

WHAT IS "RITUAL IM/PURITY" AND WHY?

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When I entered a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in France, I was introduced to the restrictions imposed on a nun when she has her period. Although she was allowed to go to church and pray, she was not to go to communion; she could not kiss the icons or touch the *antidoron*; she could not help bake prosphoras or handle them, nor could she help clean the church; she could not even light the *lampada* or icon-lamp that hung before the icons in her own cell: this last rule was explained to me when I noticed an unlighted *lampada* in the icon-corner of another sister. I do not remember that anyone attempted either to question or justify these strictures; we simply presumed that menstruation was a form of "impurity," and we had to stay away from things holy so as not to somehow defile them.

Today there are different regulations in the Russian Orthodox Church based on the concept of "ritual impurity," varying from parish to parish, usually depending on the local priest. The popular *Nastol'naia Kniga* of S. Bulgakov instructs a priest not to allow menstruating women to come to church.¹ In Russia, however, women are generally allowed to come to church during menstruation, but cannot receive Holy Communion, kiss icons, relics, or crosses, touch prosphora or the antidoron, or drink holy water.² In parishes outside Russia, as far as I know, women usually only abstain from going to communion.

An article written by His Holiness Patriarch Pavle of Serbia,

¹ *Nastol'naia kniga sviashchenno-tserkovnosluzhitelia* (Khar'kov, 1913), 1144.

² See the questions-answers of Fr Maxim Kozlov on the website of the St Tatiana Church in Moscow: www.st-tatiana.ru/index.html?did=389 (15 January 2005). Cf. A. Klutschewsky, "Frauenrollen und Frauenrechte in der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche," *Kanon* 17 (2005): 140-209.

entitled “Can a Woman Always go to Church?”³ is often cited as a moderate opinion allowing menstruating women to participate in all but communion and denouncing the concept of “ritual im/purity.” Yet Patriarch Pavle defends another traditional restriction forbidding a woman to enter a church or participate in any sacraments for forty days after giving birth to a child.⁴ This stricture, also based on the concept of “ritual im/purity,” is observed in ROCOR parishes I know both in Germany and the United States. However, one can find evidence on websites of the Moscow Patriarchate that the usage is not upheld everywhere and is being questioned in Moscow-run parishes.⁵

Today, in light of “feminist” theology⁶ and traditionalist reactions to it,⁷ it is tempting to approach the issue of “ritual im/purity” in a political or social vein. Indeed, the rather degrading day-to-day implications of the above-mentioned restrictions can be taxing for any woman accustomed to the socio-political culture of the West. Nonetheless, the Orthodox Church traditionally has no socio-political agenda,⁸ rendering an argument from this perspective largely irrelevant for the Church. Furthermore, the concern that something may be “degrading” for a woman is foreign to Orthodox spirituality, which focuses on humility: when we experience

3 First published in Russian and German in the quarterly of the ROCOR Diocese of Berlin in Germany: “Mozhet li zhenshchina vseгда poseshchat' khram?” *Vestnik Germanskoi Eparkhii* 2 (2002): 24–26 and later online: <http://www.rocor.de/Vestnik/20022>.

4 This stricture officially holds according to the *Trebnik* or “Book of Needs” of the Russian Orthodox Church. See English tr. as *Book of Needs of the Holy Orthodox Church*, tr. G. Shann (London, 1894), 4–8.

5 See the website of MP parishes in the US: www.russianchurchusa.org/SNCathedralforum/D.asp?n=1097; also www.ortho-rus.ru/cgi-bin/ns.

6 See the *Conclusion of the Intra-Orthodox Consultation on the Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Rhodes, Greece: 1988). See also www.womenpriests.org/tradition/unclean.

7 For example, K. Anstall, “Male and Female He Created Them”: An Examination of the Mystery of Human Gender in St Maximos the Confessor, *Canadian Orthodox Seminary Studies in Gender and Human Sexuality* 2 (Dewdney, 1995), esp. 24–25.

