CHAPTER THREE

LITURGY, LANGUAGE AND THE VERNACULARISATION OF ORTHODOXY

In the previous chapter, I outlined the key historical narratives and scholarly discourses in order to demonstrate the significance of the link between the macro-discourses on ethnic and national identity and questions of religious identity and religious practice. In this chapter, I focus on the relationship between religious practice and language, highlighting how Orthodoxy becomes the principle expression of ‘Gagauzness’ in the early decades of the twentieth century. This process is most evident with regard to the translation of canonical and liturgical texts into the Gagauz idiom by Mihail Çakir. This chapter, therefore, situates language in relation to ethnic and national identity, on the one hand, and official religious practice, on the other. Also, through an exploration of the liturgical and textual aspects of Orthodoxy, I present the context, in terms of texts, language and practice, against which non-official folk religious practices take shape. The dialogical relationship between the official and folk forms and the bipolar distinctions imposed by scholarly discourse will inform our understanding of the construction of the folk religious field of practice in the chapters that follow.

It will be argued here that the Gagauz language was a significant factor in determining the development of Gagauz religious life. Through the translation of scripture and liturgy into the local idiom ‘linguistic capital’ was generated for the Gagauz language. The agency of the Church, principally represented by the figure of Mihail Çakir, ensured that the Gagauz language played a significant role, not only in the future life of the Church, but also in the national awakening. Çakir’s primary motivation in his translation work was to enhance the connection with the divine. However, he was also acutely aware of the significance of the mother-tongue in the construction of a Gagauz national consciousness. The status and role of the Gagauz language, in both Church and wider society, has also been instrumental in shaping the relationship between what is commonly referred to as official and lay religious practice. The changing ways in which the Gagauz deploy
and perceive their language in relation to religion, nation and state, the result of macro political, eccleral and scholarly discourses discussed in this and the previous chapter, illustrate how elite discourses shape religious practice through language. That is to say, the language of religious practice reflects the categories and meanings of the discourses to which it is subject.

The Divine Liturgy with its scriptural base is at the very heart of Orthodoxy. The daily, weekly and calendrical cycle of worship and practice lends structure to the spiritual life of believers. The liturgy is said to operate by creating a bridge between heaven and earth and offers the faithful “perfection and self-fulfilment in worship.”¹ In this sense, for Orthodox believers, the geographical centre of their faith, the Church, through the liturgy, also creates a temporal nexus with the divine. In the context of the liturgy, the faithful hear the gospel, recite the prayers and sing the hymns that are endorsed by the Church and the clergy and which comprise the primary conduit for the message and teachings of Orthodox Christianity. Mihail Çakir’s translation of the Divine Liturgy into the Gagauz idiom is pivotal, therefore, as it instigated a new and more immediate mode of communication with the divine in Church life amongst the Gagauz.

This model of church, liturgy and people, is how the clergy, in Gagauziya as elsewhere, envisage the spiritual life of Russian Orthodoxy functioning under ‘normal’ circumstances. Yet there also exist alongside the established expression of Christian worship of the Church other practices whose locus is the home and the family. These practices, discussed at length in chapter four, also seek to create a link with the divine and often hope to channel celestial attention towards the more mundane terrestrial concerns that affect the lives of believers. Amongst the Gagauz, these practices draw on a collection of alternative texts from those of the liturgy; a varied array of apocryphal epistoloyas, literally meaning letters, that are rejected by the official church but utilised by the faithful in the village community and the home.

These two spheres of practice, each with its own set of established texts, seemingly exist in a state of tension, the first embedded in the hierarchy of the Church and its historical doctrine, the other located in the practical needs of the community and arising from the pragmatic ‘reasoning’ of individual believers. The Church does not accept these

¹ T. Ware, The Orthodox Church (London: Penguin, 1997), 266.