

# Orthodox Christianity and Gender

The Orthodox Christian tradition has all too often been sidelined in conversations around contemporary religion. Despite being distinct from Protestantism and Catholicism in both theology and practice, it remains an underused setting for academic inquiry into current lived religious practice. This collection, therefore, seeks to redress this imbalance by investigating modern manifestations of Orthodox Christianity through an explicitly gender-sensitive gaze. By addressing attitudes to gender in this context, it fills major gaps in the literature on both religion and gender.

Starting with the traditional teachings and discourses around gender in the Orthodox Church, the book moves on to demonstrate the diversity of responses to those narratives that can be found among Orthodox populations in Europe and North America. Using case studies from several countries, with both large and small Orthodox populations, contributors use an interdisciplinary approach to address how gender and religion interact in contexts such as iconography, conversion, social activism, and ecumenical relations among others.

From Greece and Russia to Finland and the USA, this volume sheds new light on the myriad ways in which gender is manifested, performed, and engaged within contemporary Orthodoxy. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that employing the analytical lens of gender enables new insights into Orthodox Christianity as a lived tradition. It will, therefore, be of great interest to scholars of both Religious Studies and Gender Studies.

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*Edited by Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola*

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# Orthodox Christianity and Gender

Dynamics of Tradition, Culture and Lived Practice

Edited by  
Helena Kupari and  
Elina Vuola

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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
HELENA KUPARI AND ELINA VUOLA	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Negotiating tradition</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>2 Gender and Orthodox theology: vistas and vantage points</b>	<b>25</b>
BRIAN A. BUTCHER	
<b>3 Women in the church: conceptions of Orthodox theologians in early twentieth-century Russia</b>	<b>47</b>
NADEZHDA BELIAKOVA	
<b>4 Obedient artists and mediators: women icon painters in the Finnish Orthodox Church from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century</b>	<b>63</b>
KATARIINA HUSSO	
<b>5 What has not been assumed has not been redeemed: the forgotten Orthodox theological condonement of women's ordination in the 1996 Orthodox and Old Catholic consultation on gender and the apostolic ministry</b>	<b>80</b>
PETER-BEN SMIT	

**PART II**

**Lived Orthodoxy** 95

- 6 How to ask embarrassing questions about women's religion: menstruating Mother of God, ritual impurity, and fieldwork among Seto women in Estonia and Russia** 97

ANDREAS KALKUN

- 7 Enshrining gender: Orthodox women and material culture in the United States** 115

SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ

- 8 Tradition, gender, and empowerment: the Birth of Theotokos Society in Helsinki, Finland** 131

PEKKA METSO, NINA MASKULIN, AND TEUVO LAITILA

**PART III**

**Crises and gender** 147

- 9 Shaping public Orthodoxy: women's peace activism and the Orthodox Churches in the Ukrainian crisis** 149

HELEEN ZORGDRAGER

- 10 On saints, prophets, philanthropists, and anticlericals: Orthodoxy, gender, and the crisis in Greece** 171

ELENI SOTIRIOU

- 11 Russian Orthodox icons of Chernobyl as visual narratives about women at the center of nuclear disaster** 190

ELENA ROMASHKO

- Index* 211

# Figures

4.1	The artist Martha Neiglick-Platonoff conserving an old icon of the Mother of God in the 1950s	66
4.2	The language of ancient iconography was studied through art history. The artist Ina Colliander painting an icon of the Mother of God of Kazan in 1968	67
4.3	Marianna Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff painting an icon of Christ the Almighty at her home in 1968–1969. Following Ouspensky’s teaching, she mixed the colors in the palm of her hand	69
4.4	The art historian Aune Jääskinen and Hierodeacon Joonas in front of the icon “The Mother of God of Konevets.” The icon was covered by an enigmatic riza prior to the research that led to its restoration in the 1960s	70
11.1	The icon “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl” is carried through the demonstration Chernobyl Way in 2017	191
11.2	“The Madonna of Chernobyl” by Mikhail Savitsky	197





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x *Contributors*

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# 1 Introduction\*

*Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola*

The Orthodox Christian tradition appears to many people as patriarchal. These people include both sympathetic and critical outside observers as well as practicing Orthodox more or less content with and approving of this aspect of their religion. As with any religious tradition, this interpretation of Orthodoxy can be sustained by historical and theological arguments. At the same time, no religious tradition—Orthodoxy included—is merely and monolithically sexist. Not only are there changes over time, but also multiple views within each tradition. Historical and local circumstances affect how continuity and change are interpreted and what kinds of modifications can be made without departing too much from tradition.

For example, the Finnish Orthodox Church has recently given up the custom of bringing infant boys into the altar at 40 days of age as part of the service of churching. According to the earlier practice, baby boys were carried into the altar, whereas baby girls were brought only up to the Royal Doors leading to the altar. This practice signals the male infant's potential clerical vocation (see Butcher in this volume). In their ruling to change the custom, the Bishops' Council of the Finnish Orthodox Church argued that carrying the baby boy into the altar does not add anything theologically significant to the service (Suomen Ortodoksisen Arkkhiippakunnan Piiispainkokous 2002). Moreover, both priests and laypeople had considered the custom pastorally problematic. So, nowadays, not even boys are taken into the altar. According to the Metropolitan emeritus of Helsinki, Ambrosius (personal communication to Elina Vuola), this policy seems to be unique to the Finnish Church: while local practices may vary, no other Orthodox Church has effected changes to this ancient custom through an official decision.

The Finnish Orthodox Church can justifiably be considered an exceptional case among Orthodox Churches. It is simultaneously an autonomous national church and a small minority church embedded in a dominantly

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Lutheran society. The Orthodox people in Finland face different challenges than the faithful in the Orthodox heartlands of Eastern and South Eastern Europe or in the diaspora communities of Western Europe and North America. Nevertheless, developments within the Finnish Church reflect dynamism that is inherent in Orthodoxy more generally.

As two Finnish scholars (of Protestant background) who have studied Finnish Orthodox women (Kupari 2016; Vuola 2019), we are intrigued by the myriad ways in which gender is manifested, performed, and engaged within contemporary Orthodoxy. This book project has grown out of our realization that there is an acute need for comparative gender-sensitive investigations of Orthodox Christianity.

### **Why this book?**

Gender is a fundamental social categorization influencing all spheres of human life. Religion as a social phenomenon is expressed in relation to the gender constructions of any given society. On the one hand, gendered roles and norms produce gendered patterns of religious behavior and belief, and on the other, religious teachings and traditions are used to legitimize, and sometimes to undercut, established power relations between men and women.

Orthodox Christianity takes different forms in various social and cultural contexts. This book describes and analyzes lived expressions of and negotiations with the Orthodox tradition in several such contexts in Europe and the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It covers a wide array of gender-related phenomena and issues: theological, social, political, ethical, and practical. Our aim is to demonstrate both similarities across and differences between local manifestations of Orthodoxy, to capture crosscutting themes as well as individual cases.

The scholars contributing to this volume are based in several disciplines: theology, religious studies, history, art history, folklore studies, anthropology, and sociology. In their chapters, they apply methods and theories common to their respective disciplines. Many also take an interdisciplinary approach such as combining theological reflection with sociological analysis. They investigate a rich variety of primary sources, including theological writing, folklore, memoirs, letters, speeches, and social media content. Some chapters are based on interviews and participant observation. What unites them is that their analyses deploy an explicitly gender-sensitive gaze.

The Orthodox Christian tradition has been much less studied from the perspective of gender than other branches of Christianity—as well as many other religious traditions. This major lacuna in scholarship, especially in Anglophone research, is the result of several intertwining factors. First, the meagerness of gender-sensitive research on Orthodoxy reflects the “double blindness” that has, for a long time, hampered the full integration of questions related to gender and religion into research agendas. That is to say, whereas gender studies have suffered from a blindness to religion, religious

studies and theology have suffered from a blindness to gender. This situation is changing, but it is still far from standard that scholars of religion acknowledge the importance of gender in their work or that scholars of gender pay due attention to religion in theirs (Vuola 2016a).

Second, Orthodox Christianity as such is an understudied field in theology, religious studies, and the social sciences—beyond specifically Orthodox institutions. While the Iron Curtain was up, the scientific study of religion was severely restricted in the academic establishments of the Eastern Bloc, which set back research on this topic in many Orthodox-dominated countries (Bubík and Hoffman 2015). In Western Europe and North America, the bulk of scholarship—particularly empirical scholarship—on Christianity has always focused on the Western churches. This applies also to research that combines an interest in religion with gender-related concerns. Generally speaking, gender studies is established as a discipline in the universities of Western Europe and North America, regions where Orthodoxy does not constitute a particularly prominent research area.

Gender-sensitive research on Orthodox Christianity is relatively scarce, both in theological elaborations and empirically based studies. Compared to other branches of Christianity, very little feminist theology has been produced from within the Orthodox tradition. Some Orthodox women write explicitly from a female perspective, however, without necessarily calling their work feminist (see, e.g., Behr-Sigel 1991; Behr-Sigel and Ware 2000; Karras 2002, 2006).

The obvious need for further theological analysis notwithstanding, we maintain that at present it is principally through empirical—historical, sociological, and ethnographic—research that essential knowledge is gained about gender-related issues and women’s realities in Orthodoxy. In religious traditions such as Orthodox Christianity, in which women hold less formal power and right to interpretation than men, it is particularly important to understand how women produce and reproduce theological ideas as well as embody and challenge them in their lives. Furthermore, on account of the Orthodox rhetoric of unity and stability, it is also crucial to shed light on little-known policies and instances through which gender-related practices—such as churching in Finnish Orthodoxy—have been established, perpetuated, or transformed in different national churches and on the local level. Therefore, while this book includes theologically oriented chapters, its emphasis is on empirical research. Only through a variety of concrete case studies can this inner diversity of Orthodoxy be illuminated.

Gender is still very much an emerging field in Orthodox scholarship. The central objective of this book is to put together interesting examples of topical research scattered across disciplines to produce a partial overview of the state of the art. We believe that, taken together, the individual chapters make a fascinating and unique whole and testify to the relevance of gender-sensitive scholarship on Orthodoxy. Our hope is that the book will pave the way for more focused discussions in the future.

## Unity and diversity in Orthodox Christianity

Orthodox Christendom consists of a communion of independent churches. The case studies presented in this volume all discuss the Chalcedonian or Eastern Orthodox Churches that include the four ancient patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) as well as a number of churches that trace their origins to the Byzantine Empire and its missionary activities. Altogether, the family of Chalcedonian Churches presently includes around 15 fully independent or autocephalous churches as well as a few autonomous churches all linked to a certain autocephalous church. By far the largest in terms of membership is the Russian Orthodox Church. The status of some local churches remains contested; in this respect, disputes have most recently flared up in Ukraine (see Zоргdrager in this volume).

There are no jurisdictional structures binding the autocephalous local churches together. Each church has its own hierarchy and administration, yet shares in the understanding of the fundamental unity of all the individual churches as the Orthodox Church (Grdzeliidze 2011). Simultaneously, the practices and policies of each church are firmly embedded in a specific social and cultural context and reflect a specific historical trajectory. To conceptualize the dynamic between the universal claims and local manifestations of Orthodoxy, Sonja Luehrmann (2018, 12–13) has recently suggested that Orthodox Christianity can be approached as a “discursive tradition,” similarly to how Talal Asad (2009) has conceived of Islam.

Orthodoxy, like Islam but unlike Catholicism, lacks a central interpretative authority. The Orthodox Church emphasizes fidelity to apostolic tradition as realized, first and foremost, in the Scriptures, canons (consisting, most importantly, of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils), writings of the Church Fathers, and in the liturgical life of the church. However, no single person or office has the final say on how these various sources should be related to each other and applied in a specific situation. This, states Luehrmann (2018, 15–16) leaves “room for choice, enabled, but also constrained, by the fiction of the overall spiritual unity of the church.” In a similar vein, Maria Hämmerli and Jean-François Meyer (2014, 22) conclude that in the Orthodox Church, innovation involves the creative interpretation of tradition, while adaptations and reforms are “justified in the name of deepening the meaning of tradition and not as departing from the past” (see also Butcher in this volume).

These interpretations can also be used to make sense of how gender is negotiated in Orthodox Christianity. The process is characterized by a dynamic tension between the appeal to immutable teachings and authoritative representations and the commitment to “allow for a ‘normal’ functioning” (Hämmerli and Meyer 2014, 21), in particular historical moments, local realities, and personal circumstances. This dynamic tension ensures that, for both institutions and individuals, discerning and living true to the essence of gender as understood in Orthodox anthropology consists of more

than rote reiteration of old forms. Depending on contextual factors, projects engaging with gender in the spirit of tradition can result in either increased flexibility or rigidity of gendered roles, norms, and representations (see Beliakova, Smit, and Sotiriou in this volume).

### **Gender in Orthodox Christianity: preliminary remarks**

Gender has been embedded in Christian theology since its inception. Women and feminine symbolism have always featured in Christian theology, which was formulated and canonized by men from the earliest centuries, as evidenced in the authorship of the New Testament texts and patristic theology. All Christian churches have a complex history of excluding and nurturing negative interpretations of women and, relatedly, of the body and sexuality.

Theological anthropology—the theologically based image of the human being in relation to God, creation, and other people—is central to all critical assessments of Christian views of gender, bodiliness, sexuality, and especially women. Orthodox and Catholic understandings of gender are based on the idea of God-given complementarity between women and men. In Orthodox theology, the God-given roles, qualities, and functions of human beings tend to be interpreted as immutable and essentialist. In reality, conceptions of complementarity are not disjointed from the surrounding culture and society or from historical changes.

The theological basis of gender has direct relevance to how Orthodox Churches discuss—or are silent about—women’s participation in church life, the relationship between men and women, and sexual ethics (see Butcher, Metso et al., and Smit in this volume). An important way in which complementarity is applied in practice is priesthood. The prohibition of women’s ordination is based on an understanding of the priest as an image of Christ. The priest stands in the place of Christ who was male (Demacopoulos 2011, 456). This view, shared by the entire Orthodox world, comes close to the Catholic understanding of priesthood where Christ’s maleness is considered so essential that it overrules any other human qualities. In Protestant Churches, the understandings of priesthood do not hinge on a complementary and essentialist notion of gender difference, often allowing for a more flexible stand on women’s ordination. Ordination is not a sacrament and pastors are not considered to represent Christ.

Complementarity also bears upon the practices and policies of Orthodox Churches in the delineation of social and sexual ethics. Unlike priesthood, this has direct relevance to the lives of millions of people. For instance, referring to the 2005 document “The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” produced by the Moscow Patriarchate, Elena Chernyak (2016) notes that while the equality of men and women before God is affirmed by the church, this equality does not eliminate their “natural” differences or translate into gender equality in families and society. According to the church, women have a God-given destiny in

marriage and motherhood and their role in the family is subordinate to the husband as the head of the household (Chernyak 2016, 303–305).

Orthodox anthropology conceives of the human being as *imago dei*, capable of deification (*theosis*). This image is, in certain aspects, more positive than the Protestant view, which tends to emphasize the fallenness and sinfulness of humanity. More broadly speaking, Orthodox theology emphasizes the sacramentality or sacredness of all reality, including the natural and material world, as the primary sign of God’s mercy and love (McGuckin 2008, 475). Both notions have implications for the understanding of bodiliness and sexuality, and could potentially underpin a new theology of gender. In practice, however, women’s “negative” characteristics are often presented as obstacles to their greater participation in church life.

At the same time, the prominent status accorded to female saints and, above all, to the Mother of God gives the Orthodox Church a “feminine” character—especially when compared to Protestant Churches, many of which ordain women but pay considerably less attention to the Virgin Mary in their theology, liturgy, and spirituality. The Mother of God is an ideal for both Orthodox women and men to follow. Furthermore, she is the All Holy (*Panagia*), higher than the angels, the most powerful intercessor and symbol of protection (McGuckin 2008, 501–509).

Over the course of the past 60 years, debates concerning gender and sexuality have taken center stage in Protestant and Catholic ecclesiastical policy and academic theology. Although these issues have been discussed far less in the Orthodox tradition, this does not mean that there is no recognition of their relevance. Niki J. Tsironis (2011), for example, argues that the Orthodox Church needs to reconsider the place of women in ecclesial structures and offices, because in today’s world it is impossible to discuss “women” without taking into account the vast social changes in their role. In her view, while some initiatives aiming at such reconsideration have already been launched, a long road still lies ahead (Tsironis 2011, 641).

### **Orthodoxy and gender in modern times**

The contributions to this volume are all set within the broad context of modernity. The oldest materials discussed in the book (excluding theological writings) date from the turn of the twentieth century, while approximately half of the case studies concern the present day. Modern structures of governance, technologies, and imaginaries do not produce identical results everywhere. Rather, processes of modernization play out differently in different societies. Nevertheless, dictating the defining attributes of modernity has historically been a Western European prerogative. The “Western” narrative of modernity has conceived of modernization as a process spreading from Western Europe and promoting values and policies prevalent in this part of the world. The hegemonic status of this narrative has only recently been seriously challenged, for example, through advances made in postcolonial and postmodern theory (Makrides 2012, 249–251).



Processes of modernization have multifarious influences on differently positioned people such as men and women. The gendered effects of modernization include the so-called feminization of religion or the greater religious involvement of women than men in present-day European and North American societies (Keinänen 2016). Scholars have suggested that, in these societies, modernization had more of a secularizing influence on men than on women. In fact, as laymen disaffiliated from churches, laywomen often took on additional religious responsibilities (Woodhead 2007; Aune, Sharma, and Vincett 2008). While discussions concerning the feminization of religion mostly concern countries where the Western churches dominate, parallel gender disparities in religious activity have also been documented in Orthodox-dominated societies (e.g., Dubisch 1995; see also Beliakova, Kalkun, and Sotiriou in this volume).

The relationship between Orthodox Christianity and modernity is strained (e.g., Roudometof, Agadjanian, and Pankhurst 2005; Willert and Molotokos-Liederman 2012). In his insightful analysis of this relationship, Vasilios Makrides (2012, 257–261) notes that arguments for the incompatibility of Orthodox Christianity with modernity have been posed by both Western Christian and Communist critics—as well as by advocates of Orthodoxy. Due to a number of historical factors, Orthodox Churches tend to distrust or downright reject various advances connected with the Western narrative of modernity. These include religious pluralism, cultural liberalism, individualism, and a secular or religiously neutral state. Orthodox Churches severely criticize:

the modern western system of values and alternative lifestyles and their repercussions in many domains, because they are considered as leading to the demise of traditional values and institutions with Christian underpinnings. The defence of “traditional values” (...) includes, among other things, a critique of individual human rights and the proclaimed autonomy of the individual which are thought to jeopardise patriarchal values, Christian morals and the nucleus of the traditional family.

(Makrides 2012, 260)

The “traditional family” here refers to a nuclear family with a mother and a father, while an important constituent of “traditional values” are those related to gender roles and behavior. Feminism, obviously, is considered as yet another modern phenomenon alien to the Orthodox world.

Nevertheless, present-day public discourse on the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernity is often fraught with ideological undertones and simplifications serving political agendas. The dichotomy between the Orthodox or “Eastern” respect for the traditional family and the “Western” disintegration of family values is one such simplification. In fact, a similar concern for the traditional family is shared by many factions in Western Europe and North America, including in the Catholic Church and various conservative Protestant denominations.

Overall, when discussing gender discourses and representations within contemporary Orthodoxy, one needs to consider the vastly varied conditions under which Orthodox communities operate in majority and minority contexts. In the traditional Orthodox heartlands of Eastern and South Eastern Europe, bonds of affinity and alignment exist between national churches and political institutions. Orthodoxy also plays an important role in the construction of national narratives and constitutes an ethnic identity marker even for many religiously passive people (Merdjanova 2002; Makrides and Roudometof 2010; Leustean 2014). In these societies, religious, political, and civil society actors are often allied in their defensive attitude toward “foreign” influences.

Furthermore, for much of the twentieth century, most of these countries were ruled by Communist regimes, which repressed religious practice and expression and exerted tight control on churches. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, they have experienced a radical resurgence in the visibility of religion, with Orthodox Churches in the forefront (Borowik 2007). The increased weight of religious and nationalist rhetoric in public life and political decision-making has contributed to the rise of neo-traditional gender ideologies, which promote “re-feminization” and “re-masculinization” and distinct roles for women and men (Johnson and Robinson 2007, 5). It is important to recognize that in post-Communist societies, religious interpretations of gender do not only oppose notions deemed to be of Western origin, they are also pitted against Communist gender constructions, which emphasized women’s participation in the labor force, albeit also glorifying their “natural” vocation as nurturers and caretakers (Johnson and Robinson 2007, 7; see also Romashko in this volume).

The Orthodox minorities in contemporary Western Europe and North America, for their part, are immersed in societies where religious pluralism, individualism, and cultural liberalism are prominent. These minorities originate in small indigenous Orthodox populations or have emerged as a result of migration over the course of the past century. Exposure to multiculturalism, religious diversity, and secular influences can produce differing reactions. Initially, note Maria Hämmerli and Jean-François Meyer (2014), transition from a social and cultural context in which Orthodoxy holds an unquestioned position is often challenging. Individuals and churches both adjust to their newfound minority status through a tight coupling of religious with ethnic identity and a recourse to ancestral customs and practices. Sustained interaction with a pluralistic host society, however, can result in the adoption of different strategies—as well as in increased tolerance of, openness toward, and engagement with various modern notions and practices. Longstanding and well-established minority communities do not commonly advocate a total rejection of the surrounding culture, but creatively straddle both worlds (see, e.g., Slagle, 2011, on churches’ adaptation to the spiritual market of the United States).

In the contemporary global world, Orthodox believers draw on a variety of repertoires to perform and negotiate gender. Moreover, even if their identity is in close concordance with Orthodox conceptions of gender, they need to come to grips with the presence of contesting imaginaries. This holds true for people in the Orthodox heartlands as well as elsewhere. On the one hand, even the predominantly Orthodox countries of Europe are more and more religiously and culturally heterogeneous. In addition, interpretations of the relationship between religion, gender, and modernity in global media and politics commonly reflect Western European and North American sensibilities. In minority contexts, on the other hand, commitment to Orthodox gender roles constitutes a more or less conscious decision (see Riccardi-Swartz in this volume). It can also be seen as a means to escape from or to take a critical stand against hegemonic understandings of gender and modernity.

### **Empirical approaches to religion and gender**

Scholars of religion and gender have long recognized that the theories and methods they employ can either hamper or facilitate the production of nuanced and accurate interpretations. Integrating a gender-sensitive perspective in the study of religion has enabled theoretical and methodological innovation, as new concepts and approaches have been required to push past the male bias of predominant scientific paradigms, to tackle the representations of gender in religious thought and imagery and to capture the many ways in which lay practitioners perform religion and gender (Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016). Methodological discussions concerning empirical research on religion and gender, while emphasizing the need for multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary dialog, often privilege ethnographically oriented approaches (e.g., Gross 2002; Neitz 2004; Fedele and Knibbe 2013). These approaches, it is argued, can produce knowledge uniquely sensitive to the material, social, and cultural realities within which particular people encounter religion.

This volume prioritizes empirical case studies. At the same time, we emphasize the need to enrich and complement such studies with theological considerations. A strict division between “empirical” and “theological” approaches, we maintain, does not help scholars to decipher lived expressions of faith traditions such as Orthodox Christianity, where ordinary believers incorporate theological notions in their interpretations and self-understandings (Vuola 2016b, 2019).

The authors of the chapters in this book touch upon several topical themes and engage with several influential discussions that cut across disciplinary boundaries in the study of religion and gender. Here, we provide a brief outline of some theoretical currents that recur throughout the volume.

*Religion-as-lived*

Over the past few decades, scholars of religion have become increasingly aware of the profound influence of the intellectual heritage of the Reformations, colonialism, and Enlightenment on conventional academic theorizations of religion (e.g., Asad 1993; McCutcheon 2003; Stringer 2008). Research, they have come to realize, has relied on concepts perpetuating a narrow and biased understanding of religion. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (2010) have argued that much social scientific theorizing concerning Christianity continues to operate with a simplistic juxtaposition of Protestantism and Catholicism. Often, it recognizes the existence of a third branch of Christianity only in passing, rarely, if ever, engaging with historical or contemporary manifestations of Orthodox Christianity in a substantial manner.

Efforts to deconstruct and circumvent this historical baggage have opened up new avenues of research in several disciplines. One often suggested solution has been to replace normative a priori definitions of religion with an inductive approach that prioritizes research subjects' own interpretations of their practices, beliefs, and experiences. A focus on religion, as embedded in the lives of concrete people, underpins discussions of both lived religion (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2010; Ammerman 2016) and vernacular religion (Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012).

While closely related, lived religion and vernacular religion are not identical concepts, as they originate in different disciplines. The study of lived religion draws mainly from sociology and history of religion. It emphasizes the dynamic and ambivalent nature of religion as rooted in the material and social realities within which individuals live their lives. Moreover, it is attuned to the complex relations between lived religious expression and institutional religious traditions, acknowledging that individual religiosity can develop in close contact with or relatively independently from and assume a conciliatory or critical stance toward the teachings and policies of institutions (cf. Ammerman 2016). The study of vernacular religion has developed elsewhere, in folklore studies. Besides paying close attention to the individual-institutional divide, it is thus geared toward discerning local, communal, and contextual manifestations of religion, especially those that develop far from the centers of ecclesiastical authority. This slight difference in focus is evident in how the concepts of lived religion and vernacular religion are used in this volume.

A central characteristic of the study of religion-as-lived is a keen awareness of the substantial divergence between the religious needs and interests of various groups. This divergence is often connected to power and to nonreligious concerns and motivations guiding people's actions. Differently positioned individuals have differing access to religious and secular power, to material and symbolic resources. They face different challenges and employ religion differently: using diverse tactics and strategies for divergent

ends (see Woodhead 2013). The contributions to this volume argue that gender is an important factor in how people encounter and experience religion. Nevertheless, the authors demonstrate that gender does not influence religious belief and action in a straightforward way. In combination with other factors like age, social class, and ethnicity, the impact of gender on religion-as-lived is revealed to be rather complex (see Husso, Kalkun, Metso et al., and Sotiriou in this volume).

### *Material and embodied piety*

Humans are corporeal beings who interact with each other and the world through the medium of their bodies. Scholars are increasingly recognizing religion-as-lived as thoroughly embodied, sensory, and material—and matter as undervalued and misrepresented in much of the previous theorizing on religion (e.g., Houtman and Meyer 2012; Opas and Haapalainen 2017). As Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012, 1) note, the study of religion has been informed by an antagonistic understanding of the relationship between spirituality and materiality. As a result, beliefs and “questions of meaning” have been privileged, while material and corporeal expressions of religion have been branded as inferior to intellectual ones.

Orthodox Christianity boasts an intricate understanding of the role of the body and the senses in humanity’s strive to approach the transcendent (Ware 1997). Corporeal aspects of Orthodox practice include embodied rituals and gestures, customs related to food and fasting, and gendered behavioral norms and clothing practices (e.g., Kivelson 2006; Tiaynen-Qadir 2017). Objects and matter feature prominently in Orthodox worship, mysteries (or sacraments), and devotions. In several contributions to this volume, inquiry into gendered religion involves considering the embodied and material aspects of Orthodox piety. Two such aspects that recur throughout the book are icons and saints.

The veneration of icons is so central to everyday Orthodox practice that, for many, icons constitute the exemplary material manifestation of Orthodox Christianity. According to Orthodox teaching, icons are portals between the mundane and the divine realm. They are expressions of divine presence in the material world, but not objects of worship as such—that is to say, in their material form (Ouspensky and Lossky 1999). Nevertheless, in religion-as-lived, it is common to consider specific material icons as agents in their own right, to which testify the myriad miraculous icons throughout the Orthodox world.

Gender often matters in the veneration of saints and icons (e.g., Dubisch 1995; Kalkun and Vuola 2017; Rey 2012; Shevzov 2012). The authors show how domestic icon corners or home altars provide women with a sacred space to act out gendered performances of piety that depart from the expected code of conduct in more public settings (see Riccardi-Swartz in this volume). During the past century, more and more women have painted icons as a means of expressing their religious devotion and creativity (see Husso in this volume).

Materiality also plays a conspicuous role in beliefs and practices related to saints. Orthodox holy men and women lived on earth as ordinary people, sharing in the physical and mental limitations of all humanity. However, through their virtuous behavior in life and (especially in the case of martyrs) death they have come to embody the image and likeness of God in a unique manner (McDowell 2011). In the form of relics, even the physical bodies of saints are seen to partake in the holiness of God.

As to the relationship between Orthodox faithful and holy persons, the contributors illustrate how, on the one hand, people often seek the assistance of a certain saint because, by virtue of some aspect of his or her biography, he or she is considered particularly close to the individual or community in question (see Metso et al. and Sotiriou in this volume). On the other hand, communities are also prone to “indigenizing” (Roudometof 2014) important Orthodox saints, attributing familiar qualities and features to them (see Kalkun and Romashko in this volume). The Mother of God, in particular, has countless local representations all around the world. Due to her embodied and even visceral experiences as a mother, many Orthodox women form a particularly intimate bond with her. They both identify with the Mother of God as another woman and resort to her as a powerful female who has the capacity to intervene and protect (Vuola 2016b, 2019, 107–140).

### *Religion and agency*

At present, agency constitutes a lens through which scholars examine gender and religion, particularly women’s religion. Following Laura Ahearn (2001, 112), agency can be understood as the “socioculturally mediated capacity” for action. Discussions surrounding women’s religious agency have gradually shifted from focusing on acts of defiance and liberation toward the manifold ways in which internalized religious norms are being virtuously observed, pragmatically negotiated, and creatively applied (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Bucar 2010; see also Honkasalo 2015; Kupari 2016). In the process, scholars’ have come to critically engage with the secular feminist question of why women would willingly support religious ideologies that “oppress” them.

The framework of agency is applied by several authors of this volume (see Metso et al., Riccardi-Swartz, and Sotiriou in this volume). Their chapters demonstrate that agentic action is enabled through the everyday cultivation of piety, in both domestic and parish settings. Here, the Orthodox tradition functions as a constraining and enabling structure, which individuals artfully employ to navigate their lives and realize their religious aspirations. In the process, they can confirm, reinterpret, or subtly challenge dominant gender norms (see also Sotiriou 2004; Weaver 2011; Kizenko 2013; Roussou 2013). Moreover, the chapters exemplify the collective undertone inherent in Orthodox conceptualizations of agency. Orthodox Christian belief and practice are essentially about participation in a community of faithful

spanning from the past to the present and the future. This participation receives its fullest manifestation in the Divine Liturgy and the sacramental life of the church. However, even private devotions generate capacities for action that are fundamentally collective in nature, as they rely on submission to God and collaboration with saints, whose agency exceeds that of any living Orthodox person.

In addition, many of the chapters also describe the agency of expert women such as nuns, icon painters, education and social work professionals, scientists, and civic activists (see Beliakova, Husso, Romashko, and Zorgdrager in this volume). Some of these women are inspired by their personal religious convictions to effect a change in the prevailing gender order of the community. Others consciously make use of religious representations to expand the rights of women or to further the goals of peace, justice, and welfare (see also Korte, Tolstaya, and Zorgdrager 2014).

In Orthodox Christianity, women can perform only a limited number of institutional roles and are excluded altogether from ecclesiastical hierarchy. With the notable exception of convents, space for experimenting with alternative gender roles is most likely to open up on the margins of institutional religious life, where the contours of proper conduct are less comprehensively codified and strictly enforced. Vague or conflicting rules and lack of regulation encourage the idiosyncratic interpretation and flexible adaptation of norms. Based on the contributions to this volume, such spaces can include domestic icon corners, lay communities, the practice of icon painting, and social outreach programs. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the reconfiguration of conventional gender roles is not based on secular argumentation in any of the case studies presented here, although some draw on other, for instance nationalistic, discourses. Rather, this reconfiguration makes use of notions and practices intrinsic to the Orthodox tradition.

## **Scope of the book**

This book is not an overarching presentation of Orthodox Christianity, either institutionally, geographically, theologically, or even from a gender perspective. Rather, it provides examples of gendered manifestations of Orthodoxy in a variety of settings approached from a variety of disciplines. The book is divided into three sections, which are presented below. First, however, we briefly address two limitations in its scope.

Attaining full geographical coverage of the Orthodox world is not our central concern. Within the confines of a single volume, this would always be an impossible task. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the book leaves out many important contexts. More information is acutely needed, especially on contemporary Russia as the most populous Orthodox-dominated country in the world. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the public role of the Russian Orthodox Church has transformed, and drastic social



changes have affected both gendered religious expression and the representation of gender and religion in Russian politics and culture. Several other predominantly Orthodox countries such as Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia are not covered in the book; nor does the volume contain inquiries into the non-Chalcedonian Churches of Africa or Asia or diaspora churches elsewhere. Yet, we believe that the case studies included here show that Orthodoxy is far from monolithic. Instead, there is a variety of contextual interpretations of a religious tradition, which reflect continuity as well as change, unity as well as diversity.

Throughout this introduction, we have been describing how Orthodox Christianity and gender intertwine. The case studies in this book focus on women, as has tended to be the case with research to date. Given the overall scarcity of gender-sensitive studies on Orthodox Christianity, this is understandable. However, the result is the current lack of theoretical and empirical analyses of men and masculinities in Orthodoxy. While the same lack is felt in this book (apart from the chapter by Sotiriou), we maintain that the category of gender is still appropriate for the title. After all, even studies of women are never solely about women, for women's designated social roles and feminine cultural traits are always constructed in relation to the overall gender order of the society.

### *Negotiating tradition*

Societal changes in views on women and sexuality impact on Orthodox Churches. These changes can be engendered by internal as well as external factors. That is to say, they do not merely reflect secular or "Western" pressure or influences, but also dynamics inherent in the Orthodox tradition. The chapters of the first section shed light on the question of continuity and change in Orthodoxy. They present historical examples of negotiations concerning women's participation, which are not necessarily well known, but which challenge the normative view of Orthodox theology and tradition as unchanging and homogenous in its understanding of gender.

The social evolution of women's roles, their relationship to men, and the understanding of gender difference has opened up new spaces to discuss theological anthropology. Nadezhda Beliakova's chapter offers one historical example. She analyses texts written by Orthodox authors in early twentieth-century Russia, pertaining to women and their role in the church. A central question in her material concerns the concept of deaconess and how it could be employed to recognize and channel growing female activity in the church. Beliakova's study shows how the office of deaconess was a contentious issue in late imperial Russia. Moreover, her investigation demonstrates how various female communities, and especially their leaders, played a prominent role in Russian religious life of the time, although they remained somewhat isolated from most male clerics.



Katariina Husso also takes historical perspective on gender-related changes in an important realm of Orthodox piety and church life: icon painting. Her case study is Finland, where debates surrounding the gender of icon painters intertwined with the reconstruction of Finnish Orthodox Church identity as a national minority after the Second World War. The 1960s witnessed not just the appearance of revivalist icon art in Finland, but also the entry of women professionals into the fields of icon production and related research. The new role of women as iconographers and icon scholars highlighted the unchallenged division between official and unofficial Orthodoxy, as previous public representatives and spokespersons of Orthodoxy had always been clerics. According to Husso, this caused controversy among the Orthodox (male) authorities. Nevertheless, toward the end of the century, icon painting became a popular hobby among Finnish women, dramatically changing the gender profile of icon painters.

In his chapter, Peter-Ben Smit examines the little-known Orthodox theological condonement of the ordination of women in the 1996 consultation between Orthodox and Old Catholic theologians on gender and the apostolic ministry. This formal consultation came to the conclusion that there are no theological objections to women's ordination. Smit sees the issue of the ordination of women as touching on a fundamental theological question—how is tradition, including Scripture, to be received? The consultation approached this question through a careful articulation of the relationship between theology, history, and the social sciences. Smit's contribution sheds light on a highly interesting yet relatively obscure episode in Orthodox ecumenical relations. The chapter shows that negotiations with tradition have happened recently, even in cases considered “closed” such as women's ordination.

In order to approach developments in theological thought and social practice, it is crucial to be informed about how gender issues have conventionally been interpreted in Orthodoxy. In his theologically inclined overview of the Orthodox understanding of gender, Brian Butcher takes up this challenge. Butcher covers notions and practices concerning priesthood, women's purity, and marriage and monasticism as the two blessable states. He clarifies problematics related to change in Orthodox theology and practice, drawing attention to some new avenues in discussions regarding homosexuality.

### *Lived Orthodoxy*

The three chapters of this section investigate the religious practices, beliefs, and experiences of lay Orthodox Christians. They focus on how Orthodox women, in and through their everyday religious expression, creatively apply and interpret the gendered norms and expectations of their religious community. Moreover, all three contributions describe contexts in which Orthodox Christianity is a minority religion. In these chapters, gender is

therefore negotiated both in relation to Orthodoxy and the structures and discourses of the surrounding non-Orthodox society.

In the study of religion-as-lived, methodological and ethical issues are often prominent. In his chapter on the interpretations of Orthodox purity regulations among Seto women, Andreas Kalkun addresses some of the challenges of conducting field research on delicate topics such as the intersection of religion, gender, embodiment, and sexuality. In addition to fieldwork among contemporary Setos, a small minority people living in the borderland of Estonia and Russia, Kalkun draws on folklore material gathered during the early twentieth century. He reflects on the evolution of Seto religious practices and perceptions, and demonstrates how Seto women have actively interpreted the restrictions imposed by the church on their religious participation through their ethnic oral tradition related, for instance, to the Mother of God.

While the study of religion-as-lived often emphasizes practice or what people do, it is equally important to inquire into how they interpret their beliefs, practices, and experiences. The intricate dynamics between “doing” and “speaking about” religion and gender are illustrated in Sarah Riccardi-Swartz’s chapter on the domestic religious devotions of Orthodox Christian women living in Missouri, the United States. In her ethnographic study, Riccardi-Swartz noted the discrepancy between her interlocutors’ verbal affirmations of Orthodox theological precepts concerning gender and their embodied and material piety, particularly as related to domestic icon corners. She argues that home altars are agentive spaces that allow for more flexibility in the performance of gender than public religious functions, including the renegotiation and subtle transformation of church-sanctioned gender roles and norms.

The investigations in this section cover both cradle Orthodox believers and converts to Orthodoxy. Pekka Metso, Nina Maskulin, and Teuvo Laitila’s chapter on a Finnish lay monastic community is concerned with conversion and learning a new religious tradition. Based on material gathered through interviews and participant observation, the research team shows that the community’s activities are geared to support and facilitate the gradual mastering of an Orthodox lifestyle. The community is led by a charismatic nun and frequented mostly by women. According to the authors, the marginal position of the community in relation to the parish and other church institutions helps to constitute it as an egalitarian and “safe” space where conventional gender roles can be broadened and reinterpreted.

### *Crises and gender*

In the third section, the chapter authors investigate the influence of social upheavals and disasters on the intertwinement of religion and gender. Crises often have both gendered and gendering reverberations. The concrete effects they produce in the lives of men and women are different; furthermore, they change how gender roles and norms are conceived of in

the society. The contributions to this section focus on three recent crises in Orthodox-dominated countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Religion and gender, the chapters demonstrate, can be mobilized in multifarious ways to manage, cope with, and take advantage of social cataclysms and their aftermath.

In the first chapter of the section, Heleen Zorgdrager discusses women's peace activism in contemporary Ukraine following the Maidan protests, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the war in the Eastern regions of the country. Taking up four different examples of such activism, Zorgdrager shows how many new forms of women's sociopolitical engagement are informed or inspired by religious values, notions, and representations. While all four initiatives have different understandings of the roots and resolutions of the conflict, they are all attentive to the gendered aspects of war. Moreover, they all draw from the Orthodox tradition as a spiritual and cultural resource for the advancement of social cohesion, solidarity, empathy, and the common good.

The context of Eleni Sotiriou's chapter is the recent economic crisis in Greece. Based on ethnographic material gathered in the town of Larissa, she discusses the complex and still-emerging effects of the crisis on gender relations within the religious sphere as well as on the religious beliefs, practices, and experiences of women and men. She argues that the crisis has forced both men and women to reconfigure their relationship with religion and—especially as regards men and women under 40 years of age—that the positions they have adopted vis-à-vis the Orthodox Church differ markedly. While younger men have increasingly turned to the church for spiritual, social, and economic support, younger women have become more disillusioned with the message promoted and remedies provided by the church.

In the final chapter, Elena Romashko analyses the religious commemorative culture that has sprung up in Belarus in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. More specifically, she considers how commemorative icons and religious artwork are used in coming to grips with the effects of radiation contamination. One central such consequence is that people in the contamination zone have to live with the threat of infertility or congenital disease in their offspring. Romashko sheds light on the conflicting interpretations of the disaster and its proper commemoration by different individuals, interest groups, and religious institutions. She proposes that the struggles between various parties over legitimate representation pertain to how gender comes to play in the imagery of Chernobyl icons and religious art.

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Part I

# Negotiating tradition



## 2 Gender and Orthodox theology

### Vistas and vantage points

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A provocative recent issue of the journal *The Wheel: A Journal of Orthodox Christian Thought* assembled a spectrum of Orthodox thinkers to reflect on the theme of “being human,” including such subthemes as “embodiment and anthropology” and “sex, marriage and theosis.” The publication aimed to draw attention to how Orthodoxy is or should be engaging with the controversies of our day regarding gender—a term often serving metonymically to connote other debates, whether of a psychological, philosophical, or indeed theological order. Brandon Gallaher neatly articulates the dilemma faced by Orthodoxy on this front as it seeks to eschew traditionalism while preserving tradition—a distinction rendered by Jaroslav Pelikan (1986, 65) as that between the “dead faith of the living” on the one hand and on the other, the “living faith of the dead”:

To be blunt: should we pay attention to the natural law reasoning of the fathers if we ignore their outdated cosmologies? When it comes to the tradition, we all pick and choose. We must pick and choose with tradition! But the question is: what are the appropriate bounds of that theological picking and choosing? What does and does not constitute a normative standard in the tradition? What are the bounds of the perpetual reinvention of tradition?

(Gallaher 2018, 62)

Gallaher’s expansive questions are perhaps best addressed with an analogy drawn from hiking, inasmuch as the scholar who would explore the landscape of gender within Orthodox Christianity faces logistical challenges well known to those embarking on a trek. To wit: one has to stand somewhere in order to see the lay of the land, and yet the place one chooses cannot, for that very reason, be encompassed in the perspective which it affords. Hence the title of this chapter: accessing the thematic vistas relevant to the topic requires conceding the stability and yet relative invisibility of those *loci theologici* (theological sites) from which the widest views are to be had.

What are these vantage points? Orthodox theology characteristically appeals to Holy Tradition writ large, differentiated according to a number of sources: usually, the Scriptures, the fathers, the Ecumenical Councils and

their legislative/disciplinary canons; the Liturgy and the Holy Mysteries or sacraments—namely, the “law of belief” (*lex credendi*) expressed through the received “law of prayer” (*lex orandi*)—as well as hagiography and iconography (Louth 2013). Modern church teaching is often added to this list, especially when it is articulated by synods of bishops rather than by individual theologians. To canvass these sources for all the material pertinent to gender studies would be a formidable task indeed and well beyond the scope of an overview.

A more expedient approach, therefore, is to propose certain key vistas and in turn, describe how they appear from one or more of the vantage points indicated. This is the method I use here by asking how the following topics, each an aspect of classical theological anthropology in the Orthodox Christian tradition, present themselves to view: humanity as made in the image of God; Christ and the Theotokos as the respective exemplars of paradigmatic male and female humanity; the Trinity as the model for the self-in-relation; and marriage and monastic celibacy as the two blessed states of life.

Surveying these vistas from the height of the *loci theologici* enumerated above allows me to sketch the contours of an Orthodox “theology of gender,” as this has traditionally been envisaged—if not in so many words. To facilitate a critical dialogue between the Orthodox tradition and other academic disciplines—for example, to limn the social imaginary operative in the kind of case studies presented throughout this volume—it seems prudent to reflect upon how Orthodox have historically understood the meaning of gender difference theologically, that is, from within the particularity of their own religious *Weltanschauung*.<sup>1</sup>

### Humanity as made in the image of God

A good place to begin is by considering how Eastern Christians have understood the nature of things “in the beginning”: the Biblical book of Genesis has proven a site of patristic theological reflection *par excellence*, intensely interested as the fathers were in questions of human origins, identity, and purpose. Running throughout such reflection is a focus on humanity being created *imago Dei* (in the image of God) as per Genesis 1:26, with several of the fathers distinguishing between the divine image objectively present in all human beings and the divine likeness we are called, by and through grace, to acquire. Important here is that human nature is regarded as a psychosomatic whole: both body and soul are constitutive elements, and salvation must hence include both. Nonna Verna Harrison (2013, 122) summarizes the key features of patristic thinking on the *imago Dei*:

[A]ll humans are endowed with the capacities for love and spiritual perception, for virtues, good works and contemplation. (...) Together with the freedom to choose how they are utilized, they are the means

through which the human person can pursue and fulfill his or her vocation precisely as human. They are thus the most important facets of human identity. They enable us, in synergy with divine grace, to live as active, loving members of Christ's Body and of his Kingdom, both in this life and in the life to come.

Now the God in whose image we are made is, in the Orthodox understanding, Trinitarian: our ability to relate to others, therefore, is also an essential aspect of the *imago Dei*. As Harrison (2013, 123) continues:

[Such] capacities (...) are definitive features of our existence as hypostases [i.e., as persons]. They delineate our being in the image of the Holy Trinity. They enable us to fulfill our ultimate vocation of sharing the love of the three divine persons with them and with all other human and angelic persons.

Human potential notwithstanding, our actual resemblance to God has been obscured because of the Fall: so-called ancestral sin haunts human experience and is expressed most poignantly in what Heidegger much later aptly termed our "being-toward-death" (Wheeler 2011). In the Eastern Christian understanding, it is this very awareness of our mortality which impels us to sin—a view grounded in the peculiar reading of Romans 5:12 to be found in the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Our original capacity for knowing and loving God has been impeded by sin, a "missing the mark" (*hamartia*) reflected particularly in the vice of pride. As a result, we now possess what St. Maximus the Confessor calls a "gnomic will": one subject to incertitude and deliberation and thus tending to vacillate with respect to the acknowledgment and performance of the good (Meyendorff 1983, 143).

Axial to the theological anthropology outlined above is the premise that human nature is common to both men and women (Hopko 1993, 150). As both are made in the image of God, both suffer the consequences of the Fall. Some Orthodox theologians have therefore taken the force of the creation narrative to be that gender and sexuality are in principle only secondary, albeit necessary, aspects of our humanity.<sup>3</sup> What is primary is our personhood—a view reiterated in the recreation effected in the Mystery of Baptism by which all alike are born again as little Christs, as it were, through the womb of the church. To be sure, the baptismal liturgy makes almost no distinction with respect to the sex of the candidate: the exact same prayers are sung over both a male and a female baptizand, varying only by referring to the former as the "servant" of God and to the latter as His "handmaid." The theological rationale for this is elucidated in the jubilant processional hymn sung immediately following the rite of Chrismation, adjoined to the baptism proper: "All you who have been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. Alleluia!" (Galadza, Roll, and Thompson 2004, 409).

In principle, baptism thus points to a common Christian vocation which appears to transcend gender difference. As Kenneth Paul Wesche (1993, 227) observes:

All who enter the waters of Holy Baptism put on Christ, the Son of God by nature, and in this putting on of Christ, all men and women receive the grace of His natural Sonship, becoming thereby sons of God by grace. While remaining who and what we are, we move out of ourselves in *ecstasis*, into the divine Sonship which is beyond gender, enjoying by grace the same intimate communion with the Father which the divine Son enjoys by nature.

And yet even in the course of Christian initiation we encounter a conspicuous marker of gender difference. During the “churaching” of a newborn on (or around) the 40th day, a rite which may precede or follow the baptism/chrisamation, the priest carries a baby girl in his arms up to the Royal Doors, whereupon he intones the *Nunc dimittis* or Song of Simeon (Lk. 2:29–32). For a baby boy, however, the rubrics are otherwise: “The Priest then carries the male infant into the Sanctuary, circling the Holy Altar, and reciting Symeon’s prayer” (Contos and Kezios 1995, 18). The import of this still widespread custom is that the baby boy may be taken into the altar as a harbinger of his potential clerical vocation; since Orthodox do not presently ordain women to any order, however, there is ostensibly no reason to do likewise for a baby girl and even reason not to—despite the fact that in the past Orthodox women were indeed ordained to the diaconate in a ritual transpiring at the altar.<sup>4</sup> Lurking in the background is the further unresolved issue of ritual impurity: a survival into Orthodox Christianity of Jewish and/or pagan views of the allegedly defiling properties of menstruation, which Vassa Larin (2008) has castigated for its theoretical incongruence with the Christian Gospel no less than its debilitating effects upon Orthodox women’s spiritual practice.

