

1 Introduction*

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

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

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

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

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

Why this book?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unity and diversity in Orthodox Christianity

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

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

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

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

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

Gender in Orthodox Christianity: preliminary remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Orthodoxy and gender in modern times

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

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

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

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

(Makrides 2012, 260)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Empirical approaches to religion and gender

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

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

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

Religion-as-lived

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

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

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

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

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

Material and embodied piety

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religion and agency

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

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

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

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

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

Scope of the book

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

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

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

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

Negotiating tradition

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

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

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

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

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

Lived Orthodoxy

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

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

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

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

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

Crises and gender

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

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

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

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

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

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