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You are what you don't eat – Fasting, Ethics, and Ethnography, in Serbia and Beyond

Abstract: This article examines Orthodox fasting in contemporary Serbia. It does so through the theoretical lens of 'ethical affordances', suggesting that food and fasting practices allow a range of people to articulate different ethical evaluations. Food and fasting generate diverse reflections on the importance of rules, spiritual growth, hypocrisy, and sincerity. Thinking anthropologically, we see that people with range of viewpoints on the Church are in fact *united* in making ethical evaluations. More broadly, the article speculates that thinking about the ethical affordances of food might be one way to develop the ethnography of religion after Yugoslav socialism more generally.

Keywords: ethics, food, fasting, former Yugoslavia, Orthodox Christianity, Serbia.

It goes without saying that food is 'utterly essential to human existence' (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 99). Through studying food, anthropologists illuminate much wider themes about social structure, personal and collective identities, and societal norms, rules, and divisions (Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Watson and Klein 2016). Ingredients, the way in which we prepare, serve, and consume them say something about who we think we are. Likewise, that which we elect to *not* eat is equally integral to the ethical, religious, healthy, or meditative subjects we strive to be. Food, in short, sits at the heart of human social life. As James Watson and Jakob Klein put it: 'Everyone eats and, fortunately for anthropologists, most people like to talk about food' (Watson and Klein 2016, 6).

When I started an ethnographic project about Orthodox Christianity in Serbia, back in the autumn of 2016, my research was not conceived in terms of what people ate. And nor, for that matter, what they chose not to. I had imagined a project which would touch upon some big sounding words – 'eschatology' was one – and speak to debates which were unfolding in the anthropological

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study of Christianity, 'postsocialism', and historical consciousness. As fieldwork progressed – largely conducted in central Serbia[1] – I interviewed a diverse range of people with differing relationships to Orthodoxy: self-identifying 'believers' (*vernici*) who strived to live a 'liturgical life' by receiving frequent Divine Communion, as well as people who understood themselves as 'traditional believers', celebrating their patron saint day (*slava*) and major feasts, but otherwise looking askance at the fervent piety of some of their compatriots. I met others who emphasized their deep scepticism of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its 'hypocritical' clergy, as well as self-declared atheists who were nevertheless keen to 'respect our faith'. What linked all these interlocutors was their readiness to comment on practices of Orthodox fasting. They all had something to say about food.

Fasting is a core dimension of Orthodox Christian liturgical life. In its most basic iteration, to keep a fast means refraining from meat, fish and dairy products at certain times in preparation for a feast. The severity varies: 'fish' and 'wine' are allowed on some days, whilst at other times food should be prepared solely with 'water', not 'oil'. The Orthodox year revolves around four principal fasts: The Nativity Fast in preparation for Christmas, Great Lent in preparation for Easter, the Apostles' fast in preparation for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and the Dormition Fast in preparation for the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The calendar indicates that the two Feasts of the Cross on 18th January and 27th September are fasting days, as is the Feast of the Beheading of St John the Baptist on 11th September.[2] A fast is kept on Wednesdays to commemorate Christ's betrayal, and on Fridays to commemorate His crucifixion.

With the disintegration of Yugoslav socialism, Orthodox ideas and practices exploded into the Serbian public sphere – a process which has been well documented (for instance Blagojević 2008; Malešević 2006; Radulović 2012). An aspect of this renewed interest in 'our faith' has been an increased engagement by some of the population with fasting practices (Lackenby 2021a, 2022). Those curious about fasting have encountered a set of rules and ideas about what to not eat and when. The rules can seem opaque, unfathomable – and sometimes excessive. Fasting practices generate discussion, especially amongst a generation who grew up in a social climate less conducive to overt religious practice. As one man, who was drawn to Orthodoxy whilst a student in Belgrade in the 1990s, put it: 'we talk about this [fasting] a lot because it's new for us'. During fieldwork, I gathered data about what people thought of fasting, how to prepare

[1] Initial fieldwork was conducted between 2016 and 2018, largely in and around Kraljevo. I carried out shorter fieldtrips in 2018, 2021, and 2022 in Belgrade, Kruševac, and Kraljevo.