Nevertheless, an equal-but-different view of male and female is undoubtedly the default setting among Orthodox today. To appreciate why this is the case, we must consider how and why given persons have been held up as paragons of their sex. Who are the heroes and heroines in the Orthodox pantheon, so to speak, and how and why are they so idealized?

### **Paragons of divin(ized human)ity**

The figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary obviously occupy the central place in Eastern Christian faith and devotion: as Christ is the New Adam, in the understanding of St. Paul expressed in Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:47, so the Theotokos (Mother of God) has traditionally been seen as the New Eve (Meyendorff 1983, 165). In turn, the two are commonly presented as the exemplars of masculinity and femininity—even as,

of course, all Christians are called to be like Christ as also imitate the humble declaration of Mary to the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38).<sup>5</sup> In a Byzantine-rite church, this is illustrated by men traditionally standing on the right side in front of the icon of Christ, always hanging to the right of the Royal Doors, which today mark the entrance to the altar; the women position themselves on the left before the icon of the Theotokos.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, at the Service of Crowning, it is customary for the bridal couple to have icons of Christ and the Theotokos held up for veneration, on the respective sides corresponding to those of the icon screen, as the husband and wife are led in procession around the tetrapod, a small table located in the nave in front of which the rite has been celebrated. The role played by iconography in the Crowning, as elsewhere in Orthodox religious experience, derives from a theological conviction that the respective heavenly prototypes are not only contemplated in their icons but made present therein.

Importantly, representations of the subjects of icons conventionally represented in such a manner as to highlight their masculinity and femininity—for instance, the *maphorion* or veil almost always covers the head of a female saint and is emulated in the chapel veil worn by women even today in many Orthodox churches.<sup>7</sup> One may note that even when an icon does not readily convey the identity of a given saint, the gender is invariably explicit.

The received correlation between Christ and Mary on the one hand, and male and female on the other, receives an intriguing development in the thought of lay theologian Paul Evdokimov, one of the most original and influential Russian Orthodox voices of the twentieth century, whose oeuvre has engendered a substantial secondary literature in its own right.<sup>8</sup> Peter Phan (1990, 58) helpfully summarizes how Evdokimov elaborates analogies on both the Trinitarian and Christological planes. In the former, woman is to the Holy Spirit as man is to Christ; in the latter the equivalencies are the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, who flank the Lord in the classic icon known as the *Deisis* (Intercession).

As archetypes [these figures] are as it were God's thought and model of the female and the male, their normative, hypostasized truths. And just as the Logos and the Holy Spirit find their unity and source in God the Father, so here too the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist find their unity and integration in Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28) but also in whom the woman is not without the man nor the man without the woman (1 Cor. 11:11).

Evdokimov is quintessentially Orthodox in his privileging Trinitarian theology as the context for reflection on the question of gender. Let us look, then, more carefully at the question of how gender figures in the discussion of God qua God.

### The Trinity as model for the (gendered) self-in-relation

Despite the burgeoning of scholarship on Syriac Christianity in recent decades, it remains an underappreciated fact that, in its early literature, the Third Person of the Trinity was often described in feminine terms, on account of the originally feminine gender of the Syriac (and Hebrew) term for spirit (*ruha*). From the fifth century on, however, masculine pronouns come to be used even as the feminine qualities of the Holy Spirit continue to receive emphasis in the Syriac and to some extent the Armenian, liturgical traditions (Ashbrook Harvey 1993).<sup>9</sup> In this light, Evdokimov can present women as embodying the specific attributes of the Spirit. For him, a proper respect for the diversity of the Trinitarian persons leads to a reverence for the distinctive female vocation as ordered toward being rather than doing: such a vocation expresses a receptivity to God at once emblematic of the royal priesthood to which all the baptized are called and exclusive of the ministerial priesthood, circumscribed as this is by the specifically “masculine” ambit of “penetrating” and (re)claiming the world.

Evdokimov’s undeniably essentialist vision—while a cardinal instance, perhaps, of the kind of appeals to fixed and given natures, which according to Kathryn Tanner “help solidify unjust social arrangements and disguise their contingency” (cited in Horan 2014, 97)—continues to intrigue, grounded as it is in a lavishly poetic reading of the second chapter of Genesis and illustrating thereby the enduringly fecund significance of the Creation accounts in Orthodox anthropology. It is worth quoting Evdokimov (1994, 31–2) at length:

Woman has her own mode of being, her own form of existence, the gift of weaving her entire being through her special relationship to God, others, and self. (...) [She] safeguards at the very depth of herself the mystery of her being and of her charisms that St. Paul designates with the symbol of the “veil” (1 Cor. 11). It is this mystery that she must “unveil” and interpret to understand her destiny “nuptially,” in close relationship with that of man. The Biblical account (...) is correctly set up as the original archetype of the consubstantiality of *complementary* principles. The masculine and feminine form the archetypal human monad: Adam-Eve. The Fall breaks up this oneness into a bad masculinity and a bad femininity: couples made of two polarized, objectified, and separate individuals, situated outside each other, placed nonetheless side by side. (...) The nuptial community arises as the prophetic figure of the Kingdom of God: the ultimate unity, the community of the Masculine and the Feminine in their totality in God.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, however, such a conclusion has not proven persuasive to all. On the contrary, inasmuch as Christian theology classically begins with the confession of Jesus as Lord—the Word through Whom “was not any thing



made that was made” (John 1:3)—some have found it quite inadmissible to schematize the relationship of male and female in terms of correlations to the respective divine persons of the Son and Spirit. It is hence contended that the Son subsumes in His own being the entirety of creation, both masculine and feminine properties. He Himself is the consummate Image of the Father: the One Who, to be precise, establishes the proper frame of reference for understanding humanity as created *imago Dei*. Thus Wesche (1993, 223) can insist, following St. Maximus the Confessor (590–662 C.E.):

The Divine Logos is a unity embracing a diversity of principles. Applied to woman this means that even the inner principle of “femaleness” lies in the Logos. And since Jesus is the Divine Logos, then even in his Incarnation as “man,” He is the ontic source of woman. Again, this confirms for us that a true understanding of gender can be acquired only in the context of the doctrine of the Incarnation. To seek an understanding of gender outside the Divine Logos incarnate can yield no ultimately satisfying conclusion.

Yet other voices within modern Orthodoxy have gravitated toward Evdokimov. Thomas Hopko, one of the most influential, similarly bases his reflections on gender in the Trinitarian mystery. Affirming the paradoxical, if not contradictory, notion that God is worshiped “wholly without gender,” despite being invoked under the name of “Father,” Hopko (1993, 146–147) explains:

Christians are enabled to relate to God as Father because they share in the relationship which God’s Son has with God in the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God is to be conceived or imagined as “male.” God is Father to his Son in the Spirit in a divine manner which absolutely excludes gender and sexuality, as it excludes everything which belongs to created nature. In Christ, God becomes Father to men and women by the grace of the Holy Spirit in this same divine manner. According to Orthodox doctrine, Christians do not call God “Father” because they project onto God the characteristics of human fatherhood. Just the contrary. Human fatherhood, which includes being masculine in gender, reflects in a human form, within human conditions, that which God is in a uniquely divine manner.

The import of Hopko’s somewhat ambivalent claim is that although sexuality as such is excluded from consideration of the divine nature, gender yet pertains to it. In fact, the Scriptures, and in their wake the Byzantine liturgical tradition, very rarely directly invoke God by means of feminine nouns or pronouns, and the use of apophatic (“negative”) terminology radically qualifies the ubiquitous masculine terms.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the author’s admission that human fatherhood reflects divine paternity begs the ensuing

question as to where a companion reference point for motherhood is to be found. The answer is in the determinate character of divine revelation whose system of analogies is mutually dependent: information from Scripture forms a set governed by an intrinsic and irreducible logic:

[Scripture's] gender-related names, images, and symbols are so essential to the Biblical story and the church's faith, together with the liturgical worship and mystical life which they engender, that the story and the faith would not be what they are without them. (...) To change or replace its names and imagery is to change and replace its reality into something totally different from what it is.

(Hopko 1993, 149)<sup>12</sup>

Now, according to Hopko, this revelatory network exposes a homology between the Holy Spirit, the Theotokos, the church, and Divine Wisdom—and, in turn, women generally. The Holy Spirit as the Giver of Life is intimately associated with Mary in the moment of the Incarnation and overshadows in an kindred manner the Church Herself, who “in her sacramental being [is] the foretaste of the cosmos transformed by Christ into the Kingdom of God which is the heavenly Jerusalem, the ‘bride of the lamb’ who ‘is our mother’ (Gal 4:26, Rev 21:9)” (Hopko 1993, 154). Even though in the Byzantine tradition it was predominantly Christ who was seen as the personification of Divine Wisdom—a fact illustrated in the dedication of the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, for which Christmas, the birth in time of the Logos, was chosen as the patronal feast—in the second millennium the title has come instead to denote the Mother of God. Ultimately, this conflation of categories invited the twentieth-century development of Sophiology in the work of Vladimir Solov'ev and then Sergii Bulgakov.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, one notices several distinctive premises. First, there are particularly feminine aspects to the divine character. Second, these are expressed most conspicuously in the person and operations of the Holy Spirit, especially in relation to the genesis of the church, the birth and maturation of believers in and through the Holy Mysteries, and the nuptial consummation of God's love for the world that lies at the heart of Orthodox eschatology. Third, the typologies of masculine and feminine that emerge in and through the church's received practices, that is, her (!) tradition, are an index not only to the mores of marriage itself, but more generally to the peculiar charisms of men and women. Thus, Hopko (1993, 169–170) can conclude:

In the most basic sense man in relation to woman is made to be a giver. Giving is not simply man's function or role in regard to woman; it is the heart of his being as imaging God the Father and Son. (...) She inspires, empowers, and nurtures man to be man in a manner analogous

to the Holy Spirit's inspiring, empowering, and nurturing Jesus to be the Christ, the church to be his body and bride, and Christians to be God the Father's children.

Such a categorical sense of the givenness of tradition and of its coincidence with nature is arguably an abiding characteristic of Orthodox theology.<sup>14</sup> Rather than asking whether the difference between male and female is principally ontological or functional, Hopko proposes that the Orthodox tradition intuits an irreducible both/and.

### **Marriage and monasticism: the two blessable states**

It is commonplace that in the Orthodox Church, as in both the wider Eastern heritage and the Latin West, marriage and monasticism have historically been seen as the principal, if not exclusive, states of life which may receive the blessing of the church. The former expresses gender as complementarity and the latter as sublimated into the "angelic life." Undoubtedly, the theological literature has favored the vocation to celibacy in spite of, or perhaps because of, marriage remaining far more common. John McGuckin (2017, 35) thus laments:

Orthodox theologians in times past have rarely been able to move their imagination away from marital union considered as an ascetical "lapse": a lesser state of seriousness than single celibacy. The ascetical dimension has so overshadowed thinking on marriage that a deeply scriptural resonance has stood in danger of being lost.

Others, such as Harrison (2013), see recent theology as having overcompensated for the historical privileging of monastic life, with the result that precisely monasticism, and by implication celibacy, is in need of the more robust defense today.

Let us return here to Evdokimov, who (1985, 65–84) seeks to square the circle by stating that marital and monastic spirituality are reciprocally connected, rooted in an awareness of the ontological equality and eschatological orientation of both vocations. These two different modes of Christian witness should cross-pollinate and exist in symbiosis, since both marital chastity and monastic celibacy function on the same level of ascesis of the absolute, albeit in distinct modalities. Monks and spouses alike are called to a kind of renunciation that Evdokimov argues is directed toward positively embracing another in love following the verdict of Genesis 2:18: "it is not good for man to be alone." Chastity (*sophrosynê*) in this connection is taken to be tantamount to "integrity" and "integration" rather than continence. For spouses, it signifies that faithful praxis of nuptial love, which can protect them from the flux of the passions and serve as a kind of propaedeutic or preparatory study for the life of eternity. Indeed, their summons to a

kind of communion renders them in principle a “nuptial icon” of the Trinity, the love of whom is mediated through love of another—even as within the Trinity there is the dynamic mutual exchange of love between the divine persons classically termed *perichoresis* (rotation or circumincession).

Importantly, Evdokimov’s rhapsodic vision of the complete humanity expressed by the man and woman united in marriage evokes what some Greek Fathers have taken to be the prelapsarian androgynous being God created in the first instance prior to its separation into the two sexes.<sup>15</sup> The corollary of this is that for St. Gregory of Nyssa (335–394 C.E.), *inter alia*, the life of the future Kingdom recapitulates that of the original creation: it will be one without gender difference (Harrison 2013, 123). And yet the settled conviction of Orthodox theology would appear rather to hold that marriage, and thus the distinction between male and female, has a permanent significance in the divine economy. As Hilarion Alfeyev (2011, 152) explains:

In the Christian East, the words of Christ that the people in the age to come “neither marry nor are given in marriage” but “are equal to the angels” (Luke 20:35–36) have not been taken to mean that marriage comes to an end after death. They show that people’s mode of existence in the future will differ from that of this transient world. What constitutes the precise nature of this difference remains a mystery. (...) the mystery of marriage will reveal itself even more fully in the future life, in spite of the fact that sexual intercourse will no longer be possible and our entire bodily condition will change.

Echoing Evdokimov, Alfeyev continues that monasticism is best appreciated as itself a kind of marriage. Far from constituting the opposite of the Mystery of Crowning, it is analogous to it: “[m]onastics are espoused to God Himself” (Alfeyev 2011, 160). As we will see momentarily, such a vision of the monastic vocation is admittedly salient in the church’s hymnography. We would be remiss, however, to proceed further without mentioning the significance of married priests, ubiquitous in the Christian East, and especially the role played by the wife of the presbyter—a figure enjoying particular distinction within Orthodox cultures. Her identity and role have increasingly become the object of sustained theological attention, in tandem with a vigorous discussion in Orthodox quarters regarding the revival of the currently all but defunct office of deaconess or woman deacon.

Indeed, the former has been seen as carrying forward the symbolism traditionally associated with the latter. For example, the third-century *Didascalia apostolorum* famously correlates the roles of the deaconess and the Holy Spirit. It has been suggested that by a kind of transferral the priest’s wife has over time acquired a similarly iconic significance, if unofficially so:

[J]ust as the Holy Spirit—who is certainly indispensable in divine economy—is nonetheless thoroughly kenotic in Her vitality to the

point that even graphic imagery for the Holy Spirit is virtually absent (save the Dove and one or two symbolic images), so also the *presvitera's energeiae*, as it were, have frequently been powerfully experienced, yet without the kind of articulation typical, on the other hand, for Christ, the incarnate Word.

(Galadza 2015, 45–46)

The titles for the priest's wife further corroborate this view, in the implicit or explicit homologies Eastern Christian sources draw between the Holy Spirit, Mary, and the church (as well as Divine Wisdom). Thus the *presvitera* is known in Russian and Ukrainian, respectively, as *matushka* (little mother) and *pani matka* (lady mother): "Following the example of Mary, the *presbytera*, fulfilling her role as *Icon of the Theotokos*, can be that maternal presence in her community, complementing the paternal and apostolic ministry of her husband."<sup>16</sup> The Orthodox tradition has even felt able to speak of a kind of concomitance shared by her and her husband, deeming that her being united "in one flesh" with him effects an implicit ordination. Galadza (2015, 49) thus draws attention to the opinion of the revered twelfth-century canonist Theodore Balsamon that "the wives of priests, who are reckoned one body and one priestly flesh through union with priests, who consequently are ordained, so to speak, should not be profaned by second marriage".

Yet Orthodox hagiography includes very few examples of married saints, despite the value elsewhere ascribed to marriage as a sacrament and its acknowledged connection to the Mystery of Priesthood.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the overwhelming majority of canonized saints have been monastics, although these expressions of sanctity are at times rather unpredictable and even surprisingly germane to contemporary concerns. Exemplars of what we might call sanctified gender bending are numerous, particularly female saints who pretended to be male in order to join a men's monastery; these are honored for a deception carried out in the pursuit of a more "manly" form of asceticism.<sup>18</sup> But for the most part, nuns are praised as "brides of Christ" who long to enter into His "heavenly bridal chamber." Notably, male monastics are occasionally described in similar terms.<sup>19</sup>

If nuns serve as the principal icons of the feminine persona of the church, awaiting the consummation of the wedding feast of the Lamb, martyred women are also seen to share in this vocation. Hence the generic troparion for a female martyr can exult: "Your lamb, [name], O Jesus, cries in a loud voice: 'You, O my Bridegroom, I love; and seeking You, I undergo martyrdom,'" while that for several venerable women (nuns) commemorated together proclaims: "Being espoused to your Bridegroom, O glorious Christian women, and having renounced union with any temporal suitor (...) you reached the heights of incorruptibility (...)." (Galadza, Roll, and Thompson 2004, 912). Again, for the Forty Holy Women commemorated on September 1, the church sings: "You combined the ascetic life with the contest of martyrdom, and now you have been joined without corruption to

the Bridegroom of souls, and with joyful souls you take your places in the divine bridal chamber” (Lash n.d.).

Of course, the Virgin Mary herself is repeatedly referred to throughout Byzantine hymnography as both the Unwedded Bride of God and the Bridal Chamber of the Heavenly Bridegroom. Thus women monastics and martyrs are also, in a sense, icons of the Theotokos, reiterating in their own lives and deaths her spousal relationship with God as well as the nuptial mystery of the Church Herself:

Come, and contemplating with pure heart and sober spiritual eyes the loveliness of the Church, the King’s daughter, which shines brighter than gold, let us magnify her. Rejoice and be glad, bride of the great King, as clearly reflecting the beauty of your Bridegroom, you cry with your people: O Giver of Life, we magnify you. Grant your Church, O Savior, the defence from on high; for she knows no other but you, who laid down your life for her of old, as with recognition she magnifies you.

(Lash n.d.)<sup>20</sup>

Union with God is thus available to men and women alike, although it tends to be described differently in the liturgical poetry for male and female saints. As we have seen, women saints along with the Virgin Mary tend to be presented as “brides of God” (or alternatively, in the case of such saints but *not* the Virgin, as “brides of Christ”), while male saints are more readily hymned in non-gendered, even inanimate images—shining as “unextinguishable lights of the Mystical Sun,” for example, or flourishing “like the Tree in Paradise” (Galadza, Roll, and Thompson 2004, 916, 922).<sup>21</sup> The latter imagery tends to prevail when the tradition is performing in a systematic key, as it were. Salvation is more typically conceived in terms of *theosis* (divinization or deification) apart from explicitly nuptial terms: it is first and foremost a matter of humanity assuming, by grace, divinity. As Stephen Thomas (2011, 183) observes: “The fathers used *theosis* to bring out the high condition to which human beings are exalted by grace, even to the sharing of God’s life.” Set in relation to the idea of humanity created *imago Dei*, *theosis* allows for a distinction without separation between the divine gift of the *image*, “the human potential to be as Christ, the perfect image of God,” and the acquisition by the human being cooperating with the Holy Spirit of the *likeness*, “the actualization of this in the possession of God-like qualities, that is, human perfection.”

### Essentialism and exclusivism

In discussing the charged question of admitting women to Holy Orders, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware (2000, 77) reiterate the notion of complementarity between the sexes that is more than skin deep, which

I have shown to be characteristic of Orthodox theology. They approvingly quote the work of Kyriaki Kardoyanes FitzGerald:

I believe most strongly that maleness and femaleness, as gifts from God, have dimensions that are not only biological but spiritual. I agree (...) that the difference between men and women is “a difference of being which is rooted in the very essence of creation and manifested in the particular expression of personhood.”<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, in a recent book examining the work of C.S. Lewis from an Orthodox perspective, Edith Humphrey seeks to demonstrate that Lewis sought to express, especially through his fantasy literature, a view of gender and sexuality entirely consonant with Eastern Christian tradition. Male and female are for Lewis but finite and limited expressions of essentially spiritual categories of masculine and feminine whose full import necessarily eludes the compass of human reason and experience alike. As Humphrey (2017, 254) writes:

[Lewis] argues against the idea that the principles of masculinity and femininity are simply a projection of our physically gendered state. It is the opposite. Beyond the human gendered condition, there is something even more solid to which our sexual natures point, and in which we participate—realities of which we can hardly conceive. In this unseen relation of Masculine and Feminine, there is One who is dominant, the Other reflexive and responsive; yet there is also a matching, or a mutuality.

Drawing upon Evdokimov, Humphrey (2017, 258) rehearses the analogy between the equality in difference of the Trinitarian persons and that obtaining on a human level. In both God and humanity, there is a “mysterious tension of hierarchy-*with-mutuality*.” Hierarchy as such does not imply inferiority, although it does require subordination or rather deference: “There is an asymmetry in the relationship (the Father is not the Son, Woman is not the Man) even while each is of equal dignity.”

As Humphrey well realizes, the key issue is the extent to which we may claim the visible world and its reiteration in language, as an index to the divine—and consequently see revelation as confirming the natural order perceivable to the senses. Metaphor is the fulcrum on which the matter balances:

Is metaphor window dressing for an ineffable concept? Or are some metaphors real, living things that partake of the reality? The one who has a sacramental view of the universe would say, yes, they do. Not all metaphors are mere fancy.

(Humphrey 2017, 264)



In other words, the recourse of scriptural language to uniquely masculine titles when invoking God—or, indeed, its casting of the church in feminine terms as the Bride of Christ, the union with whom constitutes the true significance of Christian marriage (Eph. 5:32)—is not reducible to the mores of ancient Israel or the late antique Greco-Roman world in which the texts of the New Testament emerged. Rather, such language has an abiding value as the vehicle of divine revelation, evincing an intentional choice on the part of the God to bespeak (a gendered vision of) Himself to His world.<sup>23</sup>

Increasingly, and perhaps in non-Orthodox contexts especially, such a claim would appear to read as naïve, not to say ridiculous. And there are undoubtedly also Orthodox troubled by the gender binary of received Eastern Christian tradition. Inspired by works such as John Boswell’s (1995) (in)famous revisionist history of same-sex unions in the Byzantine world—notwithstanding the recent, ostensibly definitive, refutation of its core thesis by one of the foremost scholars in the field (Rapp 2016)—there is a vocal, if not yet numerically significant, contingent challenging the status quo with respect to the church’s non-recognition of homosexuality. The blogosphere is where the most animated discussions of this topic transpire, for instance, in the eclectic and apparently widely read blog “Orthodoxy in Dialogue.”<sup>24</sup> It is also through the internet that tentative movements of solidarity among LGBTQIA+ Orthodox have gained a degree of momentum and diffusion—it being difficult, of course, to ascertain details in this regard with any certainty.

It is not clear that Orthodox Christianity is amenable to transformations that have impacted on other forms of Christianity. That is, Orthodox do not tend to perceive gender as falling within the *adiaphora* (nonessential) or as a matter on which the church should tolerate a diversity of views and practices. Hopko (1993, 142) states categorically:

we speak not about an Orthodox Christian view, but about the Orthodox Christian view. We use the definite article because our faith obliges us to come to complete agreement on this crucial issue which lies at the very heart of our doctrine, worship and witness as human beings and Christian believers.

This tone is only amplified in what is certainly the most authoritative corporate pronouncement on the question, namely the *Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, issued in the year 2000 by the hierarchy of the largest and most influential of the churches within the Eastern Orthodox communion. Section XII.9 deals with sexuality in an unequivocal manner, likely to shock the reader habituated to the ethos currently prevalent in much of “the West”—an ambiguous designation, as noted below—where “fluidity” of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression has acquired an ideologically normative status:

Holy Scriptures and the teaching of the Church unequivocally deplore homosexual relations, seeing in them a vicious distortion of the



God-created human nature. (...) The patristic tradition equally clearly and definitely denounces any manifestation of homosexuality. (...) Addressing those who stained themselves with the sin of sodomy, the St. Maxim the Greek made this appeal: “See at yourselves, damned ones, what a foul pleasure you indulge in! Try to give up as soon as possible this most nasty and stinking pleasure of yours, to hate it and to fulminate eternally those who argue that it is innocent as enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and corrupters of His teaching.”

(The Russian Orthodox Church 2000, Section XII.9)

The document denies, then, first that society should recognize nonheterosexual orientations or afford them “the equal right to public manifestation and respect”; second that homosexuality derives from or is acceptable in respect of an “inborn predisposition”; third that “perverted manifestations of sexuality” can be compared to “the divinely established marital union of man and woman”; and fourth that it is legitimate for a person with transgender inclinations “to refuse the sex that has been given him or her by the Creator” and undergo surgery to that end.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, at the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in 2016 in Crete, the topic of same-sex unions was also addressed. The relevant document reaches a conclusion not dissimilar to that of the Russian Orthodox synodal text, although expressed far more economically:

The Church does not allow for her members to contract same-sex unions or any other form of cohabitation apart from marriage. The Church exerts all possible pastoral efforts to help her members who enter into such unions understand the true meaning of repentance and love as blessed by the Church.

(The Holy and Great Council of the  
Orthodox Church 2018b)

All in all, it would seem that balanced, not to say sympathetic, treatments by Orthodox scholars of LGBTQIA+ experience and aspirations are rather rare. As John Chryssavgis (2011, 371) wryly observes:

There are some topics that Orthodox Christians are singularly uncomfortable about broaching—even if it is simply to affirm their outright rejection and unqualified condemnation—and homosexuality is certainly among them. (...) Indeed, one of my gravest concerns over the years is that the oppression of homosexuality and silence on sexual issues in a hierarchical institution, such as the Orthodox Church, not only results from unjustifiable and unacceptable ignorance and prejudice. It also results in the church’s complicity in discrimination as well as the church’s reticence concerning sexual abuse in our own communities.

Ciprian Toroczkai (2016) has provided a useful review of the available literature, agreeing with Chryssavgis that respectful discussion of what has

traditionally been termed one of the “sins that cry to heaven” is in its infancy within the Orthodox Church. The author concludes that the official stance is not likely to change, established as this is by Scripture, patristic teaching, and canon law. Nonetheless, pastoral care can and should be developed—and he sees evidence of this happening. If homosexuality remains an often taboo subject in Orthodox circles, even less theological attention appears to be given to the burgeoning field of LGBTQIA+ concerns and critiques. We have yet to see, for example, a significant Orthodox contribution to the discourse emerging around the groundbreaking work of Protestant theologian Megan DeFranza (2015) on intersex.

## Conclusion

Traditional Orthodox ideas of gender in the historic Orthodox homelands of Eastern Europe and the Middle East may well prove to be increasingly at odds with what is *de rigueur* in the so-called diaspora, where, after a century or more of migration, the critical mass of faithful now live. The Orthodox continue to orient themselves along the geographical axis of the Christian East, in a variation on the disputed construct of “the West and the Rest” (Hall 1992). This can be seen in another document of the Great and Holy Council regarding inter-Orthodox cooperation in a defined set of Western countries (The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church 2018a).<sup>26</sup> While one may wish to problematize the import of “the West,” the term remains a useful heuristic for charting an arguably widening divergence between those societies in which the Orthodox Church retains some kind of cultural or even political hegemony and those where Orthodox need to find their place in a rapidly changing pluralist landscape.

The present chapter has sought to outline the theological “topography” of the Orthodox tradition. Likely it has raised more questions than it has answered, in keeping with Evdokimov’s (1985, 161) closing words to his *The Sacrament of Love*: “Human sexuality has never received a satisfactory explanation; perhaps it never will. The very transcendence of the Edenic state accounts for a certain vacillation of thought”. Thankfully, the rest of this volume brings the reader from a descriptive to a prospective account of where Orthodoxy is and may be headed. If my response to the poignant queries of Gallaher with which we began is incomplete, we may at least be assured of having taken a step or more in the right direction.

## Notes

- 1 I follow Ross Shepard Kraemer (2008, 466) in acknowledging, while suspending for the purposes of my chapter, the current Western trend toward questioning the very definition of “woman” (and “man”):

While cognizant of contemporary debates about gender identity and the imperfect mapping of gender categories onto actual persons, whether in

modernity or in antiquity, I utilize the term “women” here as broadly and inclusively as possible to encompass those persons...we would recognize as such by twenty-first-century methods of discerning anatomical and genetic difference.

- 2 Thus—according to the majority of the Greek Fathers—Romans 5:12 reads: “As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men; and *because of death*, all men have sinned” (Meyendorff 1983, 144).
- 3 Valerie Karras (2008) is one influential voice appealing to the relative insignificance of gender difference prior to the Fall.
- 4 Alkiviadis Calivas (2003) urged that this aspect of churching be revised in an egalitarian direction; such a reform would correspond to earlier Orthodox practice—a critique reiterated more recently by Carrie Frederick Frost (2016). This revision has already been implemented in certain contexts, if not always on an official level (see the Introduction for this volume on the change of this practice in the Orthodox Church of Finland). There were isolated instances of the female diaconate being revived in the twentieth-century Greek Orthodox Church, with perhaps more yet to come in our time; the office has a greater, if still highly limited, prominence in the Armenian Apostolic Church. For an appraisal of the current status quo, see my contribution to a forthcoming anthology on the diaconate (Butcher 2019).
- 5 Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (2008, 15) can thus eloquently declare:

The image of the Theotokos carries a profound symbolism, in which the whole female being, biological and spiritual, becomes a sign of openness to God, to the inspiration of the Spirit, of the transparency of the creature to the beauty and tenderness of God. It is also the sign of a vocation to spiritual maternity—the birth in each man and woman of the new man in Christ, which is the vocation of the whole of humanity, called to become the whole Christ.

- 6 For a detailed account of the practices in Byzantium, see Taft (1998). While segregation of the sexes remains common in all the Eastern churches, the Oriental Orthodox actually have the opposite practice from that of the Byzantine-rite churches: in Assyrian, Syriac, Malankara, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Eritrean churches, men stand on the left and women on the right. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in both instances, however, the principle is to have the women on the right side, in keeping with Ps. 44/45:9 (“At your right hand stands the queen in gold”). The difference is rather a matter of orientation, that is, whether one reckons right and left from a position facing the altar or looking toward the congregation from the altar.
- 7 There are rare exceptions such as St. Mary of Egypt (c. 344-c. 421 C.E.), who lacks the veil on account of the unique circumstances recounted in her canonical *vita*.
- 8 Evdokimov’s most influential works are arguably *The Sacrament of Love* (1985) and *Woman and the Salvation of the World* (1994).
- 9 By contrast, the neuter gender of the Greek *pneuma* has not prevented the Byzantine tradition from calling upon the Holy Spirit as the “Heavenly King” in one of its most widely used prayers, while also adducing the arguably feminine epithet of “Giver of Life.”
- 10 For Evdokimov, every woman is a mother, a “source of life,” even if not biologically so, for she possesses an interior maternity: a vocation of protection, nurture, care, and fulfillment of need. Moreover, women personify human spiritual receptivity, with every person in turn called to be a mother, as it were, by giving birth to Christ.

- 11 See the string of alpha-privative adjectives which come at the beginning of the ordinary Eucharistic formula of the Byzantine Rite, the Anaphora of St. John Chrysostom: “for You are God—ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, always existing and ever the same” (Galadza, Roll, and Thompson 2004, 233–234). Of course, the word Trinity is feminine in Greek (*triás*), Slavonic, and many other languages. Although English renderings of Orthodox liturgical texts consistently avoid the issue by translating periphrastically, God is in fact called “She” in such instances as the first hymn after Holy Communion: after the priest declares “Save Your people, O God, and bless Your inheritance,” the Greek text of the Liturgy has the people (or choir) respond with the literal equivalent of the following, “We have seen the true light. We have received the heavenly Spirit. We have found the true faith. We worship the undivided Trinity, for *She* has saved us.” Even so, Orthodox theologians do not appear to be sympathetic to the kind of revisionism articulated by scholars such as Elizabeth Johnson (2000).

- 12 Hopko (1993, 148) elaborates on this point thus:

In a clash of symbolisms, which testifies to the divine mystery being revealed, (and so, say the saints, is to be fully expected), Jesus is not simply the brother to his disciples, as well as their master, lord, servant and friend. He is also their divine bridegroom, husband and head. Jesus is the new Adam; his church is the new Eve. He is the bridegroom; the church is his bride. He is the head; the church in his body. In this sense, the messiah may be said to be incomplete in himself. Jesus alone is not the whole Christ.

- 13 For a lucid treatment of this signal topic in modern Orthodox Trinitarian theology, see Gallaher (2016).

- 14 Thus Hopko (1993, 150) contends:

There is no possibility for naming God “mother” in the biblical tradition and in the liturgical and mystical life which this tradition engenders. And there is no possibility for naming God’s Word “daughter.” The use of the generic terms “parent” and “child” for the Father and the Son are unacceptable since they are theologically inaccurate and destructive of the familial and conjugal imagery in the church’s scripture, liturgy and mystical experience. The terms “creator,” “redeemer” and “sanctifier” (or “sustainer”) for the three divine persons are also unacceptable because they not only are not names, but are misleading even as titles when applied to the distinct persons of the Holy Trinity, since the one God and Father creates, redeems, sanctifies and sustains the world through his divine Son and Word, and his Holy Spirit. There is no divine activity which is not the common activity of the three divine persons originating in the Father, enacted by the Son and accomplished by the Holy Spirit in perfect interpersonal unity.

- 15 St. Gregory represents an influential, if minority, view in the patristic tradition. For a nuanced treatment of his anthropology, see Smith (2004, 28–33).
- 16 Irene Galadza, “The Vocation of the *Presbytera*: Icon of the Theotokos in the Midst of the Ministerial Priesthood” (unpublished manuscript), cited in Peter Galadza (2015, 47).
- 17 For a detailed discussion of married saints in the Byzantine sanctoral, see my monograph (Butcher 2010) and an earlier form of this research, “Convoluting Conjugality: Hymnographic Repression, Transference and Co-optation in the Byzantine Sanctoral’s Commemoration of Married Saints” in *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 43–45 (2002–2004), 83–148.
- 18 “What is curious in the context of the ascetic movement is that women in the desert are usually prized and valorized for becoming ‘male’ or like ‘men.’ (...)

there are some accounts of desert ascetics who, only after their death, when they need to be buried, were identified as being women, while all along the assumption has been that they were men. There are also fascinating reports of the physical and biological changes of women's bodies that occurred in the desert. (...) As the aim of the male ascetics in the desert was to become angelic by the metamorphosis of their body and their whole being, so too the aim of the female ascetics was to transcend their gender and the limitations that it posed to them" (Antonova 2013, 36–37).

- 19 E.g., St. Abramios (Oct. 29) and St. John of Kronstadt (Dec. 20).
- 20 Sung at Matins at the Ninth Ode on September 13, Dedication of the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem.
- 21 Anthony Ugolnik (2001, 285) has argued that discomfort with the male body is endemic to Orthodox piety as such:

Males “engender.” Males “seminate.” Males “penetrate,” “fertilize” and “enact.” (...) All of these acts, and much of the male organism which makes them possible, is purged from our imagery. (...) In religious terms, we men have lost the connection between our bodies and religious meaning.

Ugolnik (2001, 294) proceeds to contend that one contrast between the mysticism of Christian East and West is the reluctance in the former to give full rein to the kind of erotic imagery which comes to prevail in the latter.

- 22 The question of the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church has generated a burgeoning literature, to which this chapter cannot do justice. For a comprehensive, recent overview of the *status quaestionis*, see Vassiliadis, Papa-georgiou, and Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi (2017).
- 23 On the significance of metaphor and on apophatic terminology within the liturgical discourse of the Byzantine Rite, see Butcher (2018), especially chapters three and four.
- 24 <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/>. Accessed November 2018.
- 25 The document continues: “While treating people with homosexual inclinations with pastoral responsibility, the Church is resolutely against the attempts to present this sinful tendency as a ‘norm’ and even something to be proud of and emulate.” Rather, such inclinations/conditions warrant spiritual remedies: “Homosexual desires, just as other passions torturing fallen man, are healed by the Sacraments, prayer, fasting, repentance, reading of Holy Scriptures and patristic writings, as well as Christian fellowship with believers who are ready to give spiritual support.”
- 26 In order, these are listed as Canada, the United States of America, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand and Oceania, Great Britain and Ireland, France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg, Austria, Italy and Malta, Switzerland and Lichtenstein, Germany, the Nordic countries (except Finland), Spain, and Portugal.

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### 3 Women in the church

#### Conceptions of Orthodox theologians in early twentieth-century Russia

*Nadezhda Beliakova*

This chapter offers an analysis of texts written by Orthodox authors in early twentieth-century Russia, pertaining to women and their role in the church. I examine how women's place in the church was articulated and the role offered to them in Orthodox institutions. The evolution of the concept of deaconesses was a key attempt to meet the need to recognize growing female activation. Various female communities, and especially their leaders, played a prominent role in religious life, although they remained somewhat isolated from the vast majority of male clerics. Interestingly, the advocates for expanding women's role in the church were hierarchs and activists, known for their conservative-monarchist, anti-socialist political orientation. I emphasize the vocabulary, thought, and logic of the time, clearly showing that these Russian Orthodox circles cannot be divided along current religious "liberal" and "conservative" lines.

The question of the role of women in the church was directly connected with the expansion of female activity in all Russian social classes following the great reforms of the 1860s (Jukina 2003). Women started seeking higher education and were active in the Narodnik movement. In the villages, the status of women also changed, because of growing peasant migration to the cities. The clergy became the first Russian social class whose daughters were entitled to a professional education (Beliakova 2016b). First and foremost, women received pedagogical training, taking on primary education courses and teaching among the poorest classes (Ruane 2009). Women grew increasingly active in ecclesiastical institutions (Meehan 1990, 1991, 1993; Worobec 2016).

#### **The importance of female monasteries**

The phenomenon and rapid growth of female Orthodox monasticism in the Russian Empire calls for particular attention to this group of women and their social role. The total number of officially registered convents increased from 137 in 1861 to 475 in 1914—3.4 times, while the number of nuns and novices increased 7.6 times, reaching 80,000.

Young unmarried women from unprivileged social classes, especially the Russian peasantry, comprised the core of these growing female communities. This important social group, which supplied the greatest number of nuns in Russia, has left practically no personal documents shedding light on their religious experience, which severely limits accurate reconstruction of women's religiosity at the time. William Wagner's study of archival materials of the Krestovozdvizhensky (Elevation of the Holy Cross) convent in Nizhny Novgorod reflects an overall tendency, seen across female monastic communities in Russia. Poor eighteenth-century convents, which heavily depended on the wealth of incoming novices, were replaced by "a large and wealthy community that appealed overwhelmingly to young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women, increasingly from the unprivileged urban and especially rural strata of society" at the dawn of the twentieth century (Wagner 2006; Wagner and Barnitt 2017). The main trait of these new monasteries was the highly developed infrastructure, aimed at improving the social needs of the local population: pharmacies, hospitals, outpatient clinics, schools, orphanages, and infirmaries. Although the infrastructure, professional and overall scale, of these new convents of the Russian Empire were in many ways inferior to that of female monastic orders in Western Europe (Wagner 2007), they clearly exhibited similar tendencies and analogous processes that emphasized the integration of female communities into the social network.

In the mid-nineteenth century, female Orthodox monastic communities were forming in direct contrast to legal regulations, which were revoked only in the 1860s and 1870s. At the same time, they were the product of a synodal system that required monasteries to have charitable structures attached (Beliakova, Beliakova, and Emtchenko 2011). The social changes in Russia, in the wake of the reforms of Alexander II, modified the legalized norms regulating the establishment of convents. This allowed the latter to encompass the crystallized potential of growing female social activity. Using the terminology of social history, it is possible to trace the main new social functions of convents. First and foremost, they began to offer social security to women bereft of families and homes. They also furthered social elevation for women from the lower classes, especially the peasantry, which was in a dire situation, facing the challenges of urbanization and modernization, the outflow of men to the cities, and the destruction of the traditional family.

Yet it would be an oversimplification to limit the role of convents exclusively to social functions. Historian Brenda Meehan-Waters (Meehan 1992, 128) notes that women:

would probably have spoken in timeless Christian terms of the overriding importance of eternal salvation and expressed gratitude to their founder, who had been particularly concerned to give poor women like themselves a chance to dedicate their lives to God and to "save themselves."

The high level of literacy among the nuns and novices, who received their education primarily within the communities, easily fits the concept that a new type of female religiosity was taking shape:

In their own way they did make considerable claims to autonomy by the simple insistence that their own salvation was of paramount importance—more important than the claims of family, marriage, or village. Religious communities gave them the opportunity for a contemplative, religiously disciplined life in a supportive community of likeminded women. Religious communities helped them shape their lives as they believed best, and they, in their turn, helped shape the lives of the communities, making them more democratic, self-supporting, and communal than traditional women’s monasteries.

(Meehan 1992, 130)

Even though contemporary female intellectuals characterized the state of convents as unsatisfactory (Kenworthy 2009), the quality of female religiosity shifted significantly in this period. Large and socially significant convents developed in the Western border provinces of the Russian Empire, becoming part of the complex and controversial history of national mobilization of the Russian population that met the needs of integrating the Western frontier. Simultaneously, the convents became part of the grand missionary project of the Orthodox Church and provided important potential for women’s initiative within the church.

The new type of female monastic life was tied to the institute of elders and the evolution of mystical, charismatic traditions in Orthodoxy (Paert 2010), which can be traced from the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov. At the start of the twentieth century, it was enforced by such a notable figure as Archpriest John of Kronstadt (Kizenko 2000). Unlike traditional Eastern monasticism, bent on asceticism and silent contemplation, female communities were noted for their social focus. The compatibility of traditional monastic ideals of “renouncing the world” with the new concept of “service to humankind” became a matter of discourse and an object of criticism from male monastics.

Many still insist that being a nun is incompatible with social activity. The renowned editor of the *Trinity Pages*, Bishop Nikon of Serpukhov, while acknowledging the Lesna Convent and other similar nunneries as beneficial and honorable, often spoke out against their status as monasteries, since they seek worldly, charitable goals, alien to monasticism.

(Ekaterina 1905)

Abbess Ekaterina (Eugene Efimovskaja, 1850–1925), the head of the Lesna Convent in the Sedletsk Province of present-day Poland (Ekaterina 2010) in the years of the first Russian Revolution, initiated the public debate on the introduction of an ecclesiastical rank meant for the “worldly”

service of female communities. Abbess Ekaterina wrote extensively about the defects of contemporary female monasticism, which rejected educated women:

Why do educated people avoid entering monasteries? Because they have nothing to do there. That's what society thinks, and that—unfortunately—is the truth. Dead routine, which pressures and burdens with its pointlessness—that is the impression an educated person receives from the experience of monastic life.

(Ekaterina 1908, 7)

The solution proposed by the Abbess lay in active forms of monastic service, including participation in education. “The aim of the best contemporary monastics is to serve the people, to be the people’s mentors and supervisors” (Ekaterina 1908, 14). She also wrote the brochure titled *Deaconesses of the First Centuries of Christianity* (Ekaterina 1909). She offered to turn her monastery into a “community of deaconesses,” yearning for it to spread the seeds of this vocation and provide future deaconesses with necessary theological and medical education, retaining direct ties to the community. She wrote:

As it is now proven, only those women were chosen for the position of deaconess who were proven in morality and piety, and were—for their time—quite educated, learned in the Scripture, and capable of teaching the foundations of the Faith. In our time it is also necessary to ordain only those women to the diaconate who have received at least a primary education, and moreover, those who have completed a theological course in specialized institutions. It is this kind of theological school, meant for deaconesses, that we plan to establish at the Lesna Monastery.

(Ekaterina 1905)

According to Abbess Ekaterina, her deaconesses could play a significant role in society; this new institute was capable of solving a series of social challenges and bringing educated women into monastic life.

Despite their dynamic growth and social integration, female monastic communities existed in a fundamentally different theological space than male monasticism: they were not touched by the debates on “learned monasticism” or by “monastic assemblies” (Kenworthy 2009, 83–102) and their representatives were not elected to the Local Council of Russian Orthodox Church in 1917–1918. Today we know that the abbesses of some Moscow convents were invited to a separate session of the 1917–1918 Local Council devoted to monastics. However, the question of the deaconesses was not discussed at that session (Zapalsky 2016, 34).

## **Women in mercy communities and missionary work**

Institutionalized female ministry in the missionary field was first proposed in the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. The best known and most referenced project belonged to the head of the Altai mission, Archimandrite Macarios Glukharev (Kharlampovych 2001). As early as the 1830s, Macarios proposed the idea of organizing a “female community of missionary-deaconesses.” His missionary reform project “More Successful Extension of the Christian Faith among Jews, Mohammedans, and Pagans in the Russian Empire” was in many ways focused on female ministry, the role of missionaries’ wives and deaconesses, who could help with catechesis and guiding the newly baptized, serve as readers, bell-ringers, bakers in field churches, contribute to educating girls, organizing village schools, and adopting newly baptized girls, teaching them grammar and crafts. Deaconesses could also care for the sick in missionary hospitals—which was a primary duty of the first missionaries. This project remained buried in the archives of the Department of the Orthodox Faith until it was published in the 1890s (Macarios 1894). Missionary periodicals of the early twentieth century make numerous references to women missionaries, constantly emphasizing the value of their vocation.

Another branch of women’s activism was the genesis and development of the mercy communities, which started in the 1860s and focused on social work. These communities embraced a basically monastic rule of life, were led by abbesses, and adhered to strict ecclesiastical canons. The only difference from convents was that the sisters could leave the community, for instance to get married, and continued to own property:

the Rules of these communities were strict, yet unlike monastic ones, they allowed their members to retain several elements of freedom. The sisters could inherit and own property, and could come back to their parents or enter a marriage, if they so desired.

(Filimonov 2000, 28)

These communities were highly oriented toward:

nursing, midwifery, and other medical assistance in Russia, with services being focused on the poor, pregnant, newborn, elderly, ill and wounded. Also, it is aimed at the relief of the victims of war, natural disasters, epidemics (...) It provided everything that falls under the modern term of social rehabilitation and adaptation.

(Filimonov 2000, 29)

The Convent of Saints Martha and Mary in Moscow occupies a unique place among these communities. It was established in 1909 by the Grand

Duchess Elizaveta, four years after her husband, the Moscow Governor General Grand Duke Sergei, was assassinated by terrorists. The sole aim of this community was to offer Christian aid, social work and medical assistance to the most troubled classes of Russian society (Elizaveta 1908). The first members of the community were ordained deaconesses—something that was insisted upon by Elizaveta herself:

I am principally opposed to nuns going out into the world for their service. Many Church hierarchs agree with me on this. Neither would I want to turn my convent into a simple community of mercy sisters, since these are connected exclusively with purely medical work, while other fields of aid remain completely untouched. Secondly, they have no ecclesiastical organization, their spiritual life is to them a secondary question, while it actually must be the exact opposite.

(Elizaveta 1996)

Grand Duchess Elizaveta did not believe in restoring the ancient liturgical aspect of the deaconesses' service, since the church life itself had changed. In the early church, deaconesses' ordination was bound to their service in baptizing adult women, leading catechism among those preparing for baptism, and ancient forms of receiving communion, which allowed for women to enter the altar.

Currently there is no need for this, but there is a real need in that aspect of the deaconesses' ministry that was expressed in spreading the faith in Christ, and in ecclesiastic charity on behalf of the Church and Christ.

(Materialy 1996, 62)

Nevertheless, the initiatives of the Grand Duchess were blocked by the Holy Synod: a decree was issued forbidding the ordination of new deaconesses and the status of the convent was frozen (Beliakova and Beliakova 2001; Posternak, Inozemtseva, and Kozlovceva 2011).

### **Deaconesses in the church: theological perspectives**

The growth of female activity naturally drove Orthodox theologians to contemplate the meaning of the normative status of women in the church. While the evolution of Russian Orthodox theological thought on women's status is well described in Wagner's study, the discourse on the reinstatement of deaconesses is literally ignored in research.

Public discussion of this institution was heavily influenced by the growth of deaconess communities in Western Europe, a phenomenon that was well known to Russian society and was considered beneficial and successful by Orthodox periodicals (Mal'cev 1907). Meanwhile, from the 1860s,

Orthodox periodicals begin publishing studies on the ancient institution of deaconesses, conducted by well-known theologians and canon law experts such as Ivan Maslov, Fr. Nikolai Dobronravov, Fr. Vladimir Ilyinsky, Pavel Gidulianov, Pavel Petrushevsky, and Sergej Troitsky (Maslov 1861–1862; Il'insky 1907; Gidulianov 1908; Dobronravov 1912; Petrushevsky 1912). In the course of these studies, the Rite of the Ordination of Deaconesses was published (Goar 1647; Dmitrievsky 1901; Neselovsky 1906). The opinions of leading canon law experts, Alexej Dmitrievsky (Lobovikova 2004) and Ilia Berdnikov, were also gathered at the request of the Holy Synod in 1911 during the debate on Grand Duchess Elizaveta's initiative. The issue of female ordination was not discussed. To be more exact, there was no theological tradition that would prove the absence of female ordination in the church. At the synod, the bishops and academics leaned toward the reinstatement or restoration of the ancient rite, which required ordination, lifelong vows, and age regulations; the final decision on the reinstatement of deaconesses was supposed to be made by the Local Council (Beliakova 2004). At the same time, those who campaigned for the revival of deaconesses also strived to restore the essence of their ministry: charity and religious education were supposed to receive a new ecclesiastical or institutional status. The age regulations and lifelong vows were seen rather as an obstacle for young women to embracing this vocation.

