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CONSTRUCTING THE PATRIARCHAL WOMAN: LITURGICAL CHALLENGES FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN GENDER EQUALITY

ASHLEY PURPURA

INTRODUCTION

An unmistakable marker of Eastern Orthodox Christianity is its patriarchal institutional and liturgical leadership. In the secular sense, *patriarchy* signifies that an exclusively male episcopacy heads the Church, and categorically excludes most women from holding equally authoritative positions of ecclesial administration.¹ Orthodox patriarchy and patriarchal aspects of Orthodox Christianity are not religiously exempt from evidencing the problematic characteristics of inequitable power and sex-based exclusion against which feminists struggle. All priests and hierarchs are male.² On the other hand, Orthodox Christianity is *patriarchal* in the historical theological sense, by which a tradition of “fathers of the church” in both spiritual and priestly ranks shape the ways Orthodox Christians formally acknowledge the theological and ecclesial boundaries of their religion.³ Patriarchy, in this understanding,

1. There are of course notable women who have exerted significant authority over the church (Byzantine empresses, female saints, influential abbesses, the Theotokos, etc.), but in general women lack access to the more normalized institutional positions of ecclesial authority available to many men. Male patriarchs serve as the heads of Orthodox churches, see for example, “Hierarchy of the Throne,” The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, 2018, <https://www.patriarchate.org/hierarchy-of-the-throne>.

2. I refer here specifically to the ministerial priesthood.

3. Although there are certainly saintly spiritual mothers also in this tradition, the “fathers” are more centrally celebrated as determining the shape of the Church through conciliar participation and theological writings. See for example, the numerous references to the “fathers” in the “Synodikon of Orthodoxy” in ways that indicate boundaries of the Church. For contemporary emphasis on Orthodoxy as a specifically “patristic” tradition see Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Vol. 1 of *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972).

intimates the very core of Orthodox tradition.⁴ Orthodoxy is patriarchal. Orthodox Christianity manifests patriarchy both as a historical fact—that women lacked (and continue to lack) the access and authority to influence the religion in the same way men did—and as a religious ideal about a continuous lineage of divinely inspired and often priestly “fathers.”⁵ In contrast to the ways in which ecclesial leaders and secular critics might want to hold up either of these interpretations of patriarchy as mutually exclusive to the other, a more complex dynamic is likely at play.

Despite theological claims about the spiritual equality of men and women, and the ways some Orthodox figures and documents historically elevated the status of women in comparison to their surrounding socio-cultural environs, a distinct patriarchal lineage and dearth of self-produced female textual representation marks Orthodoxy Christianity.⁶ An exclusively male ministerial priesthood continues to lead present-day Orthodox rituals, and an exclusively male hierarchical leadership continues to articulate for Orthodox Christians what constitutes “tradition” and the perimeters of Orthodoxy.⁷ Only men sign conciliar statements, write canons, and officiate the liturgical sacraments. The patriarchally determined retrospective “tradition” of Orthodox Christianity draws upon many historical Byzantine sources that primarily present male concerns and ideals about women rather than actual women or women’s interpretations of their own experiences.⁸ Consequently, the traditional narrative and ecclesially invoked sources of Orthodoxy leave little room for “real” women.

This patriarchal determination of women similarly persists in the mostly de-historicized and authoritative liturgical context. Even though liturgy is a powerful means

4. Like other Christian branches, Orthodox Christianity draws upon the scriptural revelation of God specifically as “Father,” see Matthew 6:9 and the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed.

5. The *apolytikion* for the Holy Fathers reflects the patristic influence on the Orthodox Church. For a translation, see *The Pentecostarion*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2014), 206.

6. “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World,” Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, June 26, 2016, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>; Judith Herrin, “In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach,” in *Unrivaled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 12–37; Peter Hatlie, “Images of Motherhood and Self in Byzantine Literature,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 63 (2009): 41–58; Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 1–14.

7. See the brief overviews of “tradition” and its adaptation in John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness to the Contemporary World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978); John McGuckin, “The Orthodox Sense of Tradition,” in *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 90–120; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 61, no. 2 (2009): 136–64.

8. For some discussion see Stavroula Constantinou, “Male Constructions of Female Identities: Authority and Power in the Byzantine Greek Lives of Monastic Foundresses,” *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* (2014): 43–62; Claudia Rapp, “Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and Their Audience,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996): 313–44; and Elizabeth Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 1–31.

of forming and affirming Orthodox identities, the distinct ways in which historically vested and ideologically charged patriarchy functions for women within contemporary Orthodox Christian rituals remain without significant critical discourse.⁹ Despite some limited reflective engagement with feminist critiques and aspects of the liturgical tradition that pose challenges for realizing the equality of Orthodox women, the ways in which presuming patriarchy as a norm functions to modulate the sanctified liturgical setting and women's experience of it remains substantively unexamined.¹⁰ Accordingly, I suggest contemporary Orthodox ritual actions, words, and images privilege the male in a way that appears as a sanctified domination and determination of women's religious selves. This is not to say that women do not participate in perpetuating this liturgical androcentric production and legitimizing of it, or that what textually and liturgically appears as an interpretation or image of "woman" or a woman's experience has any correlation to women's own interpretation and perceptions of themselves as Orthodox.¹¹ Additionally, this thesis does not negate that women can still find very meaningful ways to participate in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church, and that "men" are also patriarchally determined. Rather, in what follows I examine three domains in which women participate, and encounter an intersectional identity that they are at a disadvantage to change authoritatively and are disenfranchised ritually from autonomously articulating. First, I discuss gender differences in accessing physical liturgical space (access to the altar and women entering the church after the birth of a child) and the ways gender may shape physical liturgically oriented actions (such as accessing the altar or kissing the hand of a priest). Next, I draw attention to instances of gender-based differences in the liturgical voice to analyze the words in prayers that specifically address women (primarily in the marriage rite and prayers after birth). Lastly, I examine liturgical

9. For an insightful historical perspective see Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

10. See for examples, Leonie Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*; Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Steven Bigham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999); Pauline Kollontai "Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 15 (2000): 165–79. Kollontai summarizes that "In Orthodox teaching, men and women are equal before God and they share a common humanity. This would appear to be the perfect basis on which to promote the fullest participation of women in all areas of the ministry, but the difficulty arises because of the Orthodox belief in the concept of a distinction or otherness between man and woman. This has assisted in controlling and limiting the role of women in the Church. It has provided the opening for social and cultural ideas, which promote a view of the inferiority of women, to become embedded within the teaching, decision-making, and practice of the Orthodox Church" (176).

11. "Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century," Pew Research Center, November 8, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>. This report claims "Orthodox women are as likely as men to oppose the ordination of women to the priesthood" and "women are about as likely as men to agree that they have a social responsibility to bear children. They also are as likely as men to agree that a traditional marriage, where women are primarily in charge of household tasks while men earn money, is ideal" (38, 60).

images (both iconographic and hymnographic) of prominent women, such as the Theotokos. In short, liturgical rites, actions, words, and images present the male and often priestly construction of women and women's experiences in a way that appears sanctified. While I invite others to consider the historical and ideological reasons that may explain the patriarchal dominance of women's liturgical experience and the ways this dominance causally affects Orthodox participants, in what follows I limit myself to analyzing patriarchy's presence in liturgically related forms and questioning the gendered ideals it promulgates.

