difference, and the colonization of religious otherness by the ahistorical and universalizing presence of the secular scholar of religion. (Beattie 2005: 65)

Such a statement brings to mind the quote by (the Catholic) Johannes Fabian, that the first premise is to remain aware that all academic – not just secular – reflection on religion(s) started with critique of religious tradition. In the case of Beattie, her plea for 'narrative understanding' of religious and cultural identity and tradition (Beattie 2005: 74) unintendedly runs the risk of relativism and of losing the norm for defining what 'religious tradition' would be. It also leads to a specific paradox: if she approaches other religions as narratives, even when she considers religious narratives as 'in some sense concerned with expressing the relationship between transcendence, community, tradition, and the individual believer' (Beattie 2005: 74), the question is how she could apply this to her own tradition; she would have to be 'insider' and 'outsider' in one person. The problem is similar to the current Russian context: if each faction and believer (cf. Beattie herself in positing herself as a 'Catholic') tells different, even contradictory narratives of 'Orthodoxy' or 'Catholicism' – which are perceived as normative in *each* narrative – a scholar cannot deduce a singular 'Orthodoxy'/'Catholicism'.

For the study of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy, this definition problem is an even more complex issue than for Catholicism. Since post-Soviet societies are coping with the legacy of Marxist-Leninist anthropology, which decided that man gives sense to reality, armchair and field research on post-Soviet desecularisation cannot proceed without expressly reflecting on this dilemma, in particular when dealing with central Orthodox notions like transcendence, and appeals to the 'living God'. Crucial for Orthodox experience of the living God is the Orthodox theological notion according to which God is transcendent and unknowable in essence, eluding all human concepts and understanding, and simultaneously 'everywhere present and fillest all things'. This notion is obviously in tension with the substituted transcendence imposed by ideologies, be it Marxism-Leninism, or its adaptation to current politics.

Scholarly normativity is directly connected to the insider/outsider problematics and the problem of relativism. This latter issue was already implied in the paradigmatic approach of Peter Winch (Winch 1970; cf. Schilbrack 2009). Winch was one of the first to expressly introduce the linguistic turn for the social sciences; he pleads for an interpretative instead of a positivist or functionalist approach, contesting the idea of a neutral (and therein normative) academic

'meta-language' (cf. Benton and Craib 2011<sup>2</sup>: 98 f.). With this he raised an issue that is now still fervently debated in the frames of the insider/outsider question and the so-called 'translation problem', but which also has resonances in feminist and gender theories. In commenting on Evans-Pritchard's standard ethnographical research on the Azande, Winch suggested that the Azande worldview, as that of any 'non-Western' people, might have its own 'rationality', and that it should not directly be measured to scholarly standards of what is rational, which he reproached Evans-Pritchard – who described the Azande beliefs as 'false' and 'ineffective' – of doing (cf. Lerner 2002: 4 and Ch. 7). The scholar should seek to understand people 'who are at a great distance from us', starting with acknowledging this 'distance' or 'difference' (cf. Benton and Craib 2011<sup>2</sup>: 94–102; Read 2012: 21 f.).

The linguistic and narrative turns in the study of religion, applying the Wittgensteinian concepts of 'forms of life' and 'language game', are themselves in danger of substituting language for reality, confusing insider-outsider positions (cf. my remark on Beattie), and an image of the 'other' for the real other. Thus, if a recent theoretical consideration states 'what unites the field of the study of religion is (...) an ongoing commitment to the reproduction of the language game of "religion" itself' (King 2013: 144 f.), this reduction of religion to 'language game' is telling for such substitution, and betrays the researcher's having decided the basic question, namely that man gives sense to God. The striking thing is that this commitment often stems from an urge to do justice to the religious 'other' (as with Beattie). I do not suggest the decision has necessarily to be that God gives sense to man, but as long as this question remains unaddressed or supposed as secondary, 'secular' scholarship risks speaking of 'images' instead of people. Instead of the tacit norm of 'methodological atheism' (cf. Berger 1990), at least methodological agnosticism would be, both in a normative and in an objective sense, a more appropriate position from which to approach the *religious* other.