A real institutional breakthrough was achieved during the Pre-Conciliar Session (Predsobornoe Prisutstvie) in 1906, which accepted the Rule on the Deaconesses as a part of the Parish Regulations. Yet, in the later editions and variations of these, the idea of creating parish deaconesses was omitted.

Restoring the order of deaconesses was seen by many theologians as an Orthodox alternative to Western, heterodox practices. Even in early 1860, Fr. Alexandr Gumilevsky still opposed the mercy communities (which were supported by women of the Imperial Family) and proposed substituting them by the Orthodox institution of deaconesses. This priest, who died of typhus in 1869 while caring for the sick, formulated a preference for funneling women's activities and initiatives through ecclesiastical structures, Christianizing female activist impulses, so that they avoided taking on an emancipatory, secular character. In 1862, he wrote:

Anyone who pays attention to life cannot help but notice that in our time the educated classes have taken to Christian charity with surprising enthusiasm. Here we hear of a charitable women's committee, there, of a charitable women's society (...) We marvel at the efforts of our women and don't know what we should attribute it to: the persuasion of the modern emancipation movement that lures the woman to the universities and medical lectures, or Christian love? The latter seems truer, or at least we will choose to believe it; because, let us admit, we do not approve of this rushed, unripe emancipation.

(Gumilevsky 1862, 292–293)

The idea of turning female activism to the good of the church, to harness the unique potential unleashed during the era of Russian modernization, began to resonate in the articles of notable Orthodox figures in the early twentieth century. This was especially true for clergy involved in women's education, who supported women's initiatives, and actively sought to funnel them toward the heart of the church: Archpriest John of Kronstadt, Archpriest John Vostorgov, Metropolitan Vladimir (Bogoyavlensky), and Bishop Nikon (Rozhdestvensky). All these leaders were extremely negative about revolutionary movements. Contemporaries saw them as politically right-wing and sometimes classified them as belonging to black-hundredist (ultranationalist movement) circles.

Vladimir, the Metropolitan of Moscow, was highly supportive of Grand Duchess Elizaveta in her initiatives. The Metropolitan, an active fighter against the spread of alcoholism, saw the revolutionary socialist movement as a serious threat. He authored brochures on worker and family issues, initiated the creation of the Christian Mothers' Union and granted it official legal status as a department of the Society of Children's Religious, Moral, and Patriotic Education under the guidance of Countess Zinaida Konovnitsyna. He also supported the initiative to establish the first theological higher-education institution for women.

Another outstanding representative of the conservative right was Archpriest John Vostorgov, who spent many years teaching for various women's organizations and courses. He was the curator of the Women's Theological Courses in Moscow, which remained open in 1910–1913. In a letter defending the need for a chain of higher-level theological and pedagogical courses for women, Vostorgov wrote:

The question of “restoring the health” of women's education at the present time is urgent, and demands a swift resolution. Life took a course that leaves numerous women without either a family or a husband. Previously this problem was solved by women's monasteries (...) But the monasteries are not desirable or available to everyone. Plus let us admit that their organization makes it difficult for an educated woman to find a way for herself in that particular form of labor.

(Vostorgov 1916)

Providing women with a theological education had the potential to create a powerful force in the fight against nihilism and lack of faith. Higher theological education was seen as necessary for married women as well, “for mothers, in families—among brothers and sisters, in society, where religious knowledge is quite low, often misshapen, a problem that paves the way for anti-Christian and quasi-scientific theories” (Vostorgov 1913). Archpriest John also wrote that “the mission—in the broadest sense of the word—will receive the means through this project to be able to influence the educated classes through the most trusted sources, through mothers, wives, sisters, teachers and nannies” (Vostorgov 1913).



Due to the active support of Metropolitan Vladimir, the question of women's role in the church was raised at the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1917–1918. The surrounding debate was concentrated in the Department of Church Discipline, which was led by the Metropolitan himself. The minute taker was quite frank in formulating the position of the Metropolitan:

opposing the expansion of those public functions that separate the woman from her family, he spoke for the expansion of women's rights in church life, where the woman now has even greater power than the men; he proposed to use this power for the good of the Church, through the restoration of the ancient order of deaconesses.

(GARF [State Archive of the Russian Federation] f. 3431 [Local Council of ROK]) op. 1. d. 316. l. 103)

The Sessions Journal has preserved only one detailed speech of Metropolitan Vladimir during his entire participation in the Local Council, and it was devoted to women. The Metropolitan made a speech at the Department of Church Discipline during the discussion of the report "On the participation of women in the conciliar life of the Church" (prepared by Archpriest Yakov Galakhov) in October 1917. This is the only detailed record of the Metropolitan's speech at the Council, and shows how this key hierarch persuaded members of his corporation to pay attention to the ministry of the deaconesses:

One of the Church Fathers said, "if all the pillars fall down, and just one remains—the family—then that is not yet a calamity. If the last pillar falls—the family—then everything will be in the paws of faithlessness." I speak for extending the rights of the woman in the Church. Here the woman is a force with greater meaning than the man. Religion belongs to the heart more than the mind, and the woman lives primarily by the heart. Our Savior knew this trait, providing an honorable place for it. Aside from His most sincere feelings toward His mother, let us not forget he was the benefactor of all women. He allowed the Samaritan woman to speak freely, He forgave the woman who washed his feet, He resurrected the son of the widow of Nain, He befriended Martha and Mary, He served as the benefactor to all women, elevating marriage to the rank of a sacrament. And women answered with gratitude for this: women served Him, pious women followed Him when He walked to His death on the Cross. At that time, no one took His part, no one helped, save for Simon of Cyrene (and even he was forced to do so); only women followed Him and wept. Some of His disciples fled and hid, others kept their distance, Lazarus was nowhere to be found, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea would come later. And only the women followed Him to the Cross. After the Resurrection, they were active in the work of the Church. We know of the acts of

Thecla, one of the myrrh-bearing women, Empress Alexandra, Helena, Olga, and others. Wherever the faith was running dry, it was upheld by women. The churches in France are now filled with women. And in our churches, there are more women than men. Because of this, it would be a sin not to bring back this lost force to the church by reinstating the institute of deaconesses. We need to entrust this question to someone. We cannot present the deaconesses with the rights they had in ancient times—the rights of priesthood—which is why the Council of Laodicea chose to abolish them. This is how I envision the role of deaconesses: being raised in the spirit of Orthodoxy and in monastic regimes, they must come to wherever there are calamities and illnesses. We need to bring the pagans to the Church, and that is the mission where the deaconess can serve; we need to guide those in prison, and here the deaconess has the great potential to call to repentance. We can hardly list all of the functions a deaconess can take on. I would strongly urge us to work on the question of deaconesses and to bring it to the Council's decision.

(GARF. f. 3431. op.1. d.316. l. 117–117 ob)

After this speech, the members of the Department asked the Metropolitan to prepare a special report on the restoration of the rank of deaconess for the general session of the Council. A few months later, the Metropolitan was killed in Kyiv, which had been his see since 1915 and where he went during the break between the sessions of the Council. In the circumstances of revolutionary cataclysm aggravated by national unrest in Kyiv, Vladimir was killed by an unidentified person during a Liturgy celebrated in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra in January 1918; he was the first New Martyr to open a long list of victims of the Civil War and Bolshevik terror.

The documents found after the death of Metropolitan Vladimir included a draft of his paper on the deaconesses, which was handed out to the Council members, but was not accepted by the session. The paper on the rights of women to enter the altar (by the Department of Church Discipline) also did not receive final validation. As the Bolsheviks came to power, the Council did not have time to finish its work, and many reports were not approved. At the 133rd Conciliar Session, held on July 24, 1918, the Department's paper "On Women's Participation in the Life of the Church" was met with much enthusiasm. It promulgated the inclusion of women in the administrative, court, and economic life of the church as well as allowing for women to become readers. Yet the final decision of the Council regarding the rights of women, dated September 7/20, 1918, was severely shortened due the intervention of the bishops and the Council's Editorial Department. Women were given the right to take part in parish district and diocese assemblies and "to assume positions in all diocesan educational, charitable, missionary, and economic organizations." The only exceptions were parish district and diocesan assemblies as well as the court and administrative

branches. Women were given the right to serve as readers, but without the official ranking among the clergy and only in “exceptional cases” (Sobor 1994, 47).

These early twentieth-century texts clearly show that proponents of women’s ordination to a position of greater inclusion in the church, a process which had started in the previous century, had good and valid argumentation. Some representatives of the Orthodox Church, often from the conservative right, actively joined the debate on the role of women and fought for the expansion of their role in church and society. The institution of deaconesses was to become an alternative to the predominantly peasant female monasticism dominating in Russia, where educated women were felt to have no place. At the same time, communities of deaconesses could be an Orthodox alternative to charitable communities. The order of deaconesses, known by Orthodox theologians as a form from ancient church that was revived in European Reformed churches, was seen as greatly needed in Russia with the social problems that followed the Revolution of 1917. Some other church figures juxtaposed educated Christian women against the anti-religious activists of the feminist movement, seeing the former as an important source of stabilization, capable of solving a series of spiritual and social problems. The prevailing secularization and anticlerical sentiments were clear to contemporaries. Thus, the prophetic words were spoken that, in future, the church would predominantly rely on women.

Opponents of the expansion of women’s role in church life did not have such good arguments, but “surprise, deaf mistrust and even hostility” followed “women’s initiatives” and remained dominant in male ecclesiastical communities (Vostorgov 1916). Even at the Local Council, whose sessions took place in parallel with the rise of the Revolution, there were attempts to block the expansion of women’s service in the church. Yet no theological or dogmatic arguments against women’s active service were presented. No doubts were openly stated about the possibility of women’s ordination as deaconesses and their presence in the altar. Without theological arguments, it is thus clear that clerics did not want to allow women into their closed community of ordained men, fearing women’s opposition to official leadership, temptation, and competition. Historians are aware of the well-founded fears of “women’s riots” recorded in the legal literature of Imperial Russia. High levels of conflict with parish clergy and strained relations with parishioners were often associated with the distribution of finances within the parish. That is why they tried to deny women readers the right to be counted as clergy or assume administrative and court positions. It was also the parish clergy who persuaded the Council to deny women the right to take part in diocesan and church councils.

In practice, other models of deaconesses’ service were developed. In one model, they assisted presbyters in parishes and communities, educating and caring for troubled social groups. The other model was to be practiced in convents, where nuns led various forms of social work.

The question of women's role in the church and the restoration of deaconesses evolved along different paths. On the one hand, the "pragmatics" made efforts to legalize and to improve women's social and charitable work conducted on behalf of the church. On the other hand, the "theorists" (legalists) supported the idea of deaconesses, but sought to reinstate it according to the ancient norms, as a proper order, with ordination, lifelong vows, and age requirements. Yet, in reality it was the everyday practices of social care (for the poor, the sick, and the orphans) led by members of female communities that were in need of official status. These practices were oriented toward education, medical aid, and missionary work, taken on predominantly by young women, who deserved the right to make other choices in life, including marriage. The tension between these two groups was not settled even at the Council, which did not restore the rank of deaconess. However, in the early 1920s, some diocesan bishops were ordaining women deaconesses. The rank of deaconess existed in the Methodius Brotherhood in Petrograd (Antonov 1994) and Deaconesses were ordained in Ufa (Ivanova 2017). Paraskeva Matieshina was canonized by the Russian Church as Venerable. She was ordained deaconess in 1921 by Bishop Seraphim Zvezdinsky to further missionary work educating peasant children in Dmitrov. Later, she became a spiritual mentor for a number of Orthodox faithful in the 1960s (Paraskeva 2007; Shchelkachev 2007). Later life under constant religious persecution laid a further burden on women—to preserve church life and to provide for male clerics.

## Conclusion

A hundred years later, women's roles are seen from a totally different perspective by the Russian Orthodox community. This theme would deserve a separate study, but I pay attention to some important moments. First, the Russian theological school was completely destroyed by the repressions of the Communist regime. Texts on the theological debates of the early twentieth century concerning women in the church disappeared from sight in the Orthodox landscape. It was only at the start of the twenty-first century that these texts were made available to the Russian reader, in many ways thanks to the *Seria* research about the Local Council of 1917–1918 (Beliakova 2016a). The radical social deconstruction of the twentieth century and the Soviet gender project drastically changed the context of the discussion on women's rights. Women, who comprise the absolute majority of the Orthodox flock, came to the church from secular Soviet or post-Soviet society, deeply traumatized by various modernization projects, searching for a return to the "genuine" authority of the church that renounced the values of modernity.

With the end of the Cold War, Russian Orthodoxy was sucked into the ideological debates in Western churches, where one issue dividing liberals and conservatives is the question of women's ordination. Sympathy toward

conservative concepts in Western churches is reflected in the majority of Orthodox texts on gender, including those dedicated to the deaconesses. The Orthodox Encyclopedia entry on deaconesses by the Russian liturgics specialist Mikhail Zheltov is a case in point. It directly reflects the author's participation in contemporary polemics, which leads him to repeat all the arguments and fears of those opponents to reinstating the order of deaconesses (Zheltov 2012).

Another important factor is the growth of female monasticism, the development of women's communities such as "sisters of mercy" and other sisterhoods, which dominate the contemporary Russian Orthodox landscape. Various forms of ordination are being shaped within those communities. Women have begun to receive a formal theological education and take on official positions in the church's administration, media, and social networks. Yet women's participation in church life remains in a "gray area," devoid of proper articulation. Many opponents of women's greater participation are women themselves. Many regular Orthodox women have internalized the feeling of their female "sinfulness" and consider themselves "second-rate" humans in comparison to men. This, unfortunately, is reflected in a series of everyday Orthodox practices (Synek 2005). The disinterest of women in strengthening their role in liturgical life and demonstrative denial of gender solidarity so common in modern Russian Orthodoxy does not have any theological basis and requires empirical anthropological study.

Translated from the Russian by Ivan Fadeev, PhD.

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## 4 Obedient artists and mediators

### Women icon painters in the Finnish Orthodox Church from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century

*Katariina Husso*

In the discipline of art history, the question of gender has occupied academic researchers for decades. Generally, gender is understood as a system of power. The art historian Griselda Pollock (2014), for instance, maintains that “as an axis of power relations, gender can be shown to shape social existence of men and women and determine artistic representations.” In addition to art history, visual culture studies have broadened their scope from objects and artists to various discourses and wider contexts such as the social circumstances of art and its production. The story of art and its institutions, like its historiography, have been shown to represent the Western, white male narrative, excluding women artists. This is equally true of the history of icon art of Eastern Christianity.

My aim in this chapter is to examine the role of women icon painters in the Finnish Orthodox Church from the 1950s to today. I use the concept of gender as an analytic category to reveal different attitudes, concepts, and phenomena related to Orthodox icon production in the recent past and present.

#### **The modernist return to tradition**

Modernism as a period in art history (referring especially to painting) is commonly defined as dating from roughly the 1860s to the 1970s. The term is used to describe the style and ideology of the art produced during that era. Specifically, it can be understood to refer to the philosophy of modern art. The most common examples of modernist art are based on the rejection of tradition; at the same time, a contrary approach dwelled on ancient art and sought a return to tradition. To make this diversity visible, the contemporary composer Ivan Moody (2014, 27) has suggested that it would be more helpful to speak in terms of *modernisms* rather than a single, linear modernism. It is reasonable to assume that no European and North American art, icon production

included, has remained outside history and time, resisting modernist influences (see Drucker 1998, 248; Lepine, Lodder, and McKeever 2015, *passim*).

The “rediscovery” of the icon (*Otkrytie ikony*) was a modernist phenomenon in prerevolutionary Russia, which paved the way for revivalist icon painting. The revival of the medieval icon tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was closely connected both to the development of new restoration methods and to religious, philosophical, and aesthetic discussions. This profound rethinking of religious art focused on the very concept of the icon itself. In the revivalist discourse, icon no longer referred to just any Orthodox devotional image, but specifically to images painted according to the traditional mode of representation following ancient prototypes and applying the egg tempera technique (Belting 1996, 19–21; Kotkavaara 1999, 155). The twentieth-century revivalist approach introduced a new stylistic and artistic ideal for Orthodox iconography, which was strongly influenced by modern theories of art. The Orthodox writers Evgeny Trubetskoy, Pavel Florensky, and Léonid Ouspensky were pivotal figures in the modern Orthodox “rediscovery” of the icon and in formulating a modern doctrine of icon theology.<sup>1</sup> Revivalist views rapidly spread to Western Europe via Russian émigrés and the writings of Trubetskoy, Florensky, and especially Ouspensky (Kotkavaara 1999, *passim*; Freeman 2018, 137–151).

The art historian Kari Kotkavaara has pointed out how the revivalist approach broadened traditional professional skill, with an emphasis on artistic activity. The crucial difference between a traditional icon painter and a modern revivalist icon painter lay in the individual’s freedom of choice and liberty to make conscious decisions. Traditional icon painters produced icons for the devotional images market in different styles according to their patrons’ wishes. They usually painted in workshops where several craft workers and apprentices were all responsible for different stages of the work such as preparing the panel, gilding, or painting the ground layers. The master supervised and directed production and put the finishing touches to the images. In contrast, revivalist icon painters were motivated by an artistic, and usually also a religious, desire to paint and create icons. Also, the process of manufacturing icons was different. The holy image was a unique work of art and the artist completed it from the panel’s grounding to the final coating of *olifa* (linseed oil varnish). The magnitude of this change is reflected in the fact that no revivalist icon painters learned their skills in a workshop (Kotkavaara 1999, 12).

The classical literature of art history makes no mention of women as icon painters; the few painters we know by name are men. Therefore, it is quite commonly argued that there were no women iconographers in Russia before the twentieth century (see Yazykova 2010, 72). This conception, however, reflects the old art-history paradigm, in which women artists were invisible. According to Nina M. Turtsova (2010, 10–15), women have, in fact, been painting icons in Russia for over 400 years. At first, they were

active in workshops, as members of icon painting families. Later, when the large-scale production of icons began in the early nineteenth century, the studios where women could learn icon painting and where more experienced female painters worked were often situated in convents.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, during this period, interest in icon painting also grew in wealthy merchant families and among the aristocracy, women as well as men.

There were several women painters among the revivalists, mostly aristocrats. Many of them—for instance, Princess Natalia G. Jashvil, Tatyana V. Kosinskaya, Elena S. L'vova, Julia N. Reitlinger (Sister Joanna), Maria N. Sokolova (Mother Juliania), Sofia Volkova-Irmanova, and (Mother) Maria Skobtsova—emigrated to Western Europe after the Revolution (Kotkavaara 1999, 198–199, 210–224, 258–263, 288–290; Yazykova 2010, 72, 77). Overall, it is safe to say that the appearance of Russian women iconographers as independent artists was connected to the modernist phase of icon art.

### **Women artists as iconographers in post-Second World War Finland**

The easternmost province of Finland before the Second World War, known as Karelia, had been in contact with Russian Orthodoxy for centuries. The Monastery of Valaam (*Valamo* in Finnish), situated on an island in Lake Ladoga, was a religious center and a place for the artistic production of ecclesiastical artifacts. At the turn of the twentieth century, the art atelier of the monastery was especially famous for its icon production. However, as a result of the Second World War, the majority of Orthodox Finns had to leave their homes in Karelia. The monks, too, became homeless evacuees, and their art atelier closed. The war years thus broke the continuum of icon painting in Finland.

Orthodox Finns were introduced to revivalist icon painting and the teachings of what is known as icon theology in the aftermath of the Second World War, when large-scale rebuilding started all over Finland. In the Finnish Orthodox Church, this phase is known as the reconstruction period. The ten-year project focused chiefly on building new churches and chapels, for approximately 90 percent of the buildings and land owned by the Finnish Orthodox Church was situated on territory that had been ceded to the Soviet Union. The project also covered interior design, including furnishing the new houses of worship with icons.

One of the many Finnish artists hired to paint holy images was Martha Neiglick-Platonoff (1889–1964), who painted nearly a hundred icons for new churches and chapels. Neiglick-Platonoff had worked for decades at the Finnish National Opera and the Swedish Theater in Helsinki as a costume and set designer. She was also a distinguished portrait painter. She had studied art in Finland and abroad in the 1910s, but only began to paint icons after she converted to Orthodoxy at the age of 59. She studied Orthodox iconography independently from Christian artworks in European



*Figure 4.1* The artist Martha Neiglick-Platonoff conserving an old icon of the Mother of God in the 1950s. Jalmari Aarnio / RIISA – The Orthodox Church Museum of Finland (OKM VA 2547:1).

museums and churches (Husso 2011, 101–102). Her personal history was full of loss. Her father passed away the very year she was born. In 1921, she lost her husband, the Russian naval officer Lieutenant Igor Platonoff. Finally, during the Second World War, she had to face the death of her only child, Lieutenant Stephen Platonoff, in battle on the Karelian Isthmus (Ihanus 2006; Hätönen 2017, 1).

Another well-known Finnish artist who also took an interest in icon painting was Ina Colliander (1905–1985), a colleague of Neiglick-Platonoff. She had immigrated to Finland in her youth in 1923 and had married another émigré from St. Petersburg, the writer Tito (Fritiof) Colliander, in 1930. Six years later, while living in the small Estonian town of Pechory, near the Pskovo-Petchersky Monastery, they both converted to Orthodoxy. Colliander is famous for her graphic art, especially woodcuts, which are often inspired by Orthodox iconography. She also created religious mosaics for some Orthodox churches in Finland from the 1960s onwards (Anttonen 2000; Konttinen 2017, 203–204).



*Figure 4.2* The language of ancient iconography was studied through art history. The artist Ina Colliander painting an icon of the Mother of God of Kazan in 1968. Helena Nikkanen / Private collection.

For both Colliander and Neiglick-Platonoff, the will to paint icons arose primarily from religious conviction. Both had been educated and started their careers as artists, but perceived Orthodox iconography as a special form of artistic expression, which required personal devotion and humility. This became evident when both artists were asked to teach icon painting in Helsinki during the 1960s, but declined. They saw themselves as beginners and felt unqualified to teach either the tempera technique or iconography. In fact, Ina Colliander later attended icon painting classes as a pupil in order to learn the traditional tempera technique (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2002, 291). This is surprising as Colliander had already begun to copy and restore icons in Pechory in the 1930s. However, we know from her letters that icons struck her as spiritual and modernist artworks:

I don't appreciate only form in art, as form must have a certain connection with content. Then a balanced work of art can come into existence. It is important to find the correct ratio between form and content. Naturally, both form and content must arise from one's innermost being, but it may be that content proves more important than form. The most naïve form can often reach to unforeseen depths.

(Colliander, quoted in Konttinen 2017, 213)<sup>3</sup>

### Can women paint icons?

A youth group for students of Russian origin formed in the Orthodox Parish of Helsinki in 1962, and its members began to take an interest in Russian art and culture with the aim of reviving some of the customs and religious traditions of their forebears. Four of them, Irina Tchernych, Lisa Hoviheimo, Lana Rubanin, and Marianna Flinckenberg, set up an icon painting group the following year. Its leader was Kirill Gluschkoff, who had many international connections, especially among Russian émigrés. Their interest grew from religious and artistic aspirations, which were supported by the arrival of new, imported icons for the Helsinki Orthodox cemetery church. These had been painted by Georgi Morozov and Elena L'vova, Russian émigrés and members of the *Ikona* association in Paris (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2002, 290–291). In her memoirs, Marianna Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff (2017, 61–62) describes the impact of the icons:

We were thrilled. Could we also paint icons like those in the Church of the Prophet Elijah? They were like medieval icon art, colorful and highly stylized compositions, which were completely different from the romantic icons in other parish churches. The icons painted by the *Ikona* association proved that it was possible even in our day to take icon art “back to its sources” and create holy images, which reflected spiritual asceticism and harmony rather than external beauty.

In 1964, the members of the group received written instructions for icon painting from Reverend Georgi Drobot (1925–2011), who was also a member of the Parisian Icon Association and with whom Kirill Gluschkoff had become acquainted the previous summer. Gluschkoff also connected the group with the icon painter Léonid Ouspensky (1902–1987). In the following years, group members traveled to Paris to learn icon painting technique from Ouspensky, then returned to share their knowledge with others as teachers (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2017, 63–64). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, this pursuit of traditional iconography had also spread to other parts of Finland.<sup>4</sup>

I have not found any articles or archival documents questioning the authority of either Neiglick-Platonoff or Colliander as iconographers. On the contrary, the two women were generally highly appreciated among Orthodox clergy and parishioners. It is therefore somewhat surprising that the younger newcomers faced resentment in Finnish Orthodox circles. Marianna Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff recalls that especially the members of the Helsinki parish administration and some elderly priests disapproved of their activities. In the critics' opinion, women, particularly young women, did not have the right to paint icons, because they lacked the seriousness of character required for this sacred task. Furthermore, the leader





Figure 4.3 Marianna Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff painting an icon of Christ the Almighty at her home in 1968–1969. Following Ouspensky’s teaching, she mixed the colors in the palm of her hand. Volker von Bonin / Finnish Heritage Agency (HK7137:1108).

of the Finnish Orthodox Church, Archbishop Paul (1914–1988), had serious reservations regarding the efforts of the Helsinki icon painting group (Flinckenberg-Gluchkoff 2017, 65–66).

The roles of men and women are quite clearly defined in the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. Women do not have access to priesthood. In Finland, women regularly sang in church choirs, but could not conduct the choir in services until the 1970s, when this position was no longer regarded as a clerical one. An icon painter, however, has no official status in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although according to tradition icon painters should ideally be monks or at least pious laymen. Strict qualifications for iconographers are set out in the *Stoglav*<sup>5</sup> decisions, together with directives on how a master should teach his apprentices and how bishops should supervise painters and iconography in general. It is understood in these texts that an iconographer should be male (Jääskinen 1984, 90–92). Archbishop Paul’s background partly explains his hesitation: he had adopted the teachings and traditions of Russian Orthodoxy in his childhood and youth, at the latest during his years as a monk at the Monastery of Valaam.

In 1965, Marianna Flinckenberg traveled to Kuopio to teach icon painting, and on the same journey, she met with the Archbishop. Well aware of the Archbishop's critical opinion, she was apprehensive about the discussion. She was careful to explain that the group members were not trying to act as learned iconographers but rather as humble collectors of knowledge and skills. Their sincere goal was to "light the torch" and pass it on to following generations. After a long, profound discussion, Archbishop Paul gave his blessing for their endeavors (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2017, 65–66).

### A female art historian challenges tradition

Revivalist icon painting was the offspring of both the academic and religious discovery of icons. Art-historical research into icons and the Orthodox cultural heritage took major leaps forward in prerevolutionary Russia and like revivalist icon painting it spread to Western Europe with Russian émigrés after the Revolution. In Finland, the art historian Aune Jääskinen (1932–2015), herself Orthodox, was fascinated by the works of Alexander I. Anisimov, Nikodim P. Kondakov, Nikolay P. Likhachev, and others. Inspired by the writings and methods of her Russian predecessors, she wanted to submit the icon "The Mother of God of Konevets" (*Konevitsan Jumalanäiti* in Finnish) to technical analysis. She proposed that this icon, by then located at the Monastery of New Valaam in Heinävesi, should be examined by experienced restorers to shed light on its actual origin and age.

The Konevets icon is the most cherished holy image in the possession of the Finnish Orthodox Church. Therefore, it is perhaps no wonder that



*Figure 4.4* The art historian Aune Jääskinen and Hierodeacon Joonas in front of the icon "The Mother of God of Konevets." The icon was covered by an enigmatic riza prior to the research that led to its restoration in the 1960s. Private collection.



Jääskinen's project was vigorously opposed by the leaders of the church for devotional reasons. Jääskinen was ready to challenge the medieval legends, according to which St. Arsenius of Konevets, one of the most prominent of Karelian Saints, had brought the icon from Mount Athos to the island of Konevets in 1393. Jääskinen's research plans led to a long bureaucratic controversy between herself, the Orthodox Church administration, and the Monastery of New Valaam. In 1966, Aune Jääskinen's brother, Reverend Erkki Piironen, finally decided to write to Archbishop Paul about her hardships. He assured the Archbishop that his sister was motivated by a sincere desire to help the church by means of academic research. He recounted how his sister had asked him, "is academic research unholy or despicable?" and "is positive affection for an icon and its history un-Orthodox?," noting that he had had no answers to give her. In the letter, he wondered whether the real reason for the researcher's difficulties was that she was a woman.<sup>6</sup> While he may well have been correct in assuming that the church, as a patriarchal institution, could not accept a female researcher, in this case the researcher's maverick and assertive approach may have proven even more troubling than her gender.

Eventually, the church administration gave in. The icon was taken to Moscow, where it underwent various tests, which shifted its estimated age by approximately 100 years. According to Soviet experts, the icon dated from the late fifteenth or more probably the sixteenth century, and not the fourteenth, as had previously been assumed (Jääskinen 1971, 17). Jääskinen successfully defended her doctoral dissertation on this topic in 1971 and continued to work uncompromisingly as an icon expert. Nevertheless, this episode—alongside similar difficulties she faced in other vocational circles—marked her for life. Her narratives about her professional life mirror those of many male historians in that she portrayed her research career as a heroic struggle through hardships and anguish culminating in conquest and the possession of power over history (Jääskinen 1971, 1998, *passim*; Smith 2000, 116–129; Husso 2011, 204–207).

The rise of this new type of icon research among Finnish art historians coincided with the arrival of modernist icon painting in Finland. These were two parallel events, undoubtedly interrelated on many levels. Jääskinen's research, lecturing, and publishing activities provided a lot of practical information for revivalist iconographers and future researchers (Merras 2014, 106–107; see also Kahla 2014, 46). Her book about the masterpieces of icon art (Jääskinen 1966) was the first publication on icons with color illustrations to be produced in the Finnish language (Flinckenberg-Gluschkoff 2002, 292).

### **The post-war cultural policy of the Finnish Orthodox Church**

I have spoken of the Finnish Orthodox Church as if the meaning of the term was quite self-evident. This is not the case. The Finnish-speaking national Orthodox Church was constructed in the 1910s and the 1920s, alongside

the birth of the Finnish nation state. It involved breaking the jurisdictional tie between the Finnish diocese and the oppressed Orthodox Church in Bolshevik Russia, founding an autonomous Finnish Orthodox archbishopric and replacing Archbishop Seraphim, a Russian, with Herman Aav, who was Estonian. In the same period, Finnish replaced Church Slavonic as the language used in church services in most parts of the country. Icons and church textiles were designed in a more nationalistic fashion.

In the eyes of many Lutheran Finns, the Orthodox minority was associated with Russians and their liturgical use of icons seemed odd, even idolatrous. Many Orthodox Finns changed their Russian names to Finnish ones, including the future Archbishop Paul himself. Many abandoned Orthodoxy and joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Orthodox parents frequently allowed their children to be baptized Lutheran. Russian elements in the Finnish Orthodox Church were felt to be burdensome, a negative heritage (Suominen-Kokkonen 2016, *passim*). This tendency was reflected in cultural matters. From the 1920s, church leaders wanted to phase out Russian influences by controlling church art: architecture, liturgical textiles, church music, and icons.

The nationalist project continued after the Second World War, merging with the more general process through which the Orthodox Church was assimilated into non-Orthodox, secularizing Finnish society. In post-war Finland, ecclesial authorities paid a lot of attention to its public image and cultural identity. The cultural policy of the church was based on a revivalist vision of returning to the original sources of Orthodoxy in the Byzantine tradition (e.g., Loima 2004, 164–170, 190–194; Husso 2011, 198; Takala-Roszczenko 2015, 303–311). The public image of the church was carefully constructed in the media, with many publications introducing the Orthodox artistic heritage and culture to the general public. In particular, the founding of the Orthodox Church Museum in 1957 gained a lot of attention in the press, where its collections were described by Archbishop Paul and the curator of the museum, Protodeacon Leo Kasanko.

As acknowledged artists, Martha Neiglick-Platonoff and Ina Colliander were welcomed into the Finnish Orthodox Church with joy, probably because their status and commitment to Orthodoxy were seen as endorsing the church and strengthening its effort to construct a sophisticated and respectable public face. By this time, both Neiglick-Platonoff and Colliander had also adjusted to the disdained position of female artists in early twentieth-century Finnish society. Female artists constantly negotiated between their creative will and prevailing social circumstances, which constrained their professional and personal lives. Art historian Riitta Kontinen (2017, 6–7, 274–287) has noted that until recently, female artists were excluded from the official history of art in Finland. The patriarchal order of the Orthodox Church was thus nothing new to Neiglick-Platonoff and Colliander. They felt no need to challenge it.

Until the arrival of revivalist icon painting directly from Parisian émigré circles, the spokespersons for Orthodox religion and culture in Finland had been bishops and priests. Suddenly, the Helsinki youth group was attracting media attention and appearing frequently in Finnish newspapers, on the radio, and even on television. To further complicate the matter, most of the members were of Russian origin, an attribute that was politically problematic in Finland, both in society and the Orthodox Church.

From this perspective, these artists' gender seems secondary. As far as I can see, the issue at stake was the use of power. Who had the right to represent the national Orthodox Church? Were the representatives obedient to their (male) leaders or did they endanger the carefully constructed public image? The hampering of Aune Jääskinen's research can also be understood in this context. She was independent and persistent and by no means content to repeat what churchmen dictated. She challenged the Orthodox tradition on many levels: first by valuing the scientific facts of her day over the religious convictions of the faithful, and second by adopting the (male) role of an academic historian in contrast to that of an obedient believer.

In the 1970s, icon painting became a very popular hobby in Finland and begun to be taught in various secular adult education institutes around the country. This naturally had many consequences. Due to a shortage of competent teachers, the teaching quality varied a lot. The teachers' lack of in-depth knowledge of Orthodox iconography and theology resulted in iconographical errors and amateurish modes of expression in newly painted icons. Within the Orthodox Church, these images were looked on as libelous and trivialized, leading Archbishop Paul to order priests to bless only icons that were traditional in character (Merras 2014, 107, 110–116). This criticism no longer focused on the gender of the painter but his or her religious knowledge and devotion. Many people outside the church had become attracted to Orthodox icons. Mostly, these were Lutheran Finns with no theological knowledge of Orthodoxy and its canonical definition of sacred images, which apparently caused anxiety among Orthodox clergy and parishioners and spurred them to protect the tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Often, the most vocal “defenders” of icons were women. One was a 21-year-old student, Auli Pietarinen (later Martiskainen). Her article in the Orthodox journal *Aamun Koitto* (1976, 184–185) emphasized the duty of iconographers: “as an iconographer I am passing on the Holy Tradition. Therefore the responsibility is extensive.” She felt that icon painters had a twofold responsibility: first, to tradition and, second, to the public who had the right to experience the tradition in “unchanged and dogmatically correct” form. Icon painters needed to be loyal to the teachings and faith of the Orthodox Church. This required an active relationship with the church: without the holy sacraments, an icon remains without spirit, even though it may be technically perfect. Many Orthodox believers shared these opinions, but did not dare utter them openly. One such person may have been Archbishop Paul himself, for (as Auli Martiskainen mentioned in a personal

e-mail to the author of this chapter), he had asked her to present her views in a conference for iconographers.

In the 1970s, Archbishop Paul was once more faced with the question of who had the right to paint icons. In an interview for Finland's largest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (Väinämö 1976), his answer was imbued with political correctness: "In the Archbishop's opinion, people other than Orthodox believers can paint icons, if they meet certain requisites." Converting to Orthodoxy was not a precondition. Nevertheless, in the very same article, Silja Sandqvist, a teacher of icon painting, expressed a much stricter opinion, mentioning that in Helsinki they had decided to exclude new non-Orthodox members from icon painting courses. Furthermore, according to Sandqvist, icon painting had to be supervised by Orthodox bishops: "An icon is an acknowledgment of the Orthodox faith, and if one cannot understand this faith, it is better to abstain from painting icons." As mentioned, in the 1960s, it was not always clear whether Orthodox women could paint icons or talk about icon painting in public. These examples show that the situation was reversed in the following decade. Female icon painters were making the sharpest comments and the churchmen followed suit in a more reserved manner.

The dispute eventually led to action. In 1977, a special Icon Board was founded to "promote the traditional Orthodox meaning of icon painting and supervise the teaching given about icons." Led by Archbishop Paul and Metropolitan John, its members were noted icon painters, women, who had studied under the guidance of Léonid Ouspensky in Paris.<sup>8</sup> The Icon Board was to guide painters in theological and iconographical issues. Newly painted icons were brought to inspection events where board members evaluated them. If the board approved it, the icon gained permission to be blessed. If they found errors, the painter received instructions in how to correct his or her painting. Despite its high-minded aim to educate painters and control the production of Orthodox icons, the board's judgments were often perceived as harsh and the inspections aroused resistance. Furthermore, the clergy was somewhat confused as to which icons they were allowed to bless. So this attempt to supervise and direct icon production was not successful, and after a few years, the project was discontinued.

### Observations on the present situation

Icon painting in Finland today has strong roots in Russian émigré revivalism and Western modernism. The number of female iconographers has grown steadily since the 1950s, although only a few of them have practiced icon painting professionally. Icon painting does not usually provide an adequate livelihood, but is more of a serious task for someone of religious conviction. Margit Lintu, for instance, has steadfastly painted hundreds of icons for various churches alongside being the wife of a parish priest and the mother of five children (Okulov 2007, 15–16). On some occasions,

artistic education and profession have served as a basis for icon painting. The graphic artist Tuula Murtola was the first teacher of icon painting at Valamo Lay Academy in the 1980s and 1990s, and has also painted many icons for both churches and private use. Liisa Kuningas and Ulla Vaajakallio are other artists who are also icon painters.

Nowadays, women iconographers are a common phenomenon in many countries. One could very well argue that most icon painters in Finland today are women. Many, although not all, belong to the Association of Finnish Icon Painters; 90 percent of its members are women.

Is this female predominance reflected in recent Finnish Orthodox iconography? Orthodox iconography is generally a conventional and established entity with little room for innovation. A traditional approach is usually highly valued and perceived as being canonically correct. Nevertheless, one specific feature of icons produced today can be connected to the painters' gender: the increasing popularity of icons depicting holy women. Alongside the countless variants on the theme of the Mother of God, more and more images of women saints are in churches and private collections. This is probably partly because students of icon painting usually create an icon of their own personal heavenly intercessor. As the number of female painters has increased, so has the number of new icons depicting female saints.

Another recent change concerns style. The revivalists emphasized simplicity. Excessive decorations such as rizas, frames, and gilded accessories were forbidden, since in the eyes of modernist iconographers they spoiled the spiritual and artistic expression. Nowadays, icon painters tend to pursue new means of decorating their icons, and rare iconographic models from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are back in fashion. This tendency was clearly visible in the icon exhibition arranged by the Association of Finnish Icon Painters at the New Valaam Monastery in 2017–2018. Overall, present-day icons are considerably more eclectic than those produced by the modernists (Husso 2017, 15).

## **Conclusion**

In Finland, discussions surrounding the gender of icon painters have intertwined with the post-Second World War reconstruction of the identity of the Finnish Orthodox Church as a national minority. Naturally, the active and more independent role of women as artists and professionals has also reflected the changing status of women in Western societies more generally.

When Orthodox Finns were introduced to modern, revivalist trends during the reconstruction period, the new role of women as iconographers highlighted the heretofore unchallenged division between official and unofficial Orthodoxy. Official Orthodoxy was patriarchal and hierarchical; only male specialists were entitled to preach from the *solea* (the platform in front of the iconostasis) and to represent the Orthodox Church and tradition in the media. In everyday life, women occupied the unofficial sector.

They were parishioners, priests' wives, and teachers. In these roles, they certainly mediated tradition but in a private capacity and inside the institution of the church.

This situation began to change during the 1950s, when Martha Neiglick-Platonoff and Ina Colliander dominated Orthodox icon art. They paved the way for the next generation of female iconographers and academics who openly challenged the gender division by performing publicly as advocates and interpreters of Orthodox art and culture. The 1960s thus witnessed not just the appearance of revivalist icon art in Finland, but also the entry of women professionals into the fields of icon production and related research. This caused controversy among Orthodox (male) authorities who, since the 1940s, had been carefully constructing a socially acceptable public image for the church based on its artistic heritage and culture.

Finnish revivalist icon painting was strongly influenced by the teachings of the Parisian icon painter Léonid Ouspensky. His theological thinking and interpretations of tradition became well known among Orthodox clergy and iconographers, and he was generally considered to represent the true and canonical teachings of the church. Following Ouspensky, the theological content of icons was seen as their most essential aspect. When icon painting became a popular hobby outside church circles, many Orthodox iconographers felt a need to protect the Orthodox icon tradition from (allegedly) false interpretations and secularization. Women iconographers became the primary guardians of Orthodoxy. They defended theological convictions in public more firmly than their bishops or priests. Perhaps their unofficial position outside the hierarchy and their role as artists allowed them to express their opinions more freely than any official representative of the church could.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the revivalist discourse was considered to be the true teaching of the church. It was seen as a return to tradition, to original sources. It involved rejecting the artistic expression of (especially) the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was condemned as distorted by Western influences. Paradoxically, what most Orthodox believers see as the church's traditional "theology of the icon," dating back to Byzantine times, is essentially Western European modern art theory, as Evan Freeman (2018, 150) has recently pointed out.

From the origins of modernist icon painting, a significant proportion of iconographers have been women, not just in Finland but around the Orthodox world. Icon painting has clearly given women a meaningful way of expressing their artistic creativity in an Orthodox context. There is no direct rule or canon forbidding women from painting holy images. Consequently, the question "can women paint icons?" is more connected to social circumstances than any theological framework. In revivalist thinking, however, the personal attributes of an icon painter are assimilated to his or her artistic work and the very icon itself. An icon depicts church teaching. This makes its creator equal to priests and bishops, who traditionally possess the authority to teach, preach, and guard the dogmas of faith. Pavel Florensky

(1996, 90), whose thinking was strongly influenced by symbolist art theories, even maintained that an iconographer must be much more than a cleric: the role requires greater humility, purity and piety, and a profounder practice of fasting and prayer. Icon painters always discipline themselves more strictly than they are required to, becoming genuine ascetics. If icon painting is indeed seen as equal to priesthood with severe spiritual conviction, women iconographers unavoidably raise the more complex question of women's priesthood in the Orthodox Church.

## Notes

- 1 It should be made clear that the Orthodox Church does not have a separate "icon theology." Orthodox views about the theological significance and devotional use of icons are generally based on the teachings of St. John of Damascus and the decisions of the ecumenical synods. Furthermore, from the Church's point of view, icons have always been in liturgical use and therefore concepts like "discovery" and "revival" denote rather a specific cultural phenomenon than change in ecclesiastical liturgical practice. (See also Musin 2005, 18; Freeman 2015, 2018, *passim*.)
- 2 For instance, Japan's first icon painter Yamashita Rin (1857–1939) studied at the Novodevichiy Convent of the Resurrection in St. Petersburg (Uspensky 1995, 41).
- 3 All translations from Finnish are by the author.
- 4 In addition, the Finnish icon painter and conservator Helena Nikkanen passed Ouspensky's teachings on to the United States. She taught icon painting at the Saint Vladimir's Seminary in New York in 1982.
- 5 *The Book of One Hundred Chapters*, known as the *Stoglav*, contains the decisions of the Russian Church Council of 1551.
- 6 Erkki Piironen's letter to Archbishop Paavali, May 8, 1966, in the personal archive of Erkki Piironen [Finnish National Archives, Joensuu], XIII E:1. EPA/KA/JO.
- 7 The Uniate priest Robert de Caluwé (1913–2005) was a pioneer revivalist icon painter in Finland. He organized icon painting courses at the ecumenical center in Espoo over the course of several decades, influencing the work of many icon painters. However, his being a priest of the Eastern-Rite Catholic Church caused distrust in Finnish Orthodox circles and his contribution to icon painting was often ignored. Without a doubt, the criticism was partly directed at his activities, but he gradually became more appreciated. In 1977, he received the Pro Finlandia medal in acknowledgment of his artistic work (Elomaa 2010; Husso 2011, 98–99).
- 8 The artist Petros Sasaki (1939–1999) was invited onto the board, but resigned after the first meeting. The members were Margit Lintu, Auli Pietarinen, Irina Tsernych-Pätt, Mervi Siilto, and Silja Sandqvist. (File titled "Ikonineuvosto 1977" in the personal archive of Archbishop John [Archives of the Finnish Orthodox Church, Kuopio], see esp. minutes and the first bulletin of the Icon Board and Petros Sasaki's letter to Archbishop Paul dated November 17, 1977.)

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## 5 What has not been assumed has not been redeemed

The forgotten Orthodox  
theological condonement of  
women's ordination in the 1996  
Orthodox and Old Catholic  
consultation on gender and the  
apostolic ministry

*Peter-Ben Smit*

This chapter considers a relatively unknown case from the history of Orthodox Christianity's interaction with the question of gender. It concerns a formal consultation between Orthodox and Old Catholic theologians in 1996, which came to the conclusion that there are no theological objections to the ordination of women. This conclusion makes this consultation an interesting case. I present the consultation here in its historical context and provide an analysis of the hermeneutics and reasoning. The materials are strongly theological in nature, which must be reflected in the terminology used in the chapter. Yet, the issues at stake are of a more general hermeneutical and historical nature: they concern the manner in which Orthodox Christianity relates to and receives "tradition" as well as the question of how social issues and theology and the discourses of the social sciences and theology relate to each other.

Orthodox theology, certainly in its more official expressions, is hardly known for providing theological reasoning in favor of the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry. The same applies to official Roman Catholic theology. Their reasoning is, at its core, this: the Christian tradition does not authorize the ordination of women, given that Christ only called men to be apostles. In addition, it is frequently observed that the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry was not common practice in the early church and that men and women are different to such a degree that they must live out distinct vocations. Churches that deviate from this policy have to give an account for doing so. This demand occasioned the consultation studied here. It was part of the discernment of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, a communion of non-Roman Catholic Churches with backgrounds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concerning their decision to ordain women to the apostolic ministry.<sup>1</sup> As these Old Catholic

Churches had been in ecumenical dialog with the Orthodox Churches between 1975 and 1987, they felt obliged to think the matter through together.

The case studied here, therefore, concerns a formal ecumenical theological consultation. It occurred with the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, and under the patronage of the then Metropolitan of Switzerland, Damaskinos (Papandreou), and their Old Catholic counterparts, Archbishop Antonius Jan Glazemaker of Utrecht (the Netherlands) and Bishop Hans Gerny of Switzerland, acting as president and secretary of the International Bishops' Conference of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht (cf. Von Arx 1994; Hallebeek 1994). After two meetings, a consensus on the possibility of female ordination was reached, which surprised even some of the members of the commission conducting the consultation. The "Common Considerations" that constitute the key output of the consultation state:

We have reached the common conclusion that there are no compelling dogmatic-theological reasons for not ordaining women to the priesthood. The soteriological dimension of the church is decisive for us: the salvation of humankind and the entire creation in Jesus Christ in whom the new creation is being accomplished. We were especially guided by the conviction that was central to the ancient church: only that which has been assumed and united with God has been saved. It is human nature, common to men and women, that has been assumed by our Lord.  
(Von Arx and Kallis 2002a, 505)

What reasoning gave rise to these conclusions? In this chapter, I outline the process leading up to the consultation, provide the ecumenical and theological context, and analyze the argument as it is laid out in the consultation itself and in the documentation that was published along with it, both in German and in English. Overall, the chapter highlights aspects of Orthodox theologizing about gender that have been given less than the attention due to them in the past 20 years. Thus, an important part of the picture of Orthodox considerations about gender is understood better, both in terms of its contents, its emergence, and its reception. In addition, light is shed on the reception of insights from the ancient church in Orthodox theology in an ecumenical context.

## **Old Catholic ecumenism**

Church unity and involvement in the ecumenical movement have been a core concern of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht. Having come into existence due to conflicts among Catholics over (especially, yet not only) questions of church authority, they have sought unity with other churches since the late nineteenth century (see Smit 2011; cf. Schoon 2015). The term "old" in the name does not indicate a conservative stance, but

rather an orientation to the “early church” or the “ancient church” in order to correct wrong developments at a later date and as a source of theological inspiration, not in the least regarding church reunion. From the start, the Old Catholic Churches have looked for ecumenical partners on the basis of the conviction that being a Catholic Church means being in communion with other Catholic Churches in which their own theological identity can be recognized (cf. Von Arx 1992, 2008; Rein 1993, 1994).