METHODOLOGICAL ASIDE

Before turning to the analysis that follows, I note three methodological qualifications regarding my assessment of the liturgical construction of "women" as primarily a patriarchal concept. First, my argument predominantly focuses on the patriarchal presentation of/to women in the liturgical context rather than women's responses to this presentation (although at points I do rhetorically reflect on how certain images or rites may be sites of discontinuity with other beliefs). Therefore, what I present is only one piece in understanding the many ways gender interacts with and is shaped by religious contexts, and it remains to be seen to what degree the presentation of "women" I analyze in fact shapes the experiences or subjectivity of real women.¹² Women are not a monolithic "thing" for which others can just assume to speak (precisely one of the liturgical issues I address!). With the premise shared by both Orthodox and feminists that women are human beings, there are likely wide varieties of ways and varying degrees of agency that women draw upon to react to the liturgical context I present. Presumably, some women do not feel confronted or challenged by the patriarchy around them, rather they may feel reassured that this stability and order validates how they see themselves. For various reasons some have chosen to ignore (or were never aware of) instances where gender has distinctly influenced their religious perceptions and participation. Others may have found ways to interpret or contextualize the differences they see drawn along religiously gendered lines in liberating and satisfying ways, or at the very least rendered these aspects of their religious experiences as minor points that can be overlooked amid a broader theological perspective.¹³ While I suggest reflecting on such diversity enriches our understanding of the ways liturgical authority is felt and shaped, I go only as far as to present ways that the patriarchal liturgical elements, structures,

12. On the varieties of "popular" liturgical participation and interpretation see Robert Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2006).

13. For related discussion on women's interpretation of liturgy in Catholicism, see Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

and interactions could pose challenges to contemporary understandings of gender equality and women's perceptions of themselves. Nevertheless, I posit that the fact that the church leadership and its theological tradition are dominated by authoritative male voices—no matter how this is theologically justified or explained—perpetuates the often subtle notion that the male is somehow automatically more authoritative (and in many cases sanctified) in church, even when speaking to and about women and women's experiences.

Secondly, I acknowledge that although theologically liturgy may be highly influential, certainly all Orthodox Christians have complex multifaceted identities that make them unique and shape the particularities of their religious experiences—and these may not include any reflection on or participation in the sources I indicate. Context-dependent aspects of how one is constituted as Orthodox —(class, ethnicity, conversion or cradle-born, education, race, marital or monastic status, etc.) either inscribe privilege or disadvantage on one's experience of being Orthodox, and these factors are worthy of attention to avoid essentialization. Additionally, patriarchal privilege no doubt also affects men and their perceptions of women, as well as contributing to a broader and subtle way of understanding the Orthodox particularities governing gender performance in the liturgical setting. However, for the sake of brevity I restrict my discussion to the instances where the liturgical setting confronts and constructs women specifically. My selection of particular rites, actions, and images is not intended to suggest that women's liturgical experiences are limited to these sources—certainly there are other gender non-specific liturgical experiences that may be far more influential (baptism and communion for example)—rather, these sources specifically address perceptions about women's identities and experiences expressed by an authoritative male source. Admittedly, there are unique rites and distinctly gender-transcending characteristics pertaining to female monastics, but these deserve more space than can be offered in what follows.

Third, as a historical and geographic entry point to reconsidering the ways religious structures, ideals, and practices inflect, perpetuate, or even reject discrimination, I limit the scope of this article's considerations to critically analyzing contemporary patriarchal (both priestly and male) liturgical examples of constructing "woman" as a category of religious identity primarily within a twenty-first century North American Orthodox context. As Orthodox Christianity is a globally diverse and historically complex religion, numerous varieties of liturgical prescriptions and practices exist amid a range of culturally diverse gender constructs. The liturgical aspects that I discuss have evolved over centuries, and often vary from one particular priest and parish to another. Despite these variants and the challenges of naming original liturgical sources and forms, I focus my analysis on rites, practices, images, and prayers that are commonly known, have widespread practice, and continue to be prescribed in hierarchically approved sources. I draw upon the particularities of the North American liturgical and cultural environments, specifically Orthodox jurisdictions that emphasize a Byzantine heritage as reflected in service texts used by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America and the Orthodox Church in America. However,

in the often overlapping, jurisdictionally inconsistent, and “pan-Orthodox” United States congregational context, I imagine my argument’s sources and relevance are not limited to only these two jurisdictions. Moreover, in some cases, the breadth of variation for a particular prayer or practice reflects attempts to negotiate what the priest or parishioners perceive as dissonance between what is ritually prescribed or traditionally practiced, and broader values of equality.¹⁴ There also may be a disconnect between the ways clergy and laity are textually or hierarchically instructed to perform a rite, and the ways it actually occurs, but often the process to standardize or formalize such adaptation is slow or too contentious to occur. Regardless of all these limitations, I maintain the liturgical context(s) of Orthodox Christianity still includes a sufficient common frame of reference to explore the ways rituals reinforce and exhibit androcentric preferences, even if differently across multiple settings.

CHALLENGES OF LITURGICAL POWER AND POSITIONS

Orthodox theologians from Byzantium to modernity regard liturgy and various more pastoral and sacramental services as a meeting of heaven and earth.¹⁵ According to Byzantine mystagogical theologians, it is through the participation in the liturgical life of the Church that one participates in the life of Christ.¹⁶ Orthodox canons indicate that liturgical participation is constitutive of Orthodoxy, and patristic authors claim episcopal presence at the liturgy is iconic of the presence of God.¹⁷ In addition to the prominence that Byzantine and contemporary Orthodox theologians place on the liturgical setting, and the actions that take place therein (as realizations or

14. See for example the variations and modifications of rites discussed in Matthew Streett, “What to Do with the Baby? The Historical Development of the Rite of Churching,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 56.1 (2012): 51–71; Vassa Larin, “What Is ‘Ritual Impurity’ and Why?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008): 275–92.

15. For a historical and modern example, see Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985) and Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966).

16. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Maximus, *Mystagogy in Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. De Catanzaro (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974); Niketas Stethatos, *Opuscles et Lettres*, ed. J. Darrouzès, *Sources Chrétiennes* 81 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961). See also the discussion in Alexander Golitzin, *Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita: With Special Reference to Its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessalonike: Patriarchikon Idroma Paterikon Meleton, 1994), 167–233.

