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Stories of Faith from the Yoga Mat: A Case Study of Women's Yoga Retreats

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SUMMARY: This article presents empirical material on faith storytelling in the compilation between Orthodox Christianity and New Age spirituality. These kinds of faith syntheses are endemic to modern people, emancipated from the rules and roles of traditional religious institutions, but also in constant search for new ways to connect with the divine. In full accord with contemporary spirituality, the collected narratives are intended to demonstrate the complex forms under which religious identity is constructed today. The particular case study of women's yoga getaways, often called "retreats", also provides in-depth accounts of this new form of travel that has become increasingly popular in recent decades. The methodological apparatus of the article is organized around an interpretive approach focused on the analysis of narratives collected from women participants in the retreat. Through examples from the author's fieldwork, the paper will demonstrate how the yoga mat creates a pathway to the divine and what this might look like in the context of a post-socialist, Eastern Orthodox country like Bulgaria.

KEYWORDS: contemporary religious practices, Orthodoxy, New Age, yoga retreats, autoethnography, narrative analysis, storytelling

Introduction

I have been invited to a yoga retreat for the fourth year. This time, the place is the town of Lukovit, around which there are several natural sights, and the central theme of the retreat is "Prayer". I accept without a second thought. This is among the sites I have visited and observed every year since 2021. When I started attending the yoga studio that organizes the retreats in 2017, I intended to unwind after a long day at work, but I soon discovered that the place offers so much more. With my regular visits, I witnessed long conversa-

tions between the women, sharing and exchanging experiences, interpretation of angel cards before or after a yoga class, “cocoa ceremonies”, welcoming the full moon or writing down new moon wishes, purification rituals with rice mandalas and a whole conglomeration of practices that can be described as related to New Age spirituality (see: York 1995; Hanegraaf 1996; Sutcliffe 2003; Heelas 2009; Kyurkchiev 2019; Manova 2022; Karamelska 2023). Amongst all the conversations and advice, shared stories and wishes, discussions and sometimes arguments, invariably (and to my surprise), the figure of Jesus Christ was present. In one way or another, the women who visited the studio¹ declared they were deep believers and defined themselves as Orthodox Christians. Still, they sought their union with God precisely on the yoga mat.

Research Situation and the Purpose of the Article

Within this particular group, there was a good opportunity to explore how Eastern Orthodox Christianity coexists with yoga and New Age practices, while the activists in this group maintain their self-awareness as Orthodox Christian women. The empirical material gathered from the retreat in the town of Lukovit, in turn, provided some graphic examples of how and why the rituals of Orthodox Christianity are rejected, and how in their place women are formulating their ways of experiencing their relationship with God. This “play” of rejecting and inventing new forms of connecting with the divine references contemporary trends of the simultaneous emergence and parallel operation of secularization and sacralization concerning religious experience in much of the Western world (Berger 1999; Droogers 2007). It is difficult and almost impossible today to think of any religion as a homogeneous and well-defined canonical framework. The increasing tendency towards privatization and individualization of spirituality (Casanova 1994), faith without belonging (Davie 1994), and the boom of spiritual revolutions (Heelas, Woodhead 2005) are just some of the processes that give rise to complex syncretic forms of spiritual identities. Through the present research case, I would like to outline some dynamics and tensions generated, on the one hand, by the post-1989 revival of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Bulgaria; how it is experienced today; and, on the other hand, the forms of spirituality that people themselves produce, and that, in this case, are based on interpretations of yoga². The research problem is that, like in many post-socialist countries, the Bulgarian religious context today rests on a cultural and political substratum that has significantly influenced and

1 It is essential to emphasize that the participants are not a single group consisting of permanent members; there is no requirement for regular attendance of the yoga classes. Each woman attends whenever possible and participates in the talks or practices as much as she wishes. The company of women who travel on yoga retreats is also different in composition and varies from time to time. However, for someone to be invited to such a retreat, it is a prerequisite that they have attended classes and know the others more or less and vice versa.

2 For more insights on modern yoga practices and how they are constructed as knowledge from antiquity (see Bayer 2022).

continues to dynamize the religious field in the country. It is a matter of four decades of state socialism that invalidated the traditional Eastern Orthodoxy of the Bulgarians and imposed an atheistic worldview (Karamelska 2023: 189). After the fall of the communist regime in the country, Orthodoxy tried to regain its influence. Still, in the early 1990s, many denominations and teachings appeared on the “spiritual supermarket” to once again challenge the place of the institution of the Church. Of course, added to the trends taking hold in this country are the global processes of bringing exotic additions to particular religions and individualizing religious experiences (Clarke 2006). The trends that began then have continued in the early 21st century, when the rapid development of telecommunication technologies and the increased influence of the Internet environment have further contributed to the increased transmission of information. This also brings the hitherto isolated Eastern Bloc countries closer to discourses of holistic spirituality.

Although difficult to measure, spirituality-related changes can still be registered through many manifestations. Today, they are the subject of many debates and theoretical formulations that continuously overturn notions of the place of religiosity in the modern world. This text, while drawing on current theories and debates, does not seek to enter into them and does not set out to theorize. Instead, it draws on ethnographic work collecting and analyzing narratives where processes of secularisation and the parallel search for all sorts of ways of sacralizing life are discovered and demonstrated. Furthermore, the article aims to highlight the importance of a now popular phenomenon, such as women’s retreats. How are they experienced, what is their purpose, and are they simply a form of tourism or is there something beyond the obvious about them?

Methodology and Research Questions

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, combining years of observation among groups attending the yoga studio under discussion and, also, personal participation in four consecutive yoga retreats. This particular paper focuses on the most recent yoga retreat in the town of Lukovit from November 2023, where the oral histories presented in this paper were collected. In the exposition, where necessary, I elaborate on the methods I have used at each stage in collecting empirical material. The manner in which contemporary Bulgarians seek communion with God today will be glimpsed through the narratives and storytelling that demonstrate the personal experiences of believers, and more deeply examine values that are essential manifestations of a postmodern vision of spirituality. In addition to reporting on women’s spiritual orientations, storytelling serves in other ways. It gives space to the impulse to create a safe space of sharing in which to order and make sense of life situations, to seek understanding; to articulate values; or, through storytelling, to create a sense of communion with God. The main “stage” of these narratives is the one that has gained considerable popularity of late – women’s retreats, the importance of which the article also draws attention to.