8 Cf. G. Mantzaridis, *Soziologie des Christentums* (Berlin, 1981), 129ff; id., *Grundlinien christlicher Ethik* (St Ottilien, 1998), 73.

drawbacks, limitations, grief, etc., we learn to recognize our sinfulness and grow in our faith and dependence upon God's saving mercy.

Hence I would like to prescind from egalitarian concerns and draw attention to the theological and anthropological implications of "ritual im/purity." Our church life is not ultimately about adhering to certain rules, reading certain prayers, doing the proper prostrations, or even about humility per se; it is about the theological and anthropological meaning of it all. By doing these things we profess a certain meaning, a certain tenet of our faith. So today I shall ask: What is the meaning of abstaining from communion during menstruation? What does this say about the female body? What is the meaning of not setting foot in church after giving birth to a child? What statement is being made about childbirth? Most importantly, is the concept of "ritual im/purity" congruent with our faith in Jesus Christ? Where did it originate and what does it mean for us today?

Let us take a look at the biblical, canonical, and liturgical sources in an attempt to answer these questions.⁹

The Old Testament

The earliest biblical evidence to ritual restrictions for women during menstruation is found in the Old Testament, in Lev 15:19–33. According to Leviticus, not only was the menstruating woman "impure"; any person who touched her also became "impure" (Lev 15:24), resulting in a sort of *impurity by contact*. In later chapters of Leviticus (17–26, the "Law of Sanctity"), sexual intercourse with one's wife at this time was strictly forbidden. Childbirth, like menstruation, was also considered defiling and subjected the woman who had given birth to similar restrictions (Lev 12).

The Jews were by far not the only ones in the ancient world

⁹ For more on the historical and contemporary canonical sources concerning "ritual im/purity" see E. Synek, "Wer aber nicht völlig rein ist an Seele und Leib..." Reinheitstabus im Orthodoxen Kirchenrecht," *Kanon Sonderheft 1* (München-Egling a. d. Paar, 2006).

imposing such regulations. The pagan cults also had strictures based on a concern for “ritual purity”: menstruation was considered defiling and rendered pagan priestesses incapable of performing their cultic duties in the temples;¹⁰ priests had to avoid menstruating women at all costs for fear of defilement;¹¹ the birth of a child was believed to be defiling.¹² Nonetheless the Jews were a case *sui generis*. Apart from their singular abhorrence for blood (Lev 15:1–18),¹³ the ancient Jews held to a belief in the dangers of female blood discharge that grew gradually, and became even stronger in later Judaism:¹⁴ the Mishna, Tosefa, and Talmud are even more concise than the Bible on this topic.¹⁵

The Protoevangelium of James and the New Testament

At the very dawn of the New Testament the All-Holy Virgin Mary herself is subjected to the demands of “ritual purity.” According to the *Protoevangelium of James*, a 2nd-century apocryphal text which inspired several of the Church’s Marian feasts, the All-Holy Virgin lived in the temple from age two to twelve, when she was betrothed to Joseph and sent to reside in his house “Lest she pollute the sanctuary of the Lord” (VIII. 2).¹⁶

When Jesus Christ began to preach, a very new message resounded in the villages of Judea—one that challenged deep-seated presumptions of pharisaic piety and of the ancient world in general. He proclaimed that it is only the evil intentions that come out of our hearts that defile us (Mk 7:15ff). Our Savior thus placed

10 E. Fehrle, *Die kultische Keuschheit im Altertum in Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 6 (Gießen, 1910), 95.

11 Ibid., 29.

12 Ibid., 37.

13 Cf. R. Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When—and Why?” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 47.

14 I. Be’er, “Blood Discharge: On Female Im/Purity in the Priestly Code and in Biblical Literature,” in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion from Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield 1994), 152–64.