17. Canon 80 of the Council in Trullo in Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church: The Compilation of the Holy Canons*, trans. D. Cummings (Brookfield, MA: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957), 373; Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

reflections of the essence of Orthodoxy), scholars of Byzantine Christianity concur that the liturgical context and practices of historical Orthodoxy are powerful points of subject building.¹⁸ Similarly, contemporary Orthodox liturgical scholars generally agree that there should be continuity between the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, so that liturgical rites should reflect communal belief.¹⁹ Therefore, the liturgical setting and the actions that take place therein carry significant potential to shape Orthodox religious identities and reflect central religious values, but the liturgical rites, actors, voices, and images construct these identities in distinctly gendered ways. If the liturgical context and actions communicate “heaven on earth,” then why does this communication of “heaven” include some aspects that could be taken as exclusionary, inauthentic, theologically inconsistent, or degrading to women? It is not that the liturgically built subjects must conform to cisgender norms (there are certainly liturgical moments that transgress or transcend a traditional gender binary), but that men historically and contemporarily control the sources for building and legitimizing all liturgical participants (male and female) as Orthodox.²⁰

Despite the Orthodox belief that the liturgical actions and settings communicate and allow for participation in a heavenly reality, patriarchy pervasively dominates ritual centric gender dynamics, constructions, and performances. The authoritative-ness of the liturgical context due to its theological interpretation as communicative of a heavenly reality appears to sanctify this patriarchal imbalance of power. As women are not admitted to the higher priestly ranks and have no authority to articulate the consensus of the Church through conciliar statements, women within this tradition either accept the patriarchally determined liturgical symbols, language, and rites, or risk exclusion from Orthodoxy. To be an Orthodox liturgical participant is

18. Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy of the Orthodox Church*, 116; Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Robert Taft, “What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses,” *Worship* 66 (1992): 194–211; Christina Gschwandtner, “Mimesis or Metamorphosis? Eastern Orthodox Liturgical Practice and Its Philosophical Background,” *Religions* 8:92 (2017): 1–22. Gschwandtner explains, “Liturgy tries to unify soul and body, heaven and earth, in a particular way. Liturgy seeks to transform the human person and the cosmos in such a manner that they come to image and match each other (1). Others have questioned, however, to what extent Byzantines actually heard and participated in the liturgy, see for example, Kallistos Ware, “The Meaning of the Divine Liturgy for the Byzantine Worshipper,” in *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. Rosemary Morris (Birmingham, UK: Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman, and Modern Greek Studies, 1990), 7–28.

19. See for example, Alexander Schmemmann, *Theology and Liturgical Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 175; Vlad Naumescu, “Becoming Orthodox: The Mystery and Mastery of a Christian Tradition,” in *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality*, ed. Sonja Luehrmann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 33; Alexander Schmemmann, *Eucharist and Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988); Alexander Rentel, “Where Is God in the Liturgy?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 59 (2015): 213–33.

20. Moments of transgressing and transcending the gender binary include, for example, the male singing of the Hymn of Kassiani and the liturgical singing of the Cherubic Hymn (where both men and women identify with angelic functions). For related discussion and an interpretation of gender in liturgy “chiasmically” see Timothy Patitsas, “The Marriage of Priests: Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Gender,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 51.1 (2007): 71–105.

to participate in a patriarchal system. Due to the reverence with which many Orthodox encounter ritual sources and the ways in which theologians and hagiographers interpret them, any public feminist critique of these sources is contentious and often tantamount to rejecting the heritage, authority, and apostolicity of Orthodoxy as a whole.²¹ As the exclusively male ordained priesthood and the textual sources of “tradition” attest, many men have more control than women within the liturgical services and settings that men also historically had more privilege in creating. In contrast, most women have less overt authority to shape directly the ritual affirmation and expression of their identities and experiences in a domain in which participation is regarded as requisite for being Orthodox. Consequently, the clerical patriarchy and liturgized male ideals about women confine women’s participation in the Church to traditional roles, and reinforce patriarchal teachings and beliefs authoritatively through ritual actions and environments.

Nearly everything in the liturgical context has the potential to carry theological significance because Orthodox generally believe the actions and images in this setting are divinely participative.²² Consequently, ritually prescribed positional actions between hierarchy and laity have an additional religiously gendered weight for women, based on social inequality and ecclesial vocational difference.²³ There is an additional layer of intersectionality by which women are possibly marginalized from ecclesial authority in terms of both gender and priesthood. Men have the potential (and of course, this is very qualified) to explore vocations to the priesthood, whereas the ordained priesthood excludes women categorically.²⁴ Moreover, aside from the very rare instances of female deacons and emergency baptism, women are generally physically dependent upon a man in the form of the deacon or priest to offer them the sacraments. While indeed many laymen are vulnerably dependent on the priesthood, and must adapt themselves in order to be sacramentally welcome as Orthodox (and this may be multiplied by additional ways in which the individual man may not conform to or fit the expectations of masculinity expected and performed by the priestly ranks), women’s religious dependence is determined involuntarily merely by having female bodies. Although additional circumstances may subjugate lay and clerical individuals to particular roles or behaviors, certain prayers and rites liturgically script women’s dependence on and subordination to male (not just

21. For a brief discussion of feminism and Orthodoxy (specifically addressing that feminism is often characterized as heresy) see Nonna Harrison, “Orthodoxy and Feminism,” *St. Nina Quarterly* 2: 2 (1998), <http://www.stnina.org/node/262>.

22. Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, I.6, trans. J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 34, for example explains that even actions dictated by necessity can be revelatory in the liturgical context.

23. For theological reflection on liturgical positions in relation to developing a theology of gender see Timothy Patitsas, “The Marriage of Priests: Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Gender,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 51(2007): 71–105.

24. On impediments to the priesthood, see Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 106, 138–39.

priestly) authority.²⁵ Gender, as a “primary way of signifying power,” presents liturgical participants with distinctions in the levels of autonomy, physical access, and agency available to them based on their sex and performance of seemingly sacralized gender constructs.²⁶ Accordingly, rather than only iconically and sacramentally communicating heaven on earth, the liturgical rites and interactions also are potentially contested sites of negotiating power that institutionally place, and require women to perform their religious identities from a position of disadvantage.²⁷

Generally, women’s liturgical experience includes the same ritual images, words, actions, and symbols that men encounter, but the theological legibility of these liturgical forms, and what they signify, may be ostensibly different. Gender restricts women’s access to certain liturgical spaces and their authority to influence liturgical forms. Moreover, the liturgical context presents gendered images, actions, and words that may jeopardize the liturgical domain’s theological signification for women. The fact that liturgical positions of authority and levels of gendered subjectivity cannot be separated from socio-cultural and historical constructions of gender further complicates considerations of the intersections of gender and ritual performance. For example, the act of a woman bowing before a priest and kissing his hand in reverence carries with it complex gender and power dynamics. Despite this common act’s theological justification and ritual interpretation, in its physical and temporal realities this action encourages women to adopt a position of humble submission and devotion, not just to a priest, but also to a man, to whom the ecclesial institution, history, liturgy, secular society, and culture already grant superior sex-based privilege.²⁸ The church

25. For more on intersectionality see Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color (Women of Color at the Center: Selections from the Third National Conference on Women of Color and the Law),” *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241–99.

26. Joan Scott, “Unanswered Questions,” *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 1423; see the related observations from Catholicism in Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 66, 160.

27. Aad De Jong, “Liturgical Action from a Language Perspective,” in *Discourse in Ritual Studies*, ed. J. B. Schilderman (Boston: Brill, 2007), 113–17. Jong observes that ritual action is “a performance of intentions” and that “in liturgy the expressive form must accord optimally with the contents the participants want to express. To put it radically, there can be no expressive form without content, and liturgy has no content if it is not expressed in some physical form.” The physical position of ritual participants, therefore, is expressive of communal ideals.