[2] Dates given according to the New Calendar.

fasting food, and the best way to respect the fasting calendar. I recorded people's incredulity at (what they saw as) extreme, performative fasting, and listened as they explained what fasting was '*really* about' in essence. I heard people comment on the tastiness of fasting food and how they felt so much better when slightly hungry. And I received medical advice from a doctor that fasting food was 'heavy' and best avoided.

In my contribution to this issue of *Balcanica* I focus on local ethical debates surrounding food and fasting. Choosing what to consume – and how and when – inevitably involves ethical reflection (Luetchford 2016), and the situation in Serbia is no different. To build the argument, I think with anthropologist Webb Keane's (2014a) idea of the 'ethical affordance'. Keane is drawing on James Gibson's theory of the 'affordance' – the idea that the properties of certain objects 'afford' different uses or possibilities to those who perceive them. In the classic example, a wooden chair might 'afford' sitting, but could also afford other possibilities, such as being a stepladder, or firewood, or a weapon. Affordances are the properties of a thing in relation to 'human activity'; all depends on *how* a person wishes to use something – it is not deterministic. Keane applies affordance theory to the ethnography of ethics – the study of the ways in which people evaluate what they think is good or bad, worth striving for or not. The term 'ethical affordances' describes, then, any 'aspects of people's experiences of themselves, of other people, or of their surround, that they may draw on as they make ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not' (Keane 2014a, 7).

Keane (2014b) brings his thinking about ethical affordances to bear on the materiality of Orthodox Christian life. He notes that in communities where there is a dominant faith tradition (and Serbia might obviously be considered such) conflicts inevitably emerge about the way a tradition is practised. Such tensions and debates stem from the interplay between three different forces, which he identifies as 'institutions' (the Church, priests, canon law), 'popular practice' (what the laity actually *does*), and 'scripture'. Keane's particular interest is in the role of icons and relics, and the ways the three forces all focus on these material objects, but evaluate them slightly differently. A peasant might see the icon as holding intrinsic curative power. A priest, on the other hand, might rather insist upon more symbolic, theological aspects. Scriptures might seem to be fixed and historically rooted but can be interpreted differently. In the case of icons, Keane notes that:

> The material properties of the icons and all that surrounds them, including the places in which they are to be found and the actions people perform toward and with them, serve as affordances for further actions and reflections on them. They are invitations and provocations (Keane 2014b, S317).

The holy icon, then, does not generate a uniform response from those who engage with it. Different actors respond to it in different ways, making dif-

ferent ethical claims. The material properties of things generate reflection on what is good and bad, holy, blasphemous, and irrational.

Icons and relics are not the only material things which have the capacity to afford ethical reflection. The same may be said of foodstuffs and fasting practices. Food, whether prepared for fasting or not, generates a set of ethical reflections from a range of people across Serbian society about right practice, true faith, commitment, hypocrisy, and sincerity. One way to look at the religious situation in post-Yugoslav Serbia has been to divide people into those who have stronger, weaker, and non-existent relationships to the Church and Orthodox Christian tradition. The emphasis is on difference. Thinking through food, however, offers a different and revealing lens. We can understand the proponents and detractors of fasting as all implicated in a *shared* process of making sense. The atheist sceptic and ardent believer are united in their concern with what fasting is really about. Thinking about the ethical affordances of food allows us to appreciate contemporary Serbia as a site fraught with ethical evaluation.

In what follows, I first offer some ethnographic snapshots of how food and fasting afford diverse ethical evaluations. My approach is non exhaustive but reveals some different perspectives on fasting, from those who take the rules very seriously to those who mock (what they see as) the whole charade. In the second section, I reflect in a more speculative tone on how thinking about the ethical affordances of food potentially has wider relevance, placing the ethnography of Serbian religious life in dialogue with debates outside Serbia. Serbian Orthodox are not the only people who fast in the 'former Yugoslav' region – and thinking about wider commonalities might be productive.