The collected stories are presented and analyzed in two thematic parts. The rejection and emancipation from the canon are traced through two narratives which are presented and commented upon in the first part of the theoretical material under consideration, entitled "Storytelling: the Revolt against the Religious Canon". The two narratives are important as they shape the women's motivation to seek alternatives, despite their emphatic claims of belonging to Orthodoxy. These two stories also shape the central question that the article seeks to raise, which is: how are new hybrid religious identities formed that combine secular views and promote new forms of sacralization?

The next section, titled "The Yoga Mat as a Bridge to the Divine", uses a series of narratives collected after a visit to a cult site to focus on how the type of philosophy built on yoga provides a vision of communion with the divine and practical guidance on how to achieve it. This section is oriented toward processes of sacralization: how imposed narratives among women aim to "enchant" spaces and moments, creating new rituals and syncretic philosophies.

In the humanities, narrative cognition represents a key methodological tool for penetrating lifeworlds, which has the power to displace positivism, causing us to turn our gaze towards interpretation. Like many narrative researchers in the social sciences, my work draws on structuralist theories developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur, Gerard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, and others. For this article, it is sufficient to mention that the Bulgarian research community also has significant traditions in the study of verbal studies, and the present text uses how studies devoted to folklore and narrative are conducted (Georgieva 2000); religious images and narratives of miracles (Baeva 2013); the function of narrative in constituting local religious culture (Boyadzhieva 1994; Georgieva 2012) forms and ways in which the biographical is represented (Ganeva-Raycheva 2004; Kiossev 2018; Karamelska 2023).

What Is a Retreat – How Is It Experienced, and Why Is It Needed

In recent decades, the development of women's yoga retreats has represented a significant cultural phenomenon in contemporary health and wellness culture (Lea 2008; Corvo 2010; Heintzman 2013; Smith 2013; Smith, Sziva 2017). This type of travel also reflects several sociocultural trends and needs. A retreat is an event that offers a temporary detachment from everyday life for relaxation, self-development, and spiritual enrichment. Aimed primarily at women (Woodhead 2007; Houtman, Aupers, 2008; Crowley 2011), this form of a getaway combines physical practices such as yoga, spiritual and meditative techniques, as well as personal development, providing a unique space for participants to release stress and immerse themselves in the process of self-discovery and recovery. On an individual level, it is an opportunity to realign one's inner world and deal with significant life situations (Kelly, Smith 2017). Socially, retreats can be presented as a way to build a supportive community, which is much needed in times of disconnection and alienation. The needs that provoke the

popularization of such formats can effectively be addressed in some aspects of the contemporary world related to processes of fragmentation of the individual and social life: loss of a sense of community, decline of trust in institutions, lack of a stable paradigm coming from religion; disintegration of the “grand narratives”; deepening states such as anxiety and insecurity (cf. Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Taylor 1992; Lyotard 1997; Bauman 2000; Aupers 2012).

It is not easy to pinpoint the origins of this type of a getaway. However, some parallels with the religious traditions of solitude that exist in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc., cannot be avoided. Today, these traditions aimed at spiritual purification are being revived and reinterpreted in a contemporary way in women’s retreats, combining the spiritual aspects of ancient practices with the modern needs of women. Despite the inevitable commercial aspect³ of these acts, retreats are seen as a spiritual experience, part of a holistic mind-body-spirit concept, making them a significant form of religious and spiritual experience.

The Research Case: Main Actors and Activities

The main “actors” in the research case under consideration, their narratives, and their actions in the creation of the field picture under consideration can be typified as follows:

First and foremost is the yoga teacher, the organizer of the retreats, and the main inspirer of the practices accompanying the yoga she teaches. Maria Angelova⁴ is 56 years old at the time of this particular yoga retreat. She is a mother of two grown children and grandmother of two recently born grandchildren. Certified in many trainings, she teaches various styles of yoga, and the original interpretations she adds to them complement the messages she tries to convey in each yoga class. Her figure is charismatic for women, and it has been suggested on more than one occasion that the high attendance at yoga classes is due to Maria’s personality and not just the women’s interest in yoga as such. The group fully acknowledges her stance as authoritative and skillfully setting the directions for participants to follow. Over the years, Maria has developed a friendship circle with the women who attend her yoga classes, inspiring her to organize joint trips with them.

The second “actor” is the group of women themselves. In this case, the group consisted of twelve participants. Their age range is between 45–60 years⁵. The professions are varied, as I have noted – there are several nursery teachers and university lecturers, a judge, a dentist, several IT specialists, a private business owner, and several participants with medical professions. Their destinies, life stories, and personal dilemmas influenced the actions and

3 Mostly, these retreats take place in short formats of 4 days (the so-called long weekends), often in expensive spa hotels. Regarding longer forms of retreats – they are not infrequently carried out as excursions to distant destinations recognized as sacred places.

4 The names of all participants have been anonymized.

5 I exclude myself from this group.

general background of the trips, but only to some extent. The pre-set themes, activities, and rituals, expressed in a program prepared in advance by the teacher, contain the background and channel the stories so that they are told in a well-orchestrated chorus. Central to this chorus is the idea of divinity, which is very important to the teacher and is emphasized during every yoga retreat. The third “actor” is the researcher, who occupies a liminal position between participation in yoga classes and retreats, their acquaintance with the group of women and the teacher, and their role as a recorder and analyst of what is happening⁶.

During these four yoga retreats I have participated in, I have noted some recurring elements in the program that can be assumed to bring transformative, energizing, and purifying effects. These elements are: a) the yoga practice itself (referring to the body); b) discussions on topics⁷ pre-set in the program (referring to the mind); c) conducting everyday rituals (referring to the spirit); d) visiting a natural or cultural site. These elements successfully fit into the mind-body-spirit concept, a dominant platform in new-age spirituality (Bowman 2001; Sutcliffe 2003; Partridge 2004).