28. For an example of Byzantine ritual justification for kissing a priest’s hand, Cabasilas, *Commentary*, I.6 (Hussey, 119) mentions the dismissal at liturgy the faithful receive the blessed bread “kissing the hand which has so recently touched the all-holy Body.” Contemporary theological interpretations of kissing a priest’s hand vary and can be found in abundance in North American sources directed at converts and/or regarding church etiquette. In general, these rely on the claim that the priest is in some respects to be regarded as an icon of Christ, and that the office of the priesthood is to be respected especially when receiving a blessing. See, for example, the mention of kissing the priest’s hand in David Barr, “Church Etiquette or Some Things You Should Know While in Church,” Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, <http://ww1.antiochian.org/christianeducation/etiquette> (accessed 29 September, 2018). See the brief critique offered on this topic in Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*, 63.

and secular society accord men possibilities, affirmations, autonomy, authority, and agency in generally more superior levels than it does women, so that even laymen participating in these same actions likely experience them in more privileged ways in comparison to most women.²⁹ Women have their frequent performance of social subordination scripted into a sacred context. While priestly men may bow before each other in recognition of hierarchy, this subordination is not a sanctification of other secular modes of gender-based marginality. Notably, within the script of the liturgy, the priest images both Christ and the leader of the people and as such, he also bows before the laity, but he remains as the minister of the service and controls the access to the sacraments.³⁰ Women bow from a position of institutionalized subordination, in contrast to the priest's bow from a position of authoritative leadership, and the many laymen who bow from positions of gendered social advantage.³¹ Ecclesial structures that maintain women solely in lower hierarchic ranks and that prescribe their subordination runs the risk of restricting women's reverential mobility—it reduces the heights from which women may humble themselves, and constricts the autonomy that produces this act as a voluntary expression of spiritual humility. Gender mediates the degree of autonomy, free volition, and the legibility of what is signified by bowing before or reverencing the hand of a priest. Certainly, women as well as men may not respect the priest whose hand they perfunctorily kiss, they may do so reverentially without thought for the priest himself—viewing him only as icon of Christ, or they may not feel any resonating inflection of performing inequitable social gender constructs in a sacred setting. There is a range of ways in which Orthodox participants might interpret and interiorly mediate this action. Nevertheless, the exchange is predicated on presenting a hierarchically lower congregant in a physically subordinate position to a male priest in a position of power (at the very least in that he controls the sacraments)—a position from which women are denied access based on sex.

Female spiritual mobility in the liturgical sphere is not just distinct in terms of symbolic affects, but also in terms of physical access to and positions within the liturgical space. Orthodox Christianity from its patristic and Byzantine tradition includes sources and practice of liturgical order, a physical ordering of the bodies in

29. Other compounding factors of intersectionality including dis/ability, ethnicity, race, etc., need similar evaluation but are beyond the scope of this article. For an example of lay reflection at the popular level on how this rite may be complex for some American converts based on racial differences see, "Kiss the Who's What," *Desert Fathers Dispatch: The Journal of the Virginia Chapter of the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black*, January 16, 2014, <http://desertfathersdispatch.org/2014/01/16/kiss-the-whos-what/>.

30. See for example the bowing that takes place before the "Great Entrance" in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy (of both St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom). The iconicity of the priest liturgically is described along with the priest as a teacher and leader of the congregation, for example, in Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 64–69, 88–93; and Symeon of Thessalonika, *The Liturgical Commentaries*, trans. Steven Hawkes-Teeple (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011), 97; Robert Taft, *The Great Entrance*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 200 (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Orientale, 2004), 194ff.

31. For a study on male privilege and male intersectionality see Nancy Dowd, *The Man Question: Male Subordination and Privilege* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

the liturgical space that privileges the male. Some contemporary parishes and monasteries maintain sex-based segregation of male and female bodies during worship.³² With more widespread contemporary American acceptance, however, are the traditional beliefs and practices that restrict women physically from the altar space (frequently linked to blood taboos of ritual purity) and grant a more general admission of men to the altar.³³ Although the altar is restricted to those who have a blessing to be there for a specific function, the predominating parish practice of only having male acolytes, deacons, and priests in the altar suggests that access to the altar, although perhaps not determined by, is largely dependent on one's sex.³⁴

One prominent example of male mediation of female physical access to the liturgical space is the rite of "churching" related to the birth of a new child. Although in practice and history this rite and the prayers associated with it are somewhat ambiguous in form and meaning, the range of ways priests interpret and practice this rite largely depends on perceptions of gender equality and the need to negotiate the female body within sacred spaces.³⁵ A male priest publically prays for the mother on the fortieth day after childbirth (at least following the Constantinopolitan tradition), "as you (God) have rescued your female servant so-and-so by your will, purify her from every sin and every filth, while she approaches your holy church, so that she is deemed worthy to partake of your holy sacraments."³⁶ Despite the public rejection of

32. For a historical example, see *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2009); Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When—and Why?" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 27–87; and for a contemporary example of ordering and separation see St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, "Guide for Pilgrims," March 1, 2018, <https://www.stanthony-monastery.org/visitorpilgrimguide.php>.

33. Refer to Canons 69 from the Council of Trullo and 44 of Laodicea, in Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 372, 569; Patrick Viscuso, "Menstruation: A Problem in Late Byzantine Canon Law," *Études Byzantines/Byzantine Studies* 4 (1999): 116–25. See also Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium," Kathryn Wehr, "Understanding *Ritual Purity* and Sin in the Church of Women: From Ontological to Pedagogical to Eschatological," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55.1 (2011): 85–105.

34. For a contemporary example of restricting altar access, see number 15 in "Guidelines for Clergy Compiled under the Guidance of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America," 1998, <https://oca.org/PDF/official/clergyguidelines.pdf>.

35. Matthew Streett, "What to Do with the Baby? The Historical Development of the Rite of Churching," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 56:1 (2012): 51–71, 52. Streett explains that the "chief problem churching presents is that the vast majority of Orthodox Christians (including clergy) do not know how radically the form and theology of the rite have changed over time" (52).