Respecting the rules

Let us start with some of the people who self-identify as 'believers', those who attempt to live a 'liturgical' life by attending church and receiving Divine Communion regularly. People who attend churches in Kraljevo are a demographically diverse network who move in and out of interaction at Liturgies and church events. They are not a homogenous 'community' isolated from the world. Some of my closest interlocutors had spouses or parents who showed no interest in churchgoing. What generally links believers is a shared concern about fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, and observing the four main fasts throughout the year. Often, people narrate their engagement with liturgical Orthodoxy in terms of when they 'started to fast'. For the people who cleave close to the fasting calendar there are real consequences in the kitchen; ingredients matter.

The first week of Great Lent is known as 'Clean Week', the first three days of which involve an especially strict fast. On the Tuesday of 'Clean Week' I was

invited by Marko for dinner at his small apartment.[3] Marko, a civil servant in his late twenties, made a point about us not being allowed to drink alcohol, jestingly taking a can of lager from the fridge and waving it. Since the fast was strictly 'on water' he prepared potatoes. He diced them evenly, placing them into a baking tray with various herbs and spices but without – he grumbled – any olive oil. When the potatoes came out of the oven 30 minutes later they were steaming, but stuck to the bottom of the tray and needed a considerable amount of scraping to get them off. I have observed situations where the less liturgically-committed have rolled their eyes at such attention to detail – what difference does a drop of olive oil make? But detail mattered for Marko. Cooking is not just the transformation of foodstuffs; it is simultaneously the generation of values (Sutton 2016, 358–361). On a different evening, whilst out with a group of Marko's friends, there was some discussion about whether we could end the night with a delicious *pljeskavica* from the grill on the street corner. Marko looked uneasy, and reminded us that it was Wednesday, a fasting day. We went home. For Marko, minced pork and olive oil are not incidental ingredients, but are 'subject to ethical evaluation' (Keane 2014b, S319), everyday material forms through which much wider claims about a good Orthodox life are made.

Churchgoers frequently discuss how to fast properly. As Keane notes in his discussion of how the laity relate to holy icons, people bring a variety of perspectives to bear on the object: 'What they have heard and learned enters into the mix but does not necessarily determine it' (Keane 2014b, S318). When it comes to fasting, churchgoers also draw on their various experiences in attempts to assess proper practice, but do not necessarily agree upon – or conclusively determine – what is right. A snapshot of a car journey illustrates this nicely. I was travelling back from a trip to a monastery near Kruševac with two women, both in their sixties. It was March, and the beginning of Great Lent was on the horizon. As we saw with Marko, the first days of Great Lent are an opportunity to practice rigorous discipline. Monastics generally abstain from all food for three days. My travelling companions were chatting about how they observed the beginning of 'Clean Week'. Zorica, sitting on the backseat, suggested that she ate nothing for two days. Ana, who was driving, noted that she could only manage 'one day' without eating anything, but not more. Monks, Ana suggested, were at a different spiritual level and had much greater capacity for fasting. Zorica then mentioned that after 6pm on those days she has 'a slice of bread and a cup of tea'. At this, Ana interrupted: 'Well that's not nothing then!' Zorica retorted that she had heard it was acceptable to have a cup of tea and a slice of bread in the evening. Ana stated adamantly that technically 'you're not eating nothing'. The issue

[3] All names are pseudonyms. Some small biographical details have been changed to further protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

remained unresolved, and the conversation moved on. On this car journey, the idea of a slice of bread and a cup of tea afforded brief ethical reflection on what counted as sincere fasting. Such everyday tussling about right practice patterns Orthodox liturgical life.

