3 Women in the church

Conceptions of Orthodox theologians in early twentieth-century Russia

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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 over-riding 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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