Storytelling: The Rebellion against the Religious Canon

The starting point on which the idea of rejecting official religion is built in the article consists in two stories recorded during one of the discussions on the first day. The topic focused on spirituality and what it means to the individual participants. Among the responses to these questions, two of the women presented specific situations that reflected some of the central conflicts between the modern person and the dogmatism of the religious canon, giving rise to New Age spirituality as a response and solution to this problem.

Yoga – Sin or Enlightenment?

The first story is by Stanislava, whom I know well from retreats and the yoga studio. She is 50 years old, married with two children. Her story is the final touch of the entire answer to the question posed during a discussion by the teacher – “What is it to be spiritual?”. In this final touch, the participant presents a life situation she experienced, which she is eager to share with the group:

6 My legitimization in front of the group happened at the very first yoga retreat. At the teacher's invitation, I told the group about my PhD thesis on New Age culture in Bulgaria (Manova 2022), which I had recently defended. Thus, I formally introduced myself as a researcher and gave more information about my work. On subsequent trips, I could take notes freely and rely on my voice recorder when necessary.

7 Some of the topics in the general discussions in the different retreats are “Living in Freedom or the Power of Saying No”; “The New Wave of Spirituality”; “Sharing Circle” – setting free topics; “The Power of Prayer”; “The Power of Forgiveness”; “Genetic Code and a Mindfully Literate Mind”; “Lessons on the Path to Our Gifts”; and “A Star Journey to You” – discussion with a guest astrologer.

Stanislava: And I am just going to take a minute to share something that I'm not sure if I shared with you last year that deeply hurt me. It was before the Easter holidays when I observed a fast accordingly, and I wanted to go to communion for the first time to confess. And as in all things, maybe I didn't come across the right spiritual person (because I am sure everyone is different), but the experience was horrible for me, too. I had prepared myself, and I had read... at such a time, you know, a person, of course, he does not know me, has to guide me on what I share, what I confess, what I report as wrong and so, so and during the conversation, I don't know how we got to the point of me doing yoga. Believe me, obviously, for the father who took my confession, that was the biggest problem in my life and obviously my biggest sin. And I thought I had other ones that I had allowed over the years... but he, from that point on, only spoke on that. We even got into a slight verbal duel because I tried to explain to him that since I'm there, I am, always have been, and will continue to be an Orthodox Christian and say, even right now, I'm on a very special ritual. However, nothing was able to change his attitude towards me from that point on. Towards the end, he told me that if I wanted to do sports, I could do anything but that. And those words hurt me deeply, and I don't think I will ever do a ritual like that again. I personally feel my yoga practice has been a tremendous enlightenment in every sense, bringing me closer to my God – whoever he may be. And I didn't expect a man of God to relate that way. I wanted to share this with you.

Maria: Thank you, Stanislava, for sharing. It was very helpful!

The story begins with describing Stanislava's preparations for the Easter holidays, including fasting and confession. These practices are part of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and symbolize spiritual purification and reconnection with God. However, we understand from the narrative that for Stanislava, this is her first immersion in such rituals. This fact should not surprise us, as the participant is part of a generation that grew up in the conditions of the atheistic worldview imposed by the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria from 1944 to 1989. In contrast, the same generation of Bulgarians managed to retain at least nominally their identity as Orthodox Christians, as Stanislava herself emphasizes: "I am, have always been, and will continue to be, an Orthodox Christian". However, belonging to Orthodoxy is used only as a verbal label, given that the woman's story shows her lack of experience and knowledge regarding the canon: "I had prepared myself, I had read...". Despite this declaration, which Stanislava probably assumed would be sufficient for the meeting with the priest, she is surprised by the father's attitude (and perhaps it is here that the profound misunderstanding of her "primary" religion comes through). To minimize the damage of her disappointment with the official religious po-

sition, the woman provides herself with some disclaimers by attributing her bad experience to the particular clergyman: “maybe I didn’t come across the right clergyman (because I’m sure everyone is different)”. The essence of her negative experience is expressed in the priest’s violent reaction when sharing about the participant’s yoga classes. The woman is perplexed as to why this fact of life is generating such resistance from the priest. What follows is a path to self-empowerment and an argument for it: “And those words hurt me deeply, and I don’t think I will ever do a ritual like that again. I’ve chosen other ways to purify myself and care for myself, whatever you call it: communion or forgiveness, but I won’t do that next time”. This request is a kind of breaking away from her birth religion. Here, the excessive freedom of modern people is evident as they have a wide assortment of philosophies from which they can freely choose and shape. Without the “right” or “expected” reaction, Stanislava exercises her right to choose freely, which is more than clear: “I feel my yoga practice is a tremendous enlightenment”. From this perspective, one can see how yoga competes with the official religion and what advantages it has over it⁸. Most notably, this is evident through the word “enlightenment”, which carries religious connotations and names the act of connecting with the divine at the highest possible level. In such a context, the conflict with the priest finds its satisfactory explanations. With such a strong impact of yoga culture, Orthodox Christianity is losing yet another battle for its parishioners. This aspect of the story reveals how contemporary believers can create hybrid spiritual identities by freely choosing philosophical concepts⁹.

The last point from Stanislava’s story is: “I wanted to share this with you”. The story was told to close people as a way to heal her wounds and find support. A likely hypothesis for Stanislava’s deep frustration with the discussed situation is that she expressed a desire to participate in a Christian ritual (confession), but perhaps expected more of a therapy session format. For this woman, understanding has to occur one way or another. If there is no understanding from the church (something the institution has never promised)¹⁰, Stanislava will seek it in a space among “her own”. Moreover, the yoga group does not lack for support. What follows is a story, the telling of which is prompted

8 Theodora Karamelska’s (2022) article *Guarding the Borders: Orthodox Narratives on Yoga* is useful for understanding the clash between traditional Orthodoxy and yoga. This article deals with the opposite situation by focusing on the voices of the actors in Orthodoxy (priests, abbots, nuns, and monks) and their positions on the practice of yoga.

9 Compare with the ideas of the spiritual supermarket, patchwork religions, etc. (Hanegraaf 1996; Bowman 2001; Sutcliffe 2003; Possamai 2005; Lynch 2007).

