In this volume, twelve anthropologists specializing in the study of religion attack from a variety of angles the problematic set out by Jarrett Zigon in his introductory chapter – namely, how have Russians been reflectively and self-consciously reinterpreting morality and enlisting religion in the cause of refashioning themselves to meet the unanticipated and, indeed, staggering challenges of post-Soviet life? Although there is considerable heterodoxy among the concepts adopted to address this principal question, all accounts converge on one or both of the book’s emergent themes: the overriding importance of reticulated, personalized relations in structuring action in contemporary Russia; and the fuzziness of the symbolic order. These themes are brought to life in chapters focused on specific institutions and practices, such as teaching morality in school (Agata Ladykowska), institutional collaboration for charitable work (Melissa Caldwell; Detelina Tocheva) the use of historical figures – the Tsarist family, St. Xenia – as contemporary role models in self-fashioning (Kathy Rousselet; Jeanne Kormina and Sergey Shtyrkov) and moral discourses surrounding types of charitable practices (Tobias Köllner).

With respect to the first theme, the apparent ubiquity of strong network ties in suturing the social order, we learn how morality is embedded in an ethos of mutual aid within one or another social network (Caldwell) informally targeting the distribution of charitable contributions in the direction of kin and close acquaintances (Tocheva). Moreover, as Alexander Agadjanian shows, this same pattern of personal ties pops up in the area of moral and religious instruction as clutches of lay acolytes position themselves as “children” surrounding a “spiritual father.” Likewise, its recurring presence is visible in the content of such instruction, as believers are counseled to develop personalized relations with a patron saint who serves as a role model (Rousselet). The centrifugal pull of these personalized social relations seems to correlate with the second theme sounded in this book, the fuzziness of the symbolic order.

The second theme appears in multiple contexts with respect to the teachings and practices of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and those claiming one or another form of membership in it: for non-believers, a vicarious membership (Agadjanian) nominalized as the “Orthodox atheist” (Ladykowska); for believers, the incorporation of pagan and magical elements – although denounced by
the ROC – in their religious practices (Agadjanian; Kormina and Shtyrkov); for the ROC, the use of role models from the past, who had been openly and stridently anti-clerical, in order to enhance the attraction and buttress the authority of the ROC itself (Kormina and Shtyrkov). Alexander Panchenko reports on how movements to build Christianity today rely upon the same organizational structures and practices pioneered by the “builders of communism” in the past century, just as the template for new religious music has been provided by pseudo-folk songs produced for the Soviet state. In other words, masks masking masks, reminiscent of, say, American blacks performing in blackface during the era of minstrelsy.

Although the descriptions in this book are apt, intriguing and often arresting, some readers are likely to be disappointed by the relative absence of a critical moment in it. Here are two examples that might illustrate my complaint. First, although multiple and often conflicting forms of morality are discussed and analyzed in this volume, the positive association between the ROC and morality is never called into question. This approach, then, screens out the opposing contention – present in Russia today – that the ROC is a compromised if not corrupt organization whose practices cry out for moral censure. Such critics would, for instance, point to the fact that during the 1990s the ROC financed itself by selling tax-free alcohol and tobacco to a population whose male life expectancy was in decline by some ten years, due largely to the over-consumption of these two products. Second, during the Soviet epoch, social science had been effectively outlawed. As a result, the complex, industrial society that emerged during those seventy-odd years had nothing by way of a logical, empirically based corpus of knowledge and knowledge-producing techniques to examine and understand itself. Explanations for social phenomena were nonetheless produced, of course, but these tended to draw on the only robust conception available to social actors: morality. Whether in the form of regime pronouncements or chatter around the kitchen table, the story was quite the same – bad people (or countries) did bad things; good ones, good things. Unlike Western industrial states whose social science knowledge has seeped into the larger culture to produce a more enlightened public discourse on common problems, Soviet, and now post-Soviet, society has severely lacked that capacity. Instead, the category of morality has been over-tasked, resulting in accounts of the social world structured by framing the self as moral and the other as immoral. This pattern has represented a Bourdieuan misrecognition incorporated into the fundamental structure of collective cognition, insuring a surfeit of blame-laying and excuse-making along with a glaring deficit of comprehension and personal responsibility. It seems