



Book Reviews

Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola (eds): *Orthodox Christianity and Gender: Dynamics of Tradition, Culture and Lived Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020.

This interdisciplinary anthology on Orthodox Christianity and gender, edited by Finnish scholars Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola, makes an important contribution, as the topic of gender has not previously been widely studied in the Orthodox Christian context, a tradition within which feminist theology has had only a modest output. For both historical and political reasons Orthodox Christianity has generally rarely been the focus of research, which makes the undertaking even more important. As Kupari and Vuola remind the reader, previous studies of Eastern Orthodoxy were predominantly placed in the establishments of what was politically understood as the Eastern Bloc, which meant that the research could often be affected and limited by political ideologies. In Western establishments Orthodox Christianity has remained relatively unknown as a field of study. Additionally, the overall situation of gender-sensitive studies in the framework of religious studies is influenced by what the editors, following Ursula King, call ‘a double blindness’ – the blindness of gender studies to religion and the blindness of religious studies and theology to questions related to gender.

Gathering experts from Russia, Canada, Finland, Estonia, the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, and Ukraine, the anthology offers a myriad of ethnographic glimpses that facilitate the comprehension of the world of Orthodox Christianity from a gender-sensitive perspective. The chapters allow the reader to visit research fields in Finland, Russia, Estonia, the USA, Ukraine, and Greece. Two of the anthology’s contributions are clearly more theologically inclined, examining gender in the Orthodox theological tradition (Brian A. Butcher) and the question of gender in the Orthodox condemnation of women’s ordination (Peter-Ben Smit). Interdisciplinary accounts from the fields of theology, religious studies, history, art history, folklore studies, anthropology, and sociology aptly illustrate the complexity of Orthodox Christianity and the locally specific ways it is practised and lived. Observing the nuanced idea of religion-as-lived is probably the best if not only way to give a more detailed view of religious tradition, and this is a recurring perspective in the anthology.

The editors’ introduction to the volume reminds the reader that because women are excluded from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, their roles within the Orthodox tradition often remain institutionally limited, and they are most likely to be met in the margins of institutional religious life. Brian A. Butcher’s theological overview ‘Gender and Orthodox

theology: Vistas and vantage points' is an interesting way to enter into a gender-sensitive discussion. I was particularly intrigued by the pertinent thoughts presented at the beginning of this chapter, which stated that Orthodox Christianity sought 'to eschew the traditionalism while preserving the tradition' (page 25). I would claim that this is the core where many of the negotiations concerning gender within the Orthodox Christian tradition are placed.

Nadezhda Beliakova's historical chapter 'Women in the church: Conceptions of Orthodox theologians in early twentieth-century Russia' observes the developments in Russia, demonstrating women's roles in the church, and how politics and diverse group dynamics within and outside the church have greatly influenced what has happened to women's religious communities, and the place they have occupied within the Russian Orthodox tradition. The historical overview of Finland in 'Obedient artists and mediators: Women icon painters in the Finnish Orthodox Church from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century' by Katarina Husso discusses women's role within the Finnish Orthodox Church as icon painters and the struggles this has previously meant for them. It is also an appealing way to approach the question of gender and explain more concretely the moulding of the Orthodox tradition in recent decades. The narratives in these more historical chapters open the interesting horizon of the entire gender-sensitive negotiation

process and its historical roots. The chapters also led me to ponder the close connection between religion and politics, and the impact they constantly have on each other.

I also found Peter-Ben Smit's chapter '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' important. It is crucial that such theological discussions and debates are made available for wider audiences, as it would otherwise be very difficult to become aware of the nuances of the interpretation of the Orthodox tradition. It is significant that there have been favourable discussions about women's ordination, and in this case they have even had actual weight on the Old Catholic side, which formally allowed the ordination of women in 1998. A step in this direction was already taken by the Old Catholic Church of Germany in 1996. The Old Catholic Churches have separated from the Roman Catholic Church and united as the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches.