10 The essence of a ritual does not presuppose understanding in the sense that modern person seeks to express him- or herself. Ritual presupposes that only method and repetitiveness can purify and heal. The search for understanding is a modern projection that undermines/corrodes the ritual action from within. Formulations of seeking an authentic and genuine self are part of the ethos of the modern world and are in strong opposition to the ritual act. For more on this, cf. *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Seligman et al. 2008).

precisely to empathize with the experience already shared. It also lays even more bare the motivations of women to take power “into their own hands”.

Why Can't I Bless My Own Water?

The second narrative is provided by Rositsa, another regular participant in the yoga classes, whom I know well. She is around the same age as Stanislava; she is divorced, has one son, and owns a business. Her account, shared immediately after Stanislava's, reflects themes of emancipation and religious freedom.

Rositsa: I can also share such a bad experience. 9 years ago, when we founded the company, we decided to bless the room, as it is done traditionally. And we invited a priest who was an acquaintance of ours, and when he passed through, he sanctified, he left the candles and the holy water where they were, and I took it (since he didn't go through some corners), and I started to sprinkle it myself. Why shouldn't I sprinkle it? After all, he had blessed it, right? And he was like: “You can't! You are not clergyman!”. And I was like: “Why can't I? You left the water, and we have to use it. Why can't I sprinkle it after you?”. And again, he said, “No, you can't!”. And then later he goes: “And these candles, you should light them in the church!”. I agreed. I take the candles, go to church, light them, and after me, the clerk immediately puts them out – they were not bought from the same church – well then, how can I follow my ritual? From that incident on, I began reading a lot – why can't I bless my own water? I started reading about the old Bulgarian traditions, too. I have read a lot of Dunov and a lot of different things, you know, from the different spiritual movements. I came to the conclusion that all of them, you know, just as Maria says, that they all lead, at least for me, to the same thing – to find God within ourselves and that if we can reach him, we can help ourselves through his power. Meaning, we don't need the priest to help us because, in most cases, he may have more sins than we do, at least at the level they are currently at in Bulgaria. We shouldn't generalize them all, but ultimately, it all comes down to finding our own thing. So I actually combine parts of everything. And I'm starting to experiment. I found out how to bless water and began doing it myself. Whenever I see some other ritual – again I experiment with it on my own and in a notebook I take notes of what I did and what worked, what's good for me. For example, how to make a wish for things – as you taught me¹¹. And I think personal experience is the most important. When we start doing it, right, and it's like such a journey where something constantly finds me, like a ritual, and I totally vibe with it. That's why I take these days here whenever I can; I want those things to find me that I can incorporate into my daily life. And personally I feel much

11 Directed at the teacher, my note.

calmer. I still have my worries and fears, right, but like somehow, I'm much more balanced.

Motivated by Stanislava's story, Rositsa provides an example from her own experience. Thus, her story becomes an example of how the social environment is used to strengthen group identity and cohesion. The structure of the second story is quite similar to the first. It begins with a conflict, the roots of which can again be traced to the participant's lack of understanding of the context of traditional religion. A probable explanation for this is the post-socialist situation already highlighted as the general background of the religious landscape in the country. Clearly, for the second participant, the starting point in her spiritual identity is also Orthodoxy, which leads to the invitation of "an acquaintance priest" to sanctify her company office (again, a ritual that is part of the Orthodox canon). The main conflict here centers around asserting the right to perform religious rituals by a designated person. The priest represents the traditional religious authority that restricts Rositsa's actions while she attempts to exercise her faith and spiritual practices in her "own" way ("Why can't I?"). This reflects the tension between institutional religion and "personal spirituality" (Heelas 2009) that characterizes contemporary religious inquiry. Rositsa describes how, after the conflict with the priest, she began reading and researching various spiritual rituals, including the "old Bulgarian traditions", the teachings of the spiritual teacher Peter Dunov, and "many different things". She highlights the importance of personal experience and experimentation in her spiritual journey. This aspect reflects the narrative structure of the "hero's journey" (Campbell 2008), where the individual goes through hardships and trials to reach new understanding and enlightenment. Rositsa also creates a hybrid form of spirituality, similar to Stanislava, asserting her personal autonomy and determined emancipation from the authority of the Church. Despite indirect claims of emancipation from authority, the sporadic insertions directed at the yoga teacher ("right, as Maria says"; "as you taught me") speak of submission to the "softer" forms of authority.

One value of the modern world is for individuals to define what they seek and desire and then plan to achieve it. There is a curious layer in the methodologies Rositsa developed for herself: "I'm experimenting on my own"; "I take notes in a notebook". By being methodical and based on personal experience expressed in observations ("what I did and what worked, what's good for me"), the modern person acquires the identity of a scholar who is always formulating a new theory of themselves (a reflection of Enlightenment rationalism). This act contributes to the further layering of identity and demonstrates its fluidity and instability. Today, individuals are preoccupied with continually improving the narrative of the self, thereby "reanimating" their fragmented identity. This task is solved through constant "work on the self" (see Woodhead 2003; Manova 2022: 71). This is an ambitious approach that encourages people to view even spirituality as a functional problem that, through hard work (dependent

only on the efforts of the individual), can be sorted out, mastered, and solved. The connection between morality and work that can be derived from another branch of Christianity, namely, Protestantism, and its ethics (after Weber), further discredits Rositsa's identity as an Orthodox Christian. Some consumerist notions can also be accounted for in Rositsa's actions: "you left the water, we have to use it". Here, the line between the sacred and the profane is finally blurred as the woman betrays her attitude to the holy water as a product for which she has paid in advance – i.e., she has a right to its possession. In other words, this instrumentalizes the experience of the sacred. The maximalism complements the same impression in the motivation for taking the consecrated water "since he didn't go through some corners". The compulsive behavior – everything is to be done "correctly" and exhaustively – hints at background anxiety that the priest's actions fail to mitigate and level out. This situation demonstrates the extent to which traditional Orthodoxy fails to address modern anxiety. The chronic lack of trust in authorities and institutions is marked by the conclusions drawn: "meaning, we don't need the priest to help us because, in most cases, he may have more sins than we do, at least at the level they are currently at in Bulgaria". However, personal spirituality and experimentation have succeeded in the task of giving Rositsa peace, and she declares that she leads a "more balanced" lifestyle: "and I personally feel much more relaxed. I still have some worries and fears, but somehow, I'm much more balanced". Finally, space is left for the retreats' contribution to their spiritual pursuits: "That's why I take these days here when I can".