This course of action was established firmly after one of the major conflicts leading to the emergence of the Old Catholic Churches: the First Vatican Council (1870) that turned papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction into dogmas. Gatherings such as the 1871 Munich Conference of (Old) Catholics, a subsequent series of (Old) Catholic Congresses, and in particular, the Bonn Reunion Conferences of 1874 and 1875 played a key role in this. Soon, a programmatic approach was developed that looked for ecumenical rapprochement on the basis of the faith and order of the early church (Von Arx 2008; cf. Küry 1982). Key elements were the reception of the faith and order of the seven Ecumenical Councils (notably, the canon of the Holy Scriptures and the Christological and Trinitarian doctrines), an episcopal-synodal ecclesiology (i.e., with both a bishop and a synod), and a sacramental life in continuity with that of the early church.

In the first few decades following the First Vatican Council, this approach led to a principle of tri- or quadrilateral dialog with those partners in which the churches continuing the Catholic tradition following the Council could recognize the same Catholic faith and order: the Church of Utrecht, Anglican Churches, and Orthodox Churches (see Schoon 2004; Von Arx 2008; Smit 2011, 180–199). Communion with the first was formalized in 1889, establishing the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches, with the second in 1931, and with the third it was established theologically in 1987, but the Orthodox Churches have not confirmed this yet.<sup>2</sup> Further dialog partners were added to these three in the course of time. With this broader background, the Orthodox–Old Catholic dialog itself can be sketched.

### **Orthodox–Old Catholic dialog**

The dialog between the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches dates back to the earliest phase of Catholic reorientation following the First Vatican Council (cf. Von Arx 1989b). In particular, at the Bonn Reunion Conferences of 1874 and 1875 (cf. Reusch 2002), a common basis was found to work toward unity between Orthodox, Anglicans, and Old Catholics. As a background to the consultation of 1996, the course of this process is surveyed here.

The years 1871–1888, prior to the establishment of the Union of Utrecht in 1889, can be considered as the first and foundational period. Subsequently, a more formal dialog took place—by correspondence—between theological commissions based in St. Petersburg and Rotterdam

(cf. Von Arx 1989b). The commissions exchanged memoranda with questions and answers about the theological identity of both churches, leading to a statement by the St. Petersburg commission (1912) with the approval of the Holy Synod that all Orthodox questions had been answered satisfactorily (cf. Kury 1982). This dialog lasted until 1917, when political changes in Russia made further dialog impossible.

Following a shift in Orthodox agency and initiative from Moscow (and St. Petersburg) to Constantinople due to changed political circumstances, the next, third, phase of the dialog lasted from 1920 to 1960. It had at its core a meeting in 1931 in Bonn, three months after the Anglican–Old Catholic meeting in the same city that had led to the Bonn agreement. The meeting itself was promising, as no dogmatic obstacles to ecclesial communion could be identified. However, the Orthodox reception turned out to be disappointing: the Anglican–Old Catholic communion was suddenly and unexpectedly seen as an obstacle to Orthodox–Old Catholic communion (Von Arx 1989b, 15–16).

From 1960, the dialog received new impetus and a fourth phase commenced, lasting until 1975. Preparatory diplomacy led to a statement of the Pan-Orthodox Conference that underlined the commitment and self-obligation of the Orthodox Churches to dialog with the Old Catholics (Von Arx 1989b, 16–17; cf. Smit 2016, 197–218). The Old Catholics submitted a formal statement of their faith (*homologia*) to the ranking Orthodox hierarchy, the Ecumenical Patriarch, in 1970, which also helped to clear the way.

The envisioned “dialog of truth” began in 1975 and lasted until 1987; it constitutes the fifth phase of Orthodox–Old Catholic ecumenical relations. During it, the joint commission, consisting of members appointed by all autocephalous/independent Orthodox (14) and Old Catholic Churches (8), worked its way through the entirety of the Christian faith, producing something close to a shared and agreed survey of dogmatic theology, phrased in the language of the early church and the Church Fathers, on whose thinking the dialog had agreed to base itself.<sup>3</sup> Upon its completion, the commission concluded that, according to its view, agreement in the faith existed, which could be the basis for ecclesial communion.

Following this fifth phase of the now completed dialog, the achieved theological results were received by the churches involved. This sixth phase is still ongoing, rather slow, and characterized by a number of paradoxes (cf. Kallis 2006; Von Arx 2009). For instance, following the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain around 1990, the Orthodox Churches in formerly socialist countries saw a remarkable revival. However, this was usually less ecumenically minded and frequently of a nationalist theological outlook, and therefore, hesitant vis-à-vis rapprochement to churches that were seen to represent Western culture. During the same period, Old Catholic Churches moved to ordain women to the apostolic ministry, much to the dislike of many Orthodox Churches (despite the consultation that is the focus of this chapter). From 2004 onwards, a joint working party

has been tasked by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Utrecht with furthering theological conversations and encounters between the members of Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches. A significant expression of these continuing close ties was the official visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, to the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands in 2014 (see Hasselaar and Smit 2015) and the participation of the Archbishop of Utrecht as an observer in the Pan-Orthodox Council of 2016.

### **The Orthodox–Old Catholic consultation on the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry**

The most prominent discussion in Old Catholic theology in the latter part of the twentieth century concerned, on the surface, the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry. Under the surface, however, other questions were also at stake (cf. Von Arx 1999; Oud-Katholieke Kerk van Nederland 1999; Vobbe 2005; Berlis 2008, 2018, 2019; Smit 2011, 389–419). These concerned the theology of ministry as such, societal developments (i.e., women’s rights), the nature of tradition as well as theological anthropology and theological understanding of gender. Moreover, the issue of how one should reach a decision to begin with was also crucial: to whom would one be accountable? Here, I present the discussion and its eventual outcome in terms of what this meant for the Old Catholic understanding of the appeal to the early church and to tradition. This helps to clarify how the 1996 consultation could reach the conclusions that it did.

From the late 1960s onwards, prompted by ecumenical relationships—including relations with the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, preparations for dialog with the Orthodox Churches, and involvement in the broader ecumenical movement—and social developments, Old Catholic Churches and their theologians saw the need to engage in renewed study and reflection on a number of interrelated questions. These concerned the significance of and the appeal to the early church, the theology of ministry, and the admission of women to the apostolic ministry. The latter two questions proved to be catalysts for addressing the former, as a repositioning of a theology of ministry was called for in the new theological and social setting.

The ensuing discussion led to a consensus at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s that an (unqualified) appeal to the undivided church of the first millennium was no longer tenable. Instead, a different view was needed. It was expressed representatively by the 1981 International Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference, a body that meets usually annually as a key theological “think tank” within the communion of Old Catholic Churches:

The Church (...) should be an ongoing process of discerning truth and decisions, and of common action, involving all members. Ensuring the participation of all is the calling of the ministry in apostolic succession.

In this manner, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht believe that they continue the tradition (life and calling) of the undivided church of the first millennium in a manner appropriate with regard to contemporary challenges.

(International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference 1983, 67–68, translated by the author)<sup>4</sup>

The appeal to the early church is, therefore, a plea both in terms of form and content. The faith of the early church should be discerned in a manner that does justice to the order of the early church. It has to be a form of “reception-in-communion,” in which all members play a role (cf. Visser 1996). This approach is also apparent in a statement by a consultation of theologians in 1995.<sup>5</sup> In line with the general development of Old Catholic theology, this conference stressed in its conclusion a synodal and conciliar style in processes of discernment. Decisions need to be made in a church by all its members (synodality) in consultation with other churches (conciliarity). Therefore, the question of the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry was not “just” a discussion about the place of women in church or about the nature of ministry as such, but one that touched upon a key fundamental theological issue: the understanding of tradition and its reception and continuation (cf. Suter 2016). Moreover, it was not just a matter of the Old Catholic Churches. On the contrary, they needed to talk with those close to them to do justice to the notion of “conciliarity,” of being “in council” with each other.

Accordingly, the discussion about ministry in general and about the ordination of women in particular took the shape of a conversation in communion, both within the communion of the member churches of the Union of Utrecht and with ecumenical partners, notably the churches of the Anglican Communion, the Orthodox Churches, and the Roman Catholic Church (cf. Von Arx 1999; Berlis 2008). The Roman Catholic position left, at this point, relatively little room for discussion, given the publication of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* in 1994 (preceded by *Inter insigniores* in 1976).<sup>6</sup> No additional discussion was therefore pursued. With Anglican partners, the theology of ministry was discussed in general, as it was with Orthodox partners, leading to joint statements on a shared and renewed view of ministry (cf. Rein 1993), but not yet to a definitive position on the ordination of women.

As Anglicans were generally moving toward ordaining women, intercommunion was not threatened by its introduction on either side of the relationship.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the conversation with the Orthodox Churches was seen as of particular interest. It was used to test the viability of the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry as an ecumenically recognizable faithful reception of the faith and order of the early church. Also, the consultation was seen as a further deepening of the common theology of ministry that had been expressed during the formal dialog (1975–1987)



and that included the statement, “[e]xcept for the as yet not fully understood arrangement of deaconesses, the undivided church did not permit the ordination of women” (Von Arx 1989a, V/7).

### The “common considerations” of the consultation

The consultation took place in 1996 involving two meetings. The results which, despite their publication in English and German, have remained somewhat hidden, came at the time as a surprise to many.<sup>8</sup> The joint consultation reached the unanimous conclusion that there were no theological objections to the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry. Both the results of the consultation as such and their line of argument as they appear in the “Common Considerations” summarizing the conclusions of the consultation are of interest here. Together, they show how an appeal to the early church factually functions and how a faithful reception of the faith and order of the early church has its place in (an ongoing search for) ecclesial communion.<sup>9</sup>

The consultation consisted of contributions to the following topics, as outlined in the introduction to the documentation (direct quote):

- 1 The role of women in the early church:
  - Women and ministry;
  - Patristic bases for a theological anthropology, viewing women as human beings and women in their difference from men;
  - The distinction between the basis of a continuing valid tradition and traditions that are conditioned by time and changeable.
- 2 The gender aspects of the creation from a theological, Christological, and soteriological perspective.
- 3 The Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary typologies:
  - Their relationship to one another;
  - The Eve-Mary typology in theology and the status of women in contemporary society;
  - The emancipation of women as a challenge to the church.
- 4 Presidency at the Eucharist in the context of the theology of icons; questions about the ecclesial representation of Christ through the priesthood.
- 5 The question of ordination of women in regard to the communion of churches; developing theological criteria for the question of what consequences the practice of women’s ordination might have for the church community.

In addition to these five topics, two additional topics were added to the agenda of the consultation:

- 6 Analysis of the ordination of women question from the perspective of depth psychology.



- 7 The ordination of women question in the eyes of an Orthodox woman.  
(Von Arx and Kallis 2002b, 497–498).

It would go beyond the limits of this chapter to discuss the various contributions to the meeting in detail. Therefore, the focus shifts to its conclusions, as documented in “Common Considerations of the Orthodox–Old Catholic Consultation on the Role of Women in the Church and on the Ordination of Women as an Ecumenical Issue” (Von Arx and Kallis 2002a). These “Common Considerations” begin with preliminary remarks by the editors, Orthodox theologian Anastasios Kallis and Old Catholic theologian Urs Von Arx. In this preface, Kallis and Von Arx note how the participants in the consultation agreed that in the earliest history of the church “tendencies not to treat men and women differently based on gender, as both are viewed as parts of Christ’s body, allowed for multiple ecclesial ministries, even for what we would nowadays call leadership positions” (501–502). This changed, however, the more the church was influenced by gender norms prevalent in Greco-Roman imperial society, leading to the exclusion of women from priestly roles. The overall effect was that “[t]his state of affairs, initially caused by socio-cultural conditions, has become surrounded with the aura of holy tradition in the course of the church’s pilgrimage to its destination in the doxa of God” (502). Recently, however, another social development has given cause for reassessing women’s position:

This was to be confronted with the (admittedly socio-culturally conditioned) movement that evolved in modern Europe and North America advocating equality for women, and with the realization that various traditional cultures are characterized by the phenomena of patriarchy and androcentrism. This raised the question as to whether there are inevitable and dogmatic reasons for excluding women from being priests.  
(502)

The reason for reconsidering the witness of the early church is, therefore, social and contextual. However, as will become clear, the argument itself is not determined by discussions concerning social justice, but is based on discourses regarding early Christian soteriology and the theological anthropology inherent to it. Prior to making this argument, a matter of method is clarified:

The answer to this question cannot simply be taken out of the history of the church, as long as that history is identified as the “holy tradition.” In other words, it does not make sense to take statements of church fathers, made in specific historical and cultural contexts, and apply them to the questions that have emerged from the spiritual needs of people today in our own cultural context. Rather, a hermeneutical consciousness is required.  
(502)

A number of reasons why it is not possible to ordain women to the apostolic ministry follow:

Among the objections to the ordination of Christian women raised by churches in the East and the West alike, there are some that claim to be independent of time or specific sociological context. The male gender of priests is derived, according to these arguments supposedly not conditioned by culture, from an indispensable connection between the function of the priest to represent Christ (or his “Christ- iconicity”) and his male sex and gender. These reasons are ultimately untenable. The same applies to the arguments with Christ-Adam and Eve-Mary typologies when they are used to explain a gender-specific difference that would make the ordination of women impossible.

(502–503)

The traditional character of these arguments is acknowledged, yet also relativized with reference to another strand of tradition: “Although the patterns of both arguments reflect formal-patristic thought, they do not correspond to the tradition, since they ignore the universal salvific significance, inclusive of both men and women, of the incarnation of God’s Logos” (505). Thus, particular aspects of tradition that can be seen as primarily sociocultural in nature are, here, investigated in relation to the theological core of the tradition of the early church: soteriology and its implied anthropology. Similar reasoning is applied in the “Common Considerations” as well.

Von Arx and Kallis then acknowledge the complexities of the discussion surrounding gender difference and equality, noting that:

The tradition of the early church, whose founders articulated their faith in different socio-cultural environments from ours, can provide us with neither general basic guidelines nor explicit guidance for each and every case. However, they provide something of a foundation (...) when they speak of the incarnation of God’s Logos—in which Jesus Christ took the common nature of men and women—and of the restoration of the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:27) that men and women alike find in him.

(503)

Subsequently, the factor “culture” is again stressed as one that largely determines the possibility (or impossibility) of admitting women to the apostolic ministry. Kallis and Von Arx (503) also note that, referring proleptically to the findings of the consultation as a whole, no “compelling dogmatic or theological reason” was found “for not ordaining women to the priesthood.” Therefore, “the ordination of women could not fundamentally call into question or destroy the communion and unity of the church or the moves toward restoring broken communion and unity” (503).

In the subsequent “Common Considerations,” some of these arguments return. Yet, it is worth outlining them in sequence, so as to do justice to the statement’s coherence. Thus, having positioned the conversations in the context of an ongoing dialog and discernment of the Gospel (which implies the discernment of the unity of the church), the Considerations begin with a declaration of a common view of tradition, which builds on the insights of the official Orthodox–Old Catholic dialog (1975–1987):<sup>10</sup>

In faithfulness to the treasure of tradition, we discern tradition as a process, directed by the Spirit of God, of the dynamic contextualization of the faith for the life and the witness of the church in its ever-changing contemporary situation. This provokes questions concerning the appropriate way of dealing with the tradition (the hermeneutical problem).  
(505)

Next, an ecclesiological observation is made: the consultation observes “that today churches justly emphasize the dignity of the laity and especially of women, and that they appreciate the fact that these people occupy an appropriate place in the mission of the church” (505). As a next step, the consultation reports that it has researched the tradition of the early church based on the above-mentioned understanding of tradition. Particular attention was paid to:

the historical data which was brought forward as a rationale for the “male character” of the priesthood: the maleness of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ’s choosing of men in the circle of the twelve, the exclusive appointment of men to the priestly office of the church, as well as the corresponding argumentation with regard to typologies (e.g., Adam-Christ, Eve-Mary) and with ideas of the priest being the image or representation of Christ.  
(505)

On the basis of a consideration of these various traditions and arguments, the authors state:

We have reached the common conclusion that there are no compelling dogmatic-theological reasons for not ordaining women to the priesthood. The soteriological dimension of the church is decisive for us: the salvation of humankind and the entire creation in Jesus Christ in whom the new creation is being accomplished. We were especially guided by the conviction that was central to the ancient church: only that which has been assumed and united with God has been saved. It is human nature, common to men and women, that has been assumed by our Lord.  
(505)

In the document, allowance is made for the role of sociocultural (i.e., non-theological) factors in church decision-making. These, however, are seen to not infringe upon the validity of the theological view. Supported by the conclusion, Old Catholic Churches formally proceeded with the ordination of women from 1998 onwards.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

When analyzing the discussion concerning gender and the ordination of women in the Orthodox–Old Catholic dialog, the following issues can be observed. First, it is apparent that the consultation was not only concerned with gender, the role of women, or the shape of ministry. The issue of the ordination of women touched on a fundamental theological question: the manner in which tradition (including Scripture) is to be received. In clarifying this matter, the articulation of the relationship between theology, history, and the social sciences played an important role.

Second, in its approach to tradition and its reception, the consultation opted for a middle way between “copying and pasting”—which would be inherently anachronistic and thus unfaithful to the sources of the faith—and surrendering entirely to contemporary demands and questions. Rather, both ancient and modern contexts were considered in order to critically analyze them and to provide a distinctly theological answer to the question at stake. This answer would be based on key insights from the early church, but would also do justice to the manner in which such insights may receive new meanings and raise further questions in new contexts.

Third, the approach taken was contextually sensitive in two ways. It was sensitive to the contextuality of the sources of the faith and sensitive vis-à-vis questions raised by the life of the church in the twentieth century. In both cases, attempts were made to focus on theological rather than cultural arguments. This is an imperfect but nonetheless useful distinction, as the consultation’s soteriological focus provided an important hermeneutical key for dealing with contextual theologies, both ancient and modern.

Fourth, the consultation process provides an interesting (and inspiring?) example of theologizing in communion or rather, theologizing in search of communion. This, of course, has its own hermeneutical implications. It encourages critical reflection on one’s own tradition and analyzing the sources anew, prodded by the other with whom one seeks to be in communion.

Finally, the consultation may hold some promise for the future—even 22 years after its occurrence. This pertains to the chosen hermeneutics and the manner in which it was used, with a focus both on avoiding anachronisms and on applying key theological convictions, the “deep structures of the faith” as it were, as ancient resources for addressing contemporary challenges. It also pertains to the orientation toward communion that permeated the entire consultation. Furthermore, the consultation constitutes a

continuing reminder of the space that exists, theologically speaking, for the ordination of women: even if, or rather especially if, one wants to remain faithful to the tradition of the early church.

## Notes

- 1 For the history of the Old Catholic Churches, see Smit (2011) and Schoon (2015).
- 2 On the communion between Old Catholic and Anglican Churches, see Rein (1993, 217–231) and Smit (2012, 112–117). On the communion between Old Catholic and Orthodox Churches, see Aldenhoven (1989) and Von Arx (1989b).
- 3 For the full documentation, see Von Arx (1989a).
- 4 “Die Kirche muss (...) ein fortwährender Prozess der Wahrheits- und Entscheidungsfindung und des gemeinsamen Handelns sein, an dem alle beteiligt sind. Diese Beteiligung aller zu ermöglichen ist die Aufgabe des Amtes in Apostolischer Sukzession. Die Altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union glauben, dass sie damit die Tradition (Leben und Aufgabe) der ungeteilten Kirche des 1. Jahrtausends in einer den heutigen Problemen angemessenen Weise weiterführen.”
- 5 For a report of this conference, see Nickel (1996); for the conference statement, see International Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference (1996).
- 6 Though it should be noted that the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry was no hindrance for the initiation by the Vatican authorities of what would prove to be a serious Roman Catholic–Old Catholic dialogue from 2003 onwards.
- 7 For example, the Episcopal Church in the USA had been officially ordaining women to the priesthood since 1976.
- 8 The documents of the consultation have been published in German in *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (Von Arx and Kallis 1998) and in English in *Anglican Theological Review* (Von Arx and Kallis 2002c). Here, I refer to the English language documentation.
- 9 In this respect, the approach comes close to what would later be outlined in the Anglican–Orthodox Cyprus Agreed Statement (see Anglican–Orthodox Dialogue 2006).
- 10 For a discussion on the Old Catholic understanding of tradition, see Smit (2007).
- 11 In fact, the Old Catholic Church of Germany took this step earlier in 1996.

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Part II

# Lived Orthodoxy



## 6 How to ask embarrassing questions about women's religion

### Menstruating Mother of God, ritual impurity, and fieldwork among Seto women in Estonia and Russia\*

*Andreas Kalkun*

While Orthodox theology regards both women and men as equally perfect outcomes of God's creation, in practice women are subject to various restrictions that are not imposed on men. Teachings concerning women's ritual impurity and uncleanness impact on Orthodox women in their everyday lives. According to the canons, women are inherently no more sinful than men. Nevertheless, they are expected to abstain from Holy Communion and participation in any other Sacrament, as well as from reading the sacred Scriptures, venerating icons, lighting candles or lanterns, baking the bread of offering, and kissing the hand of a priest during menstruation and the period following childbirth. The canonized teachings of St. Dionysus of Alexandria, for example, state that a menstruating woman is not allowed to enter the church, take communion, or touch sacred objects; communion is also denied from a woman who has given birth because she is unclean in both spirit and body (see Polidoulis Kapsalis 1998; Schulz 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Interpretations of canonized texts related to women's impurity vary across Orthodox cultures, countries, and congregations. Once, as I was browsing the Estonian Folklore Archives for texts collected in the 1930s, I came upon interviews in which Seto women explained the origin of Orthodox menstrual taboos. I was surprised to realize that the texts associated both menstruation and Orthodox teachings concerning impurity with the Mother of God. Driven by my interest in Marian beliefs in Seto folklore, I decided to interview churchgoing Seto women to find out how the folklore related to the Mother of God and the female body has changed. During my many field expeditions to Seto settlements, I strove to learn

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how contemporary Seto women interpret the Orthodox canons concerning woman's ritual uncleanness (Kalkun 2007).<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I provide an overview of Seto women's traditions and notions based on material stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives and accounts that I have collected in the past decade. I take special interest in the Mariology of Seto women, exploring the relation between the Mother of God and women's intimate physical experiences related to menstruation and childbirth. When asking questions about such taboo topics as menstruation and postpartum behavior, I have found myself time and again revising my position as folklorist, reflecting on the topic of fieldwork ethics, and analyzing what exactly happens in interactions between a researcher and his or her interlocutors. How should one combine research and close interpersonal communication? How can one maintain intimacy and trust when discussing embarrassing subjects? In the following, I also tackle these questions on the basis of my fieldwork experiences.

### **The religion of Seto women, the Mother of God, menstrual taboos, and childbirth**

The present-day Seto settlement area on the border of the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation is also situated on the border of Eastern and Western Christianity (see Engelhardt 2015; Kalkun 2015a; Kalkun and Vuola 2017). Like Estonians, Setos speak a Finno-Ugric language.<sup>3</sup> They were Christianized as the result of an early Orthodox mission and remained in the sphere of influence of Russian culture until 1918, when Seto areas were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia.<sup>4</sup> In this border area, the small Seto people did not assimilate either with Lutheran Estonians, their linguistic relatives, or Orthodox Russians. Marriages between Setos and Estonians were constrained by religious differences, while the language barrier hindered marriages between Setos and Russians. Even though Setos and Russians frequented the same churches for centuries, Russians referred to Setos as "half-believers," since they felt that the faith of the Setos was not similar to theirs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Estonian scholars described Setos as kinsfolk who were centuries behind the Estonians in their development. One reason for Setos' backwardness was believed to be their "Russian-style" faith, which deprived them of the level of education and literacy common to Estonians (see Kalkun 2015b).<sup>5</sup>

Setos are known for their rich and unique Orthodox tradition, characterized by many divergent practices and unusual interpretations of Orthodox theology. Literacy spread among the Setos as late as in the 1920s. For a long time, their religious beliefs and practices were thus transmitted in oral form. The Soviet period, during which religious education was prohibited, prolonged this situation. My informants were often not very familiar with the official views of the Orthodox Church nor had they read religious literature. Many were aware of their different faith and lack of official

knowledge and suggested that I turn to a priest or the Scripture for the “right” answers.

One of the features of the Setos’ Marian tradition is bringing the Mother of God closer in time and space. Seto legends state that the Mother of God was active mainly in the Seto region, as she used to hold services in the caves of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery and visit local villages. Because of her physical presence there, the Mother of God also assumed guardianship over the Seto region, the area surrounding the Pechersky Monastery. Setos call their settlement area the Land of St. Mary (*Pühä-Maarja maa* in Seto). According to old origin tales, the Mother of God had even created the earth:

In the old days only water covered the earth. There were stones in the water and soil under the stones. St. Mary stepped on a stone, took three times soil from under the stone, threw it across the water, and the water receded and turned into ground. There was three parts of water and the fourth part was soil, and this is why they call it the Land of St. Mary, because St. Mary created it.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; S 5274013 Aleksei Pöhi (1933))

In Seto legends, the Mother of God wears the clothes of Seto women and speaks the Seto language, which further emphasizes the bond between her and the Seto people. For my contemporary informants, the Mother of God was simultaneously a sacred and very close and friendly figure. This intimacy was reflected in her appearance and speech. One of my interlocutors, for example, described how her mother used to have recurring dreams about the Mother of God, clad in traditional Seto clothes and speaking “in a high voice” in the Seto language. When her mother had once forgotten a Marian feast day and slept in, in her sleep she heard a woman asking in a very casual manner: “Aren’t you coming to see me today?” At once, she realized that the voice belonged to the Mother of God, upon which she got up, tended the animals, and rushed to church. The interlocutor in question ended her narrative by noting that the Mother of God is kind, she is always there, waiting for even those who are late:

You can be late for church. It is good to get there while they read the Gospel. St. Mary says that you may even come at the final hour, I am still waiting for you. When the bell is rung, St. Mary invites everyone to the church.

(N 1932, Saptja village (2013))<sup>6</sup>

In the dreams of Seto women, the Mother of God possesses other, very mundane physical qualities. She may have dirty clothes—because those who clean their floors on the Virgin Mary’s feast day taint her clothes with the washing water. She may also feel cold. A bedridden informant from

Väraska village explained how she had been thinking about taking some icon scarves she had woven to church, but had not got around to doing it. When the Mother of God appeared to her in a dream and told her that she was cold, she had understood it as a sign that she must quickly fulfill her promise.

Most collectors of Seto folklore have avoided issues related to sexuality and the female body as inappropriate and marginal topics (see also Keinänen 1999, 184). Regardless, the oral tradition collected in the Seto region in the early twentieth century contains accounts concerning Orthodox women's proper conduct during menstruation and the postpartum period (see, e.g., Väisänen 1924). These typical texts about restrictions related to menstruation are dated to the 1930s.

When one is menstruating, she is not allowed to make deep bows to God, she is not allowed to go to church or commemorate the ancestors' spirits; this is a grave sin, the woman is not pure.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; S 107614/5 (3) Anna Oinas-Tammerorg—Ode Hunt (1935))

This is the thing with a woman that you are not allowed to go [to church] when you are unclean. In the olden days they wouldn't even go to sauna, because the sauna is the same as the church, the sauna is for purifying our body, the church is for purifying our soul (...) They were not allowed to touch icons either, when it was the time. And she would ask someone else to place the candle, gave money for that.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 286, 95 (77) Ello Kirss—Nati Morel (1935))

The few folklore accounts about the causes of menstruation collected from Setos explain it as a punishment for violating an archaic taboo. These texts suggest that the Setos believed the Mother of God to have been the first woman to have a menstrual period. In one such account, for instance, nosy women secretly watch the Virgin Mary bleeding in the sauna:

St. Mary was the first to have a period, even when no other woman had had it. St. Mary went to the sauna and told women not to watch her. But the women could not resist and watched her. Then St. Mary said: "It doesn't matter, let you have it too then!"

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 194, 64475 (20) Ello Kirss—Odo Ilusaar, b. 1849 (1938))

Another version of the same legend describes how the Virgin Mary, the first woman to have a period, went to bathe in the sauna with ordinary women and would not let the women look at her long undershirt. The women still

look and see blood on the shirt. As a punishment, they have to experience the same sufferings as St. Mary: menstruation, labor pains, and a painful death (Väisänen 1924, 200).<sup>7</sup> This latter version reflects the Seto notion that objects smeared with menstrual blood carried special power that could have a positive or negative influence on both the people who saw them and their owners (Väisänen 1924, 203). The lower part of the long undershirt (hidden under the bodice skirt, *sukman* or *kitasnik*) worn during the first menstruation was kept for special occasions. Washing, soaking, and drying the shirt carried ritual meaning and was associated with various magical practices (Väisänen 1924).

In Seto oral tradition, labor pains are also associated with the Mother of God. The Virgin Mary was believed to have experienced a very painful labor. Suffering pain during childbirth was therefore considered a blessing:

Giving birth is more difficult to some women than it is to others. There are three types of women: those like St. Mary have the most difficult childbirth, those like a horse have an easier one. Women who are like bitches have the easiest childbirth.

(Estonian Folklore Archives; ERA II 194, 444 (18)  
Ello Kirss—Oga Ambo, b. 1869 (1938))

Linking St. Mary to some of women's most intimate physical experiences is very common in popular representations in both Eastern and Western Christianity. These representations often differ from the interpretations of the church (see, e.g., Timonen 1994; Vuola 2002).<sup>8</sup> In Orthodox theology, for example, the Mother of God is considered to have given birth painlessly.

Seto women have passed on the tradition that anything alluding to sexuality is considered inappropriate in church. Even today, one should not attend church wearing the large silver brooch that is a part of Seto women's traditional clothes, because this brooch indicates fertile age and has been associated with woman's sexuality in the Seto culture. Thus, when going to church, any adornments were either left at home or hidden under overgarments.

Traces of these older beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary survived in the narratives of contemporary religious women. My informants thought that the Mother of God helps women specifically with their "ladies' problems." They often had a very special relationship with the Virgin Mary due to some prayer or wish that she had granted or some very personal issue that she had helped them solve. Furthermore, my interlocutors were also aware of the traditions, according to which during her period a woman is not allowed to participate in sacred rituals, commemorate the dead, kiss icons, light candles in front of them, or in more extreme cases, even go to church. In the following, I turn to their accounts of these issues—and the practical and ethical challenges involved in eliciting them.

## Talking about purity regulations with contemporary Seto women

Folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists who study religion or religious people have usually not considered it important to discuss their own religious background. The scholar's personal religiosity has been considered so intimate and even inappropriate a topic that existing literature gives it scant attention. Yet, the religious views of many researchers have certainly had an impact on their work (see Larsen 2016). For example, when Jakob Hurt (1904) studied the religious life of Setos, he was clearly influenced by his role as a Lutheran pastor. He argued that Seto Orthodoxy is of an "external nature," a set of ceremonies and rituals the meaning of which is not questioned. Overall, scholars studying Russian peasant culture have noticed that researchers of non-Orthodox and especially Protestant backgrounds have far too casually viewed popular Orthodox practices as a token gesture. From a Protestant perspective, Russian peasants' illiterate and vernacular piety is easily interpreted as indifference to religion or as half-belief, a mix of paganism and Christianity (see Lewin 1990, 166ff).

Jakob Hurt was not the only scholar influenced by his religious background when studying Setos. As an Orthodox believer and member of the Seto community myself (although not Seto-born), I have often had to consider my positionality. I have referred to my position using the term of "halfie" by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991). It stands for a scholar who is partly inside and partly outside the studied community. Due to his or her multiple identity, the halfie is in a difficult position. On the one hand, similar experiences and background may prove useful in a field situation, and on the other, lack of distance may also become a problem.

My fieldwork has involved studying women with whom I have sung together in church, elbowed my way forward at cross-processions, and waited in line to receive communion or kiss the cross. They have offered me candy to commemorate their deceased relatives and praised my singing voice. Nevertheless, when I have casually asked the very same women, while sitting at their kitchen table or living room sofa, "is there a time when a woman is not allowed to enter a church" (*Kas om määnegi aig, ku naane tohi-i kerikoh minnä?*), I have clearly assumed the position of a researcher who is playing a closed hand (see Kalkun 2007). I know the texts describing restrictions imposed on women in the Orthodox Church and I have asked dozens of women the same questions. However, I have found it better to pretend ignorance to determine how a specific informant talks about menstruation taboos.

Theologian Elina Vuola has noted how talking with Catholic women about the Virgin Mary is often like opening Pandora's box: it enables discussions about the female body, sexuality, and motherhood, but can also evoke criticism of the Catholic Church, official theology, and Mariology in particular (see, e.g., Vuola 2011; Kalkun and Vuola 2017). In a similar



manner, some seemingly innocent or even ridiculous questions that I have asked have prompted my informants to discuss intimate topics that may be potentially uncomfortable or unpleasant for them. The questions are like bait, traps, or wormholes, which may lead to subjects that are difficult to approach directly.

During fieldwork, I have usually asked questions about purity regulations only when the conversation is in full swing, often as a logical transition from baptism, to ensure that the shift in the topic is not perceived as too sudden or dramatic. Since menstrual taboos and postpartum behavior are not often discussed aloud, at least in the presence of men, some informants found my questions concerning the times “when a woman was not allowed to go to church” confusing. Of course, my attempts to use as neutral and general phrasings as possible—for example, to initially leave out any mention of menstruation—may have contributed to the confusion. Nevertheless, most Seto women with whom I have talked about these issues confirmed that it was not appropriate to go to church during menstruation (cf. Väisänen 1924, 193–194). Furthermore, when it was deemed necessary to be present at church for a service or a ritual, a menstruating woman was not supposed to make the sign of the cross, kiss the icons or the cross, kneel, or take communion; in other words, it was forbidden to take active part in the service or sacrament. As the following excerpt demonstrates, the restrictions could lead to complicated situations. It is a custom in the Seto region that, in the funeral procession from church to graveyard, the cross is carried by the godchild of the deceased. But what if the godchild was having her monthly period at the time and, according to another strict tradition, was not permitted to touch the cross?

[AK:] But how was it in the old days, when was a woman allowed to go to church?

[INFORMANT:] Well, yes, a woman was not allowed to go to church when she was having her period.

[AK:] Okay, but if she really needed to?

[I:] Well, you can go but you have to be modest about it.

[AK:] But were you allowed to light a candle?

[I:] It was not advisable. I had a situation that my godmother had died and in the morning the priest came and asked me whether I will be carrying the cross. Well, I was her godchild. Mom then explained him the nature of the situation. But the priest told her that do as you like. Told her that he wouldn't prohibit me, but that he wouldn't tell me to do that either. But I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't carry the cross. And, yes, you shouldn't light a candle during that time either. And, well, you shouldn't go near the icons. You can enter the church, but you have to be like, modest about it. Keep to the sides... Haven't you heard enough of this? [Laughing]

(N 1928, Tiirhanna village, 2005)

Even though most of the informants were relatively tight-lipped about menstruation and religion, some of them were more outspoken. Sometimes, the topic could also inspire a rather naturalist discussion about the past and hygiene. However, it was common for the informants to burst into laughter afterwards—as if to avoid humiliation or ease the tension caused by an unconventional and delicate topic. In the above quotation, for example, the informant’s jokingly asked question seemed to signal her wish to end the conversation.

While the menstrual taboos customarily observed in the Seto region may be perceived as demeaning or discriminating toward women, my informants seemed to accept them simply as traditional rules or “laws of God” that is was advisable to observe. Some women questioned the origin of the restrictions, however, wondering whether they had emerged as a misunderstanding caused by their great-grandmothers’ lack of education.

- [AK:] But how is it, is a woman allowed to go to church at any time?  
 [INFORMANT:] No, she isn’t.  
 [AK:] She can’t when she has her period?  
 [I:] Yes, when she has menses, then she is not allowed, a woman can’t go to church then.  
 [AK:] But what if you sing in the choir or you just have to go?  
 [I:] We don’t go then! You can’t go and you won’t.  
 [AK:] But who taught you that?  
 [I:] My mother, of course, this is how it was in the old days, so mother taught me.  
 [AK:] But why is it like that?  
 [I:] Well, I don’t know why. Perhaps old people imposed the rule and we never asked the priest and the priest never told us about that. Maybe it isn’t even a sin against God if you choose to go to church like that. But the old people simply didn’t realize it. They just believed that you can’t go. My mother taught me that and all the parents did. So it wasn’t just me, or some other people, but everybody knew about it! Girls and women never went to church during this time of the month.  
 (N 1931, Saabolda village, 2014)

Since Setos usually do not speak to strangers about menstrual taboos, it is entirely possible that, as the informant suggests, they did not discuss the topic with priests either. Thus, new priests who came to the region may not have known about many beliefs and customs in their congregations.

Furthermore, instead of accepting church traditions without question, some Seto women actively proposed alternative explanations for them. One informant speculated that menstrual restrictions could be because the communion wine transforms into the blood of Christ: it would be inappropriate if women’s menstrual blood was present together with the blood of Christ in the church.

During my fieldwork, I also sought information about contemporary Seto women's knowledge regarding the traditional purification ceremony of churching a woman after she has given birth. In Seto tradition, a woman had to be confined to her home after giving birth. She was also prohibited from undertaking certain duties, going near the well, and having sexual intercourse. Forty days after giving birth she underwent a special ritual to rejoin the church and society. In earlier times, children were usually baptized no later than a couple of weeks after birth, which meant that Seto mothers could not attend their own children's baptisms. Nowadays, however, children are baptized later.

Based on my fieldwork, both older and younger Seto women had some knowledge and experience of the churching ritual. Like the woman in the quotation below, they did not question the ritual. Instead, all who commented on the ban against going to church right after giving birth talked simply about what was "acceptable" and what was not. Some women also used the word "unclean" for a woman who had not been churched. Moreover, talking about the ritual inspired some women to comment on how women are more sinful or indecent than men. The topic could surface in connection with baptism, as in the following excerpt:

[AK:] But when a woman gave birth to child, when was she allowed to go to church after that?

[INFORMANT:] After six weeks passed. When she gave birth, six weeks passed, the child, of course, was baptized by then, they used to baptize very early in the old days. And then the woman took her child and went to the "six-week" [churching] ritual. This is how it was called, but Russians called it "malitvu brat." And then the priest took the child and, if it was a boy, he was taken through the gates that lead to the altar room. But a girl is never taken to the altar room! We are sinful! [Laughing] But until then you have to take twelve bows. Yes, twelve deep bows to God. And then the priest was given kopecks or money for that as well. But when it was a girl, she was not taken to the altar room, they were at the first door, where St. Mary is. The priest recites whatever he does at St. Mary and then he goes to the second door and recites there, at St. Nicholas, but the girl is not taken to the altar room, only baby boys are taken there.

[AK:] But why couldn't a woman go to church before the churching ritual?

[I:] But well, before six weeks, some are like, not quite clean yet. Only have menstruation, when there is some. And so it has been told. I don't know either. After the churching ritual is held, you can do everything, like before. So you see.

(N 1911, Kuuraköstõ village, 2003)

Listening to the recording of the above interview, one can hear the symptomatic laughter of the informant, signaling discomfort over a taboo subject. Yet another tactic of “saving face” was to turn the discussion into a funny anecdote. This was how one of the older informants approached the topic. When discussing the mother’s absence from baptism, she is first reminded of the old tradition of confining mothers of newborn babies, after which she recounts an episode when a priest chased her daughter out of her son’s baptism, describing it in a joking manner:

[AK:] But how was it, was the mother there for the child’s baptism?

[INFORMANT:] No, the mother was not shown the baptism.

[AK:] Why?

[I:] Well, I don’t know what tradition this is. Before the churching ritual, a mother is not decent to go to church. And in the old days, it was even so that a woman was not allowed to leave her bed without a scarf before the child was baptized, she had to wear the scarf and all. And before these rules were strict, but now they are nothing. Because, when my daughter was having her first son baptized, she was also in the church and it was no big deal, because the priest did not know her. But when she had her second child baptized, the priest told her to get out! [Laughing.] She came that time as well.

(N 1928, Tiirhanna village, 2005)

### **Fieldwork, intimate topics, and scholars’ limitations**

Fieldwork is often both mentally and physically demanding. People who were complete strangers just a moment ago spend hours together, conversing, among other things, on highly personal topics. Furthermore, the interviewer and interviewee often communicate in a very intimate space, requiring both parties to make compromises concerning their physical autonomy and welfare. To ensure a successful recording session, folklore collectors try to assimilate into the physical space of their interviewee and adapt to the rules of that house or village (see Kalkun 2019). Nevertheless, the mark that a researcher leaves on a small community may still prove indelible and not necessarily entirely positive.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I have noted that subjects related to taboos seem to be capable of exposing hidden aspects of researcher-informant interaction such as hierarchies, power relations, and prejudices. It is intriguing how the seeming closeness between conversation partners may suddenly be revealed as an illusion the moment they touch upon an intimate or delicate topic, and how differing habitual, educational, or cognitive experiences may drive an insurmountable wedge between the two parties. Instances of laughter, as described above, are such revealing moments, when, regardless of all the empathy and respect between the researcher and informant, either one or both of them do not feel comfortable.

Usually, the scholar initiates conversations on topics that are not easy or ordinary for the informant. But seeing that field research is dialogical by nature, the situation may also be reversed. The scholar may be faced with themes that reveal his or her prejudices, limitations, and restraints arising from cultural taboos. Here, I introduce two such themes: sexuality and intimate medical conditions.

In the field notes and memoirs of the Finnish folklorist Armas Otto Väisänen, who conducted fieldwork in the Seto region in the early twentieth century, strange misunderstandings and sexually loaded incidents involving women figure prominently. Väisänen recounts, for example, numerous situations in which he, as an unmarried young man, was offered a wife, a fiancée, or simply a girl to spend a night with (see Väisänen 1969). When I first read these texts, his abundant descriptions of courting incidents seemed somewhat unexpected and odd (see Kalkun 2015a). At some point, however, I realized that his experiences were not so different from mine. Indeed, since my very first field expeditions in both the Seto region and Siberia, I have repeatedly been asked whether I have a girlfriend. People have also suggested that the main purpose of my travels is to find a girlfriend, promised to introduce me to a local young woman (usually a close relative of theirs), and recommended locales where young people meet and get to know each other. Some closer acquaintances have even jokingly threatened that I better have a girlfriend with me on my next visit or else “we will find a good wife for you here.”<sup>9</sup>

I have learned to think of these discussions as an unavoidable part of my interactions in the field. Although I would not consider such questions appropriate in my day-to-day life, I have never taken them much to heart. After all, I have often asked questions about delicate topics too, sometimes feeling more and sometimes less uneasy about it. I believe that my interlocutors’ concerns about my relationship status are an indication that they care about me and that our relationship is close. Furthermore, one also has to bear in mind that the worldview of the women among whom I have primarily conducted fieldwork—Seto women who are my mother’s age or older—is influenced by the patriarchal culture of early twentieth-century agrarian communities. In traditional village communities, any interaction between an unmarried man and young woman (either married or unmarried) could be interpreted in sexual terms (see Vakimo 2001; Kuutma 2006). When there was a significant age gap between the parties, however, communication on the topics of sexuality and gender relations often reflected the relationship between an older, wiser person and an “inexperienced” youth.

During my fieldwork, I have interviewed many more women than men.<sup>10</sup> All my “favorite” informants have been women and some of my warmest relationships and longest collaborations in the field have been with elderly women. At the same time, a number of instances have revealed and challenged my assumptions and prejudices concerning topics fit to be discussed with a man or a woman of a certain age.

When conducting fieldwork among descendants of Setos who had migrated to Siberia, I visited one particularly skilled storyteller on several occasions (2007, 2008, and 2012). She listened to my and my colleagues' curious and more commonplace questions with great empathy and happily shared stories that our signal words reminded her of. Over the course of our conversations, I asked her questions about menstrual taboos as well as other intimate topics that women do not usually discuss with men or even women they are not closely acquainted with. On several occasions, she told me the story of how she had been such an ignorant young girl that when she had had her first period she believed that she had hurt herself while weaving on a loom that was too heavy for her. When we met for the last time in 2012, this woman's daughter had brought her to live with her in the city of Krasnoyarsk. The storyteller was happy that we had managed to find her. We enjoyed our time together and recorded hours of conversation on a wide range of topics. We talked about her memories of having secretly witnessed her mother giving birth. After discussing predictions concerning the future of newborn children, we came to the topic of her own child-births. I inquired about postpartum behavior and the restraints imposed on a woman in labor.

At this point, something unexpected happened. The informant touched upon a medical condition—that of her grandmother—that I had never heard about or talked about with anyone before. For me, the turn in her story felt so surprising and for some reason totally inappropriate that I was unable to ask any reasonable or specifying further questions or continue on the subject. I was overwhelmed and tried to hide my uneasiness as best I could. After an awkward pause that seemed to go on forever, I changed the topic, asking her decidedly more “neutral” questions about spells used in the sauna and other rituals related to bathing in the sauna.

[AK:] But was there anything that a woman was not allowed to do after giving birth? Could she leave the room?

[INFORMANT:] Well, sure they did, they sure left the room!

[AK:] They wouldn't go out in the village, would they?

[I:] No, they wouldn't go to the village. I don't know how long they had to stay in, that they couldn't leave the yard. That I don't know either. But my grandmother told me, when I was young, that after one has a baby, she shouldn't raise her arms above the head, that grandmother herself, that after she had her baby... Well, in the old days you used to bake your own bread, and the bread trays were huge, and she had lifted the bread tray on top of the oven and strained herself. And then her body [pelvic organ] fell out. And then later she was already old and she always used to ask me to whisk her back [with a branch to cleanse it] in the sauna. And then I whisked her back and washed her where she needed me to. And she always told me: “Be careful not to let water to the pipe!” And then I'm thinking, “what does she mean by pipe?” And well, I'm

not sure how, but I looked down [between her legs] and I saw that grandma had a small ball there. And I'm thinking that "boys have balls, but why would a woman have one?" But this was me, and well, I was such a, how do you call it, nitwit, that I had to touch it, to feel whether it was soft. But her body had prolapsed and dried out like, how do you call it, some dried fruit, a dried pear. And then I told grandma, asked her what it was. "Dear child, this is because after childbirth I lifted the bread tray up on the oven and, then, the uterus came out and it remained like that. And, well, I guess there were no doctors around and it would not heal on its own. And so it remained like that. And, you see, when you get married, make sure you won't lift anything above your head."

[AK:] But you were a child at this time? When did it...

[I:] Of course! Now I'm [telling] all my grandchildren that when you are giving birth, make sure that you won't lift your arms high above your head. Even though these are [the times] when people use washing machines, you still have to hang things up [to dry]. So beware! And always use maternity support, this is a must. Use some belt for support.

[AK:] Oh, you mean, after giving birth?

[I:] Well, yes! And one shouldn't do anything or go anywhere for six weeks. But now nobody believes anything.

(N 1934, Krestyansk village, 2012)

The informant was speaking about her grandmother's vaginal or uterine prolapse, which is a very common condition among older women. She had probably been telling the story as a cautionary tale to her younger female relatives and, since we had been talking about her grandmother, childbirth and postpartum traditions, she considered it appropriate to share with me, thinking that I would find it interesting. It was; however, it also evoked quite an unexpected negative response in me. Evidently the narrative violated some taboo in my world. It crossed the line between interesting topics related to folklore, folk medicine, ethnography, history, and life in general on the one hand, and certain medical conditions and intimate anatomical peculiarities that I felt should remain private on the other. This interview held in an apartment block in Krasnoyarsk revealed taboos that I had not realized existed, taboos reflecting my position as a member of a (supposedly modern and civilized) culture, in which discussing the body of a post-menopausal woman is seen as even more inappropriate than talking about menstruation.

## Conclusion

A researcher embarking on a field expedition is equipped with not only background knowledge and communication skills, but also his or her empathy, emotions, and prejudices. Although the scholar's religious background



or relationship status is not often revealed in research reports for the sake of “objectivity,” personal experiences and preferences inevitably accompany him or her in the field. While today it is common to emphasize the dialogical nature of fieldwork, interactions in the field are usually subject to a hidden hierarchy. Encounters are planned and organized so that informants do not necessarily realize why certain topics are discussed during an interview or why they are entering into intimate communication. Scholars rarely emphasize the physical and mental challenges that they endured over the course of fieldwork in their research reports. They are afraid of having overreacted or misinterpreted something, but are also wary of breaches in research ethics, of betraying their informants’ trust.

All in all, a lot more happens during fieldwork than can be later read from publications. Traces of dismay or discomfort, awkward or funny moments, and other disturbances in fluent communication between the researcher and the informant—even subtle and fleeting disruptions that are only just detectable from interview recordings—ruin the illusion of complete understanding and shared language between the parties. However, they may be illuminating (for all concerned), as they reveal prejudices and help identify structures and hierarchies of religion, gender, and sexuality.