15 J. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden, 1973).

16 M. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), 42. Cf. Taft, “Women,” 47.

the categories of "purity" and "impurity" wholly in the sphere of conscience¹⁷—in the sphere of *free will* toward virtue and sin—liberating the faithful from the ancient fear of defilement through uncontrollable phenomena of the material world. He himself has no qualms about talking to a Samaritan woman, something the Jews considered defiling on several levels.¹⁸ More to our topic, the Lord does not reprimand the hemorrhaging woman for having touched his clothes in the hope of being cured: He heals her and then praises her faith (Mt 9:20–22). Why does Christ reveal the woman to the crowd? St John Chrysostom answers that the Lord "reveals her faith to all, so that others would be encouraged to imitate her."¹⁹

The Apostle Paul likewise abandons a traditional Hebrew approach to Old-Testament regulations regarding "purity" and "impurity," allowing for them only in the interests of Christian charity (Rom 14). It is well-known that Paul generally prefers the word "holy" (*ἅγιος*) to the word "pure"²⁰ to express a Christian's closeness to God, thus avoiding Old-Testament preconceptions (Rom 1:7; 8:27; 1 Cor 6:1; 7:14; 2 Cor 1:1, etc).

The early church and early Fathers

The attitude of the early Church to the Old Testament was not a simple one and cannot be thoroughly expounded within the scope of this paper. Neither Judaism nor Christianity had a clearly separate, developed identity in the first centuries: they shared a common approach to certain things.²¹ The Church clearly acknowledged the Old Testament as divinely-inspired Scripture, while at the same time distancing herself since the Council of the Apostles (Acts 15) from the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law.

17 D. Wendebourg, "Die alttestamentlichen Reinheitsgesetze in der frühen Kirche," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 95/2 (1984): 149–70.

18 Cf. Samariter, "Pauly-Wissowa II, 1, 2108.

19 *In Matthaeum Homil. XXXI al. XXXII*, PG 57, col 371.

20 Wendebourg, "Reinheitsgesetze," 150.

21 E. Synek, "Zur Rezeption Alttestamentlicher Reinheitsvorschriften ins Orthodoxe Kirchenrecht," *Kanon* 16 (2001): 29.

While the Apostolic Fathers, the first generation of church writers after the Apostles, barely touch upon the Mosaic laws concerning "ritual im/purity," these restrictions are widely discussed somewhat later, from the middle of the 2nd century. By that time it is clear that the letter of the Mosaic Law had become foreign to Christian thought, as church writers attempt to interpret it symbolically. Methodius of Olympus (ca 300), Justin Martyr (ca 165), and Origen (ca 253) interpret levitical categories of "purity" and "impurity" *allegorically*, that is to say, as symbols of virtue and sin;²² they also insist upon *baptism* and the *eucharist* as sufficient sources of "purification" for Christians.²³ In his treatise *On the Jewish Foods*, Methodius of Olympus writes: "It is clear that he who has once been cleansed through the New Birth [baptism], can no longer be stained by that which is mentioned in the Law..."²⁴ In a similar vein, Clement of Alexandria writes that spouses no longer need to bathe after sexual intercourse as stipulated according to the Mosaic Law "because," Clement insists, "the Lord has cleansed the faithful through baptism for all marital relations."²⁵

And yet Clement's seemingly open attitude toward marital sexual relations in this passage is not typical of church writers at this time,²⁶ not even of Clement himself.²⁷ It was more characteristic of these writers to view all proscriptions of the Mosaic Law as purely symbolic *except* those concerning sex and sexuality. In fact, the early church writers had a tendency to view *any* manifestation of sexuality, including menstruation, marital relations, and childbirth as "impure" and thus incompatible with participation in the liturgical life of the Church.

22 See references in Wendebourg, "Reinheitsgesetze," 153–55.

23 Justin, *Dialog.* 13; Origen, *Contr. Cel.* VIII 29.

24 V, 3. Cf. Wendebourg, "Reinheitsgesetze," 154.

25 *Stromata* III/XII 82, 6.

26 With the notable exception of St Irenaeus, who did not see sexuality as a result of the fall. See *Adv. Haer.* 3. 22. 4. Cf. J. Behr, "Marriage and Asceticism," unpublished paper at the 5th International Theological Conference of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow, Nov. 2007), 7.