Another example comes from the monastery of Dečani in Kosovo. It was a feast day, and the monastery was host to numerous groups who had travelled from Serbia by coach especially for the Divine Liturgy. Shortly before the priest was to serve Divine Communion, a surge of people pushed towards the front of the church. A woman in her seventies wondered out loud whether she was able to receive Communion, seemingly seeking advice from those around her. She said that whilst she had not fasted, a monastery worker had told her that this did not matter. What was at stake was the Eucharistic Fast, the practice whereby a person abstains from eating, drinking, and sexual activity from the night before until the moment of Communion. The woman asked another woman standing next to her, who promptly responded with her own interrogation:

> -Do you fast Wednesdays and Fridays?
> *-No*
> -Oooojjjjjj! [exclamation of disdain]
> *-But I do fast for Christmas and Easter*
> -I'm sorry, but I wouldn't know what to say…

Eventually, the first woman received a blessing to commune from a priest who happened to be standing nearby. He asked her whether she 'prays to God'. After she had replied in the affirmative he gave his blessing, adding that – ideally – she should also fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Again, a banal example, but one which reveals everyday musings on what counts as proper practice. The 'monastery worker' evoked by the first woman purportedly thought that it was not obligatory to observe the Eucharistic fast. The questioner herself seemed genuinely unsure and was seeking confirmation. The fellow congregant, whilst not quite condemning the woman, made her disapproval clear. And the priest was willing – on that occasion at least – to rank prayerfulness over strict rule following. The priest's lenience is noteworthy and introduces another dimension to the discussion.

Fasting is not about food

The priest's blessing speaks to the Orthodox theological emphasis on 'spirit' over 'letter'. That is, an insistence on the spiritual growth generated by a rule, as opposed to blindly following the rule, per se (see also Lackenby 2021b). There is a theological argument which emphasizes that the Church should move away from asserting fasting as obligatory precisely to *deemphasize* food and retain Christianity as the most central value (Jović 2017). For the more theologically-

minded, the point is not just not eating something, but what that act of restraint produces in a person. The idea was put lucidly by Luka, a psychology student in his twenties. He said:

> When you fast you are better at praying, because you are not overwhelmed with food. It's a tool, a device for getting to those traits – that you can forgive, love people. It can help get you there. Like training. It's not the end, it's the means. The end is those values, those Christian values. And when you don't eat meat you're less aggressive. You don't fall so easily into rage. That's my experience when I fast. If you stop having sex during that period then you'll be able to use that energy for praying.

Luka attends to what fasting *facilitates*, the prayerfulness enabled by a degree of restraint. Abstaining from fatty food or sexual intercourse is not an end in itself. Other acquaintances have confided that, in their view, the point was not following a set of prescribed rules, but that they fasted 'in their own way', when it feels right.

Sometimes, people emphatically promote the idea that fasting is 'not about food'. A member of a church choir told a story about the late Atanasije Jevtić (1938–2021), the influential bishop and theologian who taught at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade. Before one of Atanasije's lectures, a student was eating a ham sandwich in the classroom. It happened to be during Great Lent. Upon seeing this scene, some of her fellow students – struck by an aspiring theologian breaking the fast – criticised her so much that she burst into tears. When Atanasije arrived and saw the scene he promptly took a large bite of the sandwich himself. It was, Atanasije declared, a far worse sin to criticize someone for not fasting than for not fasting oneself. I do not know the extent to which the story is apocryphal, but this is not important. The point is that my friend in the choir could use this story about food to make a bigger claim: 'God prefers penitents to righteous people'. The ham sandwich is ripe with ethical affordances. It can be construed as a violation of the fast, a flagrant breach of the rules. But it is also a way of suggesting that snacking on a ham sandwich was less grave than righteously upbraiding someone else. Fasting is endlessly generative for ethical life: it is centrally about food but, at the same time, is not about food at all.