The two stories analyzed illustrate a dominant discursive framework in modernity that defines the contemporary world's broader cultural processes of hybridization and individualization. They show how individuals can create new forms of spirituality that combine different traditions and beliefs while striving for personal autonomy and authentic spiritual experience. The themes in the stories are important for understanding the common social background in contemporary religious and spiritual dynamics (at least in the Western world). Situationally, the two stories are important for the group because they identify (verbalize) the reasons for withdrawing from the traditional practice of Christianity by organizing these reasons into a narrative with which everyone in the group agrees. We can also look at this act as one of boundary formation. These boundaries fix the sacred space that the women will "invent" for themselves over the next days of the retreat, and into which they will lay their versions of ritual to eventually receive small-scale personalized forms of holiness through confession/sharing, forgiveness, empathy, prayer, gratitude, healing, and connection to the divine (to a degree dependent on each participant's success and requirements in this field).

The Yoga Mat as a Bridge to the Divine

The next segment of field material will draw out the other strand of the research situation, namely what the ways of connecting with the divine that yoga

and women's retreats provide look like and consist of. The material presented concerns a "journey" to a sacred place¹², followed by a new discussion at the end of the day. Its purpose is to narrate (verbalize) the sacred experience itself. Each participant is invited to join in this circle of sharing¹³. This layer of field material is extremely intense. On one hand, the multiple stories shared provide factual information about the experience, on the other: storytelling also takes on functions of sacred action, which leads to a connection with the idea of the divine.

Words Give Shape to Experience – an Incitement to Tell

On the second day of the retreat, the participants head to Prohodna Cave. The day is gloomy, and there is a chance of rain. This does not change the intention of the short excursion. There is one task left in the program for the group: each woman is supposed to come up in advance with a prayer to be said in her mind the moment they all join hands and are right under the "Eyes of God"¹⁴. After this short ritual, the program continues with lunch and walks. An important clarification is that I chose not to go with the group that day. The reason for my absence was a kind of methodological "trick". Given my experience from the previous yoga retreats with the same teacher, I expected that this trip would be narrated and commented on later that evening. So, I decided to move away from my role as a participant in the experience, taking a position as a listener and recorder of the stories when the women returned and began to share. The ploy aimed to center my attention on the storytelling and enhance the motivation of the women to share because one of them was not present and had to have the whole experience explained. When the time came to start the discussion, I did not need to intervene. The teacher set the tone with the instruction:

M: Now, let's talk about the experience. About this bonding that we did through our hands. What we gave and what we received, because we certainly received a lot from somewhere, so it's nice to have that exchange through words as well. Let's put it into form, as they say. Words shape the experience? Can you share it?

This start of the discussion laid the necessary framework and gave the floor to anyone ready to begin. Well phrased, the question implies that something special happened in the cave, and the words will fix it and bring it down to

12 The place designated for a short excursion during the day is the cave "Prohodna", also known as "God's Eyes". The cave is a famous natural landmark in Bulgaria. It is easily accessible through a wide entrance and a very high vault, on which are two substantial almond-shaped slits that look like eyes and are directed towards the visitors.

13 The invitation is almost obligatory, as the program explicitly includes the discussion before the evening yoga class.

14 This refers to the enormous holes in the vault of the cave.

the reality that the women are “returning” to. The attitude to the word that the teacher demonstrates refers to biblical texts such as the *Gospel of John*¹⁵ or *Genesis*¹⁶, which can be interpreted as an indirect claim of belonging to Christianity as a general framework. As a gesture, this introduction also shapes a space where the narrative of the experience of the individual participants will become a tool through which a saturation of holiness will gradually be achieved. Here, the narrative plays a central role in calling God to the center stage, where the teacher will have us place him at the end of the class.

The women begin with individual lines:

P1: Well, what I told you – it was a dream for me! It was very much like that, big... Everything was very big. And actually, I was so tiny all the time.

P2: I hadn’t done my “homework”. I hadn’t written a prayer. And I thought it wouldn’t come to me. And it came to me as we were settling in that I was surprised myself by what...

P3: I had no difficulty, but basically, apart from *Lord’s Prayer*, nothing else came to me as a prayer.

Maria: But that’s unique. The *Lord’s Prayer* is the most universal prayer.

P4: I burst into tears. Spontaneously, tears came to my eyes. It was cathartic for me.

P5: And when you asked us about the collective – I felt it very strongly when we transmitted charge and light to the Earth. The moment we all had our hands down.

Maria: I cried at that moment.

P6 [exclaims, taking a breath]: I felt like electricity was leaking out of my hands then, you know! That it was sucking something out of me. Very strange feeling, very strong.

P7: And it was also a powerful moment for me when, after the prayer, you told us to send energy to specific people we choose.

P8: And I found it very interesting that those particular people wrote to me afterward that they had been thinking about me all day.

Maria: Yes, because thought is a very strong energy, and people really feel it when it is directed toward giving. For sure. I, when we came out of there, the same way I just got an “I love you” on messenger. Just that.

These first remarks expressed by the women outline the factuality and together seem to synchronize the impressions. Each adds something from herself, forming a collage of memories in which each woman aims to reveal herself. Each participant says prayers. Additionally, they talk about the energy that

15 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1, 1–2,14).

16 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light” (Genesis 1, 1–3).

everyone exchanged while holding hands, then directed toward the earth, and finally mentally “gave away” this energy to loved ones. Twice (and, later in the recording, a third time), a phenomenon is shared where, after the activity was completed, these same recipients of the energy reached out in one way or another to the women. This marked some magical powers that the participants, without expressing directly, demonstrate that they possess. This is followed by the teacher taking the floor again and considering how she chose the particular place to take the group. In her imagination, it is soft and predisposing for an encounter with God (probably due to the natural effect of “watchful eyes”, as already mentioned). Also, weeks before the retreat, she had begun to direct her thoughts to the cave, which, as far as I could tell, was intended to prepare the place to be favorable when visited by the group.