When discussing highly intimate or taboo topics, the informant’s willingness to share his or her thoughts with the researcher is always pertinent. The researcher relies on empathy, tactfulness, and his or her relationship with the interviewee. Body and sexuality are much easier to discuss in a same-gender group. In my experience, a significant age gap between the interviewer and the interviewee may reduce the importance of gender. Over the course of my fieldwork, I have learned that a male scholar can discuss intimate topics related to religion, reproduction, and sexuality with women. Even for contemporary Seto women, these themes are intertwined—though menstrual restrictions and other religious purity regulations are usually not spoken of, at least not with strangers.

Both archival sources and my present-day fieldwork suggest that the Mother of God has had a highly influential role in Seto women’s Orthodoxy. Due to their intimate connection, women’s experiences related to menstruation and childbirth have been associated with the Mother of God. According to archival reports, the mothers and grandmothers of my present-day informants were familiar with the folklore that the Mother of God was the first woman to have a period. My interviewees today would not share this specific piece of folklore, but they, too, were familiar with the Orthodox taboos related to ritual purity learned from their mothers and grandmothers, and felt a particular affinity with the Mother of God.

All in all, Seto women’s Orthodoxy demonstrates a remarkable relation between the Mother of God and church taboos. The Setos’ Mother of God closely resembles an ordinary woman even in her bodily functions: she menstruates and suffers from a painful childbirth and agonizing death. It appears that Seto women have actively interpreted ecclesial restrictions



and associated the causes of the taboos related to women's bodies with the Mother of God. In the Seto tradition, all the Orthodox restrictions imposed on women are associated with the Mother of God as "women's God." Ancient Orthodox traditions have been kept alive in the Seto region on the periphery of the Orthodox world. The ritual taboos of purity, restrictions on menstruating women, and rules of conduct for the postpartum period have been passed on in oral tradition. An old Orthodox custom has been given a local interpretation, in which the Mother of God plays a significant role.

The Orthodox Church rules concerning a woman's body are not publicly discussed in the Orthodox communities of the Seto region. Still, folklore about a people specially chosen by the Mother of God lives on. The practice of blessing a woman after she has given birth is falling into oblivion, since these days children are usually not baptized under the age of six weeks but months or even years later. Even now, the prohibition on going to church or taking part in sacraments during menstruation was a surprisingly relevant aspect of the Orthodox tradition for elderly Seto women. It remains to be seen whether it will be passed on to future generations. My interviews with Seto women revealed that many topics, although not publicly discussed, continue to exist—one must only find a way to discuss these in a friendly and open manner.

## Notes

- 1 The custom of stigmatizing menstruation and the practice of "churching" a woman after she has given birth are based on the Old Testament. Leviticus contains passages on the uncleanliness of menstruation (Lev. 15:19–31) and a prescription to confine women to their homes after giving birth (Lev. 12: 1–5). The Christian rituals for blessing or purifying a woman 40 days after giving birth derive from Jewish tradition and reflect blood-related taboos and purification rituals known in Judaism (Raphael 1996, 135). The retention of Jewish tradition is explained with reference to the New Testament, according to which Mary meticulously observed the Law of Moses after giving birth to Jesus (Lempiäinen 1969, 10; cf. Dresen 2003; Roll 2003). Orthodox theologians began to critically address this topic only in the 1990s (e.g., Polidoulis Kapsalis 1998).
- 2 I have been asking Seto women questions about the Mother of God and menstruation as part of my fieldwork interviews since the summer of 2003. The fieldwork was conducted both in historical Seto territory and in diaspora communities in Krasnoyarsk Krai, where Setos settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All translations from Seto to English are mine.
- 3 In 2002, the Seto Council of Elders declared Setos a separate people. Estonians have considered Seto as a dialect of the Estonian language and have not recognized Setos as an ethnic minority. Russia recognizes Setos as a small ethnic minority.
- 4 Records of the St. Nicholas Church in Izborsk, situated in the Seto settlement area, date back to the eleventh century (see Piho 2011). Later, the religious life of the Setos has mostly been influenced by the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery, founded in the fifteenth century and situated in the center of the Seto area.
- 5 In the Lutheran areas of Estonia, schools were often linked to church institutions. A network of schools covering the entire country began to develop after

- the Reformation. However, schools linked to the Orthodox Church emerged much later. While there were some Russian language schools in the Seto settlement area, as a rule, Setos did not send their children to these schools (see Schvak and Paert 2014; Kalkun 2015b).
- 6 The reference to the final hour is clearly a paraphrase of the Bible (Matt 20: 1–16), but it is attributed to the Mother of God.
  - 7 The “official” Orthodox theology also emphasizes the human nature of the Mother of God. For example, it is emphasized that the Mother of God died like an ordinary human, but she was assumed into Heaven where she acts as a mediator and protector for the rest of humanity (see Cunningham 2015, 65, 183). However, there is no mention of her experiencing a painful death.
  - 8 Feminist theologians, speaking specifically of Western Christianity, have criticized the asexual image of the Virgin Mary and her virgin birth for serving as poor examples to ordinary women of flesh and blood (see Kalkun and Vuola 2017).
  - 9 For a discussion on intimate and sexual relations between anthropologists and their research subjects, see Kulick and Willson (1995).
  - 10 I have often been asked why I am not studying men’s songs and men’s religion. Why would a man explore themes related to women and, moreover, themes not conventionally disclosed in the Seto culture? In my research, I have focused on the older singing tradition and the religious culture of Setos. Since the number of recorded and written songs performed by Seto women is far greater than that of men, I have chosen to study women’s songs in particular. Another reason is that contemporary Seto women lead a far more active religious life than men. Processes of modernization had begun to affect Seto men long before Seto women, whose bond with the past and with Seto traditions is therefore much stronger and more organic.

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## 7 Enshrining gender

### Orthodox women and material culture in the United States

*Sarah Riccardi-Swartz*

In early autumn of 2013, I visited the home of Xenia, a therapist, author, wife, mother, and Eastern Orthodox Christian living in a small town located in the Missouri Ozarks.<sup>1</sup> We sat at her kitchen table not far from her icon corner (devotional shrine), which was housed in an east-facing corner of her open-plan office. Between sips of coffee, she told me about her conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy, faith-based devotional activities, and home icon corner practices. Toward the end of our conversation, Xenia retrieved a small wooden box from the bottom shelf of a baker's rack that she had converted into a space for icons and special religious objects in her icon corner. Inside the box was a small scrape of cloth tinged with a bit of dried blood; it was a swaddling cloth that was wrapped around her newborn daughter as she passed away years ago. Because Xenia's daughter was baptized right before she reposed, she affirmed that her child is not only in heaven but that she is a saint. Xenia canonized her. By extension, Xenia regarded the bit of cloth as religious relic, venerating it as she would an institutionally acknowledged Orthodox relic she encountered at church.

I suggest that through analyzing ethnographic vignettes of how female Orthodox converts use their icon corners, we can gain a better understanding of the ways in which Orthodox Christian women perform their gendered roles through various forms of embodied piety (Jackson 2012; van Nieuwkerk 2013).<sup>2</sup> Xenia's creation of a relic highlights how icon corners can function as spaces of gender performativity—allowing Orthodox women, such as Xenia, to embrace yet reimagine conceptions of the female religious self through expressions of piety (Butler 1988; Mahmood 2005). Through their speech they remain staunchly supportive of traditional theologies of gender, while using materiality to gently subvert notions of what women can and cannot do in the Orthodox Church (Butler 1988; van Nieuwkerk 2013).

Eastern Orthodoxy claims to possess a living theology, manifested in the traditions, rituals, and practices of believers (McGuckin 2010). By participating in the life of the church—through the sacraments, prayer, and other devotions—adherents are transformed over the course of their lives to become “partakers in the divine nature of God” (Bartos 1999). This living theology also sets forth “predetermined gender roles,” rules, and a

construction of feminine Christianity entrenched in ancient body taboos and cultural expectations of what constitutes appropriate behavior (Liveris 2005; Chernyak 2016, 299). While the patriarchal authority of Eastern Orthodoxy has been subject to feminist critique by theorists and those outside Orthodoxy, very little anthropological scholarship concerning how Orthodox gender roles are manifested in everyday life has been written by those inside the church (Liveris 2005, xii–xiii). This is one such case; during my fieldwork for this project, I was received into the Orthodox Church. These women from the heartland of the Midwest seemed to find in me not only someone interested in their religious beliefs, ideas, and practices for both personal and academic reasons, but also an outlet through which they could express themselves. Through their experiences, these women gesture toward the ways in which religious traditions have active imaginaries of gender role performativity, expressed verbally and manifested physically.

Within the confines of this chapter, I use the terms *gender* and *gender role(s)* to denote the religious cultural expectations of theological belief and praxis. Thus I refer not only to the gender self-identification of these women as females, but specifically to what Simon Coleman and Anna Stewart (2014, 106) label as the “cultural expectations about the roles of men and women” as dramatized in religious communities. Anthropologist of Russian and Siberian studies Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, in her scholarship on the relationship between religion and gender, notes that analyzing the ways in which women “translate beliefs into practice” allows us to more fully understand the intersection of religion and gender as a dynamic site that is perpetually being transformed through the everyday actions of female believers (Balzer 2008). The notion of praxis as an embodied mobilization of belief ultimately led me as an ethnographer to ask these women about how their personal understandings of gender relate to their home icon corners, personal piety, domestic devotions, and experiences with Orthodox gender norms. Through this lens we can gain more insight into how feminine religiosity is lived out in ways that are not divided into popular or institutional but are holistic in the vernacular sense of the word (Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012).

### Placing ethnography, doing anthropology

The stories retold here are part of a larger project I conducted between 2011 and 2014 with a rural Eastern Orthodox community predominately composed of converts in Southwest Missouri. Located in a small town of less than 2,000 residents, Most Holy Theotokos parish attracted so-called cradle Orthodox Christians, converts, and inquirers from a three-hour driving radius, even though there was another Orthodox church more centrally located in a larger college town nearby. With an average number of 50 parishioners on the roster at any given time, the church was (and still is) a vibrant, growing Orthodox community. The parish itself has a Russian Orthodox ethos. Although it is part of the Orthodox Church in America

jurisdiction, it is one of very few American Orthodox parishes with a special hierarchal blessing to be on the Julian calendar—something typically associated with Slavic forms of Orthodoxy, such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). The rector of the parish—a convert himself—was spiritually trained in part at the Optina Pustyn near Kozelsk in the Kagula Oblast region of Russia, a place considered to be a spiritual center of Orthodoxy in many circles. Liturgically, Old Church Slavonic was occasionally used during services at the parish, but the majority of services were chanted in English. However, Slavic influence was felt in the music, which generally consisted of *Znamenny*, *Kyivan*, and *Obikhod* chant forms.

Corporately, the parish held deep devotions to many Russian saints, such as St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. John of Kronstadt, and the Royal Passionbearers, and Russian American saints and teachers such as St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco and Father Seraphim Rose of Platina, California. A quick perusal of the now defunct parish bookstore, a space where I often interviewed male parishioners, would yield devotionals and writings from many Russian saints, theologians, and priests. Even the parish building was constructed to resemble the small wooden churches often found in the wilds of Russia. Within this community, a Russian Orthodox aesthetic was not only adopted materially, it was embraced spiritually and socially as well. Beyond the walls of the nave, the materiality of community gatherings also had a Russian flair. Comestibles, often including traditional Russian Orthodox Easter items such as *kulich*, an enriched sweet bread, and *paskha*, a sweet cheese spread, were prepared and consumed by parishioners. Women could often be heard during coffee hour swapping recipes or giving advice on the most authentically Russian festal dishes.

Theologically, the parish might be considered fairly conservative by American Orthodox standards. Community members typically held fast to the vernacularly labeled “one-to-one” rule for receiving the Eucharist, which meant that parishioners went to confession weekly with the rector in order to partake in Holy Communion. While lay members were not segregated by gender during services, as is the custom within ultraconservative parishes in the ROCOR jurisdiction where I have also conducted research, female parishioners wore head coverings (such as scarves or hats) during services, and they were expected not to receive the Eucharist while menstruating or for 40 days after childbirth.<sup>3</sup> With regards to participation in corporate parish worship, women were encouraged to chant prayers, sing in the choir, host coffee hour, and form a women’s ministry, which they did during the course of my time there. In line with traditional Eastern Orthodox structures of church hierarchy, none of the women at Most Holy Theotokos parish were not allowed to be ordained to Holy Orders.

My research began with an interest in how this community used their home icon corners in everyday life and what the broader sociocultural implications of community rituals, which included a distinctive gifting economy of icons and relics, might entail.<sup>4</sup> During my last 12 months with the

community (2013–2014), I shifted my theoretical framework slightly, specifically asking lay women about their understandings of gender roles and canonical expectations of the female person in relation to their parish and the broader Orthodox Church. A curious trend emerged in this portion of my research: during our conversations the women produced an embodied rhetoric that was fraught with negotiations of the female self in relationship to the hierarchical teachings and androcentric structure of the church. While some of these comments were supported by practices conducted in their home icon corners, many often conflicted with their various forms of spiritual praxis that they described or I witnessed. This conflict provides us a way of thinking about the ever-evolving relationships between gender and religion in the Orthodox Church, for the critical intersection of belief/apologia and practice among women today allows us access to living theologies—not found in books, but rather in the actions and words of believers. In the vein of folklore and anthropology, I privilege the experiences of Orthodox women, for it is through encounters with pious Orthodox faithful that we see how theologies, traditions, and beliefs are manifested in everyday life (Primiano 1995; Mahmood 2005).

### **Implications of conversion**

The limited literature on Orthodox women often focuses on so-called cradle Orthodox believers in countries that are considered traditionally Orthodox such as Greece, Russia, and Romania (Paxson 2006; Oprica 2008; Shevzov 2014; Lubanska 2016).<sup>5</sup> Less attention has been devoted to the role of women in Orthodox communities in the United States (Slagle 2011). While it is not the goal of this project to understand why these women converted, it is vital to note that all women mentioned in this chapter save one converted to the Orthodox Church as adults. Indeed, one of the key aspects of this community is the fact that 90 plus percent of the adherents are converts to Eastern Orthodoxy. Conversion as a part of religiosity brings with it layers of complexities, particularly in the United States, where a vital religious marketplace exists, allowing for the adoption of a spiritual community to be a personal, individualistic endeavor (Roof 1999). These women selected Russian-influenced Orthodoxy as their religious affiliation; they knowingly aligned themselves with a conservative form of Christianity that has distinctive gender roles and boundaries. In a country and a region, where Orthodoxy is considered a minority religion, conversion to this religious group adds to the layers of political meaning-making that are present in the performativity of these women (Slagle 2011; Mullen 2017).

### **Language and praxis**

The women in this community displayed gaps between their oral affirmations of theological precepts and many of the devotions carried out in



their home icon corners. Most of the women verbally positioned themselves within the canonical confines of Orthodox theology, concomitantly engaging in personal practices of piety that opposed Orthodox theological ideas and church authority, such as Xenia's creation of a relic from the blanket of her departed infant daughter. As Saba Mahmood points out in her work on female Islamic piety in the Egyptian mosque movement, in order to understand varieties of agency expressed by religious women, we must analyze the "scaffolding of practices—both argumentative and embodied—that secured women's attachment to patriarchal forms of life, which, in turn, provided the necessary conditions for their subordination and agency" (Mahmood 2006, 180).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is crucial, as Mahmood notes, to investigate the logic behind discourses of piety not only through words, but also through the actions that are embedded into the broader discursive traditions of a particular community (*ibid.*). In Xenia's case, she created and venerated the relic and orally affirmed it as a sacred object, even though these actions did not align with the teachings of the church.

When discussing the structure of religious services and the positions of authority and prominence available for women in Orthodox liturgics, the women of Most Holy Theotokos parish overwhelmingly approved of their seemingly fixed gender-based roles in the collective community. Conversations often centered on what roles women should have in and outside of Orthodox services such as chanting in the choir, baking prosphora (used in Holy Communion), hosting coffee hour, and running the church bookstore or gift shop. However, conversations often turned to the potential for female inclusion in male-only performative ritual roles in the Holy Priesthood and what that might mean for the parish. Xenia, who was an original founding member of the parish, was quite vocal about female inclusion. Her comments provide insight into restrictions Orthodox women face in corporate worship:

My role in Divine Liturgy is singing and chanting, which I so love. Yes, it is the typical gender role, but Fr. Macarius has told us that women can be readers. Women can also be deaconesses, if there is no appropriate male to fill the role. I suppose if a plague wiped out all the men, a woman could then serve the Liturgy. Until then—and God forbid!—I am thankful to receive Holy Communion from someone who more easily represents the Father and to be side by side with those who represent the nurturing Mother.

(2012)

Xenia's discussion of the roles of women in the church center around her own experiences while broaching the idea of potential changes and theological crises. There are lay positions of religious service available to Orthodox women outside of Holy Orders, according to Xenia, but there is only limited number of ways in which women can serve the church before they hit the proverbial glass ceiling.

Approval of the patriarchal hierarchy of Orthodoxy was also evident in Xenia's description of some of the embodied practices she enacted in her home icon corner:

I wear a headscarf when my husband is present. I also wear a skirt on Sundays. I do the majority of the chanting, but whenever there is the reading of the Gospel, my husband does that. He also does what is typically done inside the altar in a church, such as burn incense and pray during the chanting. The teachings of the church are the reasons I dress differently—with scarf and skirt—symbolizing that the man, like Christ, is the head of the church.

(2012)

Here, Xenia's performative dress and submissive role in ritual actions during their family prayers expresses subordination to her husband, affirming the church's teachings about male authority. Thus, her husband is the one who completes the ritual acts that males are generally in charge of in an Orthodox church service, at least when he is present with her in the icon corner. Xenia argued for the normative theologies of the church, specifically regarding her place in its structure, while also creating relics and making saints, which speaks to the ways in which Orthodox women subtly push back against the structured roles they have in the church.

In a similar fashion to Xenia, Dorothea, the wife of the rector of Most Holy Theotokos parish and a convert by way of the Holy Order of Mans, provided verbal answers that articulate the traditional teachings of the church, thereby reinforcing normative understandings of gender and spirituality that pervade much of the emic literature of Orthodoxy (Lucas 1995). However, Dorothea is the one woman interviewed (besides Xenia) to address the role of female deaconesses. Dorothea and Xenia are part of a growing number of women in a wide variety of Orthodox jurisdictions who are beginning to take notice of the ancient guild of deaconesses in Christian tradition (see Beliakova in this volume). While arguments against the revival of the female diaconate from male theologians abound, particularly in the digital world of Orthodox public scholarship, very few Orthodox lay women—within and outside the academic world—have a voice in this debate.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Xenia, Dorothea remained cautiously open to the idea of restoring the female diaconate:

A return of the female diaconate might be useful. I don't have much information about this, but my understanding is that there was a female diaconate in the early church, and these women were responsible for the catechism and assistance in the baptism of women. If such a movement would cause any division in the Church, then any usefulness could well be nullified.

(2012)

Dorothea struggled to legitimize the return of deaconesses, while also stressing the importance of avoiding gender-based conflicts in the church, in an effort to both support the church's teachings of an all-male diaconate, while also contemplating the notion of change. Surprisingly, Dorothea did not address her home practices extensively. This may be in part because she sees many of her religious obligations as situated within the confines of the parish sphere. She did, however, explain that her domestic devotions are not affected by and do not inform her understanding of gender roles or dynamics in the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, her identity as a female Christian was not influenced particularly by her move into Orthodoxy. "That was pretty well established before I became Orthodox, as I converted as an adult. Church teachings, as far as I'm aware of them, have not affected my gender identity" (2011). Despite this proclamation, Dorothea went on to explain her role as a priest's wife—a role that is constructed by the church and comprised of complex socioreligious expectations:

I am a priest's wife, and so I have a unique role in the local parish. With regard to Liturgy, I support my husband in prayer during Divine Service. I also "lead" the singing although we do not have formal choir. Otherwise, my gender is not relevant.

(2011)

Here Dorothea expresses what theologian Maria McDowell (2013, 75) describes as "the visibly gendered division of the Liturgy" that is articulated in corresponding "modes of action for men and women". Dorothea's liturgical role is confined to particular actions—singing, chanting, and praying—because of her gender, even though she believes her gender is not relevant to the practices she participates in during the Liturgy. Dorothea's comments speak to the dissonance between actions and language, between performance and theological rhetoric.

In a similar fashion to Dorothea, Raphaela, an entrepreneur, wife, and mother, also supported the hierarchical structure of the church. Indeed, she stressed this point when asked about the androcentric nature of the priesthood: "I have not put much time toward thinking of the prohibition of female clergy. I believe, intuitively, that men and women have specific roles in the church which are equally necessary, demanding, and sacred" (2012). Raphaela's words draw on the theology of distinctive roles created by God for men and women to live out. Beyond this short polemic regarding public, communal religious action, she focused almost entirely on her domestic religious practices. Raphaela, who worked for her family business and was married to a lay leader in the church, stressed the importance of male leadership and family prayer time in her comments about domestic devotions: "My husband leads these prayers as the head of the family. I sing and chant when needed, but he is the one leading us." In this statement, Raphaela acknowledged the different religious roles men and women enact;

yet, she immediately stated that women do not “have different instructions when it comes to prayer at home. We are all to pray with attention, humility, and contrition and I don’t see a difference in this between men and women” (2012). Thus, Raphaela seemed to express cognitive dissonance when it comes to how men and women use home icon corners—how they perform piety.

Macrina, another founding member of Most Holy Theotokos parish, drew upon Orthodox theological understandings of piety, sanctity, and humility in her discussion of gender roles. Macrina’s answers offer a glimpse into the struggles Orthodox women have with the complex theology of gender in the Orthodox Church (see Butcher in this volume). When asked how she feels about the gendered structure of the church, Macrina replied:

I have strong feelings. I am very much for the all-male clergy. I believe strongly in the personal equality of men and women, but I also believe strongly that we’re different and suited for different roles. The world—and the Church—needs good men with the courage to be fathers, both earthly and spiritual.

(2012)

Macrina defended the patriarchal structure of the church, while noting her belief in equality between men and women beyond the confines of the church. However, as our conversation progressed, she began to focus more on gender roles as constructions associated with particular temporalities:

I don’t believe it impacts my faith much. My faith is in God, and God is spirit. Ultimately, gender roles only matter when it comes to the temporal. In the Orthodox Church, humility is seen as the saving virtue. A man or woman who has acquired true humility becomes like Christ, and a saint. That’s what we’re all corporately striving for: sanctity, not equality.

(2012)

Instead of focusing on gender roles, Macrina resituated the conversation, shifting into an extended monologue about salvation, ending with the proclamation, “The Church teaches that in Christ there’s no male or female. I’m very female, and still trying to wrap my mind around that one.” When asked for further clarification, Macrina declined to answer. While she verbally pushed the limits of Orthodox theology, she also remained firmly within its canonical confines.

Despite her acknowledged personal difficulty with Orthodox teachings surrounding gender, Macrina tried at one point to negotiate her understandings of gender, holiness, and devotion, using the lens of iconography:

My role is to be a worshiping part of the Church. I don’t believe that role is affected by gender. If you look at the icon “The Joy of All of

Creation,” the Mother of God is surrounded by a host of saints. There are genders depicted, but only because each person had one, not because it defined their sanctity.

(2012)

With this statement, Macrina moved beyond gender, focusing on deification and sanctification (*theosis*) as the primary means of identification for believers. Yet her language was still troubled by the fissure between her identification as “very female” and the church’s teachings about gender, which are fundamentally based on the latter half of Galatians 3:8, in which the Apostle Paul proclaims that there “is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This teaching comes to the fore in Macrina’s discussion of saints, in which she explained, “I think of the female saints as women and the male saints as men, but I don’t differentiate between them gender-wise regarding their prayers and intercessions” (2012).

Macrina’s struggle with the theological concepts of gender is also found in her statements about her home icon corner. At first, she suggested that her gender did not affect the way she used it, but immediately followed that statement up by explaining her gendered experience with the space:

I only know that I’m a woman and have a woman’s experience. Outwardly, my husband and I appear to use the icon corner in the same way: as a place for prayer and devotion. But I suspect that there is probably some gender-specific difference in our perspective, only because that usually turns out to be the case in other aspects of our lives.

(2012)

While Macrina did not address specific examples of gender role differences between her and her husband’s devotional practices, she sensed differences, gesturing toward some of the complicated notions of gender that are caught up with piety.

Helena, who converted to Orthodoxy after marrying her late husband, also struggled with the androcentric structure of the church. Helena’s devotional activities are the product of her husband’s instruction, although she claimed that with regards to her understanding of gender and church activities she kept her own counsel “about such things” (2014). Helena’s notion of her role or place within the Orthodox Church is both traditional—in the sense that beliefs are passed down through instruction by an Orthodox male—and innovative, because they do not directly affect her beliefs. A prime example of this is found in Helena’s comments about wearing a head covering during Divine Liturgy: “If I cover my head, for example, it is because of the tradition, not because I believe there is anything irreverent about going to church bareheaded” (2014). Within the confines of her home icon corner, Helena follows the prescribed teachings of her late husband, despite her belief that female Orthodox Christians should have equal say in theological matters. Indeed, when asked about her views of the

hierarchical, patriarchal structure of the church, she proclaimed, “I don’t like it—or agree with it. It is a fact of my life; there are things I do not like, but do not expect to change in my lifetime—so I accept things as they are” (2014). Here subordination is acknowledged, viewed as problematic, yet still found acceptable.

Nadieszda Kizenko (2013, 595), in her history of Orthodoxy and gender in post-Soviet Russia, also explores the idea that Orthodox women can be deeply involved in the life of the church, even though the religion they ascribe to maintains theologies, practices, and social constructs that “seem to keep women in a subordinate position”. Kizenko (2013) notes that some women affect and “subtly” alter the patriarchal tradition of Orthodoxy through social networking, writing, and fashion, while others affirm the traditional teachings of the hierarchy. Those who affirm traditional gender roles view outside influences or progressive feminist theology as hostile and damaging to their Christian values and to Russia. Summing up her analysis of gender and the Russian Orthodox Church, Kizenko suggests that Russian women embrace religious possibilities as long as they remain canonically and ecclesiastically appropriate.

It is evident from the conversations with female believers in the Missouri Ozarks that much of the same thought process regarding gender roles is found in this American Orthodox community, yet they seemed to find a vernacular space—icon corners—on the periphery of the formal structure of Orthodoxy through which to flex the limits of possibility and acceptability (Primiano 1995; Kizenko 2013). With vernacular, I do not intend to create a binary with so-called institutional religion; rather, in the vein of folklorists such as Leonard Primiano, I want to acknowledge the conflicted nature of belief and practice, enabling us to see the dynamic, vibrant expressions of religion manifested in the lives of these women (Primiano 2012).

### **Vernacular feminine piety**

Icon corners are a major aspect of Orthodox domestic life, providing a vernacular parallel to liturgical altars found in parishes around the world. Altars, sometimes bookcases or small tables, are often the foundation upon which the icon corner expands spatially through the placement of icons of Christ and the saints on the walls and other forms of religious materiality on the altar itself. Icons are a form of connective media through which practitioners communicate with members of the celestial realm (Riccardi 2014). Often, the language these women used to describe icons of saints became conflated with the saints themselves, so that they would speak of one but refer to the other. Indeed, when referring to the Theotokos or the Mother of God, they would always use feminine pronouns to refer to the icon. Thus these women would say “she arrived” if an icon of the Mother of God toured the parish. Often in descriptions of their everyday vernacular practices conducted in their icon corners, the women of Most Holy Theotokos parish highlighted

the improvisational and individualistic nature of their spiritual lives, thereby performatively negotiating the androcentric theologies and patriarchal structure of Orthodoxy through actions and words.

Home icon corners are agentive spaces in which women interpret theology through embodied practices and lived experiences such as creating relics and icons. While a few of the women I spoke with disregarded gender in relationship to the saints, Raphaela highlighted how the gender of the saints affected her connection to them: “I feel a warmer (woman to woman) connection with female saints because many of their stories have elements to which I can relate as a woman” (2012). Perhaps this warmth, this connectivity, is indicative of what folklorist Kay Turner (1987, 1999) describes in her work on women’s home altars, where she posits that keeping an altar, especially in a gender-stratified community, allows women to participate more fully in male-dominated religious experiences, serving to reimagine tradition through practitioners’ actions. For Turner (1987, x, 1999), the embodied actions of women in their altars emphasize the relational values of inclusion and exchange, providing a private harbor from patriarchal alienation. While the women of Most Holy Theotokos parish often defer to males while participating in joint ritual practices in their icon corners, during personal devotions the corners materially provide space for important forms of religiosity, such as the cloth relic Xenia created, the printed icons and pictures of icons venerated widely by women in the community, the belief that the smell of roses filling a living room signals a personal visit from Theotokos, the folk icons created by Brenda, the artist-in-residence at the parish, and the apparitions of St. Herman to one of the women in her living room. These are all part of the materiality of belief present in the lives of these women and made possible through their icon corners.

The materiality of icons and the space of the icon corners themselves are vital sites of interaction in which many of these women exerted their agency and reimagined the teachings of Orthodoxy by crafting vernacular forms of piety (perhaps even vernacular theologies). Macrina suggested numerous times that photographs of icons she took are equivalent to traditional, canonical icons of the church. Xenia labeled many of her photographs of religious sites and the relics of saints’ bodies as iconographic relics, and had crafted a relic from a bit of cloth that was taken from the body of her reposed infant daughter—whom she now considers to be a saint. Xenia also venerated a “Crayola icon” of her daughter that was given to her by her own goddaughter and she included that icon as part of her ritual domestic practices (Riccardi 2014). Through these performative acts, the normative, hierarchical process is disrupted by female piety, for both the canonization of a saint and the recognition of authentic relics are confined to Orthodox institutions—to clergy and hierarchs. In other words, both actions are situated fully in the male sphere of power. Thus when these women craft relics and canonize saints within their icon corners, they are in some way shifting the dynamics of spiritual power in the Orthodox Church.



In many ways, the actions of these women are similar to the rituals described by Gabriella Ricciardi in her analysis of shrines found in the homes of Mexican American Catholic women. Ricciardi (2006, 539) notes that in both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, men represent God and “worship is highly codified”. Ricciardi also suggests that this type of liturgical religion is a “patriarchal institution that has historically marginalized and silenced women.” Home altars, according to Ricciardi, allow for material expressions of female agency and a way for women to partake in the liturgical life of the church that is personal, gendered, and adaptive. Icon corners had a similar effect in the lives of the women at Most Holy Theotokos parish. By serving at the home altar, they partook in the liturgical life of the church, expressing and shaping individual feminine spiritualities that broke free of the ecclesiastical confines of androcentric religious precepts, despite their verbal affirmation of these same theological ideologies.

One of the important regulations regarding prayer in the Orthodox Church is the prohibition against mental imaginings or imagery during private devotions. This, of course, is complicated by the emphasis on and use of visual things as primary devotional aids for practitioners. As Sergei Sveshnikov (2009, 26), a Russian American Orthodox priest and theologian, notes, “The Orthodox Tradition does not encourage the use of mental imagery. In fact, it almost appears to forbid sensory imagination during prayer altogether”. The implied injunction against visualizing religious images or figures not only pertains to devotees, but also the painters of icons (see Husso in this volume), who are warned through the teachings of the Church Fathers to avoid painting imaginative iconography lest the visual image arouse imaginings in its viewers. Working primarily with the writings of the Russian Orthodox Fathers, specifically St. Ignatii Brayanchaninov, Sveshnikov makes the case that iconography and visual images of the saints and Christ are meant to stimulate pious feelings and specific spiritual memories, not visions or the spiritual imagination. This indictment of mental imagery, according to Sveshnikov (2009, 26–35), is tied to the theology of humility and the conscious avoidance of activities that might create illusions of spiritual superiority.

Despite the canonical injunctions against religious imaginings, it is evident from the language employed by female parishioners from Most Holy Theotokos parish that domestic practices do not completely align with institutional theology. Xenia imagined throwing her head on the breast of St. Xenia as she wept for her family during her morning prayers in front of the icons, and said, “Oh help me with this!” (2013). Xenia’s statement indicates that she imagined herself touching and being touched by the physical body of St. Xenia, a mental image that was evoked by looking at an icon of the saint. Juliana, a mother and medical professional, described how her connection to the Theotokos was strengthened by the image of the Mother of God: “To see her face, it makes it become more real. I think about her as a person, that she is hearing our prayers” (2013). These prayerful imaginings



are outside of the theology of the church, but through them, these women purposely created their own relationships with the saints. Their individual icon corners created space for them to reimagine Orthodox ideas, thereby crafting their own form of faith.

In a sense, the women in this community expressed “modalities of agency” that were “both argumentative and embodied” (Mahmood 2005, 154). These agentive modalities seemed to be embedded into the socioreligious construction of the icon corner, an area that complicates the performativity of Orthodox gender norms, destabilizing the prescribed rituals of the church. Within the parish setting, the materiality of Orthodoxy is communal and often subject to male intervention. Holy Communion, anointing, and incense are all distributed by ordained males. While icons and relics abound in the space of the parish, they too are subject to the particularities of Orthodox tradition, such as when and how they can be venerated or what form those icons and relics should take. This is not the case in the icon corner, which, as a physical space, becomes a material means through which women can act out performances distinctly different from those located in the communal space of the parish. Icons, prayers, and practices are chosen by women for women. Thus, in a way, icon corner rituals become performances that are embodied rewritings of Orthodox life.

Icon corners, therefore, are sites of contested performances that reflect the shifting religiopolitical ideologies of Orthodox women. However, conservative religious reconfigurations of the self are often not forms of subversion; rather, they are different forms of agency (Mahmood 2005). Perhaps, much like Mahmood’s assessment of Islamic piety, the embodied religious beliefs and actions of female Orthodox Christians destabilize normative conceptions of male hierarchy, while abiding by the standards of socio-cultural mores and religious piety. As these Ozarkian Orthodox women agentively reconfigure the parameters of piety, the very material culture of Orthodoxy becomes entangled in the active power of feminine belief. The seeming domesticity of the home icon corner belies its vital transtemporality, for through its iconographic nature, it allows direct access to God. Through the creation of relics, painting of folk icons, the curation of rituals through personal piety, and other material and sensory components of religious praxis, these women work out their own articulations of self, of womanhood, of life as Orthodox Christians.

## **Conclusion**

While I engage with theoretical concepts to help make sense of how the women of Most Holy Theotokos parish argue for patriarchal normativity while concomitantly reimagining their roles through their domestic piety, it is their words and actions alone that help us see how they conceptualize themselves in relationship to the Orthodox Church and its teachings. Through crafting relics, canonizing saints, and imagining holy people, they

push against the male-dominated structures of power that they verbally support. Ethnographically, this study is a limited, micro perspective of female participation and gender roles in the Orthodox Church, focusing specifically on converts. These women enhance our understanding of the tensions that accompany female agency in a conservative branch of Christianity, and how temporalities and access are part of the negotiations of female piety and belief are internalized and habitualized as part of the praxis of tradition (Kupari 2016). In other words, they help us make sense of the various facets of religious experience, including how it is encountered, practiced, and transformed through narratives, materiality, and actions (Primiano 1995; Orsi 1996; Bowman and Valk 2012; McGuire 2016). Engaging with the materiality of their icon corners, these Orthodox women use devotional shrines to negotiate their roles in the church, thereby pushing us to think more deeply about how these Christian women exert their agency, particularly in a church as highly structured as Eastern Orthodoxy. In a community where oral affirmations of theological ideas are crucial in maintaining one's status and participation in the life of the church, icon corners provide a material means through which belief is enforced and transformed.

## Notes

- 1 Given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, all my interlocutors have aliases and I changed the name of the parish. For more ethnographic fieldwork from this community, see another book chapter (Riccardi-Swartz 2016). In conjunction with the wishes of participants, I used their given names in that publication.
- 2 Van Nieuwkerk, drawing on the work of Saba Mahmood, discusses “discursive piety” in relationship to the piety movement in Islam. While her research is focused on a different religious tradition, her theories are helpful, given the conservative nature of Eastern Orthodoxy and its focus on expressive piety that is both embodied and discursive.
- 3 The idea of receiving Holy Communion while menstruating was a subject that my subjects refused to broach on the record, although a few acknowledged privately that they viewed the prohibition as a holdover from ancient Jewish purity laws (De Troyer et al. 2003; Briskina-Müller 2014).
- 4 By gifting economy, I am referring to how icons are shared and distributed among community members for ritual occasions. A prime example of this would be an adult baptism, where the convert is often given icons from various members of the community.
- 5 For an excellent account of conversion to Orthodoxy by Tlingit women in Alaska, see Kan (1996).
- 6 Drawing on Mahmood's (2001) notion of agency, I see it as both action and subversion, dependent upon the person and the context.
- 7 For more information on this complex issue in contemporary Orthodox circles, see FitzGerald (1999) and Zagano (2013, 2016).

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## 8 Tradition, gender, and empowerment

### The Birth of Theotokos Society in Helsinki, Finland

*Pekka Metso, Nina Maskulin, and Teuvo Laitila*

The Birth of Theotokos Society (*Jumalansynnyttäjän syntymän yhteisö* in Finnish, henceforth the Society) is a lay-dominated Orthodox monastic community in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. It represents one of the ways in which monastics and laypeople alike can pursue an urban Orthodox way of life. The Society is led by a nun, Mother Elisabet. It welcomes both laywomen and laymen. At present, however, most active members are women. In this chapter, we study the Society from a gender perspective. First, we discuss how the Society is constructed by its members' relationships and activities. Second, we examine how the Society interacts with the Helsinki Orthodox parish, its clergy, and other employees, observing how this interaction also shapes and characterizes the Society. Last, we describe the material and immaterial dimensions of member engagement with the Society and investigate how these dimensions contribute to the Society's role in their lives.

Finland has been dominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Today, some 70 percent of the Finnish population (of c. 5.5 million) is Lutheran, while the Orthodox are a small minority of 1.1 percent.<sup>1</sup> Orthodox monasteries were first established in Karelia—in the borderland between Finland and Russia—in the fourteenth century and in Pechenga (*Petsamo* in Finnish) on the Kola Peninsula in the sixteenth century. In 1944, Finland ceded most of its Karelian territories and Pechenga to the Soviet Union. The three monasteries and one convent located in these areas were evacuated and resettled in Heinävesi, a rural municipality 400 kilometers north-east of Helsinki. At the time of the evacuation, Orthodox monasticism was unknown in Finland outside of Finnish Karelia. More than 70 years later, Valaam (*Valamo* in Finnish) Monastery and Lintula Convent continue to host a small community of monks and nuns, invite laypeople as guests for short periods, especially during holiday seasons and Great Feasts, and promote Orthodox monastic tradition and prayer life in present-day Finnish society.

Not foreign to Orthodoxy, lay-dominated monastic societies are atypical in the Finnish religious landscape. Presently, there are three such societies, all located in the diocese of Helsinki in southern Finland. The Juliana

Orthodox Women's Association, founded in 1997, targets women who have experienced some radical change in their life, supporting their everyday Orthodox lifestyle. The lay monastic Panagia Society, established in 2013, invites both men and women to pursue ascetic life according to the Athonite monastic tradition. The Juliana Association is located in a small, quiet town and the Panagia Society in a remote village, both some 140 kilometers north of Helsinki.

The third lay-dominated monastic institution, the Birth of Theotokos Society, operates in the heart of Helsinki, promoting a traditional Eastern Orthodox monastic lifestyle in the form of prayer, common worship, activities, and spiritual direction. Moreover, the Society is actively connected with the liturgical life of the Helsinki parish. The publicly available information on services, the Society's visibility in local and national media, and the lack of exclusive structures such as a membership register or fee, all enable anyone to visit the Society's chapel for help or prayer. Its organization and location in the city center make the Society different from that of the other Finnish Orthodox ascetic and monastic institutions.

The idea to establish the Society first arose in 2006, when Mother Elisabet was not yet ordained as a nun. It started to materialize six years later, when the (since retired) Metropolitan of Helsinki, Ambrosius, appointed her the head of the Birth of Theotokos Society, then located on the outskirts of Helsinki. Despite her ordination and monastic duties, Mother Elisabet kept her civilian profession as a high-ranking state official and medical doctor until her retirement in 2018. The other founding member of the Society, a monk, moved to the Valaam Monastery in 2013. The same year, the Society moved to an apartment owned by Mother Elisabet in central Helsinki. The area is near the main railway station and can be restless due to illegal drug trade and prostitution. From 2014 onwards, the Society has rented a ground floor shop consecrated as a chapel in the same building.

This chapter is based primarily on ethnographic data, including interviews, participant observation, and research diaries.<sup>2</sup> The interviewees were selected by Mother Elisabet, who has a good knowledge of research ethics due to her education as a medical doctor. Therefore, she suggested selecting members that she considered strong enough to go through a long and intimate interview that could potentially revive stressful memories. The interviews thus provide an active participants' perspective on the Society, but do not necessarily reflect the experiences of its most vulnerable members.

We interviewed six women between the ages of (approximately) 40 and 90. At the time of the interviews, the women were single; some were single parents, either divorced or widowed. Their social status was middle class and, based on their work history, their education intermediate or higher. The interviews lasted between 100 and 180 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Except for Mother Elisabet, we refer to our research participants using pseudonyms.

All the interviewees had been members in the Evangelical Lutheran Church prior to joining the Finnish Orthodox Church in adulthood. Adult conversion to the Orthodox Church has become a common phenomenon in Finland in recent years, while membership in Christian denominations in general is declining (Nguyen 2007; Statistics Finland 2016). Converts with a Lutheran upbringing are currently prominent among the Orthodox faithful and clergy. Since men were only scarcely involved in the Society's activities, we did not interview any. Some men attend services at the chapel, occasionally call in to get advice, or visit out of curiosity. Parish priests regularly celebrate the Divine Liturgy. As studies of many churches have demonstrated, women are often more involved in church activities, whereas men occupy leading positions (Walter and Davies 1998; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012; Hovi 2014).

According to Mother Elisabet, the Society is, “for the most part,” a community of “wounded people,” of whom she distinguished four types. First, those who only participate in services in the chapel. Second, people going through some kind of tragedy: they come for an intensive period and then disappear. Third, people who visit the Society now and then, and, fourth, people who visit regularly. Mother Elisabet identified the people in the fourth category as individuals at the intersection of emotional, economic, and medical challenges. They are regularly involved in the chapel's weekly routines such as preparing refreshments, doing simple needlework, or making decorations for Great Feasts. Like many of the occasional visitors, they evidently find consolation in their dialogs with Mother Elisabet.

### **Theoretical premises: theo-anthropology, agency, and empowerment**

We chose theological and sociological analysis to help us understand women's religiosity in the context of urban monastic and communal life. Our theological framework, focusing on the equal dignity of men and women and the status of women in monastic life, is compatible with our sociological framework of agency. In order to elaborate our approach, we first discuss Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's interpretations of theological tradition and history as contributing to the ministry of women. Second, we outline our understanding of how women's everyday religion can positively influence their agency and empowerment. In the analysis, we apply these two frameworks to explore the situated, temporal, and complex nature of our interlocutors' religiosity, as illustrated in their accounts.

A leading Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005) contributed to the conceptualization of the ministry of women in the Orthodox Church (Behr-Sigel 1991; Behr-Sigel and Ware 1998). The twentieth-century Orthodox women's movement worked toward “breaking the silence” surrounding the tradition of excluding women from ministry. It aimed at abolishing the sinful hostility “between



a bad masculinity and a bad femininity,” which has distorted the image of woman in the history of the church (Behr-Sigel 1991, 103–114). Behr-Sigel’s Christian anthropology or theo-anthropology builds on a critical reading of the Bible and patristic theology. Her *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (originally published in French in 1987 as *Le ministère de la femme dans l’Église*) is her key work, and makes the following four main arguments:

First, Christian personalism overcomes the dichotomy of masculine and feminine. Building on patristic theology (e.g., the Cappadocian Fathers and John Chrysostom), Behr-Sigel (1991, 91–92, 117–119, 130–132) proposes that individuals (human persons) are concrete, uni-complex, composite human beings, with a socially accentuated, formed or deformed feminine or masculine dominance.

Second, women have experienced oppression in the church (Behr-Sigel 1991, 73–78, 122–123). In Behr-Sigel’s reading, mainstream biblical exegesis is not based on genuine theological premises, but is supported by outdated cultural stereotypes and historical conditions, dualism, and fear of sexuality. The Bible and tradition propose reciprocal masculinity and femininity in the church. Furthermore, she maintains that, in contrast to the mainstream feminist interpretation of Christianity, Orthodox believers do not understand the true church as a “society with a patriarchal structure thought up by men and governed by and for them” (122–123).

Third, the whole of humanity should strive toward feminization. In the Orthodox view *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, is an archetypal image who defines the woman as a figure of love with a mission to remind the entire humanity of the importance of following “the law of love” and opening “oneself to the universal.” Behr-Sigel (1991, 77–79, 130–134, quote from page 134) calls for the feminization of human beings by awakening and preserving in men and women alike a love-driven “feminine attitude of effacement and of acceptance.”

Fourth, monastic communities may liberate women. Since Antiquity, Christian monasticism has affirmed women as genuine persons. Asceticism, as an alternative to marriage and motherhood, has had the potential to liberate women from many social restrictions. Following in the footsteps of early monastic communities, Behr-Sigel (1991, 118–122, quote from page 134) argues that new communities may be created as “places where being would have priority over having, where inner fulfillment would be more important than competing for power and where science and technology would serve life, not death.” According to Behr-Sigel, the Orthodox Christian way of life leads to a proper understanding of the human nature as an infinite totality of feminine and masculine potentialities. This vision can materialize in the life of a monastic community, and may be somehow “liberating” or empowering for its members.

Behr-Sigel’s approach can be seen as compatible with the concept of agency in the sociology of religion and gender studies. In sociological research,



agency is often defined as a person's intentional and conscious effort to achieve something. Successful agentic action often implies changes in power relations. Here, our focus is on microlevel manifestations of such relations. Thus, in the analysis, we trace the interviewees' experiences and interpretations of their status within the Society, the parish, and the Orthodox Church in general.

In previous research, the concept of empowerment has been understood to refer to increased autonomy: to women gaining more say in their own lives (see Ozorak 1996; Sadati et al. 2015). Like agency, empowerment is often considered in terms of its outcome. Here, we emphasize the processual aspects of empowerment by paying special attention to our interlocutors' accounts of interactions between Society members and their relations with the outside world, including priests and local parish structures (cf. Ammerman 2014, 212–249; Pollari 2017, 41–46).

Sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman (2014, 2016) has stressed that scholars should be cautious not to narrow down what actually is a multitude of “everyday religion.” According to her (Ammerman 2016; see also Emirbayer and Miche 1998; Leming 2007; Hovi 2014), laypeople's religious lives and experiences are complex, layered, and deeply rooted in the social and cultural context. This holds true for our interviewees' religious lives. The Society, as a community of monastics and lay participants, is constructed through interpersonal relations and material and immaterial realities both within and outside formal religious institutions. That is to say, it is the product of ongoing negotiations and interpretations, produced by laypeople and religious professionals in various everyday situations: individual and collective, private and public, and more or less official.

All in all, taking our cue from Ammerman, we understand agency here as oscillation between everyday practice and dynamic action, where both are related to a meaningful Orthodox religious life. We conceive of the Society members' empowerment as evolving through both the discursive and material aspects of their everyday religion (see Ammermann 2014, 2016). In the analysis, we therefore emphasize what the women do (activities); how they share experiences and talk about religion together (discourse); and what kinds of embodied relations, spaces, and objects are involved in their religious practice (materiality). This approach has previously been used to investigate the religiosity of Finnish women in general (Utriainen and Salmesvuori 2014) and elderly Finnish Orthodox women in particular (Kupari 2014, 2016).

Our interviewees described their individual religious practice, the Society's activities, and participation in parish life as equally significant. Nevertheless, their accounts reveal that the Society provided them with special tools to pursue an active and meaningful Orthodox life—thus contributing to their agency and empowerment in their daily lives and as lay members of the Finnish Orthodox Church. To better understand this, we now turn to the analysis of our ethnographic data.

### Activities and communality

When we are talking about the Society we speak of two different communities. So there is this monastic community that only I belong to at the moment.... And then there is this extended community, and it is very meaningful. Because they [members] can be served and are provided with certain possibilities, presence, and whatever they themselves look for.

Mother Elisabet is describing the difference between two parallel realities within the Society: the monastic life upstairs, with one nun (herself), and the chapel community downstairs, where people come to pray, socialize, and meet Mother Elisabet. She describes her ministry or service in the chapel community as “presence” through which people are encouraged to action in the form of simple spiritual practice and, ultimately, to gain spiritual agency.