To take up the game, I indicated a number of similar paradoxes we are logically trapped in: scholarly neutrality or normativity; position both oneself as a scholar and the 'other' in the insider-outsider and subject-object distinctions; and normativity of religious tradition. These are all 'semantic' paradoxes. For example, statements like 'there is no normative academic "meta-language"' or 'there is no normative scholarly position' are implicitly normative, and posits itself as meta-language. There are also reminiscences of a famous set theoretical paradox, 'Russell's paradox'. Briefly summarised, various 'subsets', in our case, the Orthodox believers, factions, clergy, and so on, calling themselves Orthodox, belong to a main, defining, or normative 'set of all sets', in our case 'Orthodox Tradition'.<sup>10</sup> 'Russell's paradox' of self-reference arises by considering this specific set of 'all sets that are not a members of themselves'. 'Such a set appears to be a member of itself if and only if it is not a member of itself, hence the paradox' (Irvine 2009). In their way, Pussy Riot may be said to have explicitly challenged the 'normative' claim on Orthodoxy by the ROC: 'there is no single, unified group of Orthodox believers, as the prosecutor would like to prove' (Tolokonnikova 2012). This is an urgent societal issue since, as already indicated, the ROC itself claims normativity for this Tradition, which it couples to

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<sup>10</sup> I have described this extensively in relation to Orthodox Tradition (Tolstaya 2014).

institutional power structures and interests (cf. for example, the Chaplin quote above). For all her exemplary integrity, Beattie is trapped – as all scholars are – in the same self-reference paradox, as she correctly argues against the ‘universalizing presence of the secular scholar of religion’ and at the same time is committed to the norms of secular scholarship, while being a ‘Catholic’.

In conclusion, a scholar cannot speak of lived religious experience nor of the ‘living God’; at the same time, to exceed imagology, ‘language games’, logical paradoxes, or any other form of conceptualism, s/he *has to* speak of lived religious experience and of the ‘living God’. The methodological task is thus to delineate the applicability of scholarly notions like ‘narrative’ and ‘language game’ in each concrete case. When dealing with religious plurality and religious traditions, academia should thus find the balance between reductionism and relativism. And hence the need for a sense of normativity, not to impose it, but as precondition for engaging with the ‘other’. This is precisely the point behind criticising a *sui generis* conception of religion (as Beattie does).

Concretely, this sense of the ultimate elusiveness of the other would qualify the terminology used in academic analysis (such as the terms ‘insider’, ‘outsider’, ‘Orthodox’, ‘punk performer’, or also ‘scholar of religion’), leaving the real persons ‘open’ and respecting them as ‘subjects’.<sup>11</sup> Of course, ‘elusiveness’ does not imply that a scholar cannot understand anything of another person (or tradition). It serves as a methodological restriction on his or her claims of understanding, to prevent positing the ‘other’ as a ‘postmodern objectification’ (cf. Fabian 2001: 23; Jensen 2011), and to prevent improper identification with the real ‘other’, in short: to balance engagement and distance. In the end, ‘kaleidoscope’ is itself an image; we should remind ourselves that we do not actually ‘grasp’ it. Therefore, it also serves as an imperative to pursue the investigation as far as possible, and not to think a ‘case closed’ as if one had ever fully understood it or the people involved.<sup>12</sup>

Since in this essay I merely can address this dilemma, being fully aware of the impossibility of solving it – because that would mean solving the basic question of philosophy – and my aim has been simply to show some kaleidoscopic turns of the Pussy Riot case, let us return from these academic depths (or heights) to journalistic realism. The general lack of reflection within the ROC MP was embodied in the patriarchal ‘watch controversy’. The contradiction between the vow of non-possession the future Patriarch took when becoming a monk in 1969, and the apparent fact that the hierarch has his own human weaknesses, is secondary here. The questionable thing is the contrast of such incidents with the ROC’s claim on normativity and morality, particularly in its official documents,<sup>13</sup> and not least in the Pussy Riot case. The reflection of the absent is, perhaps, not a bad image for the post-traumatic state of post-Soviet society.

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<sup>11</sup> Compare the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin, who found such openness to the voice of the other in the novels of Dostoevsky, which he subsequently called ‘polyphonic’ (Tolstaya 2013: 3-42).

<sup>12</sup> I take this very concretely, e.g. in trying to interview the members of Pussy Riot for this issue, or by conducting (archival) research on ‘established’ images (Tolstaya 2013; Tolstaya and Versteeg 2014).

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 5.

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