Maria: I manifested very strongly to have no one there when we were there. I prayed very hard that the weather would stay clear, that there wouldn't be any rain, and that it would be dry. The weather felt super gentle. Somehow, the place was super hospitable to us. There was...

P3 [adds]: there wasn't any wind at all...

Maria: ...yes, there was a warm presence, like someone invited us to be there. The other thing that terribly impresses me now is when I say it, I get a total chill – it reminded me very much of that experience of the feeling I had at the Lotus Temple in Delhi, India. I have told you this is the biggest temple uniting all religions. It is very huge. It's just like a lotus where you go inside, and there were thousands, thousands, thousands of people inside – different nationalities, different skin color, etc., but it was grave silence [...]. Somehow, it was like everybody going in there was silent, which is a lot! [...] It impressed me a lot, and I actually prayed that we could have that feeling. It's like we walked into an open temple, and He said, “I'm here”.

After what the teacher shared, a sense of holiness began to build. Prayers are said in advance for an appropriate time, and easy access to the place manifests through thought, showing that this particular visit is special. One may go to the place many times or have visited it already, but now a special “audience” has been arranged for this particular group. The narrative also mentions that at the very moment that the women were saying their prayers and holding hands, no other visitors came to the cave, i.e., a moment of solitude was achieved, which is proof that this was the right time and place to meet God, and he welcomed them. Through these prior arrangements and proofs given, the place chosen for the occupation scene seemed to be “enchanted”¹⁷ by the wo-

17 I use the idea of “re-enchanting the world”, which implies a revival of spirituality and wonder in modern life despite the prevailing rationality and secularization. This includes new forms of religiosity, spiritual practices, and mythological narratives that again give much-needed meaning and depth to human existence (cf. Weber 2001; Taylor 2007; Kearney 2009).

men, transforming it into a sacred space-time in their memories. By orienting women toward memory, Maria implements a successful formula for “enchantment”, because memory is presumably more embellished, colorful, and magical. Working with memory is more effective in creating a sense of sacredness and a sense of community than the sheer density of the ongoing “in the moment” experience. Because no one fully experiences the “moment”. This is almost impossible, as there is so much more going on in the experience in parallel-walking, talking, noticing/reflecting things, and landscapes, whereas shaping a memory through narrative works only with the mind and language and allows for a deepening into the state of mind that the experience provoked. It is through the “crafting” of a narrative (“putting the experience into words”) that the memory is formed and solidified, and it is the memory that creates an almost magical reality.

The comparisons with the Lotus Temple in Delhi form a kind of sacred geography in which the places in the world where the presence of God is found seem to be connected by an invisible thread, sharing a sense of continuity. And here it is, the first object of privatization – the temple. The group in which a departure from the canon was unanimously expressed now has its own form of temple where they enter for prayer and where the Lord awaits them. Immediately following the teacher’s narrative, the women chime in with further additions that aim to convey the intensity of their experience.

Maria: Yes, there was much softness in that place. It was very, very gentle. I don’t know, that’s how I felt it. Starting with the weather. And then, when we were coming back, it rained over us. Then the rain stopped, in the distance, the sky brightened, the sun came out, and...

P2: ...and the music started!

Maria: *Sunshine Reggae*, we all listened to [it] and sang in the car!

P4: (starts quoting the lyrics) Don’t worry, take it easy, let the good vibes get stronger. But it was very cool!

Maria: It was just very “wow”! These kinds of cues line up the whole picture of our experience here today. So... I’m really very grateful.

P4: ...and I had a fabulous trip in the forest as we walked to the rock monastery. I felt like I was in some fantasy. I even made some associations with movies. And I thought we were going into some forest, and like (P5) said, we were fairies. 11 fairies and many other *samodivi*¹⁸ and woodland creatures of all kinds that surround us. It was very fairy-like to me.

The synchronicity of events that the teacher brings up (“And then, when we were coming back, it rained over us. Then the rain stopped, in the distance, the sky brightened, the sun came out [...] and the music started”) consolidates the general impression of a successful connection with the divine. The rain came

18 A Bulgarian word for a mythological female creature.

only after it was all over, perhaps as an act of purification, and the sun and music in the narrative hint at a blessing. The narrative also receives a direct complement through the song lyrics, which one of the participants excitedly recalls. Then, taking her turn to speak, the same participant contributes to describing the events infusing the narrative with fairy tale elements about her experiences – “fantasy, fairies, *samodivi*, and woodland creatures”. The group’s reflections illustrate the successful enchantment of this unique moment and its final saturation with holiness. A sacralization has taken place, and its purpose is to give meaning and depth to the women’s experiences during the retreat. What else can these experiences do in the long run? We will explore this in the next example.

After these introductions, the discussion transitions to reflections on everyday life and how to live it through the philosophy of yoga. When the next participant’s turn comes, the mood and direction of the discussion shift.

P3: ...what I felt was an admiration of the beauty that exists, and lately, I’m realizing what my dark thoughts are due to as well because apparently, you know, the side effect of traveling a lot and seeing a lot, a hell of a lot, of beautiful places is that you’re super indifferent to that beauty afterward. And unfortunately, we live in a very unpleasant environment.

This is a prelude to a long talk by the participant, in which she expresses anger, irritation, and frustration with her environment through examples from everyday life. The central example around which her resentment is focused is marked as a conflict with the neighbors in the apartment building (the outside environment) who do not share her aesthetic views on the landscaping of the common parts of their property. The participant is passionate about this topic and occasionally fails to speak up when others try to calm her down.

P3: I am very saddened. Every day when I leave home. And you know what makes me sad the most? Everybody says, “Oh, why don’t you do it, you’re just waiting for somebody else”. I can do it; I can raise the funds, give of my time and effort and all that, but what saddens me the most is the fact that the people I live amongst, neighbors, and so on, it doesn’t really matter to them most of the time, they’re ok with everything being the way it is. To them, it’s all perfectly normal, and they are actually willing to destroy even the smallest thing you have as some beauty and aesthetic in the environment that surrounds us. I don’t know; it ruins it for me, folks. I’m an aesthetic person!

Through the examples and the unforeseen turn in the discussion that the participant provokes, the sacred and the profane come into confrontation. However, in the end, the teacher decisively takes the floor to present her vision of a philosophy of life subordinated to her yoga practice.