36. Miguel Arranz, "Preghiere parapenitenziali di purificazione e di liberazione nella tradizione bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 49 (1995): 445–47, trans. Erini Afentoulidou; "Gendering the Baby in Byzantine Prayers on Child-Bed," Paper presented at the XVII International Conference on Patristic Studies (Oxford, 10–14 August 2015), 5. Afentoulidou translates "παντός ῥύπου" as "every filth," and although most contemporary English forms of this prayer omit such a blatantly negative rendering, implications of problematic impurity remain. See, for example, "Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day after Childbirth," *The Service Book of the Holy Orthodoxy—Catholic Apostolic Church*, trans. Isabel Florence Hapgood (Englewood, NJ: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 1975), 268–70; "Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth," *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), 10–15.

historical understandings of ritual impurity by several Orthodox jurisdictions, the language and actions of this rite continue to convey in a public, authoritative, and sanctified way that postpartum women need male mediation (and therefore permission) due to their problematic physical state in order to enter into sacred space and participate in certain sacraments.³⁷ Additionally, in terms of physical practice, postpartum women cannot enter the church or at the very least approach the chalice without first admission through this rite by the male priest. In conjunction with the churching of the mother, there is also the admittance of the new child. Some priests differentiate their treatment of the child based on sex. Often infant girls are not brought into the altar in the same way male infants are (in instances where this is even the practice), a distinction that has been made at least since the thirteenth century.³⁸ Drawing such a sex-based division among infants suggests even before menarche (and the associated blood taboo), there exists for many priests and parishes a theologically charged yet unclear gender-based distinction.³⁹ The churching rite is just one example of reinforcing ritually (in both overt and subtle ways) the normativity and superiority (even if just in rank and access, not value) of men in the liturgical praxis, the notion of fundamental “otherness” of women, and at times “problematic” status of the female body in sacred space. This example of androcentrically determining women’s physical situation in the church is ritual synecdoche for women’s participation in androcentric norms and spaces.⁴⁰

CHALLENGES IN LITURGICAL VOICE

In addition to the instances where male concerns and prescriptions regarding the female body may dominate the physical access and actions of women in the liturgical context, the liturgical voice also often privileges patriarchal expression. By “liturgical

37. See the discussion of the historical separation of women in Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium,” 75; and the discussion of contemporary discontinuity in Vassa Larin, “What Is ‘Ritual Im/Purity’ and Why?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008): 3–4; Anca-Lucia Manolache, “Female Sexuality and Bodily Functions according to the Romanian Orthodox Tradition,” Comments for the WCC Study Project (WCC Archives, 1986).

38. Miguel Arranz, “Les Sacrements de l’ancien Euchologe constantinopolitain,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 49:2 (1983): 295, n. 11.

39. See Streett, “What to Do with the Baby?” 66. Streett observes regarding the practice of bringing the infant child into the altar during the churching “some Orthodox jurisdictions maintain the gender distinction (meaning they only bring male infants to the altar), some have formally eliminated it, and some still struggle with the issue.”

40. Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium,” 80–82, 87. Taft also suggests it is not merely a pre-occupation with the seconding of women but a priority of order (taxis), decorum, and security, but ultimately concludes, “the reasons for segregating women in church or forbidding their attendance at night services can be considered a combination of church order, decorum, gender discrimination, and paternalistic protection.”

voice,” I refer both to the words the liturgical participants sing and to the physical vocalization of these words. Although in certain historical, festal, and cultural moments Orthodox liturgical practice emphasizes women’s contributions towards hymn composition and singing, the normative featuring of female liturgical voices is historically inconsistent.⁴¹ Despite the undeniable contemporary female presence in many American parish choirs, the male liturgical voice appears historically, in the Greek Byzantine tradition, more widely as an unquestioned norm. There has never been a debate on whether men by virtue of their gender can chant or read publicly, only canonical concerns to ensure that they refrain from sounding too womanly.⁴² Additionally, by relying on traditional sources, some Orthodox maintain that women from apostolic times to the present should be silent in the liturgical assembly.⁴³ It is hard to imagine that such historical ambivalence towards women’s voices does not shape contemporary perceptions and preferences regarding those who chant and lead hymns.⁴⁴

Liturgical hymns and prayers predominantly represent a male perspective—even those specific to the lives of women—speaking to, for, and about women’s experiences and roles. Specifically, rites related to childbearing and marriage address women and women’s experiences through the voice of the male priest reciting prayers that were likely written (at least until very recently) by men, or conform to androcentric norms and expectations enough for their acceptance in the liturgical domain.⁴⁵ Such prayers therefore primarily address male concerns, present them through ritual authority as Orthodox concerns, subtly reinforcing the notion that women are subordinate to

41. See the summary of women’s singing in C. B. Tkacz, “Singing Women’s Words as Sacramental Mimesis,” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 70 (2003): 275–328; Kurt Sherry, *Kassia the Nun in Context* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013); S. A. Harvey, “Bearing Witness: New Testament Women in Early Byzantine Hymnography,” in *The New Testament in Byzantium*, ed. Derek Krueger and Robert Nelson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Publications, 2016), 205–19; S. A. Harvey, “Performance as Exegesis: Women’s Liturgical Choirs in Syriac Tradition,” *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Acts of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy*, ed. Basilius Groen, Stephanos Alexopoulos, and Steven Hawkes-Teeples, *Eastern Christian Studies* 12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 47–64; Georgi Parpulov, *Toward a History of Byzantine Psalters ca. 850–1350 AD* (Plovdiv, 2014), 117–21. Parpulov notes that feminine endings were added to certain hymns and prayers intended for wealthy women patrons who commissioned psalters; however, this gender “voice” adjustment appears to be for private prayers rather than public congregational reading.

42. Canon 75 from the Council of Trullo in Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 379–80.

43. 1 Corinthians 14:34; Canon 70 from the Council in Trullo in Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 373–75. For further discussion on the place of women in the canonical tradition, see also Patrick Viscuso, “Theodore Balsamon’s Canonical Images of Women,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (2005): 317–26, 319.

44. For example, contemporary practices among Greek and Antiochian Orthodox parishes regarding who may stand at the chanting-stand may vary widely, but still may reflect gendered exclusions and privileges.

45. Such prayers in various forms include rites: after giving birth, the churching of the mother, after a miscarriage, and mid-term prayers between birth and churching (not common in contemporary use), and the betrothal and crowning (marriage).

men, and exist as objects in relation to men.⁴⁶ Although these ritual sources and actions may shape many women's spirituality and religiosity, and address traditional roles and rites specific to women, critique or revision of them by women is subject to approval by authoritative men. Accordingly, inasmuch as women continue to participate in marriage and childbearing, and desire to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, they participate in and subsequently perpetuate (even if inadvertently) male-determined interpretations and perspectives about themselves.⁴⁷ Participation in such rites shapes women as Orthodox, and necessarily patriarchally produced subjects.⁴⁸ There is significant historical and contemporary development and local variation in these rites, but their persistent legacies and dominating forms reveal seemingly sanctified male productions of women with few exceptions.

The sacrament of matrimony, for example, prays publicly for women's assimilation to the traditional forms of wife and mother.⁴⁹ Drawing on rich allusions to biblical women and sainted couples, this combination of betrothal and crowning services reinforces a subordinate positionality of women in relation to men that women have very little voice in determining. Overall, the prayers surrounding marriage emphasize mutual submission between husband and wife, but also indicate with scriptural basis distinct roles in marriage and in spiritual pursuits for men and women.⁵⁰ Despite the equality suggested by the emphasis on mutual submission between husband and wife, the marriage prayers address the husband first in every action and

46. See the related discussion in Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*, 146–54; Vassa Larin, "What Is 'Ritual Im/Purity' and Why?"