Hypocritical haters

To this point, I have offered examples involving people who were reasonably involved in Orthodox life. But, being to do with food, fasting can implicate those who have little or nothing to do with the liturgical life of the church – indeed, perhaps especially – those who are very critical of it. Unlike aspects of Orthodoxy which require a degree of learning and deep involvement with the rhythms

of the Church – the words to hymns, or the structure of the Divine Liturgy, say – food is by its nature a substance which pervades public space. Bakeries mark fasting products with little stickers. In supermarkets, one encounters a whole range of foodstuffs labelled *posno!*, fasting. Magazines and newspapers publish simple fasting recipes. Small businesses have sprung up which offer to cater for 'fasting *slava*', to save the hosts the trouble. And just as foodstuffs appear on shelves and behind counters, people who 'fast' appear visibly in public space, at dinners, meetings, and at their jobs.

Elsewhere (Lackenby 2022, 406), I describe a woman called Milica who was taken aback by her friend's sudden insistence on fasting. Milica was amazed that her friend refused to have a cappuccino (because it contained milk) whilst she was 'fasting on water'. What is noteworthy is that this exchange in the coffee shop led Milica to elucidate *her own* understanding of fasting, expanding it beyond the realm of the alimentary. If one is fasting, she told me one should not drink, swear, watch films with sexual content, or think bad thoughts. It is *more* than avoiding milk. She gets annoyed by people whom she sees as performatively fasting, but who fail to meet this standard. Milica's view is not uncommon. Other acquaintances have laughed aloud at the appearance of products such as *'posni kačkavalj'* – fasting cheddar, made on a base of soy. Finding cunning workarounds, they say, is not the point of fasting.

In a 2019 online article for the news portal *Srbija Danas*, the journalist Maja Šolević addressed the tense question of fasting directly.[4] She drew attention to the way in which fasting has come to animate social media: 'While some happily announce that they are beginning a long period of purification, others claim that said purification is an empty promise.' In Šolević's ironic gloss, in present day Serbia the main question is not whether people fast or not, 'but whether fasting is perhaps the most unscrupulous pretence of an individual'. With this, she reproduces a trope commonly associated with fasting: that people who fast are in fact hypocrites, outwardly declaring their piety whilst simultaneously living morally reprehensible lives. As one of the social media posts she cites put it, pithily: "The fast is starting. We can hate without meat". Fasting, then, affords a set of reflections about hypocrisy and about the ways in which Christian practice has been misappropriated and misunderstood. In their own terms, the Twitter critics and people like Milica are leveraging what they see as a legitimate critique of their compatriots who, they feel, have missed the point of fasting. But, if we step back and think anthropologically, we might ask: how different is the Twitter critic to the woman in the monastery who was scornful of someone who did not fast on Wednesdays and Fridays?

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[4] See https://www.sd.rs/vesti/drustvo/post-ne-sluzi-da-se-gresi-okaju-jedu-bareni-krompir-mlate-zene-pa-trce-da-se-priceste-2019-11-27 [accessed 25 August 2024].

Common concerns?

The re-emergence of overt Serbian Orthodoxy in the 1990s and 2000s generated a wealth of scholarship which assessed how different people related to their professed faith. It became clear that – as in other countries where ethnic and confessional identities intertwine – whilst most Serbs identified nominally as 'Orthodox' only a minority engaged regularly with Orthodox liturgical practice. Social scientific work observed the differences in people's relationship to the Church, whether they were 'traditional believers' or people who were doctrinally engaged (Raković and Blagojević 2014; see also Simić 2005; Todorović 2008). The Church formulates its own typologies, drawing distinctions between committed and 'traditional believers' (see Krstić 2011). I have also been curious about the objective distinctions which can be tracked in people's relationship to Orthodoxy, as well as the internal distinctions that my interlocutors draw between different sorts of believers and their relationships to the Church.

But I wonder if another productive approach might be to ask – not what divides people – but what unites them. An ethnographic stance invites us to see the angry Twitter users and the performative fasters as all engaged in thinking about what fasting means and the right way to do it. The responses of people like Milica are not operating in a different realm to the women who had the conversation in the car about a slice of bread at the beginning of the fast. In fact, they have a lot in common: All parties take the 'invitations and provocations' (Keane 2014b, 317) offered by food and fasting and tangle with them, raising ethical questions.