The most important thing is what attracts attention. It is a provocation. Let us observe what we focus on because in the world, as there is a lot of junk, there are also a lot of beautiful things. That is, we are the ones who choose a different focus. We do it because we know that no matter how much we want to, no matter how much we strive to make the world we live in perfect – beautiful, orderly, etc., there will always be people who will be the opposite of us. In fact, through these experiences, we look for a good focus to return to. So you can compare it to the feeling you have on the mat. You've done yoga many times. Why do we say yoga is not just a physical practice on the mat? Yoga is building a life philosophy. If I can take what I experience on the mat off the mat, then I can truly claim to the whole world that I am doing yoga. Because you know, many people have come to the studio, hundreds of people, in these 15 years have come through our meetings, and I can tell you that many times I grit my teeth and chuckle mentally when someone says, "But I've done yoga, I practice yoga". These people have never done yoga! The way they live, the way they behave, and the way they manifest their lives. So yoga actually gives us one such knowledge. Focus. Why do we do it otherwise? Sometimes I say to myself, God, I must be annoying in their ears, but let it be so when I say to you, "Come back to the body, catch your breath". Because actually, that's the knowledge that has been passed through time. It tells us that we come (into this world) with our breath, and we have one tool – the breath. This tool leads us to the spirit.

With this tool, we evolve, we grow, we do everything we do in this life, and with one breath, we leave it. And that's why Baba Ji says: "Your whole life lies between one inhale and one exhale". What you do between the inhale and the exhale is your choice. What you focus on is your choice. How you will live this life, between the inhales and the exhales – you are the protagonist. So the world will always, always, always send us these challenges. The kind we're not going to like either with the environment, or with the people who will betray us, or with the work that we will not accept. And we tell ourselves, "Okay, I'm doing what I can, and as much as I can, that's not going to be my focus". (Note: Additional examples from the statement have been omitted at this point.) By the way, I've copied this prayer by hand many times to get a feel for it because I've had much anger in me about similar things that you say, too. For it says: "God, give me serenity to accept what I cannot change, courage to change what I can, and wisdom to distinguish between the two"¹⁹. Because we want everything to be perfect, to do this for our home, for ourselves, our children, and our loved ones; however, sometimes, we see that the effort we give is not the result we want. So it's good that there's some inner rebellion, and it's good that there's some

19 The quote is attributed to Reinhold Nieber and is also known as the Serenity Prayer.

form of anger, but it changes us! But then I say to myself, "Focus. What do I choose today?" (note: Gives a popular example of children, some of whom see a flowering tree in a picture, while others – a garbage can). We can pick out many things here. Most of all, by opening my door, I enter my world, and my world is different! That over there is the neighbor's world! That's the other's world! My world is not that world; I only pass through there and enter another world, live in another world with another focus, another purpose, another intention, another feeling, another love, and another acceptance. The neighbor there, if he likes those tiles, okay.

The participant's dissatisfaction gave the teacher a good opportunity to show her idea of life through yoga. A compilation of several philosophical and religious trends could be found in the reflections and advice. Buddhist philosophy is a significant influence: the emphasis on mindful focus, acceptance of inevitable challenges, and the importance of breath as a tool for spiritual development reflect Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and meditation. Along with Buddhism, elements of Stoic philosophy, Christian spirituality, and New Age movements also coexist in her understanding. Stoicism is evident in her emphasis on accepting the things we cannot change and finding peace and wisdom in the face of challenges. Christian elements can be seen in the mention of the Serenity Prayer and the emphasis on spiritual development. New age spirituality provides the framework that can accommodate and contain the different philosophies without them affecting or contradicting each other by applying the popular idea of holistic living. Also, in her statement, we can rely on the principle of analogy: "what I experience on the mat, I can take off the mat". On other occasions, the phrase familiar from Hermeticism, "As above, so below"²⁰, was often quoted. The formulas for a good life offered by Maria align with modern spirituality. In her advice, self-realization and self-development are stimulated through intense self-observation and the search for "good focus".

Apart from the opportunity for the teacher, once again, to express her philosophical views and give prescriptions for a better life, the dialogue between the two women has the potential to be meaningful symbolically again in the context of Christianity. After the first two stories, which reveal failed attempts at ritualization, can we see the last story as containing elements of a kind of confession? Right at the beginning of her statement, the participant mentions having dark thoughts and looking for the reasons for them. This is followed by plenty of examples of what irritates her and provokes her anger. Unlike the other participants, she does not seem to be at peace with what she has seen and experienced during the afternoon, but, on the contrary, she despairs and

²⁰ The phrase originates in Hermeticism, a philosophical-religious movement associated with Hermes Trismegistus (the ancient Greek god Hermes, identified with the Egyptian god Thoth), and is prominent in esoteric literature.

sinks into self-pity. The others try to chime in several times but are unsuccessful. The teacher waits for the participant to vent her resentment as much as possible and then begins her form of “preaching”. Anger, resentment, and reckoning are all sins that are now confessed, and this is what happens on the yoga mat. Unlike what is shown in the first two stories, this impromptu and peculiar form of confession provides a path to peace, especially when an hour-long yoga session follows it.

The pursuit of spiritual growth and the connection to spirit through breath and yoga are some techniques that Maria teaches her followers, and they often confirm the positive effects of what they have learned through their stories. However, Maria’s final piece of advice might cause us to consider a critical point: “Most of all, by opening my door, I enter my world, and my world is different! That one over there is the neighbor’s world!”. Suppose religion is no longer the prerogative of the collective, of the communal, but can be disassembled and privatized “piecemeal” by the individual. What happens to the communal bonds between individuals if freedom can pierce every boundary and soften it? New Age spirituality relies on postulates such as autonomy, authenticity, and experience (Manova 2022: 71) – all formulas in which the idea of the conception of “other” is removed. Many theorists of modernity raise similar troubling questions (see Lasch 1991; Taylor 1992; Bauman 2003). The “good focus” in the example can be reflected in the idea of spirituality, both in the light of Stoicism and Buddhism and in pursuing personal pleasure, reaching hedonism and narcissism. The lines are thin. Communally, the idea of “my world” encapsulates the individual and atomizes society. A debate on the longing for community and togetherness that some such women’s circles presuppose would be appropriate in such a perspective. However, along with this, the individualization of sacred experience to the degrees shown through the above examples aids in the erosion of the collective and also the relationship with the “other”. One assumption might be that the agreement and harmony evident in this group rests on a fragile balance that is threatened at any moment when, as in the example of the clergyman, someone is unhappy with the rules of the game and decides to change them.