47. Cf. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 168.

48. A brief description of one woman's disconnect with her marriage service and her analysis of gender and feminism in the Bulgarian and Russian Orthodox context can be found in *Feminism and Religion*; see Maria Stoyadinova, "Feminism in the Eastern Orthodox Church," in *Feminism and Religion: How Faiths View Women and Their Rights*, ed. Michele Paludi and Ellen Harold (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 144–45; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2. Butler's observation that "It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" could be applied in this instance to the Orthodox Church.

49. Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*, 149–56. For a brief overview of the development of the Byzantine marriage rite see John Meyendorff, "Christian Marriage in Byzantium: The Canonical and Liturgical Tradition," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 99–107.

50. Jurisdictional variations of the Orthodox marriage service exist, as well as adaptations for the rite of second marriage. I will focus my discussion to the more common first-marriage rite (including the betrothal and crowning services) and refer to the ritual as it is found in Greek Orthodox usage. See "The Service of Betrothal—Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, March 1, 2018, <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-service-of-betrothal?inheritRedirect=true> and "The Service of Marriage—Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church" Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, March 1, 2018, <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-service-of-the-crowning-the-service-of-marriage>. For a brief overview of the development of the Orthodox marriage service and additional versions of the rites see John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

attribute to him the first rank in the domestic hierarchy.⁵¹ For example, one of the crowning prayers inscribes sacramentally the scripturally based order and positionality of the sexes. This prayer reads, “And now, O Master, Lord our God, send down Your heavenly Grace upon these Your servants, (Name) and (Name), and grant unto this woman to be in all things subject unto the man, and to this Your servant to be at the head of the woman that they live according to Your Will.” Translating the roles from Ephesians 5:22–23 into an invocation sanctifies women’s subordination and male headship without additional qualification, explanation, or interpretation that might highlight the divinely imitative and kenotic nature of marriage as explained by other Orthodox authors.⁵² Instead, this prayer reinforces a gender dynamic that could seem divinely instituted as based on sex rather than determined and moderated by one’s ability to act Christ-like. Similarly, a closing prayer of the betrothal service reads, “You, O Lord, from the beginning have created male and female, and by You is a woman joined to a man for assistance and for the continuation of the human race.”⁵³ This scripturally based language, performed as part of a ritual speech act, sublimates women’s marital and maternal roles as divinely instituted vocations.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, such verbal positioning reinforces the view that the woman is the unstable and transferrable part of the relationship—the one who can be “joined” to another, not the primary subject to whom another is “joined,” nor an equal subject who voluntarily “joins” and is “joined” by another.⁵⁵ This seemingly minor semantic point reveals the androcentric prioritization at play in the sacraments in a way that differentiates the subjectivity of the groom and the bride.

Other instances convey similar gender distinctions that challenge equability between Orthodox men and women. At the end of the crowning service, for example, the presiding priest tells the groom to “Go your way in peace, performing in righteousness the commandments of God,” while the bride is told to be “glad in your husband, keeping the paths of the Law, for so God is well pleased.” The prayer calls man to act in divine righteousness without reference to his wife (although often, this is inferred), while his wife is first told to be glad in her husband. A wife’s happiness is dependent or at least in reference to and attached to her husband, and through him to God. Consequently, this marital hierarchy denies the woman the same degree of agency her husband is given, and situates the husband as the mediator of the family

51. *Ibid.*, “The Service of Betrothal” and “The Service of Marriage.”

52. *Ibid.*, “The Service of Marriage.” For discussion of epistle readings for the marriage rite see Alkiviadis Calivas and Philip Zymaris, “Ephesians 5:20–33 as the Epistle Reading for the Rite of Marriage: Appropriate or Problematic?” *Public Orthodoxy*, September 8, 2017, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/09/08/ephesians-rite-of-marriage/>. See also John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 1996).

53. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, “The Betrothal Service—Liturgical Texts.”

54. Aad De Jong, “Liturgical Action from a Language Perspective About Performance and Performatives in Liturgy,” *Discourse in Ritual Studies* 14 (2007): 111–46.

55. Cf. Gen. 2:24, where the man leaves his family to join the woman.

pleasing God upon which the woman is necessarily dependent.⁵⁶ Even though some aspects of the marriage rite and its commentators idealize mutuality and equality among spouses, language content, structures, and male priestly performance within the sacramental rite of matrimony, authoritatively prioritize androcentric ideals about women's identities (fulfilled as wife and mother) and reinforce the view that women are objects of male exchange and use.⁵⁷

Similarly, the patriarchal perspective subtly dominates the liturgical voice and ritual performance directed specifically at women in the prayers and rites surrounding childbirth. Despite their variation and some acknowledgement of their theological discontinuity, many of the contemporary prayers relating to birth, miscarriage, and churching suggest either directly or indirectly that there is something shameful about women's bodies and reproductive functions.⁵⁸ More than just insinuating biologically linked shame, the prayers also implicitly sanctify men speaking about, to, and for women's experiences with more authority than the women themselves. For example, until very recently, prayers for a woman after suffering a miscarriage included praying to cleanse the woman "who today lieth in sins, having fallen into manslaughter, casting out, willingly or unintentionally, that which was conceived within her," and that she be cleansed from "bodily defilement."⁵⁹ Many might deem such things as inappropriate to say to a woman in a secular context, so, why pray these words in a more sacred context? Vestigial concerns for ritual purity aside, this is just one example of several, where women do not have their own liturgical voice to articulate spiritual–pastoral responses to often deeply personal experiences.⁶⁰ Despite revisions in some jurisdictions, the previous tradition likely affected (even indirectly) generations of women's and men's perception of miscarriage and women's experience of their own bodies and the church.⁶¹

56. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "The Marriage Service—Liturgical Texts."

57. For interpretation of marriage rite as fostering divine likeness (in which there is no inequality) see Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, trans. Anthony Gythiel and Victoria Steadman (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 117–18, 150–55.

58. See the discussion in Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*, 149–56; also Larin, "What Is Ritual Im/Purity?"

59. "Prayer for a Woman When She Hath Miscarried Her Child," St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas (March 30, 2018), <http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/prayer-for-a-woman-when-she-hath-miscarried-her-child.html>. See also Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Exomologetarion: A Manual for Confession*, trans. George Dokos (Thessalonica, Greece: Uncut Mountain Press, 2006), 245–46; Nicodemus and Agapius, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church: The Compilation of the Holy Canons*, trans. D. Cummings (Brookfield, MA: Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957), 945, 949.

60. That is not to say that women cannot make the liturgical words their own through their own interpretation or inflection of them.

61. For example of revision see, "The Service after a Miscarriage or Stillbirth," approved for use by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, October 2015, <https://oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/service-after-a-miscarriage-or-stillbirth>. Luce Irigaray's observation that "there are centuries of sociocultural values to be rethought, to be transformed. And that includes within oneself" seems poignant here as well. Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11.