In more conventional monasticism, members customarily participate in the community by carrying out various duties. Anneli, who had served in the Valaam Monastery as a guide and by waiting tables, contrasted the Society with Valaam, where assigned duties are central. In the Society, “none of us has fixed duties, it is very freely organized.” Mother Elisabet said that this was because people usually visit the Society when they are sick or otherwise suffering. The daily running of the chapel does not, therefore, depend on members of the chapel community. Engagement with the Society is not constructed through spiritual labor but through voluntarily lending the community a helping hand. “If there is nobody else to take care of cleaning or do the dishes, I do it,” said Mother Elisabet. Thus, one could claim that the Society is not a place for accomplishing duties, but rather a safe haven.

Daily services (morning prayers, matins, the Akathist Hymn, and intercessions) are celebrated at the Society’s chapel from Monday to Saturday by Mother Elisabet or available members. The schedule is updated weekly on the Society’s website and can be received by text to one’s cellphone. According to Mother Elisabet, it is important to mediate the exact time of prayer for those who have asked for intercession. For the Saturday night vigil, Sunday morning Liturgy, and services during major feasts, the members attend their local churches. Mother Elisabet regularly leads Jesus Prayer services at *Kotikirkko* (Home Church), in the Helsinki parish main building. There are only two fixed days for Liturgy in the Society chapel: the Birth of the Mother of God on September 8 and the feast of St. Xenia of Petersburg on January 24. Occasionally, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated at the chapel by a visiting priest.

Prayer services structure monastic life and are the *raison d’être* of the Society. Several of our interlocutors emphasized the significance of continuous prayer. Anneli stated: “I really believe that praying has always worked miracles. If people truly pray, it helps.” Helena had an idea of an endless

chain of prayer that brings Christians together: "If you have no strength to pray yourself, there is always prayer somewhere. There is always a monastery or a time [for prayer] somewhere." Kyllikki, moreover, compared daily prayer to "rye bread," evoking the poetic meaning of rye as the ultimate nourishment in Finnish culture.

The Society's activities also have an economic dimension. Active members bake and deliver *phosphoron*, the Eucharistic bread, to churches, and operate a small-scale catering service for baptisms and other family celebrations. The chapel also has a small shop selling icons and books. Furthermore, the interviewees did everyday chores in the chapel, washing dishes after a post-service cup of coffee, cleaning, and doing handicrafts during the opening hours. As Mother Elisabet put it: "Here nothing is done without God being present. No matter how prosaic, nothing goes beyond His sphere of influence."

The hospitable atmosphere in the downstairs chapel emanates from the invisible monastic life upstairs. Anneli explained: "You can go there to speak about what concerns you, and she [mother Elisabet] always has time." During our fieldwork, Mother Elisabet could be contacted by paying a visit or by phone. On Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, the chapel is kept open as a sitting room where guests and members can do needlework or knit, talk or just listen, have a cup of coffee, buy necessities for prayer life, or be comforted by Mother Elisabet in times of hardship.

The elementary Orthodox way of life begins with and is manifested in small actions, like making the sign of cross when starting a task. The purpose of the monastic community, according to Mother Elisabet, is to be present for guests visiting the Society chapel and give them guidance in such simple ways to lead a spiritual life:

Meeting the visitors' needs, to help them with their spiritual life. It does not necessarily mean the Liturgy or spiritual discussions. We have them too, but I mean that...it is the presence. When we are sitting together in the chapel with needlework. There is value in humdrum chores.

Participating in services and activities, praying, and simply being present constitute Orthodox life in the shared space of the chapel. The Society has an open structure, which provides laypeople with an opportunity to learn different practices and duties (liturgical, practical, and other), according to their abilities. This has much in common with Behr-Sigel's understanding of genuine Orthodox religiosity: tradition is the framework within which people truly live their religiosity. Or, paraphrasing Emmanuel Levinas (1974), the Society gives the interviewees the necessary basis of existence, which enables them to fulfill their own needs without neglecting those of others. Members' agency is manifested and supported through socialization and collective action.

## The society in relation to the outside world

The Society is embedded in the local Helsinki Orthodox parish and the Finnish Orthodox Church. In Orthodoxy, ritual life and institutional hierarchy are sex segregated. Society members had adapted to this gendered division of labor, while at the same making use of traditional patterns to pursue an active lay life acceptable by Orthodox standards.

In the interviews, a recurrent theme was what could be termed “mutual benefit.” Mother Elisabet stressed the significance of laypeople for the parish. Helena, likewise, stated that “the parish cannot exist without laypeople.” The other research participants described their relations with the parish through emphasizing their participation in church activities according to their abilities, competences, or talents: singing in the choir in the Divine Liturgy, making church decorations such as *käspaikka*, traditional Karelian embroidered needlework, or volunteering at Valaam or Lintula during the holidays. In general, our interlocutors’ understanding of a quotidian Orthodox way of life involved serving both their parishes and their families, children, and grandchildren.

Helena held an administrative position in the Society and led Jesus Prayer services in the parish when needed. Marjatta had been singing for years in the church choir, and Johanna participated in *panikhida* memorial services for the deceased every other week when her ex-husband looked after the children. Most of the interviewees had served as board members in various parish organs. Through such forms of institutionalized involvement, they established themselves within the parish and the Orthodox Church as “indispensable” and therefore, also independent insiders. Immersion in the everyday running of the parish thus contributed to our research participants’ sense of agency and empowerment.

Nevertheless, this independence was not pushed too far. A good example of Society members’ tacit acknowledgment of traditional Orthodox authority is the Eucharist, at which only a priest may officiate. Mother Elisabet summarized the issue by emphasizing the priority of services in the parish churches over those conducted in the chapel. Overall, the Society and the parish were closely linked at the liturgical level, so the Society could not be dismissed as a dissenting sect. The Society’s relationship with the parish is characterized by theological and social interaction; members keep to the confines of tradition in relation to it and the wider church.

The overlap between the Society and the parish (and church) indicates that one can live as a layperson and lead an Orthodox way of life in both. This was illustrated, for instance, by Johanna, who stated that the parish is important for her, but that she also participates in the Society’s activities. According to our interlocutors, however, some important aspects of the Society were missing from the parish. Since the Society lacks traditional hierarchy, one can come and go as one pleases and participate freely as oneself. As Anneli put it, the Society is “a place of equals.” Meetings with Mother Elisabeth took place in the Society chapel and not in the parish, so

the Society is also constructed in opposition to it. For the interviewees, the Society had “added value” that the parish could not give.

Our interviewees compared the nature of the Society to Orthodox monasticism. They all had positive experiences of visits to a monastery or convent, which had deepened their understanding of the “angelic life.” However, they did not see monastic life as an option for them at present. All of them had a solid understanding of the demands of monastic commitment and wanted to pursue lay cultural learning of the Orthodox way of life instead. Mother Elisabet, too, was convinced that supporting a Christian way of life rather than promoting monasticism is the Society’s primary task. In her view, the Society is a place of rest and renewal for people living in the world. It guides people to sanctify everyday life by doing “little things, very little things.” Mother Elisabet crystallized the meaning of the chapel as a spiritual space by calling it “the presence of monasticism in the middle of the city.” The monasticism advocated by the Society is constructed around regular services that are promptly mediated, the articulated equality among members, and the lack of social control in participation. This kind of “easy” Orthodoxy encourages members’ own initiative to act, thus empowering them.

Theologically, the Society can be seen as bringing together women with different roles, statuses, and backgrounds, and foster interaction not dominated by a predetermined paradigm or social expectations. Rather, as a community of monastic(s) and laywomen, it creates a space and existence that allows people to be themselves despite the restrictions of the hierarchy and the often rigid social norms of the Orthodox Church.

### **The society as a physical and spiritual community**

Based on the interviews, the physical space of the chapel, where most of the Society’s common activities take place, played a very important role in the religious lives of its members. The chapel is a place for presence and for theological discussions. It is a place that, as Johanna said, “creates true peace of mind” and, according to Helena, “the only place where anybody understands a word” of what she says. Society activities are experienced as equal, free of competition for social acceptance, and consoling. Marjatta pointed out that the Society consists of “likeminded peers.” Johanna and her children felt “fully accepted” there. Helena and Anneli both deepened their prayer life in the chapel and felt “accepted” and “appreciated.”

Overall, our interlocutors describe the Society as a supportive learning environment where different ways of conducting an Orthodox life are accepted. Hence, it is also seen as strengthening its members’ faith. According to Mother Elisabet, people still advancing in their religiosity can develop their Orthodoxy there. Marjatta pointed out that one cannot take refuge solely in human beings, but in God; this can be interpreted to indicate that Society members help each other to get closer to God. For the elderly members in particular, Mother Elisabet also functions as a substitute for

a confessor. Anneli emphasized: “I know that I have someone close to me, someone I can always lean on. It is of immense help.” To paraphrase Mother Elisabet again, the Society is a community where people who need each other can rest together. The role of congenial relationships in personal and spiritual growth has also been acknowledged in identity theory (e.g., Deaux et al. 1999).

Mother Elisabet manages the Society’s intercession list, which she prays through privately in the chapel daily after matins. The importance of common prayer for someone, either living or deceased, was acknowledged by our research participants. Kyllikki emphasized the value of remembering the dead, while Marjatta stated that “the fact that the others pray for me is even more significant.” In other words, praying was conceived of as a gift that could be given or received, depending on circumstances. The idea of reciprocity was also expanded to cover material things such as donations. Marjatta explained that although she is not wealthy, she had presented an unspecified nun with a bike, “because she had such a bad bike,” and had donated a sewing machine she did not need to a nunnery.

The Society is also linked to the communion of Orthodox saints. The Mother of God and other saints play an important role in the everyday lives of the members. In the physical space of the Society, the presence of and communion with saints is manifested through icons; most walls of the tiny chapel are covered with them. The interviewees also had several icons at home and even carried icons in their handbags. Icons served as companions in everyday strategic decisions, sources of guidance, and tokens for prayer.

The Society’s web page emphasizes the active presence of saints in the life of the Society. Of all Orthodox saints, it gives prominence to St. Xenia of Saint Petersburg (d. c. 1803). According to ecclesiastical tradition, after her husband’s death she distributed her wealth to the poor and begun to live like a nun dressed in her husband’s clothes. Mother Elisabet identified a specific spiritual connection between St. Xenia’s *vita* (life) and her own pursuit of ascetic life in the middle of the city, where she was constantly mistaken for and mocked as a Muslim woman because of her nun’s habit: “Above anyone else, she [St. Xenia] understands challenges, and helps me to find answers as well.” Helena and Johanna maintained that St. Xenia had helped them to find housing.

The interviewees emphasized their everyday interactions with saints. Helena said, “they had the same fears and doubts as we do.” Saints’ lives were seen as patterned along similar lines to the lives of the interviewees. In some cases, the relationship with a saint could even be characterized as constant “cooperation,” which helped the interlocutor in question to face the complexities of postmodern Finnish society. Asking for and receiving practical help from particular saints strengthened the everyday and this-world-centered model of living Orthodoxy advocated by the Society. Our research participants’ dialog and engagement with saints can be understood as an important feature of their religious agency.

As the Society's patron, the most important saint for members was the Mother of God. Mother Elisabet characterized the Mother of God as a courageous teenager who got pregnant outside wedlock, married an old widow, and bore the social consequences of her choices. Later, she suffered immensely, having to face and witness the death of her child, but did not collapse. These aspects of the Virgin Mary's life, suffering and survival, recurred in the experiences of the interviewees and gave them some important clues as to how to lead an Orthodox life. Relatability and familiarity were crucial in other saints. If a saint's life made them appear difficult to approach or understand, Society members were unlikely to express daily devotion to them.

Mother Elisabet was the axial figure around which the Society turned, as both a physical and spiritual community. Her personality and actions aroused commitment among the interviewees. Johanna explained how she felt like "an invisible child" whom Mother Elisabet had made visible again through her attention and unconditional acceptance.<sup>3</sup> An easily approachable person, Mother Elisabet helped the interviewees and other people in spiritual matters and everyday problems. Helena even considered Mother Elisabet as almost like a *starica*, a female monastic elder advisor and teacher. As a woman, she is a peer and equal to the (female) members, but as a nun, she is acknowledged to have authority reminiscent of that of a priest or monk. Mother Elisabet herself compared the women's discussions with her to talking to a priest or confession, with the exception that her gender helps women to approach her. Women may sometimes find it difficult to discuss their concerns with male confessors.

As a nun, Mother Elisabet is dedicated to being "dead to the world" and living the "angelic life." This frees her of the social restrictions on male clergy: "I do not need to be that polite, I can easily tell things straight... I can bluntly say what a goof someone has been when they have done something stupid." In other words, priests, who are prone to offering theological instructions and choosing their words carefully, may appear too ambivalent in their advice to laypeople. Mother Elisabet, in contrast, follows her own understanding of the monastic rule, which allows her to practice honesty and to treat others as equals. She is a role model for our interlocutors, educated and economically independent Finnish women who want to be active within a patriarchal ecclesiastical institution. Their activities, which are both traditional and (post)modern, challenge traditional Orthodox hierarchical structures. Marjatta gave an example of this when offering her interpretation of the Orthodox practice of asking for a blessing from a priest:

We position our hands [reference to the gesture of asking a blessing]. We go in front of the priest. We ourselves take the initiative [to show] that we want it [a blessing]... And the priest knows it, no need to say anything, and then he blesses...



Here, Marjatta describes the structured, traditional ritual of receiving blessing from a priest. For her, the layperson's initiative puts the act in motion and not the traditional liturgical setting in which everyone is expected to ask a blessing or the equally traditional authority of the priest, which "good" parishioners are expected to acknowledge through asking a blessing.

All in all, the material dimensions of the Society are focal for its significance to our research participants. In the chapel, social relations operate differently than in the outside world, and in relation to hierarchy, on a more equal basis. The chapel is a safe space for learning a religious lifestyle and expressing one's religiosity through prayer, worship, discourse, and confession. The person of Mother Elisabet is crucial to bringing these positive attributes to fruition.

Set within our theological framework, the Society is an ecclesiastical context and lived reality (more than a theological vision) constructed by its members themselves. It enables the interviewees to pose questions, share thoughts, work together, get spiritual guidance from another woman, and interact, to create and maintain the social and spiritual basis of the Society. Mother Elisabet is another reason for membership, particularly her special position somehow between the Society (as an autonomous place for its members) and the parish (where one is expected to behave similarly to the other parishioners). Precisely because Mother Elisabet is not a man, and thus cannot be a member of sacramental Orthodox clergy, she can be both honest and equal to other women. So her role in the Society challenges traditional Orthodox hierarchical structures, although none of the interviewees said so explicitly. In Weberian parlance, Mother Elisabet performs her pastoral role charismatically and with an intention to show that women, too, can be active within a traditional ecclesial institution.

## Conclusion

The Birth of Theotokos Society in Helsinki promotes Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition in the heart of the Finnish capital in a postmodern, Northern European cultural and social context. Based on ethnographic material, we have shown how the Society is constructed through the activities, interactions, and meaning-making of its members. These processes are expressions of and supported by the agency of our interviewees, which empowered them both as (religious) women and as (lay) Orthodox.

The women's activities empowered them in three ways. First, intense commitment to the Society and involvement with its activities (e.g., prayer, discussion groups, voluntarily participation in communal chores) turned the Society into a kind of safe haven, where women can (or feel they can) themselves decide what they do, how, and when.

Second, the spiritually, socially, and personally empowering effects of the Society arise from its nature as a meeting place for likeminded women



with similar religious aspirations to express and share their thoughts and experiences freely and equally.

Third, the interviewees acknowledged the leading, charismatic role of Mother Elisabet; they saw her as the Society's heart, holding it together. Her personality, example, dedication to serve, and pastoral ministry (listening, discussing, guiding, and receiving confessions) represented a fundamental model of true Orthodoxy to them, an alternative to the traditional male-centered understanding of their faith. Members did not exclusively participate in Society services and activities; they also did so in Helsinki Orthodox parish, which was important in constructing the Society and giving it meaning.

Agency can manifest in traditional behavior with a knowledge that, as Mother Elisabet said, "I do not have to do this, instead, I'm free to do this." As Marjatta said, tradition or society does not force one to ask the priest's blessing; she decides for herself whether or not to approach a priest. Independence originating from this kind of agency is important to our interviewees. They constructed their belonging based on a shared understanding that one can freely choose to take care of everyday chores and one's spiritual life in the Society.

Mother Elisabet stresses the importance of easy access to help. She is often approached to discuss issues that women find difficult to share with male clergy. As a supportive learning environment for religious life, the Society fosters a shared experience of equality and meaningfulness. It can be argued that, through participating in the Society's activities, members and guests enhanced their agency in their personal lives and in their parish despite social pressures and dominating structures. Mother Elisabet led this process by guiding others in the Orthodox way of life. This understanding of the Society as an education to Orthodoxy was also echoed in Mother Elisabet's rather pragmatic and simple thoughts regarding the Society's future. Her primary goal is simply to survive: as long as they can pay the rent, the Society exists. She hopes that in the future there will be more committed nuns, so that the chapel may stay open daily to welcome guests.

The Society was initially intended to have male and female members. Yet mostly women actively participate, share thoughts, work and interact together, and get spiritual guidance from a nun. This gender imbalance is acknowledged. Mother Elisabet stated that the Society was willing to offer responsibilities to men as well, but they had proven hard to reach. "Female dominance," as she put it, may scare men away from crossing the Society's threshold.

One more dimension requires attention, namely the Society's special status as a material entity. Several of the activities take place in a concrete place, the chapel. It is the locus where the women's agency evolves. It is really their space, where they can feel free and happy despite their imperfectness and express themselves unhindered by the expectations and prescriptions of a larger community, Orthodox or otherwise. The apartment belongs to Mother

Elisabet and the Society pays the rent of the chapel; the parish has no control over it. So the women quite literally stand on their own territory. In Victor Turner's terms, the chapel is an arena where the Society members live in a "permanent" liminal phase. They are simultaneously attached to Finnish and global Orthodoxy (a structure), and a *communitas* of equals allowing them to select and live up to those aspects of Orthodoxy that are most important in their present situation (cf. Turner 1969). This dialectic, realized in the Society's selective performance of tradition, empowers its members.

How do these findings suit our theological perspective, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's ideals of balanced conception of human being, and freedom from male oppression in the Orthodox Church? To begin with, the Society is not explicitly dedicated to these aims. A conscious feminist agenda did not emerge in the data, and hostility between femininity and masculinity or the suppression of women in the church was rarely indicated by the interviewees. Thus, the Society's empowering effect was not based on its "feminine theology," but its "marginality." It is a borderline community. Based on the interviews, the Society offers a secure space (physically, mentally, and socially) for women to exist and act freely and reach their full potential. In promoting traditional Orthodox monasticism, the Society creates a modern (individual) way of practicing it, as Behr-Sigel envisioned.

## Notes

- 1 The roots of Eastern Orthodoxy in Finland and the neighboring Karelia can be traced to contacts with Novgorod from the eleventh century. Administratively, the Karelian Orthodox were first part of the archbishopric of Novgorod, then the diocese of St. Petersburg. In 1809, Finland was annexed as a Grand Duchy to Russia and, in 1892, the Orthodox parishes of Finland and Finnish Karelia were united into a separate Orthodox diocese. After the Russian revolutions and Finnish independence in 1917, the diocese became an autonomous church in 1923 under the Patriarchate of Constantinople (see Laitila 2006).
- 2 The fieldwork was conducted in November-December 2017 (for interview dates, see references). The semi-structured interview form was composed jointly by the three authors. Nina Maskulin conducted the interviews (in Finnish) and produced their transliterations, and Pekka Metso was responsible for participant observation. All translations are by the authors.
- 3 *The Invisible Child* (1962) is a children's book classic by the Finnish author Tove Jansson. It is a story of a little girl, Ninny, who has become invisible after being mistreated by her caregiver. Moominmamma's affection and care make her reappear and find her place in the world.

## Interviews

Anneli, December 1, 2017, Helsinki.  
 Helena, December 20, 2017, Helsinki.  
 Johanna, December 15, 2017, Helsinki.  
 Kyllikki, December 8, 2017, Helsinki.

Marjatta, December 2, 2017, Helsinki.

Mother Elisabet, December 13, 2017, Helsinki.

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Part III

# Crises and gender



## 9 Shaping public Orthodoxy

### Women's peace activism and the Orthodox Churches in the Ukrainian crisis

*Heleen Zorgdrager*

The Maidan Nezaleshnosti (Independence Square) protests in Kyiv began in November 2013 as a student-led protest against President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. The protests finished at the end of February 2014 with sniper shootings that killed more than a hundred people. During the protests, religion played a visible and influential role (Fylypovych and Horkusha 2015; Kalenychenko 2018a, 2018b). Clergy of all confessions led the prayers at Maidan, provided pastoral assistance, performed a peacekeeping role as human shields during nightly clashes between protesters and the Berkut (the riot police), and acted as mediators in the negotiations between state authorities and political opposition. Churches close to the central square—the Orthodox St. Michael's Monastery and the Lutheran St. Katharina Church—opened their doors for protesters who sought safety from police violence. In the final stage, the churches even served as provisional hospitals where injured activists were given medical treatment. During the protests, religious symbols such as icons, banners, candles, and crosses were all over the tent camp and the streets. After the protests ended, religion continued to play a public role in mourning rituals for the “Heavenly Hundred” and in the people's particular arrangements of memorial shrines for them. The memorial space was sacralized (Wanner 2017; Zorgdrager 2016b), as were the Maidan protests themselves, as a “Revolution of Dignity” (Dymyd, 2014; Fylypovych and Horkusha 2015). The civic uprising of Maidan transformed the role of religion and religious institutions in Ukraine (Hovorun 2015). At Maidan, religion, including Orthodoxy, went public.

The growing civic awareness and activism of the protesters at Maidan not only transformed the role of religion, but also that of women. The Maidan uprising engendered civil society as a third sector in post-Soviet Ukraine. This had a significant impact on the public role and empowerment of women. As activists and volunteers, they took on manifold leadership roles during Maidan and continued their civic activism afterward (Onuch 2014; Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014, 2015<sup>1</sup>; Phillips 2014; Petrenko 2014; Khromeychuk 2015). Though still underrepresented on traditional decision-making levels in politics and the economy, women are now at the forefront of the civic

activist movements, NGOs, and nonprofit organizations that have come into existence since 2014. Thus, as an effect of Maidan, religion has a more public role and women have taken up significant positions as leaders and activists in civic organizations. These are not two separate movements of “going public”; we may assume that women who have become active in civil society also play a role in shaping the public appearance of religion, whether in a strengthening, affirmative, or more critical mode.

In this chapter, I am interested in the way in which Ukrainian women today articulate and embody religious practices, values, and beliefs in new forms of sociopolitical engagement and how this could provide a resource for renewal of theology, religious life, and church practices. I investigate the peacebuilding potential of women’s civic activism in Ukraine, their understanding of gender in relation to their work, and how they mobilize, embody, and shape religious values, motives, and goals in their grassroots work. How does women’s civic activism as a response to the war contribute to shaping Orthodoxy as a public religion?

I describe the implicit theology in women’s peace activism by showing how its key values, thoughts, and practices connect to notions of Orthodox tradition and ecumenical theology. To do this, I employ theories from different disciplines, including peace studies, religious studies, ecumenical studies, and theology. The methods used are review of the literature, analysis of primary documents such as public speeches, interviews, Facebook posts, and blogs, and modest fieldwork in the form of in-depth interviews with four women activists in the Ukrainian civil society.

### **The context of Orthodoxy in Ukraine**

Ukraine is multi-confessional and multireligious. No single church enjoys a monopoly. While all branches of Christianity have a well-established place in Ukrainian society, the majority of the population (67 percent) declares adherence to one or another strand of Orthodoxy. Until January 2019, the major churches in Ukraine were the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Statute of the ROC reads that the UOC-MP is “a self-governing church with the rights of wide autonomy”; in practice, however, external relations are dealt with by the ROC and the primate is elected by the Synod of Bishops of the ROC. Since the conflict with Russia, the largest number of Orthodox believers, close to one-third of the population, has adhered to UOC-KP (Razumkov Center 2018); however, the church had no canonical status. The war sharpened the divisions between the churches and made the position of the UOC-MP complicated and contested (Jarzynska 2014; Korniiichuk 2016; Krawchuk 2016; Suslov 2016).

On December 15, 2018, backed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, representatives of the UOC-KP gathered with the bishops of



the small (noncanonical) Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church and with a few bishops of the UOC-MP for a unification council in St. Sofia Cathedral in Kyiv. Three weeks later, on January 6, 2019, the elected head of the unified church, Metropolitan Epifaniy, traveled to Istanbul accompanied by the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, to receive the Tomos, the document granting the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), from the hands of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The unified, independent OCU opens a new chapter of Orthodox history in Ukraine and in global Orthodoxy. In reaction to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's decision to grant autocephaly to the UCO, the ROC broke off Eucharistic communion with Constantinople (The Russian Orthodox Church 2018).

### **Public religion and ambient faith in Ukraine**

Sociologist Tetiana Kalenychnenko (2018a, 10, 2018b) analyzes how religion has returned to the public sphere and regained social influence since the Maidan uprising. She suggests that this can be seen as a process of desecularization. Following Vyacheslav Karpov (2013), three aspects of desecularization can be distinguished: rapprochement between secular institutions and religious norms, a revival of religious practices and beliefs, and an intensified presence of religion in public space. The first two characteristics were already manifest from Ukraine's independence in 1991; the third aspect, the public, social influence of religion, became manifest during the Maidan protests. Kalenychnenko, drawing on Peter Beyer (1994), differentiates between five types of social influence of public religion: it can serve as a source of collective duties, a legitimization of collective action, a shaping of collective identity, a generation of values, and a sacralization of new historic developments. In all five aspects, she argues, the significance of religion has increased so much during and after Maidan that we can speak of the emergence of public religion at Maidan.

I use the term public religion instead of civil religion, even though they are often used synonymously. Civil religion usually refers to the implicit, often state-constructed religious values of a nation, as expressed through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies on festive days and in sacred places. This is how Robert N. Bellah (1967) first introduced the concept, including a certain top-down mode in how it was shaped. In the 1990s, the term public religion became increasingly popular. Casanova (1994) describes how, since the 1980s, religion has left the private sphere to which it was relegated by modernity to thrust itself into the public arena of moral and political contestation. Although the relationship between private and public forms of religion appears to be more complex and paradoxical than Casanova seems to acknowledge (Beckford 2010), I consider his concept of public religion applicable to developments in Ukraine because it is a more bottom-up approach than Bellah's and can be used to analyze the agency of civilians.

Another helpful concept for analyzing the changing role of religion in the course of sociopolitical changes in Ukraine is ambient faith.<sup>2</sup> The concept was coined by Michael Engelke (2012) and it has already been applied productively by several scholars investigating the religious developments in Ukraine. A conceptual tool to overcome the problematic distinction between public and private religion, ambient faith appeals to the sensual registers of social spaces in the ambience of lived life. The concept helps to make visible the role of multiple social actors in creating and shaping new religious practices and meanings. Maidan was saturated with such sensory articulations of ambient faith. After Maidan, the creative processes continued.

### **Orthodox Churches' responses to the war**

Religion in its public presence during Maidan served as a cultural resource for the process of identity transformation in Ukrainian society. The unity of religious churches and organizations enabled this. This bond, created by the emotional and spiritual context of Maidan, was also maintained when Crimea was annexed by Russia shortly afterwards and the war in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk broke out between separatists backed by Russia and the Ukrainian government. Through the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, churches spoke with one voice in condemning separatist aspirations and the attack on the territorial integrity of Ukraine (All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations 2014). But soon the ecumenical tone evaporated. The war revived and sharpened older, unresolved conflicts between the churches. The situation of transition with a weak central government caused the churches to return to their traditional patterns of behavior: mutual distrust, defining identity through differentiation, competition, and conflict (Hovorun 2015; Krawchuk 2016; Kalenychenko 2018a). As religious discourse and practices became intertwined with nationalism, ethnicity, language, and geopolitics, this type of top-down public Orthodoxy can be better called civil religion, as in Bellah's original (1967) understanding.

Ukrainian theologian Cyril Hovorun (2017) has identified two ideological narratives and types of civil religion that are promoted by the major Orthodox Churches in Ukraine today. A Russian-style imperialist narrative is widely supported in the east and south, whereas a Balkan-style nationalist paradigm is promoted in the west. The divided Orthodox Churches associated themselves with these opposing civil religions. The UOC-MP embraced the Russian-imperial paradigm of *Russki Mir*, the Russian World, a new kind of transnational nationalism. The UOC-KP relied on a nation-based civil religion, with the vision of *Kyivan Rus* serving as the horizon for a unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Hovorun 2017, 259).

From its nation-based civil-religion framework, the UOC-KP has accepted and openly supported the militarization of society and justified the

conflict as a legitimate defensive war against a foreign aggressor. From its *Ruski-Mir*-oriented civil-religion framework, the UOC-MP has silently accepted Russia's armed support for the separatists.

### **Women's civic activism in Ukraine**

Since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war between separatists backed by Russia and the Ukrainian army in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, numerous initiatives of women's civic activism have emerged as responses to the war and to the militarization of society. The war in the East has claimed more than 10,000 victims so far and has left more than 3 million Ukrainians in need of assistance. Ceasefire agreements, signed in Minsk in 2014 and 2015, have failed, as parts of Donetsk and Luhansk still remain under the control of pro-Russia separatists, while daily shelling and shooting continues. There are about 1.6 million internally displaced persons in Ukraine, of whom over 60 percent are women.

Women's activist responses to the war range from organizations of soldiers' mothers via initiatives to improve the position and working conditions of women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteer organizations providing the army with material support, and civic organizations that aim to promote dialog in Ukraine by nonviolent methods to patriotic women's civic activism. Organizations are secular, religious, or, quite often, formally secular but with religiously inspired activists. While women play a prominent role in grassroots organizations, they are significantly underrepresented in peace negotiation and monitoring, at both lower and higher levels (Gast 2016).<sup>3</sup>

In Ukraine, civil society has become more important since the Maidan protests, and more people are getting involved in NGO activities and civil movements. Four years after its outbreak, the grim reality of the war and its effects on the people are manifest. Mothers mourn lost sons, wives their lost husbands, and children their fathers who were killed during battle. Soldiers return home wounded or disabled. Veterans suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, often leading to alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence, and crime. There is a lack of social, economic, and psychological support for the veterans and their families. In times of war, women are especially vulnerable. They are disproportionately hit by the economic consequences such as the lack of access to work, social services, education, medical care, humanitarian assistance, and childcare. Women living on the border of the Ukrainian warzone face a myriad of problems, as psychotherapy centers in these regions testify (The Voice of Non-Militants 2015; Gast 2016).

Since the outbreak of the military conflict, women have started to organize themselves in their own civic initiatives that address specific problems of the war in relation to women. Various associations of mothers and wives of servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine provide economic, social, and

psychological support to their families (Strelnyk 2016). The Invisible Battalion is a feminist initiative of Mariya Berlinska to study and improve the vulnerable position of women in the armed forces who face specific problems. Journalist, television moderator, and (voluntary) military chaplain Olesya Dolina leads an initiative called Heart of the Dove (*Sertze Horlytschi*) to support and promote the patriotic role of women in the Ukrainian army. Civic initiatives, often with women in leadership roles, question the system of militarism and search for alternative, nonviolent ways of resolving the conflict (Snyder and Stobbe 2011).

I have selected four groups for case studies. The first is a civic activist organization, the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation). The second is Dolina's civic initiative, Heart of the Dove. The third is the feminist scholarly activism of Mariya Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik, who criticize the system of militarism. The fourth is the Dialogue in Action project, which is an example of grassroots engagement in peacebuilding. I now discuss these four cases in terms of religion, gender, and peacebuilding.

### **Mothers' civic activism**

Since the outbreak of war, different maternal civic organizations have emerged (Strelnyk 2016) such as the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the ATO, the Mothers Union "Defense," the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Ukraine (CSMU), the Anti-War Movement, and Soldiers' Mothers for the New Army.

Maternal activism is a specific type of social activism. Often grief energizes mothers' movements for collective action (Flam 2013). Besides their own losses, mothers grieve for the insecurity and future of their (own) children and grandchildren. They draw attention to the disappearance or murder of political activists or—potential or actual—victimized military recruits, endangered deserters, missing, maimed, or killed soldiers. These mothers themselves stress that, as a shared emotion, grief can evoke immediate mutual understanding and accelerated bonding among those affected by it (Schirmer 1989; Oushakine 2009; Jagudina 2009).

Maternal civic activism in Ukraine has grown rapidly since Maidan. Even during the Maidan protests, the group Mothers of Maidan asked the riot police not to use force against "our children" (Strelnyk 2016; Zorgdrager 2016a). They wore banners with the slogan "Do not shoot the heart of the mothers."

Sociologist Olesya Strelnyk analyzes how these activists' identification as mothers resonates with dominant gender expectations and stereotypes of women and motherhood in Ukrainian society. Demands for change are justified through appeal to motherhood. Concerned and grieving mothers' movements tend to play on the venerated, sacred mother figure in their societies for greater legitimacy (Flam 2013).

In the ideological context of Ukraine, the fusion of the Holy Virgin, the Mother of God, and the mythical symbol of Berehynia, “the one who protects, takes care of,” represents and undergirds the cult of motherhood (Kis 2007). The symbol of Berehynia from old Slavonic mythology reemerged in the Ukrainian national renaissance in the 1980s and had become one of the elements of official state ideology during the 1990s. It is materialized in the Independence Monument on Maidan in Kyiv. The monument consists of a statue of a young woman dressed in national costume with a banner of stars above her head, symbolizing the young Ukrainian nation. By presenting themselves in the role of a “protecting, caring mother,” the Mothers of Maidan took on their public role as mediators and peace builders in the protests.

Strelnyk points out that mothers in different contexts have engaged in activism, both in favor of and in opposition to war and militarism. Gender ideologies are central to the arguments on both sides. The maternal groups supporting militarism argue that they have a duty to care for their country, their nation, and their sons. Mothers opposing the war also base their arguments on their responsibility to care and protect: because they are life givers, women are “by nature” more caring than men, and therefore oppose the military system with its intrinsic violence (Yuval-Davis 1997). In Ukraine, we find both these types of maternal activism, although there is a much stronger allegiance to the patriotic one.

As Strelnyk makes clear, gender ideology alone does not fully explain the positions of mothers’ organizations toward militarism. The sociopolitical context of the war is important. In Ukraine, the patriotic mood that swept over the country since the beginning of the armed conflict has led to broad support for the ATO. Groups that in the beginning used anti-war rhetoric, such as the CSMU, have become more cautious.

The Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the ATO started from rather traditional gender assumptions and practical goals. However, after the first five years, they moved toward multifaceted empowerment of women by critically questioning gender stereotypes and injustices in society. In the new initiative of a Women Resource Center in Kyiv (2018), the organization aims to promote women’s civil activity and representation at the decision-making level by systematically addressing “gender stereotypes, low self-esteem of women, physical, sexual, and psychological violence, psychological trauma of war, ignorance of their rights and mechanisms for their implementation” (Familyto 2017).

The Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the ATO is not faith based, but refers to (Christian) religion as a shared source of inspiration. A telling example of this is the new name of the association newspaper, *Schid ta Zachid Razom (East and West Together)*. The editor in chief, Natalia Moskovets, explains how the newspaper redirects its journalistic attention from covering mainly militaristic themes to the problem of disunity in Ukrainian society (Moskovets n.d.). She promotes an

inclusive patriotism, aiming to overcome the fractures in Ukrainian society, even across the frontlines, by the fact of shared moral and religious values. She calls Ukraine “the common home of both East and West.”

The mobilization of public (Orthodox) religion by the association is also illustrated by the commemorative event held near St. Michael’s Monastery in Kyiv on August 28, 2017, called “Ilovaysk 2014: time does NOT heal all wounds” (Religious Information Service of Ukraine 2017). Families of fallen and missing soldiers, together with official representatives, remembered their beloved ones, victims in the Battle of Ilovaysk.<sup>4</sup> A memorial prayer service for the fallen defenders of Ukraine was led by a UOC-KP priest from St. Michael’s. In their speeches, the women expressed their refusal to forget or be silent about the wounds of the war, and demanded clarification from the government about what happened in the Battle of Ilovaysk. This is a very sensitive political issue in Ukraine. The inclusion of Orthodox prayers in the commemorative ceremony shows how the women are actively shaping public religion; it is a source not only of national unity, but also of collective resistance against military power systems.

### **Charismatic-patriotic civic activism**

A second type of women’s response to the war in Ukraine could be called charismatic-patriotic civic activism. It is here represented by Olesya Dolina, former military pilot, author, journalist, television moderator, and poet. She volunteers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a military chaplain, which is an exceptional phenomenon in a country where churches do not ordain women (Dolina\_radio 2017). In public, by wearing the camouflage dress with the insignia *kapelan* (Ukrainian for chaplain) on the breast, she challenges the image of a male pastor. If asked for her confessional and professional affiliation, Dolina shortly states: “I am a Christian and a military chaplain” (Dolina\_int 2018). Her background is in Evangelical churches, but she refuses now to identify with a particular church: “At the front there are no religions, at the front there is only faith. We seek the communion of faith” (Dolina\_radio 2017). With a group of four other female voluntary chaplains, she is ministering “in the invisible church” (Dolina\_int 2018). She considers it her mission as a military chaplain to help and support soldiers and volunteers at the front and their families at home.

I call her chaplaincy “charismatic,” in the sense that no institutional church authorizes or legitimizes the mission. Dolina understands it as a prophetic gift of the Holy Spirit, who operates through feminine functions of love, support, and peace, whereas men are on the side of law, defense, and time. She purposely challenges the profoundly male image of the chaplain in Ukraine. As long as she feels supported by the soldiers in the field (“they are my friends and pray for me”), she does not need the church to confirm her calling (Dolina\_radio 2017).

Dolina also understands her mission as a journalist and television program director in religious-charismatic terms. From 2016 to 2018, Dolina hosted the program *Neslamni Duchom* (Indestructible in Spirit) on Centralny Canal. In the program, she conducted interviews with “heroes of our time,” soldiers and officers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine who despite great trials have not lost their hope or morale. Dolina also considers the widows and mothers of the fallen soldiers to be true heroes. She publicly supports them and raises awareness of the problems the veterans’ families face, even sensitive issues such as domestic and sexual violence (Dolina\_comment 2017). Although she does not call herself a feminist (Dolina\_radio 2017), she strives to empower women, both within the army and on the home front (Dolesya\_int 2018). Dolina made a documentary film on military chaplains serving in the ATO zone, also entitled *Neslamni Duchom*. The film won a prize at a secular media festival.<sup>5</sup>

Dolina’s mission of creating the correct image of a “Christian warrior” also includes the women who serve in the army. She set up her Heart of the Dove project to promote the role of female soldiers. The project included a photo shoot with female soldiers of the President’s Division (a special unit), a photo exhibition in Kyiv, a women’s conference with various NGOs in 2018, and a concert, all supported by the Ministries of Defense and Culture. For the photo shoot, the female soldiers were dressed in Ukrainian folk costumes and/or in military camouflage dress. Dolina herself features prominently in the pictures. The photos aim to present the image of the female soldier as both brave and beautiful, both courageous and feminine (Dolina\_fb March 23, 2018). “The idea of a photo exhibition is to show the image of a woman protector, in which the military form will be combined with ethnic and fictional elements” (Dolina\_fb February 7, 2018). In her choice of words, it is easy to hear the Bereheniya ideology. In Dolina’s eyes, the female soldiers represent the perfect image of the Ukrainian woman—and of the nation. This is her gender philosophy:

The image of a Ukrainian woman—she is a warrior, mother, and wife. (...) The image of a Ukrainian woman merges with the image of Ukraine not only because it is raised to a symbol, but above all because it embodies the best moral features of the Ukrainian people, its highest spiritual upsurge, and best moral convictions. Despite their hard life, Ukrainian women have not lost their benevolence and compassion. Proud, honest, decent, intelligent, educated, freedom-loving, noble, friendly, and very hospitable. They cherish beauty and heroism.

(Dolina\_fb February 7, 2018)

Dolina’s gender ideology remains in the service of a patriotic, heroic discourse. It is typical of Ukrainian national feminism, a concept coined by the gender scholar Tetiana Zhurzenko (2011). To Dolina, patriotism means



loyalty to Ukraine, and defense of the nation is a Christian duty. She can frame the conflict in a dichotomist way, as a religious narrative of “us” versus “them”:

God protects the borders of the nation and those who defend their land! And whoever went with the sword, whom Satan pushes, is a servant of the Satanic army, and he will perish by the sword. (...) Shame to those who work in the hands of the enemy.

(Dolina\_fb December 6, 2017)

Yet, her position on the war is not straightforward nationalism. Dolina's mother lives in Russia and her brothers live in Kazakhstan. She has cooperated with the Russian Association of Mothers of Soldiers. For her, the enemy is not Russia, but sin, evil. In her perception, Russia is an “an immature nation, like enslaved children.” Ukraine has much to share with Russia, including the “brilliant gift of forgiveness” (Dolina\_int 2018).

The charismatic activism of Dolina is a manifestation of public religion in Ukraine. She is an interesting example of a woman who gives herself a central, authoritative role in shaping religious practices and meanings for society. She reactivates symbols and narratives of Ukrainian tradition and Christian/Orthodox religion and blends them into a powerful resource to generate values, collective action, and a certain sacralization of war. She idealizes Ukrainian female soldiers as beautiful hero-warriors who embody the moral and spiritual excellence of the nation. With the iconic representations of herself and others in social media and public exhibitions, she engages in the production of ambient faith where the private and public spheres fuse with sensorial effects to change the consciousness of individuals.

### **Feminist-intellectual civic activism**

A third form of women's activism is primarily intellectually shaped and expressed in critical feminist analysis of developments from the Maidan protests to the armed conflict. Maria Mayerchyk, historian and social anthropologist, and Olga Plakhotnik, social philosopher, identify themselves as feminist activist-scholars. Their public platform, besides conferences, is the bilingual Ukrainian/English online academic journal *Krytyka. Thinking Ukraine*.

The core of their critique is that, because of the growing dominance and recognition of far-right groups, nationalism took over the agenda and managed to shape the women's activism at Maidan (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2015). Although the far right was a minority at Maidan, in the course of the events they put their stamp on the discourse of the protests, presenting them as the time for militant male bodies to be glorified as the nation's defenders against the criminal government. According to Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik, this discursive frame gave way to white, normative, military,



and tradition-oriented figures, and narrowed the feminist discussion on women's agency at Maidan. Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik see the rhetoric of "othering" at play, as people from Donbas were depicted as improper Ukrainians.

In my interview with Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik in June 2016, they commented on the role of church and religion in the public sphere (Mayerchyk\_int 2016). Their assessment is nuanced but critical. Mayerchyk is from an Orthodox family. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, she became a committed religious person inspired by the religious renaissance in Ukraine. However, when she saw the church becoming the strongest conservative force in society, she turned away from it. Plakhotnik is not from an actively religious family and does not consider herself a believer. Both appreciate religion and share a genuine respect for some individual priests.

They have a critical stance toward how church representatives performed religion at Maidan. Religion was used to legitimate a process of militarization and gender segregation. Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik differentiate between Maidan in Kyiv and the protests in other cities. They participated themselves in the "Maidan" in Kharkiv, only twenty kilometers from the Russian border. In their city, protests took place every evening. An Orthodox priest, Fr. Viktor Marynychak, a former professor of linguistics and a moral authority in Kharkiv's intellectual community, led the prayer at the beginning of the meetings.<sup>6</sup>

In the Maidan protests in Kyiv, however, it was different, as Mayerchyk comments: "prayer filled up the whole space when there were no political speeches from the stage" (Mayerchyk\_int 2016). Her point is not so much that the church was present, but that the church became complicit in the processes of othering:

The church was included in the process of normalization of domination [of violence] and, in feminist terms, of gender segregation. (...) the church was part of this mood of the Maidan, this conservative, women-excluding environment.

At the end of Maidan, when religion was overwhelmingly visible in the public rituals of mourning, they found it appropriate because "in Ukrainian society and culture, there is no other way of mourning for people who were killed, besides religion" (Plakhotnik\_int 2016). They are less positive about the fusing of religion and politics into the concept of "Revolution of Dignity." They criticize the concurring idea of a Ukrainian nation that had finally emancipated itself from the Soviet past, apparently leaving "others" behind. Mayerchyk comments:

Dignity is a necessary word in order to make *koloradi* [scolding name for pro-Russian separatists and those who have pro-Russian positions]. It is the language of racism, stating that "we" are dignified, emancipated

from a terrible past: we are not Soviet people anymore, but “they” are Soviet, *kolorado*, non-human: it is a rhetorical strategy of dehumanization of the enemy. (...) It is a nationalist language which makes some people extra valuable and some people beneath dignity.

(Mayerchyk\_int 2016)

In their view, the leading churches at Maidan (UOC-KP, Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church) have strengthened the narrative of “us” versus “them.” Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik reject the type of public (civil) religion that is shaped by the institutional churches, while they have more appreciation for how individuals express religion in its public dimensions. Their intellectual strategy is inspired by feminist postcolonial theory and aims at dismantling the discursive system that creates “others.” They plead for a solidarity that is neither caught within the frame of the nation state nor exclusive to “dignified” people. Peacebuilding begins with understanding how exclusion works, and it must take those who are excluded as its starting point.

### **Women’s peacebuilding activism: dialogue in action**

The Dialogue in Action project (full title: Dialog Involving Religious Communities: promoting tolerance, acceptance, and peacebuilding in Ukraine) was active from August 2016 till November 2017 in several towns in Ukraine (Final Report 2017). It aimed to promote a culture of dialog in the public sphere through professionally organized and facilitated dialogs. The project was supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Ukraine. The organization, which now operates as a department within the NGO Spirit and Letter (*Duh-i-Litera*) in Kyiv, is not based on shared women’s identity, but on an egalitarian framework (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2011). In practice, however, as in many other NGOs in Ukraine, women are the leaders and facilitators. The initiators are Lidiya Lozova, editor at the NGO’s publishing house and project coordinator of St. Clement’s Center for Communion and Dialog of Cultures in Kyiv, and Tetiana Kalenychenko, journalist, dialog facilitator, and sociologist of religion (Kalenychenko 2018a, 2018b).

The project addressed the lack of dialog and cooperation between different social agents, among them churches and other religious organizations, in small Ukrainian towns and villages (Final Report 2017). The involvement of religious communities was one of its unique characteristics. Traditionally, religious communities are among the chief agents in small towns and villages, and the clergy enjoy a high level of trust and authority. However, they tend to stick to traditional, one-way interaction with people and close themselves off from secular organizations, which also often avoid cooperation with religious communities. A further complicating factor is that churches, in particular the major Orthodox Churches, are competitive and hostile toward each other, a situation that has deteriorated since the war.

Through training, mainly in nonviolent communication and do-no-harm methodology, the project gave civic and religious activists the skills to organize public dialogs in their local communities. Six Ukrainian facilitators assisted international trainers from Denmark<sup>7</sup> and the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> One-third of the participants were from religious organizations (UOC-KP, UOC-MP, Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, Muslim communities, and the Ukrainian Bible Society). Two participants were connected with Jewish communities. After their own training, the participants organized dialogs on local issues in their hometowns. The project did not directly address the war in the East, but it dealt very concretely with one of the main roots of conflict in post-Communist societies: the lack of dialog and cooperation and the high level of mistrust between different groups.

The peacebuilding strategy was to create a “third space” of transformation. The methodology of nonviolent constructive communication can serve as a neutral platform. Lozova, who identifies herself as a committed Orthodox Christian (UOC-MP), stressed the nonreligious character of the dialog techniques used. In an interview in Kyiv, on December 3, 2017, Lozova identified the leading moral and spiritual values of the project:

Respect for human dignity which we help people to discover in themselves and the other. Seeing yourself and the other as humans who share the same human dignity and have the same needs and can do something together. This doing something together brings me to solidarity which is a more beneficial way to exist than doing things for yourself alone. Trust. Sometimes I think it is friendship and love and everything but I am not sure if it is not too much when you talk about a project, then, you know, you have to have concrete results [laughs].

(Lozova\_int 2017)

The training was about learning a certain life attitude toward the other and oneself. The learning process could be painful. Lozova recalled that people sometimes got hurt in the dialog sessions. Reactions were strong and emotional, and “to still see the human behind this person from a different camp is a very, very painful thing. You have to have a lot of trust in the human.” She saw a parallel between the dialog training and religion: through a journey to the level of basic needs (safety, security, trust), both help to revive “a desire for life.” Helping people rediscover this desire for life and the values that sustain it (trust, respect, understanding, solidarity, love) made the dialog training for her a real peacebuilding project. She commented:

I was very inspired by what this Dignity Space<sup>9</sup> did before. They did a facilitation series with Maidan protesters and the Berkut in Kyiv and Lviv, and this was something that really struck me a lot. I thought: this is what is very much needed in Ukrainian society: not only to prevent a war but to inspire people to live together. Because there is this kind of

negative peace possible when there is no war but you don't really want to see the other person. And it can be as torturous as a war. But there can be a different level of peace. You can discover this common ground very basic, not ideological, not on the level of ideological positions, but on the level of your being human.