27 J. Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford, 2000), 171–84.

The reasons for this are numerous. In an age before the Church's teaching had crystallized into a defined dogmatic system, there were many ideas, philosophies, and outright heresies floating in the air, some of which found their way into the writings of early Christian writers. Pioneers of Christian theology such as Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria and others, highly-educated men of their time, were in part under the influence of the pre-Christian philosophical and religious systems that dominated the classical education of their day. For example, the so-called "Stoic axiom," or the Stoic view that sexual intercourse is justifiable solely as a means for procreation,²⁸ is repeated by Tertullian,²⁹ Lactantius,³⁰ and Clement of Alexandria.³¹ The Mosaic prohibition of sexual intercourse during menstruation in Lev 18:19 thus acquired a new rationale: it was not only "defiling"; if it could not result in procreation it was sinful even within wedlock. Note in this context that Christ only mentions sexual intercourse once in the Gospel, "... and the two shall become one flesh" (Mt 9:5), without mentioning procreation.³² Tertullian, who embraced the ultra-ascetical heresy of Montanism in his latter years, went further than most and even considered prayer after sexual intercourse impossible.³³ The famous Origen was notoriously influenced by the contemporary eclectic Middle Platonism, with its characteristic depreciation of all things physical, and indeed of the material world in general. His ascetical and ethical doctrine, while primarily biblical, is also to be found in Stoicism, Platonism, and to a lesser degree in Aristotelianism.³⁴ Not

28 S. Stelzenberger, *Die Beziehungen der frühchristlichen Sittenlehre zur Ethik der Stoa. Eine moral-geschichtliche Studie* (München 1933), 405ff.

29 *De monogamia* VII 7, 9 (CCL 2, 1238, 48ff).

30 *Div. Institutiones* VI 23 (CSEL 567, 4ff).

31 *Paed.* II/X 92, 1f (SC 108, 176f).

32 Cf. Behr, "Marriage and Asceticism," 7.

33 *De exhortatione castitatis* X 2-4 (CCL 15/2, 1029, 13ff). Cf. Wendebourg, "Reinheitsgesetze," 159.

34 Innumerable studies have been written on Origen's relationship with the philosophical currents of his time. For a summary of recent scholarship on the topic see D. I. Rankin, *From Clement to Origen. The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers* (Aldershot-Burlington, 2006), 113-40.

surprisingly, then, Origen views menstruation as “impure” in and of itself.³⁵ He is also the first Christian writer to accept the Old Testament concept in Lev 12 of childbirth as something “impure.”³⁶ It is perhaps significant that the cited theologians came from Egypt, where Judaic spirituality peaceably coexisted with a developing Christian theology: the Jewish population, constantly diminishing from the beginning of the second century in the capital city of Alexandria, exerted an often unnoticeable yet strong influence on local Christians, themselves largely Jewish converts.³⁷

The Syriac Didaskalia

The situation was different in the Syrian capital of Antioch, where a strong Jewish presence posed a tangible threat to Christian identity.³⁸ The *Syriac Didaskalia*, a third-century witness to Christian polemics against Judaic traditions, forbids Christians to observe the levitical laws, including those concerning menstruation. The author admonishes women who abstain from prayer, Scripture lessons, and eucharist for seven days during menstruation: “If you think, woman, that you are stripped of the Holy Spirit during the seven days of your menstruation, then if you die at this time, you will depart thence empty and without hope.” The *Didaskalia* goes on to assure the woman of the presence within her of the Holy Spirit, enabling her to take part in prayer, readings, and the Eucharist:

Now think about it and recognize that prayer is heard through the Holy Spirit; and the eucharist is received and

35 *Cat. in Ep. ad Cor. XXXIV*124; C. Jenkins (ed), “Origen on 1 Corinthians,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (1908): 502, 28–30.

36 *Hom. in Lev. VIII 3f*(GCS 29, 397, 12–15).

37 See L. W. Barnard, “The Background of Early Egyptian Christianity,” *Church Quarterly Review* 164 (1963): 434; also M. Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World* (London, 1953), 117, 265. Cf. references in Wendebourg, “Reinheitsgesetze,” 167.