I had hoped to read more about women's roles in the field of ecclesiastic music, as it can often be very important. Some aspects are raised in the chapters that examine the situation in the US and Finland. Sarah Riccardi-Swartz's chapter 'Enshrining gender: Orthodox women and material culture in the United States' offers a rich ethnographic

account of women who are members of a rural Eastern Orthodox community, most of them converts. The chapter maps how women challenge male-dominated structures while remaining loyal to them verbally. The case study presented in the chapter "Tradition, gender, and empowerment: The Birth of Theotokos Society in Helsinki, Finland" by Pekka Metso, Nina Maskulin, and Teuvo Laitila very concretely outlines how gender-sensitivity can be transformed into ways of living in a liminal phase as a borderline community.

The volume also contains detailed reflections on the realities of ethnographic fieldwork. This is meritoriously discussed in the chapter 'How to ask embarrassing questions about women's religion: Menstruating Mother of God, ritual impurity, and field work among Seto women in Estonia and Russia' by Andreas Kalkun, who examines the challenges and opportunities of a male scholar in mapping women's religiosity. Additionally, this field study brought close the interviewees' concrete ways and choices of adapting and interpreting the Orthodox Christian tradition in their own cultural framework. I was also fascinated by the last part of the anthology 'Crises and Gender', which illustrates in multiple ways the roles religion can play in the contexts of conflict. The chapters show that religion is often a forum offering space for diverse negotiations. This means that, regardless of the apparently stiff framework, the religious

context is constantly transforming and transformed over time.

The repercussions of these negotiations might be both positive or negative gender-wise, as becomes clear in the chapter 'Shaping public Orthodoxy: Women's peace activism and the Orthodox Churches in the Ukrainian crises' by Heleen Zorgdrager. A visible transformation within gender roles in the religious context itself may arise, or women may become more visible and active in the religious life because of crises, or crises may even reinforce gender segregation. This can sometimes mean that women are scapegoated during crises and suffer because of this, as Eleni Sotiriou points out in 'On saints, prophets, philanthropists, and anticlericals: Orthodoxy, gender, and the crisis in Greece'. In 'Russian icons of Chernobyl as visual narratives about women at the center of nuclear disaster' Elena Romashko describes how local iconography ambiguously depicts women's roles in the disaster. In the icons associated with the disaster women can be made invisible and passive, or given more active and professional positions. Orthodox Christianity seemed to offer tools for both ways of approaching a conflict: battling and reconciling. I was impressed by the examples presented in the final three chapters, which demonstrate very concretely how gender roles are challenged and moulded during a crisis.

The recurrence of the discussion of gender complementarity through-

out the anthology is intriguing. As it colours the entire Orthodox Christian religious tradition, it is discussed in relation to priesthood, sexuality, religious practice, and social norms, for example. I could recognize several manners in which Orthodox Christianity comes close to Islamic ways of interpreting religious tradition and negotiating with it. I never cease to be amazed by how conflicts arise from the similarities and closeness of the deeply intertwined roots of the three religious traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Perhaps it is here, as with siblings in general, that being close or relatively similar is not always a factor that helps maintain peace, as the need and pressure to be different, separate, and independent grows.

The anthology's chapters combine perspectives on living both as a minority and a majority. I find this crucial to understanding the various societal positions in which Orthodox Christianity can find itself, and that can affect how it is practised and understood. The strong connection of the religious tradition with the surrounding local culture, society, and history is demonstrated absorbingly and meticulously during the journey through the Orthodox world the book offers.

Orthodox Christianity and Gender: Dynamics of Tradition, Culture and Lived Practice is compiled coherently, and its structure is logical and clear. However, more detailed investigations of Eastern European and Middle Eastern ethnographic contexts,

which would complete the image of the Orthodox Christian world, are lacking. I would also have liked to have read some final thoughts from the editors at the end of this felicitous ethnographic journey. As this field of research offers much to discover, I am sure this opportunity will present itself in the future.

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