(Lozova\_int 2017)

For Lozova, such a radical inclusive peace, which is based on the acknowledgment of common humanity, is ultimately a gift from God. She understands the transcendence of God as a critical boundary against the attempt to claim God for a certain religious or political camp. It prevented her from affirming, as many activist Christians did, that "God was at Maidan":

A lot of messages [from Maidan] were just very kind of counter something, very conflicting and I couldn't really identify with that to participate fully. So, I lacked a God there in a way which wouldn't be only for human rights or for Ukraine; it is difficult to explain, but like for everybody.

(Lozova\_int 2017)

The Dialogue in Action project was inspired by a practice-oriented ecumenism (Enns 2012, 49). Lozova believes that ecumenical dialogues are not helpful as long as church officials do not discover, accept, and nourish the human level from which mercy and kindness come. The project coordinators experienced serious difficulties with engaging participants from the churches. However, according to Lozova, churches and church officials are called to "descend" into society and learn to go back to the human level. In this sense, the project profoundly challenges institutional churches' relationship with secular society. Lozova continues to contribute to a public religion or public Orthodoxy that is relevant to civil society, which offers an alternative to the logic of armed violence, and finds its core in the incarnational truth that "the human level is the theological level" (Lozova\_int 2017).

### **Theological viewpoints**

From the perspective of ecumenical theology, I want to highlight the notion of Just Peace. It represents a new ecumenical paradigm in theology and social ethics (Enns 2012, 229–249, 2017, 240). A comprehensive conception of Just Peace was presented at the end of the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence (2001–2010).<sup>10</sup> Just Peace is defined as:

a collective and dynamic yet grounded process of freeing human beings from fear and want, of overcoming enmity, discrimination and oppression, and of establishing conditions for just relationships that privilege the experience of the most vulnerable and respect the integrity of creation.

(WCC JPC 2011, par. 11)

This comprehensive approach to peace as a process going beyond the silencing of weapons is reflected in the aims and methods of Dialogue in Action and, to a lesser extent, in the programs of the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the ATO. Notably, ecumenical discussions stress that nonviolent methods are important not only as a civic-dialog technique, but also as part of a national defensive strategy (Iersel 2018). These ecumenical insights have not yet been incorporated by Ukrainian and Russian churches in their attitudes and strategies toward the military conflict.

From the perspective of Orthodox tradition, the emphasis in women's activism on living with multiple perspectives, wounds, ambiguities, and complexities of conflict rather than stressing the "nationalist" or "imperialist" narratives, reflects an authentic spirit of Orthodox peace theology. The UOC-KP solves the complexities of conflict by employing an oppositional scheme and by glorifying the homeland. The UOC-MP does not distance itself from the vision of *Ruski Mir* with its dualistic narrative of Russia and "the West," its idealization of a supranational pan-Slavic entity and its denial of the imperial powers at play. Ukrainian women's activism for peace, by not giving up a relationship with the other, appears to stay closer to the sources of Orthodox tradition than the institutional churches do. In these sources, the value of homeland is relativized in the light of the Kingdom of God. Hildo Bos (2011) has shown that the Byzantine liturgies of so-called "warrior saints" reflect a fundamental hierarchy of values, which bears witness to the Kingdom of God as the highest value, against the possible absolutist temptations of the Empire. Warriors' sanctity comes not from their military heroism, but from their good deeds or martyrdom. To take Bos' argument a step further, the value of the earthly homeland has to be subsumed under the value of *sobornost*, not understood in an ethnic, nationalist, or imperialistic way, but as the catholicity of all God's people. Ukrainian women's civic activism, in its inclusivist attitude, is a reminder of such moral and spiritual values expressed in Orthodox theology.

Further, Orthodox tradition offers helpful theological notions to reflect on the spiritual meaning of dialog practices. In particular, the notions of personhood and asceticism may shed light on the spiritual meaning of dialog as a way of attaining and maintaining peace. According to John Zizioulas (1997, 2007), a Trinitarian understanding of personhood sees it as a relational event in which the human being is constituted as irreducibly unique and free. In Zizioulas' theology, as Aristotle Papanikolaou (2017, 58) summarizes:

Personhood is a Eucharistic event, and as such, is the realization to love God with all one's heart, mind and soul, and to love the neighbour as oneself; it is an event of communion, of unity-in-difference, of the one and the many.

As a necessary addition to Zizioulas' concept of personhood, Papanikolaou brings in the notion of asceticism. Personhood as "being in communion," as love, is not simply an event but is just as much a virtue that must be learned. Training is required to shape and strengthen the person in his/her capacity to love (Papanikolaou 2012, 87–130, 2017, 51–67). Ascetical discernment and practices need to be learned in order to grow into the divine-human communion. In my view, this notion of social asceticism helps to reveal the theological relevance of what happened in the training organized by Dialogue in Action. As the project demonstrates, ascetical practice includes painful confrontations with the self, the other, and with memories of the past.

With the training on how to learn to love and to build community, Dialogue in Action offered something indispensable to Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Churches of the Eastern tradition tend to keep their theology of peace and reconciliation focused primarily on the individual and the need of *metanoia* (conversion) of the heart (Rap 2015, 417<sup>11</sup>; Elsner 2018). The problem is the lack of reflection on practical implementation in the gap between the individual and the state. How should the moral claims be translated into strategies, actions, community work, or other practical steps? The grassroots work of Dialogue in Action and similar organizations promoting a culture of dialog aims at filling the gap.

## Conclusion

The peacebuilding potential of women's civic activism in Ukraine has been analyzed, paying special attention to the gendered dimensions and the way women actively shape and negotiate public Orthodoxy, based on four case studies. They differ with regard to their gender assumptions, their diagnosis of the roots of the conflict, and their strategies for conflict resolution. All four forms of civic activism are attentive to gendered aspects of war and peace making, although in different ways.

Interestingly in terms of women's agency in shaping public Orthodoxy, these women's civic organizations tend to acknowledge religion not only for its cohesive power, but also for its capacity to relate to the "other" in the conflict. To various degrees, they appeal to religion as a source of moral imagination, that is, the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationships, across existing borders, even with their enemies (Lederach 2005, 34). All forms of women's activism discussed in this chapter refuse to go along with narratives that divide the parties into "us" and "them."

Whether based on shared female identities across regions and the frontlines of the conflict (maternal activism) or on the sense of a shared humanity (Dialogue in Action), the image of the enemy is likely to become less absolute. Processes of "othering" are interrupted by self-critical reflection on primary needs and priorities, on a form of solidarity that goes beyond

the boundaries of the in-group, and on imagining a better future for all. The excluding discourses of good and evil, victim and aggressor, truth and falsehood are questioned and replaced by a moral attitude to endure living in the affirmation of complexities, ambiguities, and historic entanglements—and to find a way forward.

I have shown how Ukrainian women's grassroots activism has the capacity to revitalize the Orthodox Christian tradition as a spiritual and cultural resource for social transformation and enhancement of the common good. It does so in close affinity with the ecumenical movement's inclusive vision of Just Peace. Key elements of the public Orthodox religion shaped by women's activism are its practical ecumenical outlook, attention to the effects of war and militarization on everyday life, expression of a basic sense of belonging to each other, cohesive function across various fractures in society, and determined resistance to politicization or instrumentalization within the existing political structures. Public Orthodoxy shaped by women offers a much-needed alternative to the forms of public or civil religion that remain attached to particular interest politics, namely the imperial paradigm embraced by the UOC-MP and the nationalist paradigm promoted by the UOC-KP.

The effect that the newly established, unified OCU will have on the conflict is not yet known. Will it lead to further escalations or be an instrument of conflict resolution? The leadership of the OCU will gain credibility and trust in the wider society by entering into a real dialog with the various forms of civic activism, including women's activism, acknowledging its rich spiritual and theological potential. Scholars of religion and theologians in and outside Ukraine are challenged to reflect further on collective practices of peace and grief generated by women's active engagement with the realities of conflict and war.

## Notes

- 1 The Ukrainian Protester Survey of Maidan was conducted from November 26, 2013, to January 10, 2014. It is the only on-site continuous multiday survey of the participants in the EuroMaidan protests.
- 2 See the Public Religion, Ambient Faith: Religious Institutions and Socio-Political Change in the Black Sea Region Conference, Kyiv, September 30 to October 10, 2016, organized by the Religion in the Black Sea Region Working Group, headed by Catherine Wanner. <http://www.uaregio.org/en/about/stage-4/> (Accessed April 16, 2018).
- 3 The higher peace negotiation level here is the Normandy contact group and the trilateral contact group (Russian Federation, Ukraine, OSCE); the lower peace negotiation and monitoring level is the special Monitoring Mission of the OSCE (15 percent female) and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (12 percent female).
- 4 Ilovaysk, the site of a battle in which up to a thousand Ukrainian soldiers were killed, became a symbol of the horror of war and the failing leadership of the ATO in Eastern Ukraine.
- 5 In 2015 at the All-Ukrainian Festival of Television and Radio Programs of Kobzar.



- 6 A film on the life and thoughts of Marynychak, priest of the UOC-KP, “Man’s Way to Freedom,” was screened for the first time in Kharkiv in 2017. <http://kharkivobserver.com/mans-way-to-freedom/> (Accessed April 16, 2018).
- 7 Carl Plesner, director of Dignity Space, a center for nonviolent communication and reconciliation in Kyiv.
- 8 Jan van Kourt and Sonja van der Meulen.
- 9 Shortly after the Maidan revolt, Carl Plesner from Denmark and Olena Hant-syak from Ukraine established Dignity Space as a center to promote nonviolent communication and reconciliation. <https://dignityspace.org/en/> (Accessed May 16, 2019).
- 10 The Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, 2006, formulated the vision of the “Way of Just Peace.” The Assembly in Busan, 2013, called upon the churches to walk the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (Enns 2012, 229–249).
- 11 Rap analyzes this for the case of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, but her findings are applicable to Orthodox Churches in the post-Soviet regions. “In their discourse the leadership of the Church does not primarily focus on action but rather on prayer, on the inner world of the people, on the reflection about one’s own shortcomings” (Rap 2015, 417).

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# 10 On saints, prophets, philanthropists, and anticlericals

## Orthodoxy, gender, and the crisis in Greece

*Eleni Sotiriou*

The year 2018 marked a decade since the beginning of the economic crisis in the Eurozone, and Greece, its protagonist *par excellence*, is still living under its spell. “The crisis” (*i krissi*), as it is termed colloquially, became an everyday word in the vocabulary of modern Greeks and an all-encompassing explanatory term for the drastic changes that occurred in their lives. The prolonged economic and financial crisis and its concomitant political, institutional, and societal ones are coupled with the migration/refugee crisis that Greece has been experiencing since 2015. Currently, therefore, the country is facing not a single crisis, but a manifold one that withstands an easy definition. Its effects are multifarious, deeply enmeshed, and ever evolving, making their analysis and appraisal arduous.

This chapter is a first attempt to sketch and provide a “flavor” of the changes being brought about by the infamous Greek crisis on the religious beliefs, practices, and experiences of Greek Orthodox women and men: what changed, what form or forms these changes took, and how such changes have impacted on gender relations within the religious sphere.

### Studying the Greek crisis

Over the last few years, a host of studies have been produced on Greece, analyzing the socioeconomic transformations brought about by the crisis from different disciplinary lenses and intellectual viewpoints. Yet, this current academic interest in the crisis has mostly suffered from what Ursula King (2005, 1) refers to as “double blindness”: being either religion or gender blind, it has yet to produce a study (outside the field of theology) that focuses on the entanglement of the crisis in the complex relationship of Greek Orthodoxy and gender.<sup>1</sup> I argue that gender and religion require careful remapping in times of crisis, linked as they are to new attitudes and changed practices that often go undetected; studying their interplay can serve to illuminate the nuances of the ways in which preexisting inequalities are either reconfirmed, defended, and reinforced or negotiated anew. My intention, however, is not simply to adopt a power perspective

on how the crisis affects the relationship of Greek Orthodoxy and gender, but to use ethnographic detail to synthesize such an approach with the actual practices and the meanings attached to them by my female and male interlocutors.<sup>2</sup> My emphasis is thus on “lived religion” (McGuire 2008) and lived experience of the crisis.

The data on which my observations are based derive from ethnographic research conducted periodically from 2014 to 2017 in Larissa, the capital and largest city of the Thessaly region. As a researcher, the Greek religious landscape is an area I am well familiar with, since from the early 1990s I have investigated various aspects of the religious lives of Greek Orthodox women and men, both lay and monastic. My long-term engagement with the topic of gendered religiosity, as well as my Greek origin, has honed my ability to recognize the complex and subtle changes and transformations that the Greek crisis precipitated.

During the crisis years, Larissa, which in 2011 had a population of 144,651 (census 2011), has shrunk demographically and lost its economic vibrancy (mainly commercial and agricultural). Somewhat paradoxically, during the recession the city’s economy has shifted to recreation, leisure, and particularly to food services, altering its identity and transforming its center “from a district of productive economic activities to a district of symbolic economy and leisure” (Manika and Gospodini 2015, 68).

The city’s Cathedral of St. Achillios, the main locus of its religious life, provided the site of the ethnographic vignettes outlined here and the main meeting place with my interlocutors. These were both men and women of different generations (from 22 to 81 years old). In my analysis, those under the age of 40 are categorized as “younger” women and men, while the rest belong to the “older” generation. Most of my interlocutors come from a middle-class social background and the majority of them hold university degrees.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, a number of clarifications are necessary concerning my use of the main concepts of this chapter: crisis, religion, and gender.

First, I treat “crisis” not simply as an event of momentous changes, a snapshot of Greece’s present, isolated from its past, but rather as a process that simultaneously creates and reveals multileveled asymmetries, cultural contradictions, and new opportunities (Dalakoglou, Agelopoulos, and Poulimenakos 2018, 11).

Second, in spite of recent changes, especially due to the various migration waves since the 1990s and the recent migration/refugee crisis that led to an increased presence of other religions in the country, Greece remains predominantly Orthodox. A poll by KΑΠΑ Research shows that 81.4 percent of Greeks still consider themselves as Orthodox Christians (Chiotis 2015). More important, though, than the language of statistics is the fact that when my interlocutors talked about religion, they talked about Greek Orthodoxy. Thus, when I use the term “religion,” it is to this emic interpretation that I refer to.

Third, I do not treat gender only as synonymous to women (King 2005, 5). At present, a big gap exists in most anthropological studies on Greek Orthodoxy and gender: that of the “ordinary religious man.” The Other of the Greek Orthodox woman has mainly been the male cleric, while ordinary laymen have been treated as peripheral, only discussed either in relation to their numerical inferiority in the church and/or to their anticlerical feelings. My analysis, however, points to the necessity of bringing laymen into the picture. In fact, I would argue that as the sweeping social and economic changes unleashed by the crisis filtered slowly through the religious sphere, both men and women had to reconfigure their relationship to religion in general and to the church in particular, and specifically in the case of men, to redefine their masculinity. Crucial to my purpose is also the need to move beyond homogenized social categories and simple dyadic oppositions such as men/women and to take into account other determinants of identity. Here, perhaps even more than anything else, age matters. Particularly, as far as women are concerned, paying attention to the women under 40 generates a whole new picture of “doing” religion and gender in times of crisis, prompting us to reconsider the feminization of Greek Orthodoxy.

Scholars of gender and religion have often expressed the urgent need to overcome the rigidness of dualistic interpretations, focusing instead on “the motivations, desires and goals” that might otherwise remain unexplored (Mahmood 2006, 38; see also Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016). This line of argumentation is particularly pertinent to my discussion of victimhood and agency, both in the religious and the wider Greek social context. Greek women and men are not passive victims of the drastic changes and rapid transformation of power structures brought about by the prolonged crisis in their country. Rather, victimhood must be seen in this context not as completely devoid of agency. Both victimhood and agency are tactical mechanisms adopted by Greek men and women vis-à-vis the church, the state, and the broader international community.

Finally, this study bears upon wider issues, both internal and external, such as the intricate interweaving of Greek Orthodoxy and Greek nationhood, the close relationship of church and state, and the alterity of the Orthodox East vis-à-vis the Latin West. Because of its geopolitical position and history, Greece continues to be regarded as a hybrid of elements from both East and West. After the foundation of the Modern Greek state in the nineteenth century, Orthodoxy became central to the official public discourse and instrumental in the diachronic preservation of Greek national identity. The very close connection and mutual legitimation between church and state corroborated this relation and deployed it against various perceived enemies, which were mostly thought of stemming from Western Europe/the West. Historically speaking, East-West relations have always been tense. The Greek Orthodox were often suspicious or even dismissive of Western ideas and influences, including modernity and secularism, whereas their Western counterparts regarded Greeks as tradition-bound



and lagging behind. Although the Modern Greek state kept close ties with the West, anti-Western and anti-European mentalities and orientations, Orthodox and otherwise, prevail to this day. An outburst of such attitudes can be particularly observed during the recent Greek crisis.

### **The gendered face of the crisis**

While there is no agreement on exactly when the Greek crisis began and no shortage of scenarios as to who should be held accountable for it (lazy and unproductive Greeks, corrupt politicians versus the Troika, neoliberalism, the Great Powers—to name but a few), all scholars and analysts agree that this crisis has an intensity unmatched by any other EU country. Austerity-ridden Greece has become the scarecrow of the Eurozone: an exemplary failure, spreading fear and uncertainty for the future of the EU, yet peripheral and marginal enough (geographically and financially) to become the testing ground of a number of neoliberal policies (see Knight 2013).

Both internationally and locally, Greece is portrayed as an exceptional case due to its economic, political, and cultural idiosyncrasies (Rakopoulos 2014, 191–194). This enables discourses of governance and media narratives based on generic concepts and categories such as “the Greek crisis” and “the Greek people.” Simultaneously, the crises of different gendered, classed, and racial subjects, during what were termed as “exceptional times,” “critical weeks and months,” and a “state of emergency,” were sidelined, and these people’s needs were sacrificed on the altar of overall economic necessities as dictated by the white and predominantly male governing elites. Yet, like the economic and financial crisis of the rest of the Eurozone, the Greek crisis is both “gendered and gendering” (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 5).

The overall picture is bleak for both women and men. The crisis-austerity-recession environment in Greece brought about high rates of unemployment combined with falling wages, an increase in working hours and loss of benefits, cuts to public services and welfare provisions, cuts in health care and pensions, and increased taxation. Women became progressively the shock absorbers of austerity and recession measures, the most vulnerable being the young (25 and under), single mothers, pensioners, and migrant women (Karamessini 2014, 173; Bakalaki 2015).

The lower quality of life and precarious work resulted in the deterioration of the physical and mental health of the general population and in an increase of what has been termed “economic suicide” rates, particularly among men (Harrison 2015). This is also due to the persistence of the male breadwinner model that was dominant even before the crisis, and to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles that allocate the major responsibility for the children, the ill, the elderly, and the care for the home to women. Before the crisis, this work was largely assumed by migrant women (Papataxiarchis, Topali, and Athanasopoulou 2009). However, as the welfare state deteriorated, the “new poor”—that is, middle-class Greek



women—are undertaking such work themselves. The return to traditional values thus exacerbated gender inequalities and undermined the modest advances toward gender equality made in pre-crisis Greece.<sup>4</sup>

This is also attested by the alarming increase in violence against women, both in the public and in the domestic domain. In 2012, two women politicians were attacked on live television by a leading figure of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, who later became a member of the Greek Parliament when his party won 7 percent of votes in the elections of the same year. The aggressive male chauvinistic ideology of the extreme right is a sign that Greek men are seeking to regain the masculinity stolen from them by the crisis.

My male Larissean interlocutors also think of the crisis as entailing a sexual assault (*mas exoune gamisei*), an act of sodomy (Bakalaki 2015). Given that Greek men have always viewed themselves as the defenders of the nation (partly due to their compulsory military service), such blows on masculinity are regarded as blows to the nation as a whole and are evaluated in terms of the values of honor and shame. The international politico-economic elite shames the imagined male national self, and the blame is directed not only outwards but also inwards against Greek women. As Alkis, a 48-year-old doctor, jokingly commented: “fire, woman, sea, and the crisis—all evil things are gender feminine.”<sup>5</sup> Alkis has added the crisis to the commonly used anti-feminist proverb in Greece “fire, woman, and sea, three evils,” alluding to their feminine grammatical gender in Modern Greek.<sup>6</sup> In this context, women are blamed for the economic crisis since they are associated with overspending and having a taste for luxuries.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the domestication of women becomes once again the solution to the ills of the crisis.

Interestingly enough, not only the language but also the very conceptualization of the Greek crisis is gendered. Larissaeans women, particularly the older ones, talk about the crisis in terms of feeling “confined” (*perio-ristikame*), both economically and spatially, since getting out of the house involves the danger of spending money otherwise required to cover basic needs. This confinement is conceived of as a punishment for the excesses of the past as well as a cure that will bring about a better future. However, such logic is contested by many, especially the young, who see no future and are infuriated with those in power and their bending attitude toward the West.<sup>8</sup>

### **The church, the crisis saints, and the crisis prophets**

The Greek Orthodox Church, including its finances, was also seriously affected by the crisis. Yet, the crisis offered the church a unique opportunity to become a key provider of philanthropic services throughout the country, replacing the state and collaborating with secular actors. Given its strong connection with the Greek nation, the church thereby appeared

to fulfill its traditional role not only as the mother of the nation, but also as “the people’s mother” (Makris and Meichanetsidis 2018). At the same time, the church focused on the spiritual side of the crisis, considering it as a theodicy, a pedagogical punishment from God, and demanding for a return to traditional Orthodox values, including gendered ones (Kessareas 2018). In this way, the crisis was portrayed as a disease, the church as its doctor, and charity as its medicine (Makris and Bekridakis 2013, 121). The crisis had significant repercussions on the way that many Greeks view the church, not only in institutional but also in spiritual terms, and on how they practice their religion. It is against this background that my interlocutors are “doing” religion and gender in their quotidian lives.

Attending services at St. Achillios, I witnessed a scene quite unfamiliar to the pre-crisis one. Timothy Ware (1997, 269–270), describing the effect of the absence of pews in Orthodox worship and commenting on its flexibility, informality, and homeliness compared to that of Western Christianity, writes:

Western worshippers, ranged in their neat rows, all in their proper places, cannot move about during the service without causing a disturbance; a western congregation is generally expected to arrive at the beginning and to stay to the end. But in Orthodox worship people can come and go far more freely, and nobody is greatly surprised if they move about during the service. (...) They are at home in their church—not troops on a parade ground, but children in their Father’s house.

The picture today appears to be different. Chairs are arranged in rows, in every available space within the church. Almost everybody is sitting in silence, participating in the outward and audible prayers and singing of the Liturgy, while kneeling—one of the most visible, outward bodily expressions of prayer—is restricted because of the seating arrangements and confined only to bowing one’s head as a sign of devoutness, humility, and participation. Given that bodily movement in Orthodoxy is an “enacted symbol” of liturgical participation (McDowell 2013, 79) used among the laity, especially by women, such seating arrangements have gender implications for they circumscribe women’s ritual space; so almost all liturgical movement is embodied by the male priests, deacons, and altar boys.

This is not to suggest that such changes are a direct consequence of the crisis or that they can be observed in every church throughout Greece. Still, for my interlocutors, there is a connection between the more orderly liturgical practices and the reverberations of the crisis on the individual body and the body politic. In the words of Anna, a 43-year-old teacher:

Sitting helps my mind to better concentrate on prayer that we all so much need to give us strength in these troubled times. My body can relax, I feel less tired, and I can more easily follow the Liturgy. I like the

order that exists now in the Church. It shows what we should all do in our lives. It is the anarchy that existed in our country that brought us to the situation that we are now in.

If we acknowledge that religion is both in the “heart” and in the “knees” (Sakaranaho 2011, 142), the changes mentioned above, simple as they may be, should not go unnoticed. They reflect the need for deeper transformations within Greek society at large. Anna’s statement echoes those of the EU institutions demanding that Greeks “put their house in order.” As Father Georgios told me, “the Church should be the first to give an example of order and discipline.” Paradoxically and ironically, order and discipline, two elements more typical of Western Christianity, are thus observed even within one of the pillars of Greek alterity vis-à-vis the West, namely the Orthodox Church.

The image of the laity, sitting with their heads bowed, is an image of a nation tired and crushed. The church, in its effort to help the people, has multiplied the number of services, adding all-night vigils and intercessory prayers to the Mother of God and to the saints. In the Cathedral of St. Achillios, the most popular of all services is the intercessory prayers to St. Luke the Surgeon (*Agios Loukas o iatros*), an Orthodox saint (1877–1961) from Crimea, who was a medical practitioner believed to have performed many healing miracles and a bishop persecuted by the Communist regime. Although this prayer service was introduced in 2007, the year that the saint’s relics were brought to St. Achillios to be venerated, its popularity has greatly increased during the crisis, pointing to the main concerns and needs of the congregation and its reaction to current events. As Nikos, a 52-year-old bank clerk, remarked, “we attend this prayer service because the crisis made all of us sick.” His comment is suggestive not only of the detrimental effects of austerity on the mental and physical health of the population, but also of the pathology of a corrupt state that cannot care for its citizens. As Father Georgios pointed out to his parishioners: “Demand from God and the saints, not from the state.” The crisis has become chronic, and its routinization and naturalization have relinquished hope to the metaphysical domain.<sup>9</sup>

More importantly, in this parish the prayer service to St. Luke attracts even more people, both male and female, than the intercessory prayers to the *Panagia* (Mother of God). In Orthodoxy, the Mother of God is venerated above all saints. She has traditionally provided the main model for the ministry and role of women, both in church and society (Sotiriu 2004, 501). Prayer services to the Mother of God are vital for women, who are the main participants and chanters of these prayers, since they provide a unique female performative space within the formal space of the church (Glaros 2011, 139). This is not to say that the exalted position of the *Panagia* in the spiritual realm and in the hearts and prayers of both men and women has in any way diminished, but rather that the intercessory prayers to St. Luke are

thought to be more suited to the pathology of the crisis. Nevertheless, this practice further restricts women's already limited location within formal liturgical practices. Their ritual performative expertise is slowly eroding, resembling more and more the passive liturgical participation of laymen.

While male saints cure, the words of male prophets such as those of Elder Paisios, a Greek monk from Mount Athos who died in 1994 and was canonized in 2015, are used to make sense of the experience of living in an uncertain present, "in an enduring attitude of expectant waiting" (Guyer 2007, 414).<sup>10</sup> Paisios is said to have predicted the economic crisis, the future of the EU, and the eventual building of a modern Greek "Byzantine" Empire. Prophecies are crucial because they are gendered (Nissinen 2017, 297). In contemporary Greek Orthodoxy, in particular, the prophetic realm remains exclusively male, connected primarily to the powerful spiritual elders of Mount Athos.

My male interlocutors often discussed such prophecies and predictions of things to come. Such discussions pointed to the need to suffer and repent for desiring material excesses and often involved not only self-blaming, but also the blaming of Others glossed in conspiracy theories of imagined foreign plans and desires to destroy Greek Orthodoxy—the sole bastion of authentic Christianity. Though such prophecies were circulating among believers even before the Greek crisis, their ambiguous wording was interpreted anew to refer to current political and socioeconomic conditions, producing a climate of quasi-certainty where divine justice will prevail and Greece, the now European outcast, will relive the golden age of a distant past. In this sense, the current "social turmoil is not (only) embodied alongside past crises," as Knight (2013, 153) argues, but also emotionally experienced alongside past glories.

Yet, such expectations of a glorious future foster the same nationalistic, racist, sexist, and homophobic discourses actively promoted by the Golden Dawn party and various Orthodox ultraconservative groups. My male interlocutors do not identify with any of these groups. They rather think of themselves as devout Orthodox and separate themselves from the above-mentioned groups in terms of action. They are proud Greeks and Orthodox and at the same time pacifists, traditionalists, and modern Europeans, believing and discussing the prophecies not only of Orthodox elders, but also of leading local, European, and international economists and politicians.<sup>11</sup> Curiously enough, the women of my study rarely discussed such religious prophecies; this may suggest that men use such mechanisms to reimagine the masculinity of a threatened Orthodox national self.

When I asked Father Georgios to comment on the current growing popularity of Elder Paisios and St. Luke among his parish members, he offered the following explanation: "It is because they are contemporary saints. Both lived during the twentieth century, and many people feel closer to them. Some men have even met Elder Paisios when he was alive during their pilgrimage to Mount Athos." Given the fact that far fewer female saints

have been canonized by the church, particularly in recent periods, the prevalence of male saints in the Greek Orthodox scene is of no surprise. Their temporal proximity brings the two saints closer to the individual and the collectivity, facilitating communication with the divine world. In the case of St. Luke—an imported saint from the Russian Orthodox Church—not only his believed therapeutic powers make him an ideal helper, but also the fact that he lived and suffered under the Communist regime. My interlocutors imagine and recount his suffering as analogous to their own in the current socioeconomic circumstances. In his saintly persona, medicine, miracle, suffering, contemporaneity, and anti-establishment attitudes are thus combined, granting him a unique relevance to the current crisis.<sup>12</sup>

The popularity of the two saints is an example of what I term “adjustment tactics,” by which the laity try to adapt to and make sense of the changes occurring in their everyday experience. Such tactics are further fostered and validated by the church because of their connection to both nationalism and paternalism. The nation is under attack and its male breadwinners at a loss. Male role models that are at the same time “ordinary people like us” (because of their corporeality and temporal proximity) and extraordinary (because of their virtuoso asceticism and self-discipline—culturally, a male trait much needed in times of economic hardship) are held up for emulation, help, encouragement, and hope for the future.

### **Feminized men and disenchanting women**

The increasing importance of male prophets and male saints is connected to another, even more crucial, effect of the crisis. The Orthodox Church, to date a “feminized church”—in terms of women’s active participation and numerical prevalence in church attendance, the sacraments of confession and communion, and pilgrimage—seems to be slowly losing its feminine touch. Studies on European Christianity’s feminization abound and, as Linda Woodhead (2008, 188) has declared: “The typical churchgoer in Europe is now an older woman.”<sup>13</sup> While my ethnographic study confirms this, a more nuanced analysis through the generational lens shows that, under the adverse conditions of the crisis, more men are attending church and participating in the sacraments, particularly among my younger interlocutors. Almost all of these men were university graduates. Some were in search of their first job while the ones already employed had seen significant wage cuts; two of them had even lost their jobs and been forced to accept part-time lower paid ones. Enquiring about their increased participation in church-related activities, I received the following answer from Father Georgios: “The Church has become the new Department of Social Security (*tameio anergias*).”

As victims of economic hardship and professional insecurity, men are more inclined than before to get actively involved in church-related activities, seeking to extend their social circle, solidarize with other men facing

similar financial and emotional distress and—through their contact with the clergy—increase their chances of finding employment and financial support.<sup>14</sup> The threefold increase of men joining the priesthood during the crisis period (Stamos 2015) provides additional proof that the financial benefits drawn by men from their religious involvement should not be overlooked.

Nevertheless, personal material gain is not the sole reason of men's growing involvement in the religious sphere. As Marja-Liisa Keinänen (2016, 68) appropriately argued, "religion does not exist in a social vacuum but is socially embedded and practiced." Thus, men's material and social needs do not preclude their spiritual ones, as is made clear by their increased participation in the sacrament of confession, in which previously older women prevailed. Men's quest for a spiritual father is not a new phenomenon, neither a direct consequence of the crisis. It is often connected with the access that men have to supposedly "superior" spiritual fathers, that is, the elders of the all-male monastic communities of Mount Athos. Such confessions are regarded as offering a superior moral guidance to that available to women by the parish priest.

Confession to the parish priest, however, is usually regarded as running counter to ideas of normative masculinity, as it entails the intimate disclosure of the inner self to someone whom men often criticize as not having to endure the financial hardship they face and whom they regard as closer to the older women of the parish.<sup>15</sup> The men of my study increasingly embraced such practices for several reasons. First, because of their devoutness and will to "do things the right way," which included going to confession before receiving Holy Communion. Such an attitude has been more vigorously adopted by men since the crisis began and is the result of the official church discourse of treating the crisis as a theodicy. Second, confession allowed men to get closer to the parish clergy, meaning easier access to certain economic and social privileges. Finally, many likened confession to a psychotherapy session, as it created a secure offstage space for revealing their embarrassments, anxieties, and fears about being unable to be "real men" in terms of providing for themselves and their families. After confession they usually felt empowered to face their situation anew.<sup>16</sup>

Men's numerical participation in Sunday school and in the social and philanthropic work of the parish has also augmented in the last years. Perhaps the most striking observation coming from my ethnographic research is the complete absence of women from the parish's social work for the ill and the elderly. Taking into account that both in secular society and in the church's philanthropic domain, practices, and ideologies of caring remain strongly associated with women, this development is rather atypical.<sup>17</sup> The group of volunteers responsible for the care of the old and the sick on the parish level was composed of ten younger men that visited and offered their services to those in need once a week. My male interlocutors agreed that care work was largely feminine and that women "know how to do it better." Yet, they viewed such work as "work for the soul." In times when

secular work is hard to find or downgraded, it is replaced by spiritual work to confer value and self-worth. Thus, the church's provision of care for the sick and the elderly provided men with the opportunity to override traditional gender stereotypes and to reveal new, more feminine elements of their identities.

This new role of men, however, was not entirely dependent on men's volunteerism, but also on women's active rejection of participation in this specific philanthropic activity. My female interlocutors claimed that, since the crisis, they were overburdened with such care work in the domestic sphere. Viewing the crisis as instigating "a state of depression," they preferred to spend their free time in what they regarded as "more fun" philanthropic activities—such as working as a volunteer in the *Epiousios* soup kitchen administered by the Diocese of Larissa and Tyrnavos. *Epiousios* (literally meaning "daily bread") was established by the local church in 2002, initially offering 150 daily meals to the destitute, the homeless, and the lonely of the diocese. In 2017, after almost ten years of economic devastation, the number of meals exceeded 450. Taking weekly turns, volunteer women of different parishes in the diocese engaged in the soup kitchen, cooking the daily meal for what the church considered as "the larger family of the poor." These women were usually the older women of the parishes of the diocese, aged 50 years and over, and most of them were either *noikokyres* (housewives), pensioners, or unemployed due to the crisis.

For my female interlocutors, participation in the soup kitchen was a positive experience. It was not simply seen as an extension of women's domestic roles and a locus of female sociability and mutual support; more importantly, it was a sphere of action involving creativity, strategic planning, agency, and what it means "to do something out of choice." In their task of organizing menus with few ingredients and debating with other female volunteers and male administrators and clerics on ways to feed an ever-growing number of people, the women felt creative, productive, happy, and above all both spiritually and socially worthy. They were the main actors in what the local bishop called "the miracle of the pot." They engaged in cooking for the larger family of the poor as "mothers," and this symbolic motherhood was based more on an "ethic of choice" than an "ethic of service" (Paxson 2004). Food is, among other things, a marker of social injustice. By engaging in food caring as volunteers, these women were asking not only to be seen as autonomous individuals free to choose, but also as religious and political actors involved in a critique, however diffused, of austerity measures.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the rising involvement of laymen in church-related activities and philanthropic tasks, the dedication, participation, and religious expertise of these older women ensure that philanthropy and religion in crisis-ridden Greece maintain their feminine character. Yet, many feminine aspects of Greek Orthodoxy are becoming increasingly less apparent not only because more laymen are turning to religion during the crisis for spiritual



and secular reasons, but also because of the changing religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices of younger women.

Among my interlocutors, the most outspoken critics of the church's handling of the crisis were the educated, middle-class women under the age of 40. As we have seen, the church purports a return to traditional gender values as an important remedy to the afflictions of the crisis. Often, in their preaching to the churchgoers, priests laid the blame for "the current difficulties faced by Greek families" explicitly on women. In the words of one priest:

I am not sure that the story of Eve is without relevance in our times; many current evils came from the desire of Greek women to emulate imported modern ideas of womanhood. These led them to idealize work at the expense of the family. The cure is to reprioritize their roles as wives and mothers, using as role models the Mother of God and the many female saints of Greek Orthodoxy.

Predictably, such views that call for the domestication of women do not go down well with younger female churchgoers, even the devout ones, and they are either totally ignored or rejected as outmoded and degrading. Younger women regard priests, particularly the unmarried ones—who hold higher positions within the church hierarchy—as "coming from another world." However, their reaction is not so much against the individual parish priests, but against the church as an institution, its leaders, and its perceived intimate relation with the state. The statement by Stefania, a 33-year-old doctor, is a case in point:

During the crisis, the Church has positioned itself not on the side of the people but against them. It has collaborated with the corrupt leadership of the state in order to keep its vast wealth. It has avoided paying the heavy taxation that we, common people, have to pay.

Such anticlerical sentiments are widespread among the Greek population as a whole and have been heightened during the crisis, focusing mainly on the church's avoidance of direct political criticism of the state's responsibility for the country's financial collapse and the economic benefits that the church is able to gain from its position *vis-à-vis* the state (the priests' state salaries and pensions, church taxation, etc.).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, my interlocutors criticized the church's philanthropic response to the crisis as inadequate in comparison to its vast wealth. This reveals that top-down philanthropy does not hold the same moral value as giving from the bottom-up, and in this respect the church will always fall short, whatever its crisis-related initiatives.

These popular anticlerical sentiments were almost never against Orthodoxy as such. Nonetheless, they produced different modalities of religious



engagement among my male and female interlocutors as well as intergenerational differences between the women. More specifically, among frequent male churchgoers, both young and old, and among older women, anticlerical sentiments were more related to general crisis sentiments and were expressed as verbal criticism against generic power structures such as the state and the church. Religious practice, however, did not seem to be affected by such sentiments, and the men tended toward “orthopraxy” and full embracement of the current official church discourse.

Younger women’s anticlericalism, in contrast, was influencing their behavior vis-à-vis Orthodoxy. During the crisis, the reaction of my younger female interlocutors against the male dominance of the church has become more noticeable, exemplified in a more individualized form of Orthodox religiosity and also through the fusion of Orthodoxy with other forms of spirituality that fall under the umbrella of New Age—yoga, meditation, reiki, feng shui, and veganism being the most popular ones. Such practices have also been described as “a Greek spiritual revolution.” Eugenia Rousou (2013, 48) argues that younger women “have begun to revolutionize Greek religiosity and their gendered identity, because they challenge the authority of the priests, their husbands, and of Orthodox Christianity.”

Certainly, the transformation of younger women’s religiosity is not wholly the outcome of the gendered consequences of the crisis in the religious sphere. Such changes are not isolated instances, and are partly due to larger processes of globalization and secularization and to the emanating shift from the Orthodox construction of relational personhood to “the imported construction of the individualistic human subject” (Hirschon 2010, 306). Yet, the growing economic and social vulnerability of these women during the crisis and the dissemination of secular and religious discourses that focus on their “essential” domesticity increased their disenchantment with Orthodoxy, leading them to look for alternative and more personal forms of religiosity. Because they had been following Orthodox beliefs and practices since childhood, they found it hard to totally break the chain of religious memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000) and thus reshaped them to be less doctrinal. For example, Maria, a 27-year old holding a degree in economics, was unable to find a job. Suffering from stress from what she perceived as a deadlock, she practiced mediation and yoga. I met Maria after her meditation session, and we attended the prayer service to St. Luke together. Maria did not want to stay for the whole service. She just wanted to light a candle, kiss the saint’s icon, and wipe the icon with her handkerchief; she then used it to wipe her forehead. She firmly believed that both practices were curative in a similar manner—bestowing “positive energy” on her.

Before the crisis, my younger female interlocutors felt more empowered in the secular sphere and were more covert about exercising agency within the androcentric Orthodox environment, adapting church rules and prohibitions to individual needs through the ecclesiastical principle of *oikonomia*. A traditional concept stemming from Orthodox Canon Law,

*oikonomia* basically refers to the mild application of church rules and prescriptions, particularly when applying them more strictly may lead someone to abandon the church. Thus, *oikonomia* provided the justification of more individualized ritual practices while keeping women within the limits of official belief and practice. During the crisis, the younger women's reaction against the patriarchal power structures of the church became more overt. Hardly any of them went to confession; rather, they "passed by" the church to receive Holy Communion, light candles, and kiss icons for help with a variety of secular concerns. They used sacred objects to gain "positive energy." Moreover, hardly any of them were taking part in the church's philanthropic activities. They were, thus, either totally rejecting or reshaping the meaning of Orthodox beliefs and practices. As Valia said, "when our mothers die, the churches will empty." Orthodoxy's "feminization" is hence seriously under threat.

## Conclusion

The Greek crisis is having a pernicious impact on gender in the secular sphere, which is starting to permeate the religious sphere too. What I have described above is my modest contribution to the layout of a story which remains inconclusive. We have observed how nationality, sexuality, gender, religion, and the Greek crisis are intertwined through the reproduction of traditional stereotypes, discourses, and practices that exacerbate and further entrench preexisting power relations and structures. The male side of the story exhibits how the crisis endangers both the individual and the collective masculine self, and how religion becomes an important coping mechanism for men. The men of my study, particularly the younger ones, are both feeling and behaving as the prime victims of the current political and socioeconomic conditions. Being the main breadwinner, being Greek, and being Orthodox reassume a heightened significance for men during the crisis, leading them to participate more in church-related practices and philanthropic activities, which were previously characterized as feminine.

It would be wrong at this point, however, to talk about a "masculinization" of Greek Orthodoxy. Despite the shrinking female space, older women still remain deeply engaged with Orthodoxy, both in everyday practice, in church worship, and in the philanthropic activities of the church. The crisis, therefore, did not result in the "masculinization" of religion in Greece, but rather in the "feminization" of men. Their engagement with the church as victims of the crisis has an agentic character and is used as a tactic to achieve personal, economic, social, emotional, and spiritual benefits.

Moreover, I would argue that victimhood, as a conscious tactical mechanism, is more often adopted by my men interlocutors than by the women. This has largely to do with the fact that women, who are more often denied choices and more often subject to maltreatment and violence, are more reluctant to employ such tactics. Reacting against the official religious

discourse that strongly defended traditional gender values as a cure to the crisis, the younger women of my study became openly anticlerical in their attitude, defying the priests' power and authority over them. Their agency is primarily expressed by the creation of an individual bricolage of spiritual and Orthodox practices, which helps them to deal with the insecurity and hardships of the crisis. In this sense, they are no longer "the traditional modern" (Sotiriou 2010) of the past, individualizing certain religious practices and beliefs yet firmly remaining within the bounds of Orthodoxy, but slowly becoming "the spiritual postmodern." Given the fact that during the crisis civil marriages have numerically exceeded religious ones and that, according to some of my interlocutors, baptisms are increasingly replaced by name giving (*onomatodosia*), younger women's religious behavior may further weaken the chain of religious memory.<sup>20</sup> Crises do not necessarily involve a rupture with the past, but certainly do invite it. The Greek Orthodox hierarchy, thus, should definitely be on its guard.

## Notes

- 1 To my knowledge only one study exists that focuses on the subject from a different perspective to the one adopted in this chapter. Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2015), a feminist theologian, deals primarily with the question of whether the Greek Orthodox theological discourse can address the crisis, social injustice in general, and gender-based issues in particular.
- 2 For an analysis of religion from a power perspective, see Woodhead (2007); for religion as practice, see Gemzöe and Keinänen (2016, 13–15).
- 3 The names of my interlocutors have been changed.
- 4 For women's position in Greece before the crisis and the Greek feminist movement, see Gaitanou (2017).
- 5 All translations are by the author.
- 6 This proverb is originally attributed to the Greek dramatist Menandros (342/41–290 BC).
- 7 On the same point, see Bakalaki (2015).
- 8 On the tactics of accountability and blame, see Theodossopoulos (2013).
- 9 On the chronicities of the crisis in Greece and their normalization, see Cabot (2016).
- 10 On the entanglement of past, present, and future and how this is used by people in Southern Europe to make sense of their experiences of living with austerity, see Knight and Stewart (2016).
- 11 On prophecy and the merging of the metaphysical and the scientific spheres in future predictions during the crisis, see Yalouri (2016).
- 12 Greek Orthodox refugees from Asia Minor on Lesbos create and use sainthood in ways that have some parallels to the uses of saints under crisis conditions; this and their gender implications are discussed in Ray (2012).
- 13 On the feminization thesis and its critics, see Keinänen (2016).
- 14 On the same point, see Kessareas (2019).
- 15 On anticlerical feelings and men, see Herzfeld (1990, 309) and Just (1988).
- 16 On confession as a "modern moment" in an otherwise traditional Greek Orthodox Christianity and its association with Western psychotherapeutic ideas, see Thermos (2014).
- 17 See also Molokotos-Liederman (2012).

- 18 For a similar analysis, see Douzina-Bakalaki (2017).  
 19 For a discussion on these points and the church's response to the crisis from 2009 to 2013, see Makris and Bekridakis (2013).  
 20 In 2013, the number of civil marriages was 25,632, while religious marriages numbered 25,624 (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2015, 23).

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# 11 Russian Orthodox icons of Chernobyl as visual narratives about women at the center of nuclear disaster

*Elena Romashko*

Ten years after the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, in 1996, a crowd gathered in the city center of Minsk, Belarus. It was the annual political demonstration in remembrance of the disaster, the Chernobyl Way (*Charnobyl'ski shljah*). One participant was an icon painter, who carried his massive icon of Chernobyl in front of the crowd. The icon depicts the Virgin Mary and her son, both surrounded by the rays of the nuclear explosion. Behind her, the radiation sign overshadows the sun and the inscription below reads in Belarusian “Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl.” A law enforcement officer beat the icon painter in the face with a baton, injuring his eye. Even today religious items serve as crucial elements of this annual demonstration. In 2017, two men carried the same icon from the 1996 demonstration through the city of Minsk. The icon was adorned with a Slavic ritual cloth embroidered with traditional symbols. In front of them was a priest in a cassock holding a silver hand cross. On the right a man carried a flag with the inscription “Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.” Two men with a church bell on a crossbar led the procession. Parts of a secular political demonstration were reminiscent of a religious procession.

In 2016, an art gallery in Minsk held an exhibition in remembrance of Chernobyl. A woman stood in front of the series of paintings commemorating the disaster. Her glance stopped at a somber painting of two angels with black wings holding the dead body of a child, they pass him, pale and ready for the burial rites, to his mother. The caption reads “Madonna of Chernobyl.” She is the Mother of God, her son is God who suffered and died for others, but he is also a child who never grew up.

In the past 30 years, the imagery chosen to depict the events of Chernobyl tells more than the story of the reactor rupturing and emergency workers dying from radiation sickness. It tells a story of Mary caught in the center of the nuclear explosion. It tells a story of Jesus, who dies as a child, implying that God incarnate can be defeated by the power of radiation.

To commemorate the worst nuclear disaster in history is not an easy task. The Chernobyl disaster revealed a new set of challenges of the nuclear age: fluidity, omnipresence, and the extended temporality of nuclear contamination (see Morton 2010). These are difficult to comprehend and even





Figure 11.1 The icon “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl” is carried through the demonstration Chernobyl Way in 2017. Photo Pavel Mart-sinchyk, icon painter Alexei Marachkin.

more difficult to depict. Since the disaster religious actors, imagery, and content have had a significant presence within the commemorative culture of Chernobyl.

This 30-year-long tradition of Chernobyl commemoration, which makes use of Russian Orthodox iconography and religious-themed art as a medium to transfer the grief of Chernobyl in post-Soviet space, is my research interest. The striking prevalence of religious imagery dealing with the disaster has not received enough attention in the academic research of nuclear culture, especially in the post-Soviet space. My research aims to fill in this gap through an investigation of the religious elements of the memorial art and Russian Orthodox iconography of Chernobyl as sources for discovering the post-Chernobyl nuclear culture.

This chapter stems from my ongoing broader study of material religion and female agency in the process of coping with the consequences of contamination in Belarus. I conducted fieldwork in Minsk between 2014 and 2019 over several trips, totaling ten months in the field. Besides collecting and analyzing artwork, I gathered a number of narratives through participant observation and in-depth interviews with people who had different attitudes to and involvement in the post-Chernobyl agenda. I asked the interviewees to interpret and discuss icons and artworks dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster and share their personal experiences of the tragedy as well as their everyday and religious life after it. Most of the interviews were

not recorded, as the respondents refused permission, demonstrating distrust in anyone gathering information about politically controversial topics as well as hesitation and often refusal to give their own opinion regarding religion or belief without the permission or supervision of a priest or spiritual father.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, to interpret visual reflections of the disaster and to fill in the gaps of personal narratives, I draw on the work of Svetlana Alexievich, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2015. She brings together oral histories of the disaster in her book *Chernobyl Prayer*<sup>2</sup> (Alexievich 2016).