Additional prayers associated with childbearing suggest a post-partum mother is in a state of physical impurity. In one version of the prayer after birth-giving, the priest asks repeatedly for God to “purify . . . and cleanse her (the mother) from bodily uncleanness,” and to “forgive all those who have touched her.” There appears to be an underlying concern to remove a state of ritual impurity where the prayer treats the presence of postpartum blood almost as a physical contagion.⁶² In other versions, the priest at the churching and in the prayers after birth prays to cleanse the mother “from all uncleanness” or “from all filth” and to “wash away the filth of the body.”⁶³ Although Orthodox Christian liturgy reflects the belief that all are in need of purification from sin, based on the history of ecclesial taboos surrounding menstruating women and the context of the prayers, it is clear this phrasing refers to bodily impurity. Despite some calls for and attempts at revision, women have not generally had the opportunity to develop or revise rites to mark such life events in meaningful and theologically consistent ways that carry liturgical authority.⁶⁴ Instead, male priests interpret these experiences for women, inscribe values to some of women’s most intimate moments, and make public ways of integrating women’s traditional roles into the life of the church without women having alternatives for sacramental participation and symbols of Orthodoxy. Clerical men speaking to, for, and about women in a way that is ritually iconic of and participative in a universal truth thus discursively colonizes the possibility of women’s authoritative self-expression liturgically.

CHALLENGES IN AUTHORITATIVE LITURGICAL FEMALE IMAGES

In addition to the physical and vocal ways patriarchy manifests in the liturgical experience of many women, authoritative iconographic and hymnographic portrayals of women similarly present the patriarchal gender constructions and concerns.⁶⁵ Within the sacred and seemingly timeless context of the liturgical services and space, patriarchally constructed images of women prompt subtle (and sometimes overt) internalization of situationally dependent constructions of gender as atemporally

62. *A Small Book of Needs*, trans. Herman Majkrzak and Vitaly Permiakov (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2012), 4.

63. Matthew Streett, “What to Do with the Baby? The Historical Development of the Rite of Churching,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 56.1 (2012): 51.

64. Discussion of ritual purity can be found in Larin, “What Is ‘Ritual Im/Purity’ and Why?” Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald “Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis: Observations and Concerns for the Church in America,” *St. Nina Quarterly* 2009; Wehr, “Understanding *Ritual Impurity* and Sin in the Churching of Women.”

65. Exceptions noted by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Women’s Voices Bearing Witness: Biblical Memory in Ancient Orthodox Liturgy” (Orthodoxy in America annual lecture, Fordham University, February 28, 2008).

and universally Orthodox. For example, although there are typically numerous icons in Orthodox churches of the Theotokos accessible for veneration, Byzantine iconographic programs also situate the *platitera* icon of the Theotokos in the altar apse behind the iconostasis.⁶⁶ The altar prominently includes the image of the Theotokos, but historical and contemporary practice generally excludes women from entering the same space. Thus, the woman to whom Orthodox render the highest devotion is unattainable in physical terms and celebrated in at least one inaccessible physical space in comparison to the majority of women who venerate her.⁶⁷ As “Mother of God” and “Ever-Virgin,” the Orthodox hymns and icons primarily present the Theotokos dogmatically, but perhaps also in less relatable terms to the ways women might actually interact with her.⁶⁸ Although women have indeed an impressive devotion to Mary and often appear to relate to Mary in ways beyond her dogmatic presentation, there are comparatively few formal liturgized opportunities in the tradition for women to voice this devotion on their own terms.⁶⁹ Marian hymns such as the *Akathist* deemphasize Mary’s humanity in order to praise her, but singing about her in this way potentially subverts the humanity of women in the congregation.⁷⁰ While singing repeatedly “Rejoice, O Bride unwedded” in front of Mary’s icon may be spiritually transformative by confounding mutually exclusive categories of virgin and bride-mother in divine acclamation, it also potentially reinforces the unattainability of the “most holy” woman in Orthodoxy.⁷¹ Shifts and variations in devotion to the Theotokos throughout Byzantine history—where Mary develops from an abstract theological assertion to intercessor/protector, to mother—primarily reflect responses to patriarchal dogmatic concerns and attempts to moderate devotional practices in

66. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Feminine Images and Orthodox Spirituality,” *Ecumenical Review* 60 (2008):15.

67. Eva Catagyioufu-Topping, “Reflections of an Orthodox Christian Feminist,” *Greek-American Review* (1991): 41–45, 44. See also Leonie Liveris, “Authority in the Church as the Body of Christ—The Orthodox Vision,” *Ecumenical Review* 60 (2008): 108.

68. See for example, Elina Vuola, “Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 24 (2016): 63–80.

69. On more “popular” interpretations of Marian significance and the ways these lay-driven perspectives in turn may influence more formal ecclesial teaching and viewpoints, see Vera Shevzov, “Mary and Women in Late Imperial Russian Orthodoxy,” in *Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture*, ed. Wendy Rosslyn and Alessandra Tosi (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 63–90; and the related observations regarding the variety of ways Marian images may be interpreted and act for those who view/venerate them especially at the popular level in terms of a dynamic relationship that mutually shapes the saint and the practitioner in Roman Catholicism, see Robert Orsi, “The Many Names of Mary,” in his book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48–72.

70. For a study on the development of Byzantine Marian devotion and the *Akathist*, see Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Leena Mari Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

71. *Akathist and Small Compline*, trans. Evie Zachariades-Holmberg and N. M. Vapouris (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 1991).

a way that supports patriarchal aims.⁷² Visual iconographic representation and hymnographic imagery are powerful tools of subject building, catechesis, and identity validation, but what they build, teach, and validate depends on their legibility and interpretive authority by those who view them.⁷³ Although historically, several Byzantine empresses played significant roles in supporting the cult of the Virgin and restoring icons in the face of iconoclasm, the images many women encounter liturgically are participative symbols that could be read as presenting a patriarchally determined interpretation of holy womanhood.⁷⁴ Women, however, often have interpreted and related to Mary in their own profoundly devoted ways. One can only imagine what the church might look like (and the ways its participants might experience it differently) if these viewpoints and expressions were reflected with comparable prominence and authority in the liturgical context.

In addition to the prominent figure of the Theotokos having an arguably patriarchal liturgical presentation, even instances where female saints prominently display an inversion of the expected gender dynamics and appear to surpass or equal men, reflect patriarchal priorities, and predicate their spiritual interpretation on androcentric normativity. The *Menaion* features commemorative and festal hymns celebrating and invoking numerous female saints, who are liturgically presented as holy precisely because of the way they function extraordinarily amid patriarchal expectations.⁷⁵ Despite confounding male expectations of female weakness, temptation, or

72. On the development of the Byzantine image of Mary see Ioli Kalavrezou, «Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became ‘Meter Theou,’” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 165–72. Kalavrezou suggests that after iconoclasm the Theotokos became a protector for patriarchs because of her power, “the Virgin seems more appropriate than Christ for the patriarch who, in his capacity as head of the clergy is, like the Virgin, the mediator between the people and God” (171). An overview of Orthodox Marian devotion in dogmatic terms can be found in Maria Rule, “Mary, Mother of God—Virgin and Ever-Virgin (Parthenos and Aei parthenos)” *Ecumenical Review* 60: 2008: 35–52; and George Khodr, “The Mother of God, the Theotokos, and Her Role in God’s Plan for Our Salvation,” *Ecumenical Review* 60 (2008): 29–34. Also relevant on this point are Leslie Brubaker and Mary Cunningham, eds., *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Maria Vassilaki, ed., *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); S. J. Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007). For an alternative Byzantine hagiographical view of Mary as a leader of the apostles, see *The Life of the Virgin: Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Stephen Shoemaker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); and the range of earlier devotion indicated in Stephen Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

73. On the pedagogical use of icons, see I.17 in John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003). On religion as a shared system of symbols see Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), 1–46.

