7 Enshrining gender

Orthodox women and material culture in the United States

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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.¹ 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).² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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).⁵ 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).⁶ 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.⁷ 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 worshipping 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 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 reimaged 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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