In this chapter, I investigate how the nuclear events of Chernobyl are perceived by lay people and reflected through the medium of Orthodox iconography. I pay particular attention to how these icons approach gender roles, and the place and meaning they assign to the agency of ordinary women and men whose lives were affected by the Chernobyl disaster.

Gendered imagery is a distinct characteristic of the commemorative culture of the Chernobyl disaster. I analyze four images. Painters often depict women to commemorate the Chernobyl disaster, especially through the image of the Virgin Mary, as present in the “Madonna of Chernobyl” and the “Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl.” In contrast, public commemoration, by the state and often the Church, honors almost exclusively military men and male members of the rescue forces. This contradiction can be seen in the third image, “The Savior of Chernobyl” and its artistic modifications. The fourth and last image, “Christ Blessing the Children,” is addressing congenital diseases affecting current and future post-Chernobyl generations. This icon avoids the depiction of gender roles after the disaster by showing both men and women as sick and suffering children asking for a blessing.

## **Impact of the Chernobyl disaster**

The magnitude of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 staggered the world, with the realization that the industrial use of nuclear energy can be as harmful to humanity as the earlier nuclear bomb in military use. In contrast to the intentional bombing of Japan in the end of the Second World War, in Chernobyl an unfortunate chain of events triggered the power of the split atom to bring destruction and contamination. However, the government of the Soviet Union considerably aggravated the consequences, as it mismanaged the disaster, attempted to silence discussion of it, and avoided informing the affected population about the appropriate safety regulations. This massive nuclear disaster on the border of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet Republics permanently changed the lives of their residents.

For the Belarusian people, the consequences of the explosion were devastating: contamination of almost a quarter of the territory with numerous types of radioactive materials as well as the evacuation and relocation of about 340,000 people (Bashilov 2013, 4). Many locals feel victimized and deceived by the authorities, and continue to suffer from a range of health issues that are attributed to radioactive contamination. This sentiment is crystallized in an interview collected by Svetlana Alexievich (2006, 193–195):

People talk about the war, the war generation, they compare us to them. But those people were happy! They won the war! It gave them a very strong life-energy, as we say now, it gave them a really strong motivation to survive and keep going. They weren't afraid of anything, they wanted to live, learn, have kids. Whereas us? We're afraid of everything. We're afraid for our children, and for our grandchildren, who don't exist yet.

Radiation presents a unique challenge for religious thought, as it is “invisible, tasteless and odorless” (Phillips 2002, 30). It has no boundaries; it can penetrate and possess human bodies, objects, and places. Some radionuclides have an extremely long lifespan and are able to harm multiple generations of people, either directly through the food and environment or indirectly through various inherited genetic mutations. All these characteristics of radiation provoke associations with supernatural forces, divine providence, or demonic powers (Romashko 2016). Svetlana Alexievich (2016, 58) writes:

I see Chernobyl as the beginning of a new history: it offers not only knowledge but also prescience, because it challenges our old ideas about ourselves and the world. (...) Chernobyl is, above all, a catastrophe of time. The radionuclides strewn across our earth will live for 50,000, 100,000, 200,000 years. And longer. From the perspective of human life, they are eternal. What are we capable of comprehending? Is it in our power to extract and decipher the meaning of this still unfamiliar horror?

The ability of radiation to take away everything one values, such as land, health, and loved ones, resulted in a tendency to correlate it with sin and evil in Russian Orthodox sermon rhetoric, newspapers, and popular magazines. Moreover, both the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, and the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, Metropolitan Philaret, regarded human sin as a reason for the Chernobyl disaster and part of God's providence (Vakhromeev 1994; Religious Information Service of Ukraine 2011).

It is not surprising that diverse layers of symbolic religious imagery have been used to give meaning to what happened in Chernobyl. Religious ideas became leitmotifs in artistic perceptions of Chernobyl, Russian Orthodox iconography, people's narratives, and vernacular belief.

### **Framing the religious dimensions of Chernobyl**

The ambiguity of nuclear power, capable of driving human mistakes to an unthinkable level—the extinction of humankind—rapidly ran through different levels of culture (see Boyer 1985; Aho 1989). I suggest that although the religious dimension is often overlooked it is still deeply integrated into

nuclear culture. People use religious texts and imagery to respond to the nuclear events, they resort to them in their attempts to control, represent, and resist nuclear power (see Hogg 2016, 7).

In the Soviet Union, a response to the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl and its precarious consequences was achieved through the production of commemorative visual art. The ideological nature of the Soviet period can explain the choice of this particular form. The religious connotations of the nuclear culture could not be spoken of in the pronouncements of the officially atheistic state. However, ordinary people, including local artists, actively used traditional and religious symbols to comprehend and depict the impact of the nuclear disaster.

For example, the image of storks, as a local folklore symbol related to vegetation, procreation, migration, and peaceful coexistence with nature, was widely used in the illustrations of the Chernobyl disaster. Storks appear in numerous schoolchildren's drawings when they are asked to express their perception of the Chernobyl disaster (see Danilenko 2011). A Chernobyl monument in Kyiv, at the Church of St. Theodosius of Chernigov, depicts storks falling down dead, trapped into the orbit of an atom encircled with the inscription "For the dead, living and unborn." This memorial church was founded to conduct commemorative services for the Chernobyl victims and serve as a visual monument for the Chernobyl disaster. The facade is decorated with a massive mosaic of "The Savior of Chernobyl," the most famous Chernobyl icon. Chernobyl memorial churches and Chernobyl icons rapidly appeared in different parts of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. For example, in Minsk alone there are three Russian Orthodox churches dedicated to the memory of Chernobyl and two of them are among the biggest churches in the city. Chernobyl memorial churches are spreading across the geographical and denominational borders: the newly built Belarusian Greek-Catholic Church consecrated in 2016 in London is also dedicated to the Chernobyl tragedy.

### **Russian Orthodox icons of Chernobyl**

The Chernobyl icons, devotional images of Christ or the Virgin Mary in relation to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, were officially blessed by the Orthodox Church and given special liturgical veneration. Nevertheless, they are not well known among Russian Orthodox believers, even though they are rapidly spreading throughout the post-Soviet territories. Chernobyl iconography has developed over the last 30 years, and the icons can be seen in a number of churches in the post-Soviet region. One of these, "The Savior of Chernobyl," was put into mass production as an affordable laminated copy, which enabled people to bring it to their homes, put in their wallets, and keep it at their workplaces. Some Chernobyl icons are unique exemplars while others come in multiple variations.

Chernobyl icons and memorial churches are often claimed to be the result of a collective vision or an individual dream supported by a number of enthusiasts who eventually negotiated the formal blessing from the official church. Chernobyl icons are predominantly ordered by local initiatives tightly connected with Chernobyl survivor NGOs and unions formed to assert the rights and financial benefits of members of the Defence and Rescue Forces or “liquidators.”<sup>3</sup> The icons of Chernobyl are also given as formal gifts to commemorate nuclear disasters on the international level. The Ukrainian Chernobyl Union sent a replica of “The Savior of Chernobyl” to the people of Japan in 2011 and the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko gave a replica of the same icon to the church in Liaskovichy during his visit to Belarus in 2017. The icons were given not only to churches, but to museums and theaters as well. The Chernobyl icons are consecrated in the Russian Orthodox Church, but it is often suggested that they can be venerated by believers of other denominations and religions, as nuclear disaster is seen as a global tragedy and therefore a unifying factor locating these artifacts in the ecumenical domain.

The combination of folk and official forms of the Chernobyl icons can be seen as expressions of vernacular religion (Primiano 1995), which acknowledges the importance of the local and contextual expression of beliefs. Bowman and Valk argue that vernacular religion is a methodologically useful and ethically appropriate concept to describe practices located outside official church dogmatics. It helps to avoid approaching them as “pagan” traditions or misinterpretations of the “correct” teaching (Bowman and Valk 2012, 3–7). Moreover, vernacular religion connects local beliefs with specific historical, social, political, and ecological conditions in which religious beliefs and practices exist, interact, and are reinterpreted, which is crucial to Chernobyl spirituality.

According to Marion Bowman, vernacular religion includes three components of religion—official (related to the institutionalized religion, theological teaching, and hierarchy), folk (related to the commonly accepted and transmitted belief and practice, regardless of the institutional position), and individual (related to the personal interpretations of folk and official ideas gained from experience) as well as their interconnections (Bowman 2004, 6). Therefore, vernacular religion is not another term for folk religion, but an attempt to include the “folk” and “personal” elements as an integral part of religion as it is lived. Multiple interviewees characterized the Chernobyl icons as “obviously folk” and therefore “inferior” or “wrong.”

Next, I analyze in more detail four artworks from the perspective of vernacular religion. First, the paradigmatic painting “Madonna of Chernobyl” by Mikhail Savitsky. After that, I analyze three icons officially sanctified by the Russian Orthodox Church: “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl,” “The Savior of Chernobyl,” and “Christ Blessing the Children.”

### The Madonna and mothers of Chernobyl

Mikhail Savitsky is a renowned Belarusian painter and cultural symbol. He was born in 1922, served in the Second World War, and was captured and imprisoned in concentration camps in Buchenwald, Dachau, and Dora during his service. After the war he studied art and became well known for his monumental paintings. In 1988–1989, Savitsky created a series of paintings dedicated to the Chernobyl catastrophe with the title “Black verity,”<sup>4</sup> including the “Madonna of Chernobyl.” This painting came to symbolize the Chernobyl disaster in Belarus.

The painting links the consequences of the disaster with the image of Mary. Even though it does not serve as a religious icon, it became culturally iconic, as it established the connection between the mourning Mother of God and ordinary women coping with the nuclear crisis. The composition of the painting resembles an overturned cross. It is a farewell: at the top of the cross stands a female figure dressed as a countrywoman who is passing the body of her naked dead son to two angels with black wings. The bodies of the mother and son form the vertical beam of the cross; the arms of the angels form the horizontal beam. The art critic Emma Pugacheva highlights the fact that there is no source of light on the painting, so the figures are shedding the light from within themselves. She characterizes this effect as giving “an impression of the Holy Ghost descending into this world of tragedy and grief” (Pugacheva 1991, “The Chernobyl Madona,” para. 3).

This development in the representation of the nuclear culture of Chernobyl is important as it differs from the male-focused way the media and state officially commemorate the disaster. The power plant employees and liquidators were predominantly male. They formed the liquidator NGOs, fighting for their rights and disability benefits. Commemoration of the events was not much different: military men were venerating their comrades-in-arms. Chernobyl was always presented in the public sphere as a male prerogative, even in monuments; a male figure is always depicted in the middle of the explosion. Russian Orthodox memorial services with male priests and deacons reading the list of male names of dead liquidators do not challenge this tradition. Within the domain of official Russian Orthodox religion men are the heroes, martyrs, and survivors of Chernobyl, while women are victims and mourners. Even though Savitsky placed a woman at the center of his Chernobyl commemoration, he still perpetuated these traditional roles. The Mary of Savitsky is depicted eyes downcast, calm, and outwardly restrained, as an obedient and helpless mourner.

“The image of Madonna is an eternal embodiment of love and regeneration of life, however, along with that she has always personified the drama of sacrifice that comes with it,” states Pugacheva (1991, “The Chernobyl Madona,” para. 1) in her analysis of the painting. Rima Nasrallah draws a similar conclusion in her analysis of the iconographic depictions of Mary in Orthodox churches, when she claims that “a highlight of this suffering





Figure 11.2 “The Madonna of Chernobyl” by Mikhail Savitsky. The Gallery of Savitsky / Photo Elena Romashko.

is that Mary did not choose to suffer as a heroic act but because of the relationship she had with the one to whom violence and injustice were being done” (Nasrallah et al. 2016, 17).

In the case of Chernobyl, the injustice is toward the children who die too young and suffer from genetic illnesses and cancer. The mother acts here as an advocate for her vulnerable child. Therefore, in difficult economic conditions, local women see the agency of the caregiver as an active and ultimately sacred female duty.

This could explain why Belarusian artists often depict Mary surrounded by the horrors of the nuclear tragedy and envisaged as an average contemporary woman exposed to radiation, with an endangered, sick, or sometimes even dead child. These allusions are not allegorical but taken from the

actual events after Chernobyl. The former chief engineer of the Institute for Nuclear Energy, who participated in trips to the Chernobyl area to assess the consequences of the disaster, reported:

There was a woman in our group, a radiologist. She became hysterical when she saw that children were sitting in a sandbox and playing. We checked breast milk—it was radioactive. (...) We saw a woman on a bench near her house, breastfeeding her child—her milk has cesium in it—she is the Chernobyl Madonna.

(Alexievich 2006, 161–163)

I believe that sensitivity to infertility issues and the power of radiation to cause congenital and genetic diseases in children born after the disaster are the key reasons for the mass appeal of the image of Mary with a child in secular art. This portrayal aims to depict the reality of everyday life for Belarusian women. At the same time, it unfortunately conveys and upholds the message that caring for the “damaged children” of Chernobyl is not a family duty but rather the concern and responsibility of the mother alone. Other paintings by Victor Barabantsev and Yuri Nikitin are similar to the one by Savitsky. Some other painters use images of Mary (Gavriil Vaschenko, Alexander Kishchenko), Marian icons (Vladimir Gordeenko, Vladimir Kozhuh), or women and mothers (Vladimir Kozhuh, Victor Shmatov, Sergey Davidovich). It is noteworthy that all these are painted by male artists and, though they use images of women to depict the disaster, they overlook the actual agency and actions of women coping with contamination. Often, a woman seems to be seen as a metaphor of vulnerability, innocence, procreation, obedience, and resignation.

Such images of Mary can hardly be included in official Orthodox practice as icons because of their noncanonical style and ideas, unlike the ones I deal with in the next section. Nevertheless, these artworks occupy an important place in the cultural memory of the post-Chernobyl territories and Belarusian national history. Moreover, they support traditional Orthodox roles assigned to women coping with the Chernobyl disaster. Perhaps these roles result from a sociopolitical construction that propagates obedience and passivity, not only as an expected feminine duty but as applied to the nation as a whole. Chernobyl, when seen as a result of the mismanagement of a totalitarian state, can evoke opposing responses. Alongside acceptance and mourning, there is resistance and protest.

### **Mary resisting radioactive contamination**

The first officially consecrated Chernobyl icon, “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl,” was made in 1990 by Aliaksiey Marachkin. This icon was officially recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church, and the original is in a chapel in Zhodino, Belarus. A copy of this icon is present at



the Chernobyl Way. These duplicate icons have surprisingly opposite destinies to the original one, which is isolated from the believers behind the iconostasis at the altar, in the part of the church where only priests and men with special permission are allowed to go. The other one, the duplicate, leads the march of the political opposition to remind people about Chernobyl and how important clarity and transparency are for civil society. The artist explains:

The icon suffered as well as those who carried it. There are spots of blood on the icon, as a reminder of the violence during the dispersal of demonstrations. The policemen tried to take it away, they wanted us to forsake it, and throw it away, they hit our hands (...) This is a powerful symbol not only of the Chernobyl demonstrations, but in general, it is a symbol of the spiritual awakening of people after terrible suffering.  
(Kirkevich 2017)

The fact that the icon is being used more for political reasons than for prayer and veneration is a peculiar aspect of the history of Chernobyl iconography. The icon has a unique apocalyptic symbolism expressed through radiation-related symbols. At its center is the Mother of God with a child on her arms standing on grass resembling wormwood.<sup>5</sup> Behind her back are the rays of the Chernobyl explosion and a sun overshadowed with the radiation symbol. The people of the contaminated territories are gathered under the explosion.

The iconography of “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl” is influenced by the iconographic tradition of depicting The Woman of the Apocalypse on Russian engravings, which had a direct political function. The depiction of the Virgin Mary as the Woman of the Apocalypse above clashing armies was used to praise military victory and emphasize divine patronage over the Russian army. The foreign army, for its part, was depicted among the demonic powers of hell (Pogosjan and Smorzhevskih 2002). Similarly, the icon “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl” can be interpreted as depicting the victory over the demonic power of totalitarianism and radioactive contamination.

Compared to Savitsky’s painting, Mary in Marachkin’s icon is strikingly different: she is powerful; the radioactive explosion stays behind her not harming her or Jesus; she is envisioned as the eternal ultimate power resisting the contamination. The icon provides hope for the triumph over evil and support to those who choose to resist evil with her. She could be seen also as the symbol of the church: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

The resistance of the Christian Church against radiation is, perhaps, the most common connection between religion and Chernobyl. Low radiation levels inside the churches in the Exclusion Zone<sup>6</sup> are claimed to be a miraculous occurrence (see Kotrelev and Shapkin 2007). Pilgrims and journalists

narrate that the level of radiation in the Church of the Prophet Elijah in Chernobyl is lower than in Moscow or Kyiv.

However, there is a certain resistance toward the icon “The Mother of God of the Victims of Chernobyl” among believers. Some struggle to accept the political agenda behind the use of the icon, while others criticize its lack of traditional Orthodox iconographic traits. In her reaction to this icon, Lidia (interviewed 2015), a parish member of the main cathedral in Minsk, said “I think this icon is definitely not canonical. I would rather call it a spiritual artwork. I would not accept such an icon in the church during Liturgy.” The case of this icon clearly illustrates that Chernobyl icons are honored by specific groups of people. Political activists participating in the Chernobyl Way, who mostly represent opposition to the current government, recognize the icon as their own sacred object. Yet they do not pray in front of it, but demonstrate it, bring it to the public sphere as an attempt to draw attention to its message. They bring both the idea of the church resisting radiation and totalitarianism and an image of a woman with her child to the center of the unofficial Chernobyl commemorative culture. In this sense, the Chernobyl Way serves as a window on alternative commemorative expressions presented as public performances.

### **Jesus Christ the Savior of Chernobyl**

My third image, “The Savior of Chernobyl”<sup>7</sup> was created in 2003, and arguably became the most well-known Chernobyl icon. Yuri Andreev, president of the NGO Chernobyl Union of Ukraine, had the idea for this icon. According to numerous Russian Orthodox websites and articles, he saw this image in a dream and later was granted permission by the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Vladimir, for such an icon to be painted by the monks of Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (Archmandrite Sergiy 2016). In 2004, its veneration was officially allowed by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, and in 2006, the original was given to the Church of the Prophet Elijah in the Exclusion Zone.

This icon initiated a new type of Chernobyl iconography. Across post-Soviet space new icons under the name “The Savior of Chernobyl” are being created (Novosibirsk (2008), Tomsk (2009), Bronnitsy (2010), Omsk (2011), Moscow (2012), etc.). Some of these look like copies of the original Kyiv icon, while others modify the iconography and composition to the extent that they can only be recognized as versions of the same icon through their name.

The original Kyiv version is set in a floral frame with a distinctive difference of iconography in the upper and lower part of the icon. The upper part is set on a golden background, with Jesus shown within a mandorla in the middle. On his left is the Mother of God, and on the right the Archangel Michael. In the centre of the lower part is a trident-shaped tree surrounded by burned land. On the right stands a group of liquidators in their uniforms:

a firefighter, a power plant employee, a pilot, a doctor, and a nurse. To the left of the tree stand faceless figures in white robes symbolizing the victims of the Chernobyl disaster. On the horizon is a falling star over the outline of a nuclear power plant.

The trident shaped tree is an image of a real tree nearby the Chernobyl power plant, which became one of the dreadful apocalyptic symbols of Chernobyl. The tree is similar to the cross and to the trident, the emblem of Ukraine. According to a legend, during the Second World War Nazi soldiers hanged people on that tree and their martyrdom gave the tree miraculous power. Another apocalyptic symbol is the falling star Wormwood, a reference to the last book of the Bible:

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

(Revelation 8:10–11, NIV)

In this passage in Ukrainian, the name of the fallen star resembles the word Chernobyl (“chernobil”), which can be translated as absinth grass, wormwood, or mugwort. Its bitterness made the herb a powerful source of metaphors in the Biblical context and beyond. A star, blazing like a torch, is frequently compared to the explosion, while bitter waters and a curse to the third of the rivers resembles a significant part of Belarus being contaminated.

The reaction to this icon has been ambivalent, both regarding its content and iconography. The obvious distinction between the upper part of the icon depicting Christ and the Virgin Mary and the lower part showing ordinary people in uniforms and gas masks was described by one of my informants, a priest and icon painter (interviewed 2015), as “a tasteless compilation.” The depiction of the nuclear reactor or uniforms on the icon was often interpreted by interviewees as intolerable, “ridiculously standing out,” and a reason to create new versions of this icon to “correct” it. Marina (interviewed 2015), a member of a church youth organization, told me, “I would cut this icon in half, with the upper part I could pray, I would remember Chernobyl and pray for the victims and the deceased, I don’t need particular details of the lower part for it.” Yuri Andreev (2010), who initiated the icon to be painted, has responded to the public critique by noting that “our spiritual relic, the icon “The Savior of Chernobyl” is not recognized only by heretics and heathens as it was canonical even before it was made.”

The inconsistency between the upper and lower part of the icon and the compilation of individual, official, and folk elements in it could explain the need for this icon to be reinterpreted, changed, and remade to satisfy the needs of different religious groups.

Some variations of “The Savior of Chernobyl” aspire to look more canonical and less centered on apocalyptic visions and elements of folk religious tradition. For example, by comparing the Kyiv (2003) and Moscow (2012) variants of the icon, one can see the change in the painting style, the central image and characters, and therefore the content and message. The Moscow icon is made in the Byzantine style. The Chernobyl pine has been replaced with a generic tree, while the building of the power plant has been moved to the foreground. With this change, the folk religious symbol is removed from the icon and replaced with an image resembling the historical Chernobyl power plant. The uniforms of the liquidators are replaced with canonical garments—the cleanup workers from the original icons are replaced with warriors in Byzantine army vestments. Through this, the military conscription to the Chernobyl cleanup is reinterpreted as a holy duty and service in “Christ’s army.” Those who died are seen as martyrs of the nuclear age regardless of their personal belief or denomination.

Some of my informants who accepted the original Kyiv iconography of “The Savior of Chernobyl” were extremely critical and unwilling to accept this Moscow version, which they described as “unrealistic.” “Did Chernobyl happen in Israel? If we would show this icon to a liquidator of the Chernobyl disaster, he would say that he wore different kind of clothes” Vladimir sarcastically commented during a group interview (2015) with members of a church youth organization. He added, “it seems that this icon depicts a reactor built by aliens and after a few centuries was found by humans.”

The most striking changes to the iconography of “The Savior of Chernobyl” involve the depiction of the female characters. The female nurse and doctor among the liquidators in the Kyiv icon (2003) are removed from the Moscow icon (2012). Faceless souls of the people who died as a result of the Chernobyl accident are given faces. The figure of a mother with a child is placed in front of them on the Moscow icon. This change, while preserving a female image, changes its content—a woman who was active on the side of the liquidators is replaced by a passive suffering image. Her agency is changed, her professional help and voluntary sacrifice of her own health for the sake of others substituted with a more traditional female role—motherhood.

Vernacular religion is conceptually valuable because “it highlights the power of the individual and communities of individuals to create and re-create their own religion” (Primiano 2012, 383). This aspect of vernacular religion can help to conceptualize women’s agency in the post-Chernobyl context.

Not all of the subsequent versions of “The Savior of Chernobyl” reduce the female roles to motherhood only. In the variation of the icon made for a church in Tomsk in 2009, the original plot and composition of the icon are significantly altered and ecological and broader cultural themes are emphasized. Liquidators and sufferers are united in the left corner of the icon, and two new characters join them—a rural couple in traditional clothes, signifying grief over abandoned farmland, together with the folklore and

traditional culture of the rural settlements, which vanished due to the sporadic resettlement of the evacuated population. The Tomsk version (2009) of this icon, in other words, blurs the distinction between the victims and the survivors and depicts women in more roles than that of mothers, while remaining traditional and following the inclusive message of the original Kyiv icon (2003).

The depiction of the role of women in Chernobyl icons is tightly connected to how these icons deal with the Soviet past. Officially, representatives of the Orthodox Church often claim that atheism and idolatry of science were reasons for the Chernobyl disaster (Romashko 2016). During the Soviet period, women were actively involved in often physically demanding work on equal terms with men. Professional education and an occupation were as essential for women as for men. The refusal of the Orthodox Church to depict women's professional qualities, instead presenting them as mothers and caregivers, seems to be an attempt to establish Orthodox values and traditional gender roles as righteous and dignified in opposition to the Soviet ones. This aspect shows the difference between folk and official religious approaches to gender roles as an attribute of the past and to the traditional role of women.

The folk religious approach, as shown on the Kyiv version of "The Savior of Chernobyl," focuses on integrating and embracing the Soviet reality. From the folk religious view, in the Soviet era, religion in the public sphere was generally persecuted; many areas were left without churches and priests. This created space for local women to take on religious and quasi-clerical roles and they integrated elements of the traditional culture into their practices. The official religion claimed that these elements were pagan, sprouting from the low catechetical levels, mundane needs, and desires of local people. Therefore, these folk "uneducated" and "inferior" religious practices were often perceived as female in opposition to the official "educated" clerical male practices.

The attempt to reduce the involvement and local religious power of women and to return clerical functions to men only using religious imagery might be one more reason for the desire of the official religion to reduce women's role exclusively to the private, domestic sphere. The iconography of "The Savior of Chernobyl" made for Moscow in 2012 represents the culmination of this tradition.

The inclusive depiction in the Kyiv version, highlighting different expressions of spirituality and interpretations of tradition, thus allowing for more female input, was eventually cut out when the icon acquired a more official status and was relocated to Moscow, associated with the domain of official religion and consolidation of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy.

### **The "damaged" children of Chernobyl**

The concept of vernacular religion stresses how the narration of the same historical events can be reinterpreted differently on individual, folk, and

official levels. Vernacular religion also reflects the different values and didactic messages that folk and official religious artifacts convey. It is typical for folk artifacts to combine religious and political power, which can serve as a tool of establishing justice and equality, as demonstrated through the agency of the above Chernobyl icons. But no less important is the ability of icons to console and heal.

The desire to be healed is met in the fourth Chernobyl icon named “Christ Blessing the Children” created in the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Kazan in 2013.<sup>8</sup> This icon has been made as an interpretation of the common iconographic motive referring to the New Testament passage about Jesus blessing children (Mark 10:13–16). The correlation between this passage and the Chernobyl disaster had previously been drawn by the German nun Angelina Heuser in her 1998 icon “Jesus Healing the Children of Chernobyl.” The icon made in Kazan, however, differs in style from the work of Heuser, as it follows the Byzantine iconographic tradition.

While preserving the standard composition of the icon “Christ Blessing the Children,” the Kazan icon adds a number of substantial alterations. At the center of this icon is Jesus Christ, seated and wearing blue garments with a golden band, his left hand raised in a blessing gesture. Christ is surrounded by children, boys and girls who are all wearing modern clothes and reaching their arms towards him. A bald child wearing a medical mask sits on his lap. To the left of Christ is a teenager using crutches. To the right, there is a group of sick children with a smaller child wrapped in bandages riding a rocking horse in front. In the background, there is a house on the left and a rock on the right; these form part of the standard composition of the icon “Christ Blessing the Children.” However, between them stands a gray building of a nuclear power plant with a substantial crack running through the front cooling tower and the main building.

The biblical passage about Christ inviting children to come to him can metaphorically be understood as a blessing of the future generations who will suffer the consequences of the explosion. By depicting all the survivors as children, this icon does not suggest any gender-based difference in the request for healing and blessing. However, as mentioned above, fertility and the health of future generations represent one of the main concerns that women express in the post-Chernobyl world. As one of the informants of Svetlana Alexievich shares (2006, 193–195):

The other day my daughter said to me: “Mom, if I give birth to a damaged child, I’m still going to love him.” Can you imagine that? She’s in the tenth grade, and she already has such thoughts. Her friends, too, they all think about it. Some acquaintances of ours recently gave birth to a son, their first. They’re a young, handsome pair. And their boy has a mouth that stretches to his ears and no ears. I don’t visit them like I used to, but my daughter doesn’t mind, she looks in on them all the time. She wants to go there, maybe just to see, or maybe to try it on.

In contemporary Belarus, long-term relocation to bigger cities is common among mothers whose children suffer from illnesses, perceived as related to radioactive contamination such as cancer. The fathers are often at work and the mothers take care of the other children at home. In many cases, families with a disabled child end up separating or the fathers resort to drinking, as happened with my informant Anna (interviewed 2016), who shared with me her experiences on raising a child with mental and physical disabilities in Belarus.

I found the monastery where I could take my daughter [to pray for healing] (...) My husband Oleg didn't want to go there. So I made him go, through extortion. I know people say it is bad. But I gave him a choice, either I will have him locked up at the LTP,<sup>9</sup> or he comes for two weeks to the monastery. So this is how he came with us (...) I was of the opinion that I am a good person and Oleg is a bad one. He drinks, and so on. But there I realized that I was wrong. The wise monk [*starets*] did not say a word about my husband, but he said that it [the disease of Anna's daughter] happened because of me, because of my arrogance. He saw through us like on an X-ray. (...) During this trip I conceived my second [healthy] daughter, which is a miracle, considering how we live.

Anna told me that she would not be able to support her child without the church. She cannot work and her husband is often missing, drinking hard and does not bring money, nor does he help with the children. She was not familiar with the icons of Chernobyl, but was very curious to see them and find out more about them. She was very interested in any healing pilgrimage destinations. She expressed longing for the genuine paternal support, love, and warmth that her own father gave to her but her daughters did not have. She mentioned that she often gets this from priests, monks, and other men in positions of authority in the church.

It is a grim reality of the post-Soviet territories that women are often the only caregivers of their sick children and many children with disabilities are given into state care in orphanages. Parents are frequently left with no help from the government and facing numerous regulations that restrict and isolate children with disabilities from the public sphere. In the hope of support and consolation, people appeal not only to the Mother of God, but also to Jesus blessing the children. Drawing on my interview with Anna, I suggest that the icon "Christ Blessing the Children" addresses the issue of missing parent(s) and fulfills the hope that even children who are neglected or orphaned due to their disability are still protected and guided by Jesus.

The origin of the Chernobyl icon "Christ Blessing the Children" is claimed to be rooted in local believers' request for such an icon to be made. According to Father Nectarius, the current head of the Kazan Monastery of St. John the Baptist and a former liquidator, one of the monks saw a similar picture in a magazine,<sup>10</sup> and decided to place it on a wall. He says:



people have come to treat it very respectfully. And when we decided to remove it, to hang another icon, they began to ask: “Where is the picture?” The decision to make an icon dedicated to Chernobyl appeared naturally. Afterward, we began to respond to people that soon instead of that picture they will see the most authentic icon.

(Kirillova and Iskandirov 2014)

By transforming the picture from a magazine into an icon with a conventional iconographic name and a style associated with canonical iconography, the monks relocated the local venerative practice into the domain of official religion with its pre-existing format of Chernobyl commemoration. This did not go unnoticed by other engaged groups. The NGO of Orthodox liquidators, named after the Chernobyl icon “The Savior of Chernobyl,” published an official letter critiquing the icon on the website of “The ‘Chernobyl’ Union of Russia”, stating:<sup>11</sup>

It causes disappointment and frustration that the important symbols of Chernobyl, such as an icon (...) are created only on the basis of one’s personal understanding of the issue, without consulting experts and specialists in the Chernobyl events. There are such specialists in the Chernobyl community, in general, and in our Chernobyl Union of Russia. If the author of the project had presented a sketch to the advisory council, he would have been given feedback without delay, and without interference with the implementation of his plan. In this case, there would have been no disappointing errors, “blunders” that sometimes devalue or reduce the honorable thoughts and ideas.

It is peculiar that members of the NGO doubt the ability of the church to create an icon related to Chernobyl events independently. In the comment, only the members of the organized and official Chernobyl bodies are seen as experts—not the local population or those survivors who are not members of the NGO. This is one example of how Chernobyl artifacts are created, interpreted, and used within a specific vernacular context by a particular group of people that claims authority over the object and determination of its purpose and functions. Besides its assigned meaning and use, the icon communicates additional messages beyond the boundaries of the group when brought into public view and serves as a prototype for further religious images. The depiction of aspects such as gender roles in coping with the disaster on the Chernobyl icons is therefore constantly contested and reformulated.

## Conclusion

In the Russian Orthodox Church, women are often depicted as having an insignificant liturgical role, as they are underrepresented in the official church structure. When focusing on vernacular religion, we often notice



that women come to the fore of religious life, bringing their concerns to the religious discourse.

In the Chernobyl commemorative culture, people frequently resort to the images of Mary as a mother with a child to convey their concerns regarding the future and reality after the disaster. These images are used to depict multiple levels of the post-Chernobyl reality, from mourning for what is lost (future, health, land, and loved ones) and expression of reproductive fears to resistance to nuclear threat and governmental oppression. The icons of Chernobyl convey the urge for healing and consolation as well as proclaiming the heroism and martyrdom of the liquidators. This made them especially important for the members of the predominantly male Chernobyl survivor unions, who commission the new icons and often claim authority over them.

The Chernobyl icons serve as ambiguous artifacts, which often perpetuate so-called traditional gender roles by denying women's agency, professional involvement, and activism related to the challenges brought about by the explosion. However, the original "Savior of Chernobyl" icon stands out as an exception to this rule by placing women among the active liquidators of the consequences of the catastrophe, depicting them as medical professionals. Nevertheless, this position of women is constantly contested through the creation of subsequent versions of this icon with frequent attempts to move them to the periphery, depicting them as vulnerable victims with their roles limited to mourning, motherhood, and caregiving. Despite the continuous production of new versions, these are not as widespread and influential as the original iconography of "The Savior of Chernobyl."

The religious dimension of the nuclear culture of Chernobyl is easy to neglect. Yet, it provides valuable material for approaching the complex ways in which people react to life-changing historical events. As argued in this chapter, analyzing the visual commemorative culture of religion contributes to the understanding of politically ambivalent events, especially when oral or written narratives are scarce. The icons of Chernobyl reveal how the same religious tradition assigns gender roles differently on its various levels: individual, folk, and official.

## Notes

- 1 For reasons of anonymity all the informants' names are changed. All translations are by the author.
- 2 The US title of the same book but in a different translation is *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Alexievich 2006).
- 3 Liquidator is a colloquial term for the civil and military personnel sent to minimize the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.
- 4 It is not an etymological, but phonetic "de-coding" of the Russian word *Chernobyl*: *cherny* (black) + *byl* (true story).
- 5 It is an attempt to connect the star Wormwood from Revelation 8:10–11 with the translation of the word *Chernobyl* from Ukrainian, meaning wormwood.
- 6 The Exclusion Zone is a restricted area around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

- 7 The icon is known in English alternatively as “Chernobyl Savior,” “The Chernobyl Savior,” or “Savior of Chernobyl.” For copyright reasons, it was not possible to print an image of the icon in this book. The image can, however, be found online (see Archmandrite Sergiy 2016).
- 8 For copyright reasons, it was not possible to print an image of the icon in this book.
- 9 LTP is a correctional facility where alcoholics are sent through the local police office if they are disturbing the social order. The alcoholics are treated there through physical labor and medical means.
- 10 It is unclear—it might be a picture of the icon made by Sister Angelina Heuser.
- 11 The website of the Union “Sojuz ‘Chernobyl’ Rossii” is: <http://www.souzchernobyl.ru/>. The letter, signed by V. Maleev, is no longer available online. The author is in possession of a copy of the letter’s content, extracted August 15, 2015.

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# Index

Note: Page numbers followed by “n” denote endnotes.

- Abbess Ekaterina 49–50  
agency 12–13, 119, 127, 134–5, 173;  
and civic activity 164; of icons 11,  
204; and religious activity 125–7,  
128, 136, 138, 143, 183–4, 185; of  
saints 13, 140; and social work 67;  
and victimhood 173, 184; *see also*  
empowerment; iconography of the  
Chernobyl nuclear disaster  
Alexievich, Svetlana 192–3  
anticlericalism 57, 173, 182–3, 185  
Archbishop Paul 69–70, 71, 73–4  
Archpriest John Vostorgov 54  
Arx, Urs Von *see* Von Arx, Urs  
asceticism 33, 35, 49, 68, 77, 134,  
163–4, 179; *see also* monastic  
communities; monasticism; nuns
- baptism 27–8; Seto traditions concerning  
105–6, 111; *see also* churching  
Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth 36–7, 41n5,  
133–4, 137, 144  
Belarus 192–4; *see also* the Chernobyl  
nuclear disaster; civil society;  
motherhood; post-Soviet space
- Chalcedonian Churches *see* Eastern  
Orthodox Churches  
charity *see* social work  
the Chernobyl nuclear disaster 190,  
192–4, 196; *see also* Belarus;  
iconography of the Chernobyl  
nuclear disaster; motherhood  
Christ 28–9, 31–3, 36, 42n12, 81, 88–9,  
122; *see also* iconography of the  
Chernobyl nuclear disaster; nuns;  
priests
- churching 1, 28, 111n1; Seto traditions  
concerning 105–6; *see also* ritual  
impurity  
civic activism 51–2, 153, 163–5; *see*  
*also* maternal activism; peacebuilding  
civil society: in Belarus 198–9; in  
Ukraine 149–50, 153, 162  
clergy *see* priests  
the Cold War 58, 83; *see also*  
post-Communist societies  
Colliander, Ina 66–8, 72  
complementarity between sexes *see*  
gender complementarity  
confession 117, 141, 143, 179, 180,  
184; *see also* spiritual elders  
convents *see* monastic communities  
conversion 74, 116–17, 118, 133
- deaconesses *see* female diaconate  
deification *see* theosis  
diaconate *see* female diaconate  
diaspora *see* minority contexts  
Dolina, Olesya 156–8
- Eastern Orthodox Churches 4  
economic crisis in Greece 171, 174–5,  
177, 178; *see also* Greece; the Greek  
Orthodox Church  
ecumenical: dialog between Orthodox  
and Old Catholic Churches 81, 82–4,  
86–7; theology 150, 162–3; *see also*  
ecumenism; Old Catholic Churches  
of the Union of Utrecht; peace  
theology; women’s ordination to the  
priesthood  
the Ecumenical Patriarchate 81, 83, 84,  
150–1

- ecumenism: of Old Catholic Churches 81–2; in Ukrainian civic activism 162–3, 165; *see also* ecumenical
- embodiment 11–12, 115, 116, 119, 120, 125, 127, 135, 150, 176; *see also* material religion
- empowerment 135; through civic activity 149, 155, 157; through religious activity 134–5, 138, 139, 142, 144, 180; *see also* agency
- ethnography: and intimate topics 102–3, 104, 106–9, 110; and researcher's positionality 102, 107, 116, 172; *see also* power relations; research; sexuality
- Evdokimov, Paul 29–31, 33–4, 37, 40
- everyday religion 135; *see also* lived religion; vernacular religion
- female diaconate 28, 34, 86, 119–21; in Russia 50, 51–3, 55–8, 60; *see also* women's ordination to the priesthood
- femininity in Orthodox anthropology 28, 30–2, 37–8, 134, 156, 198; *see also* iconography of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion
- feminist: activism 154, 157, 158–60; interpretations of religion 12, 116, 134, 144; movement 7, 57; theology 3, 112n8, 124, 185n1; *see also* civic activism; research
- feminization of religion 7, 179; in Greece 173, 179, 181–2, 184; *see also* modernity
- fieldwork *see* ethnography
- Finland 65, 72, 131, 133; *see also* the Finnish Orthodox Church; icon painting; monastic communities; nationalism; women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- the Finnish Orthodox Church 1–2, 71–2, 75
- gender complementarity 5, 30, 33, 36–7; in the Catholic Church 5
- gender order 2, 63; and modernization 6–7, 48, 53–4, 58, 87, 112n10; and religion 2, 11, 12, 116; and social upheavals 171–2, 174; *see also* feminization of religion; power relations; social ethics; theological anthropology; women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- Grand Duchess Elizaveta 52–4
- Greece 172, 173–4; *see also* economic crisis in Greece; feminization of religion; the Greek Orthodox Church; masculinity; nationalism
- the Greek Orthodox Church 175–6, 177, 179
- the Holy Spirit 29, 30–3, 34–5, 36
- home altars *see* icon corners
- homosexuality 38–40; *see also* same-sex unions
- Hopko, Thomas 31–3, 38
- icon corners 11, 115, 120, 123–7; *see also* icons; prayers
- icon painting: by Finnish women 64–7, 68, 74–5; as a hobby 11, 73–4, 75; revivalism in 64, 70, 76–7; *see also* icon theology; modernism
- icon theology 11, 29, 64, 65, 69, 76, 126
- iconography of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster 191, 194–5; female agency in 197–8, 202–3, 204, 207; icons of Christ 190, 200–1, 204–5; icons of the Mother of God 190, 192, 196–7, 198–200, 207; *see also* the Russian Orthodox Church
- icons: liturgical uses of 29; of the Mother of God 71–2, 75, 124, 126–7; political uses of 149, 190, 195, 199–200, 204; veneration of 11, 124–7, 140, 183, 204; vernacular understandings of 125, 195, 200, 201–3; *see also* icon corners; icon painting; icon theology; saints
- imago dei* 6, 26–7, 31, 36
- intercessions *see* prayers
- Jääskinen, Aune 70–1, 73
- Jesus Christ *see* Christ
- Kalenychenko, Tetiana 151, 160
- Kallis, Anastasios 87–8
- liturgical life 13, 29, 119, 121, 123, 138, 176, 178, 200; *see also* icon corners; prayers
- lived religion 10–11, 172; *see also* everyday religion; power relations; vernacular religion
- Lozova, Lidya 160–2

- the Maidan protests 149–50, 151, 152, 158–9; *see also* civic activism; civil society; Ukraine
- marriage 32–4, 38; *see also* same-sex unions
- Mary *see* the Mother of God
- masculinity: and the economic crisis in Greece 175, 178, 184; in Orthodox anthropology 28, 30–2, 37–8, 134
- material religion 11–12, 115, 125–6, 127, 128, 135, 143; *see also* embodiment; icons; relics
- maternal activism 154–6
- Mayerchuk, Maria 158–60
- menstruation *see* ritual impurity
- Metropolitan Vladimir (Bogoyavlensky) 54–6
- minority contexts 8–9, 40; *see also* Finland; Seto people; the United States
- modernism 63–4
- modernity: and Orthodox Christianity 6–7, 8, 9, 53–4, 173, 182; and religion 6–7, 151; *see also* feminization of religion; gender order; public religion; tradition in Orthodox Christianity
- monastic communities: convents in Russia 47–50, 54, 57, 59, 64–5; in Finland 65, 131–2, 136–7; mercy communities in Russia 51–2, 59; *see also* asceticism; monasticism; nuns
- monasticism 33–4, 49–50, 134, 136, 139; *see also* asceticism; monastic communities; nuns
- Mother Elisabet 132, 136, 140, 141–2, 143
- the Mother of God 6, 28–9, 32, 36, 112n7, 134; as national symbol 99, 155, 199; Seto traditions concerning 99–101, 110–11; veneration of 125, 126–7, 141, 177; in women's religion 12, 101; *see also* iconography of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster; icons
- motherhood 6, 35, 41n10; in post-Chernobyl Belarus 204–5; symbolic 154–5, 157, 181; *see also* maternal activism; the Mother of God
- nationalism and Orthodox Christianity 8, 83; in Finland 71–3; in Greece 173, 178–9, 184; in Ukraine 152, 155, 157–60, 163, 165; *see also* the Mother of God
- Neiglick-Platonoff, Martha 65–7, 68, 72
- nuns 48–52, 136, 141–2, 143; as brides of Christ 35–6; *see also* monastic communities; monasticism
- oikonomia 183–4
- Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht 81–2; *see also* ecumenical; women's ordination to the priesthood
- Ouspensky, Léonid 64, 68, 74, 76
- peace theology 162–4, 165; *see also* ecumenical
- peacebuilding 155, 160–2, 164–5; *see also* civic activism; ecumenism
- philanthropy *see* social work
- Plakhotnik, Olga 158–60
- post-Communist societies 8, 161; *see also* post-Soviet space
- post-Soviet space 58, 124, 159–60, 194, 200, 203, 205; *see also* Belarus; post-Communist societies; Russia; the Soviet Union; Ukraine
- power relations: in ethnographic research 106; gendered 2, 55, 63, 125, 127–8, 171, 173, 203; and lived religion 10; religious 3, 55, 73, 125, 127–8, 156, 164, 184, 203; and vernacular religion 202, 204; *see also* empowerment; gender order; violence; women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- prayers: continuous prayer 136–7; domestic prayers 120, 121–2, 123, 126–7; intercessions 140, 177; prayer services 136–7, 156, 159, 177; *see also* icon corners; liturgical life
- priesthood 5, 30, 89; in the Catholic Church 5; in Protestant Churches 5; *see also* female diaconate; women's ordination to the priesthood
- priests: as church policymakers 1, 53–7, 68–71, 73–4; and civic activism 149, 156, 159, 182, 190, 196; as images of Christ 5, 88–9; relationship with parishioners 103–4, 106, 141–2, 160, 180, 182, 205; *see also* priesthood; priests' wives; spiritual elders
- priests' wives 34–5, 121
- prophecies 178
- public religion 151, 156, 158, 162
- purity regulations *see* ritual impurity

- relics 12; vernacular understandings of 115, 119, 125, 201; *see also* saints
- research: on Orthodox Christianity and Gender: Dynamics of Tradition, Culture and Lived Practice 2–3, 14, 52, 116, 173; methodology 9, 10, 102–3, 115, 173; *see also* ethnography; feminist
- ritual impurity 28, 97, 117; Seto traditions concerning 100–1, 103–4, 110–11; *see also* churching
- Russia 47, 51, 58–9, 102, 124; *see also* female diaconate; monastic communities; post-Communist societies; post-Soviet space; the Russian Orthodox Church; the Russian Revolution; women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- the Russian Orthodox Church 13–14, 150–1; veneration of Chernobyl icons in 193, 195, 198–9, 200, 203; *see also* female diaconate; women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- the Russian Revolution 57, 65
- saints: gendered attributes of 29, 35–6, 123, 125; veneration of 11–12, 124–7, 140–1, 177–9; vernacular understandings of 115, 125; warrior saints 163, 199; *see also* icons; the Mother of God; relics
- same-sex unions 38–9; *see also* homosexuality; marriage
- Savitsky, Mikhail 196
- Seto people 98–9, 102; *see also* baptism; churching; the Mother of God; ritual impurity; sexuality
- sexuality 5, 27, 31, 37, 134; and ethnography 107, 110; in Seto culture 101, 107; *see also* homosexuality
- social ethics 5–6, 7, 181; in ecumenical theology 162–3; *see also* women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- social work 48–9, 51–2, 58, 175–6, 180–1; *see also* volunteer work
- the Soviet Union 58, 98, 194, 203; *see also* the Cold War; post-Soviet space; Russia
- spiritual elders 49, 141, 178, 180, 205
- theodicy 176, 193
- theological anthropology 5–6, 26, 88, 134; Protestant 6; *see also* femininity; gender complementarity; *imago dei*; masculinity; social ethics; *theosis*; Trinitarian theology
- Trinitarian theology 27, 29, 30–3, 34, 37, 163; *see also* Christ; the Holy Spirit
- Ukraine 150–2, 158, 164–5; *see also* civil society; the Maidan protests; nationalism and Orthodox Christianity; post-Soviet space; Ukrainian Orthodox Churches; war in Eastern Ukraine
- Ukrainian Orthodox Churches 150–1, 152–3, 163, 165
- the United States 117–18; *see also* women's roles in Orthodox Christianity
- vernacular religion 10, 102, 116, 124–5, 195, 202, 203–4; *see also* everyday religion; icons; lived religion; power relations; saints
- violence 149, 190, 199; against women 153, 155, 157, 175; churches' complicity in 159, 162; *see also* war in Eastern Ukraine
- the Virgin Mary *see* the Mother of God
- volunteer work 136, 138, 156, 180–1; *see also* social work
- Von Arx, Urs 87–8
- war in Eastern Ukraine 152–3, 155, 156
- women's ordination to the priesthood 5, 80, 87–9, 119–22; in the Catholic Church 80, 85; in Old Catholic Churches 84–5, 87–9; in Protestant Churches 5; *see also* female diaconate; priesthood; priests' wives
- women's roles in Orthodox Christianity 3, 5–6, 13, 87, 134; in Finland 69, 138, 141–2; in Russia 5–6, 47, 51–2, 54–5, 57–8, 124; in the Soviet Union 203; in the United States 117, 119–124; *see also* civic activism; female diaconate; social work; women's ordination to the priesthood