74. See Limberis, *Divine Heiress*; Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

75. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Chapter 3: Women in Byzantine Hagiography,” in *That Gentle Strength*, ed. L. Coon (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990); see Ashley Purpura, “Beyond the Binary: Hymnographic Constructions of Eastern Orthodox Gender Identities,” *The Journal of Religion* 97 (2017): 524–46.

stupidity, Orthodox hymns present female exemplars that function as objects of male spiritual use and reinforce the authority of patriarchal depictions of women by their liturgical situation.⁷⁶ For example, Mary of Egypt unquestionably functions liturgically as a model of repentance for men and women. The legibility of her holiness, however, is dependent on the monastically conditioned androcentric assumptions that the worst sin imaginable for a woman is unbridled sexuality, and that it is surprising a formerly profligate laywoman could attain a superior level of holiness that proves instructive to a virtuous hieromonk.⁷⁷ Moreover, the content of the hymns often subtly negates the possibility of a holy woman as woman by praising female saints for assuming manliness or in some way putting off their “womanly nature” to attain spiritual advancement.⁷⁸ Hymns employ hagiographical tropes about women and the sacred and time-transcending liturgical setting presents these attributes and ways of describing women through an androcentric lens as fitting truths for prayer.⁷⁹

Although there are a few prominent liturgical hymns attributed to female hymnographers, even these are not unconstrained by patriarchal discursive dominance.⁸⁰ The ninth-century hymn of Kassiani is probably the most well known, but even this remarkable hymn relies upon a collective liturgical reflection on and participation in a “fallen woman’s” penitence.⁸¹ This hymn extends the symbol of a sinful woman’s mournful repentance for the congregation’s performance in a way that relies upon patriarchal acceptance of this symbol as spiritually beneficial. Although this hymn provides an interesting case study for liturgical prescriptions of men praying

76. On the Byzantine gender motifs see Damien Casey, “The Spiritual Valency of Gender in Byzantine Society,” in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Lynda Garland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

77. See the hymns addressing Mary of Egypt in *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), 377–462.

78. For example, see the hymns for Catherine of Alexandria in *Menaion*, Vol. 3 (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2005), 185; Catia Galatariotou, “Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 9 (1984): 55–94, 95; Carolyn Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 80. Galatariotou observes that within the hagiographical tradition “saintly women require not only a denial of sexuality . . . but a denial of their very sex.” Connor explains that with hagiography, “in many instances, the highest praise offered by a male author for his female subject was to describe her as having manly courage or determination or as excelling in virtue in spite of her sex.”

79. J. Raasted, “Byzantine Liturgical Music and Its Meaning for the Byzantine Worshipper,” in *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. R. Morris (Birmingham: Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, 1990), 53–54.

80. Diane Touliatos, “The Traditional Role of Greek Women in Music from Antiquity until the End of the Byzantine Empire,” in *Rediscovering the Muses: Women’s Musical Traditions*, ed. Kimberly Marshall (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 92–110.

81. For a translation of this hymn and a summary of Kassiani’s hymnographic function in contemporary Orthodoxy, see Spyros Panagopoulos, “Kassia: A Female Hymnographer of Ninth-century Byzantium and Her Hymnographic Poem on the Vesper of Holy Tuesday,” *De Medio Avo* 7 (2015): 115–28; See also the brief discussion in Alexander Riehle, “Authorship and Gender (and) Identity: Women’s Writing in the Middle Byzantine Period,” in *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature*, ed. Algae Pizzzone (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 246–62.

through women's identities and words, it relies on gendered positions of power. The posture and words patriarchally deemed appropriate to collectively cultivate and convey a spirit of unworthiness and lowliness are those of a mournful penitent woman. Accordingly, a historically patriarchal authority and orientation determine the imagery and symbols that interpret and invoke women's experiences and identities liturgically.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on their ecclesial and liturgical situation, some rites, images, ritual interactions, and words confront Orthodox practitioners with patriarchal perspectives authoritatively and normatively. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of the androcentric viewpoints in liturgical sources and practices prompts a rethinking of the ways Orthodox speak about and interpret the relationships between social and spiritual "equality," and the ways those with intersectionally non-dominant religious identities may experience the liturgical forms and space differently than is "traditionally" thought. Although Orthodox authors, theologians, and ecclesial leaders often interpret liturgical space, interactions, hymns, images, and rites as modes of communicating a divine reality, what this reality looks like for women and the additional gendered values these practices and sources convey requires further consideration. While no Orthodox author, from antiquity to modernity, ventures to state explicitly that the Orthodox Church preaches women are in any way less human than men are, or spiritually unequal to men, the patriarchal presentation and determination of women within the sanctified liturgical domain, to some, may suggest otherwise.

How does the pervasiveness and normativity of the patriarchal voice, perspective, privilege, and prioritization within the sacred environment and its association with sacred acts, symbols, and words function in the lives of women? Men? Clerics? Perhaps these sources serve to perpetuate and reinforce women's silence and subordination, such that the religious ideal of "woman" is partially determined, evaluated, and accepted through a distinctly patriarchal liturgical presentation of what and how Orthodox women should be. After all, in order to participate liturgically, women and others are already performing a liturgically celebrated "stylized repetition of acts," to conform themselves to certain expectations, but perhaps it is possible to constitute Orthodox "women" in ways that are more theologically consistent, and autonomously self-expressed.⁸² If liturgy truly is to be the "work of the people," to what degree do women (as people!) have recourse to explore and have acknowledged more diverse and potentially personally authentic ways of expressing their own divine likeness in

82. See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519–31, 520.

relation to the ecclesial community?⁸³ Further, how do real women negotiate, avoid, subvert, interpret, or embrace the patriarchal formations of Orthodox “woman” they may encounter liturgically? Lastly, how do believers make sense of the ways these liturgical components construct “women” in ways that challenge other theological tenets and present a view of women that many contemporary American Orthodox might disavow (or at least feel the need to defend hermeneutically)? Despite the many questions prompted by considering the points of gender-based exclusion and androcentric privileging in presenting “women” liturgically that I highlight, countless Orthodox women no doubt find ways to express and understand themselves as Orthodox in ways that are imbued with authenticity (perhaps “knowing” Orthodoxy by other ways, and engaging “other modalities of agency” to determine their religious selves).⁸⁴ These theological understandings are worth listening to more carefully in order to explore the range of “traditional” sources and structures at play in determining what it means to be Orthodox.

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83. Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes*, 13, notes that histories of liturgy are usually “from the top down” even where people might depart from the “approved line in the official texts.” I would concur that the text still carries authority because of its liturgical presence (and often episcopal approval/endorsement for use) even when clergy and laity adapt these texts or omit them.

84. Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 121–26; Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152.