In the above examples, all the people mentioned were similarly concerned with food. They all had opinions on what fasting *should be*. At root, I suspect, is a real concern with (and uncertainty about) what constitutes sincere, authentic Orthodox practice. As we saw with Šolević's article, discussions about fasting are riddled with accusations of being *'licemir'*, hypocritical. Food raises broader questions about how people perceive the interplay between external behaviour and internal conscience – issues which reach far beyond the confines of Orthodox liturgical life. How do people assess who – and who is not – a hypocritical person? What are the histories of this moral evaluation and why does it resonate so much with a spectrum of people in contemporary Serbia? What is more, a focus on the ethical affordances of food puts the Serbian materials in dialogue with the wider region.

You are what you don't eat

The ethnography of everyday religion in the former Yugoslavia has never really taken off in the way that it has in, say, formerly Soviet countries. And yet, the

religious, transcendent, and spiritual shape and animate social life across the region. In the previous section, I suggested that a focus on fasting allows us to understand a range of people in Serbia as equally engaged in a process of ethical reflection. This approach also has the potential to reach beyond Serbia, and offer a lens onto the 'former Yugoslav' space more widely. Catholic and Muslim communities throughout Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia, as well as those in Serbia, also engage in fasting practices. Placing the materials on Serbian Orthodox fasting in conversation with the ethnography of Islamic (for instance, Bringa 1995; Henig 2020; Trix 2019) and Catholic fasting (for instance, Barišić 2023) in the region is a potentially productive starting point – however provocative that may seem for some of our research participants and interlocutors.

Henig's (2020) pioneering work about everyday Islam in the Bosnian Highlands is particularly relevant. He observes that in the village where he did fieldwork the inhabitants made sense of the fasting month of Ramadan in different ways. Some of the villagers spoke about fasting in a 'highly reflexive and contemplative' way (*ibid*, 105), recognising Ramadan as a practice which generates a better understanding of 'what it means to be human before God' (*ibid*.). For other villagers, however, Ramadan was more of a 'customary tradition' – 'it is worthwhile to fast', they say, without elaborating on why this might be so. Especially interesting is Henig's observation that during Ramadan, the villagers assessed each others' piety, criticising people who were not fasting. A tension emerges between striving to be a good Muslim (which involves fasting and going to the mosque) and being a good neighbour (which involves visiting each other's homes, but is an act which is not appropriate during Ramadan). Despite the people I described above operating within a Christian cosmology, and Henig's interlocutors within an Islamic one, the parallels between the two contexts are noteworthy. In both cases, we see a widespread social practice involving food becoming the focus of ethical evaluation by a range of actors.

It is a truism that religion has the potential to be divisive. We see this in Serbia: regular churchgoers accuse their compatriots of not being 'real' Orthodox, secular critics lambast the reactionary nature of the Serbian Church and its worrying societal influence. More broadly, the collapse of Yugoslavia was one marked by religious discord, with religious institutions fanning the nationalist fervour (Perica 2002). Countering the trend of analysing religion in southeastern Europe exclusively in terms of the geographically centred nation-state, Henig has called for an attention to 'historically sustained transregional social forms' (Henig 2016, 909). Studying the ethical affordances of food offers an obvious way to start charting such 'transregional' forms across the former Yugoslav countries. What shared concerns might different religious groups have about hypocrisy, rules, and sincerity? Can the study of foodways help further illuminate how

former Yugoslavs subvert bounded, nationalist identities and point to their primary identity as *humans* (*ljudi*) (see Barišić 2023)? How do memories of shortages, war, and hunger intersect with contemporary concerns about spiritually motivated abstention from food? And how might the ethnography of religious foodways speak to other emergent concerns about food scarcity, environmental change, and even the increasing popularity of vegan diets? 'You are what you eat', goes the famous call to a healthy diet. The ethnography from the former Yugoslavia reminds us that – sometimes – you are what you do not.

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