I Saw Him – The Last Story

This story closes the cycle of narratives and is also the climax of the day. After the discussion, the evening continued with yoga exercises followed by a guided meditation. At the end of the class, the teacher walks past us all and leaves something. When the lights are back on, I see a card with a landscape and a quote from the Bible. The song is playing: *Hallelujah*. Each participant is invited to read the random fortune they got. I begin with mine: “Even if the mountains disappear and the hills move, still my grace will not depart from you, and my covenant of peace will not change, says the Lord who shows you mercy” (Isaiah 54: 10). The individual quotations go around the whole circle of women, verbalized by each one. God’s word sounds out, and the word of God

is spoken, with a Christian “voice”. Reading her quote, one of the women tears up and begins to share spontaneously:

P5: “Faith is giving confidence in those things hoped for, convictions of things not seen”.

Maria: Yes, that’s a very strong Bible verse that tells us that just because we don’t see some things doesn’t mean they’re not true.

P5: I did see Him! Now I realize it!

Maria: Tell us! (side voices of the women in the group are heard, with the same encouragement).

P5: I didn’t feel any energy. Like, everyone is different. The moment Maria said, oh... I really don’t know if I should say it.

Maria: Say it!

P5: The moment we closed our eyes, (a long pause as she narrates) an image of a figure in a white robe – you’ve seen one like Jesus Christ, right... the image literally came before my eyes. I started squinting to see if...

Maria: ...it was true?

P5: Maybe something was wrong with my eyes, it disappeared. After a while, the same thing came back to me. The same image. And so. Like a black-and-white drawing all the same. With a head like this (indicating). And it passed and went away. And now, in practice, I brought back the memory of that.

Maria: And now you remind me of something, and I will tell you. When we held hands in a circle, I said, now we’re going to say *Lord’s Prayer* – absolutely all of you had your eyes closed, and P5 was looking at me like she was hypnotized!

P5: Who?

Maria: You! That’s right, such a piercing, mesmerizing look! Hey, that’s right, you widened your eyes like that! (pointing). You are the only one of all. And I looked at you again, didn’t I, and I said, “Close your eyes!” (imperative).

P5: I may have opened my eyes then because the moment I closed them, it appeared...

Maria: She was so mesmerized that I was actually scared by how she was looking.

This story reaches the peak of sacralization that the current yoga retreat presents. The technology of enchantment, the privatization of Christian elements and rituals, mixing them with yoga and travel, achieves the ultimate goal – an encounter with the divine, the unnamable, the unseen. That which consciousness has suppressed manages to emerge through the supportive female circle. The additional elements that reinforce the sacred experience – the cards with quotations from the Bible and the random principle by which they are distri-

buted – act as a catalyst. It is no coincidence, however, that in the participant's vision, Jesus Christ appears in a white robe. This reflects that the presetting of Christian codification directly influences and guides the women's feelings and experiences. P5's description of the image in a white robe, similar to Jesus Christ, reflects the cultural visualization of religious figures. Such visualizations are often powerful discursive factors and reinforce religious experiences through familiar symbols. All of the narrative stories in this yoga retreat give a good sense of the complexity of religious experiences and interactions in group religious practices, as well as how faith and symbolism influence personal and collective experiences.

Conclusion

The ethnographic study of women's yoga retreats proposed in this paper presented an example of contemporary forms of spirituality that successfully combine various practices and traditions, including Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The central question underlying this research concerned the forms of secularization of religious experience that are ongoing and characteristic of modernity. Still, multiple forms of sacralization are occurring alongside these processes. The verbal narratives of Stanislava and Rositsa presented here are a central point that demonstrates the reasons for and ways of breaking with the official religion, but also the possibility that in their minds they still define themselves as Orthodox Christians. The individual paths to the divine that both women take involve a range of methodologies and alternatives that act compensatory and, at the same time, elevate their roles as adept and capable people, leading to self-empowerment and emancipation from the Church. These two examples not only show the weakened relationship with Orthodoxy but also answer the research question: how are new hybrid religious identities formed that combine secular views and promote new forms of sacralization?

As for the other part of the religious experience, the new sacralizations, the remaining narratives aim to show the many forms and ways in which technologies of sacralization are produced. Traveling, the invention of rituals, the verbalization of experiences through storytelling in a women's circle, and additional supporting elements such as music, philosophical sermons, and cards with quotations from the Bible are all means of sacralization. They yield satisfactory results and the reactions of the participants testify to this. Through use of rituals, meditations, and visits to sacred places, under the guidance of a charismatic figure, a safe space is created for sharing and exercising personal spiritual connection. In "inventing" this connection, the yoga mat plays a key role as a bridge to the idea of divine connection. In the supportive women's circle, women craft narratives that consolidate them; through visiting the cave, a version of a "temple" is "made"; in the shaping of memories, a magical reality is "made"; in the quoted dialogue between the teacher and one of the participants, peculiar versions of confession and sermon take shape. The final story reaches the highest culmination of a sacralizing experience by bringing forth

a narrative of a miracle: the vision one of the participants had of Jesus Christ. This part of the collected material also echoes the questions of how women's retreats, and the yoga mat in particular, provide a vision of the divine and concrete guidance on how to achieve it, finding its place in people's lives.

The analysis of the narratives collected during the fieldwork provides an insight into the life-worlds and worldviews of the women speakers, but in a deeper sense it also provides valuable information about processes and dynamics in the religious field that encompass a part of Bulgarian society. Thus, through the stories collected in this study, we can see not just the individual cases of the group, but part of the shape of contemporary spirituality itself and the meanings and implications it carries with it. And it is, as we have seen, rife with contradictions and internal struggles, demonstrating how dynamic, pulsating, and far from definitively resolved the attempt to construct a spiritual identity is today.

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