38 See M. Simon, *Recherches d'histoire judéo-chrétienne* (Paris, 1962), 140ff, and M. Grant, “Jewish Christianity at Antioch in the Second Century,” *Judéo-Christianisme* (Paris, 1972), 97–108. Cf. references in Wendebourg, “Reinheitsgesetze,” 167.

consecrated through the Holy Spirit; and the Scriptures are words of the Holy Spirit and holy. Therefore if the Holy Spirit is within you, why do you isolate your soul and not approach the works of the Holy Spirit?³⁹

He instructs other members of the community as follows:

... You shall not separate those who have their period, for even the woman with the issue of blood was not reprimanded when she touched the edge of our Savior's garment; she was rather deemed worthy to receive forgiveness of all her sins.⁴⁰

It is remarkable that this text admonishes menstruating women to receive communion, and enforces its admonishment with the example of the woman with the flow of blood in Mt 9:20–22.

The Council of Gangra

About a century later, toward the middle of the fourth century, we find canonical evidence against the concept of "ritual im/purity" among the legislation of the local Council convened ca AD 341⁴¹ in Gangra (105 km northeast of Ankara) on the northern coast of Asia Minor, which condemned the extreme asceticism of the followers of Eustathius of Sebaste († post-377).⁴² The Eustathian monastics, inspired by dualistic and spiritualistic teachings widespread in Syria and Asia Minor at that time, denigrated marriage and the married clergy. Against this, Canon 1 of the council reads: "If anyone disparages marriage, or abominates or disparages a woman sleeping with her husband notwithstanding that she is faithful and reverent, as though she could not enter the kingdom, let him be

39 *Didaskalia* XXVI. H. Achelis-J. Fleming (eds), *Die ältesten Quellen des orientalischen Kirchenrechts* 2 (Leipzig, 1904), 139.

40 *Ibid.*, 143.

41 On the date see: T. Tenšek, *L'ascetismo nel Concilio di Gangra: Eustazio di Sebaste nell'ambiente ascetico siriano dell'Asia Minore nel IV° secolo*, Excerpta ex dissertatione ad Doctoratum in Facultate Theologiae Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana, (Rome, 1991), 23–24.

42 J. Gribomont, "Le monachisme au IVe s. en Asie Mineure: de Gangres au messalianisme," *Studia Patristica* 2 (Berlin, 1957), 400–415.

anathema."⁴³ The Eustathians refused to receive the eucharist from married clergy out of a concern for "ritual purity,"⁴⁴ a practice likewise condemned by the council in its fourth canon: "If anyone discriminates against a married presbyter, on the ground that he ought not to partake of the offering when that presbyter is conducting the liturgy, let him be anathema."⁴⁵

Interestingly, Eustathianism was an egalitarian movement, promoting a complete leveling of the sexes.⁴⁶ The female followers of Eustathius were hence encouraged to cut their hair and dress like men to overcome every semblance of femininity, which, like all aspects of human sexuality, was considered "defiling." The council condemns this practice in its 13th canon: "If for the sake of supposedly ascetic exercise any woman change apparel, and instead of the usual and customary woman's apparel, she dons men's apparel, let her be anathema."⁴⁷

In rejecting Eustathian monasticism, the Church rejected the view of sexuality as "defiling," defending both the sanctity of marriage and of the God-created phenomenon called woman.

The canons of the Egyptian Fathers

In the light of these fully Orthodox ancient canons, how can the Church have canons in full force today that support the concept of "ritual im/purity" unequivocally?⁴⁸ As previously noted, church literature, including canonical texts, did not materialize in a vacuum, but within the socio-cultural, historical reality of the ancient world, which very much believed in and demanded "ritual

43 P. Joannou, *Fonti. Discipline générale antique (IVe–IXes.)*, fasc. IX, (Grottaferrata-Rome, 1962), t. I, 2, 89. English trans. from *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans by D. Cummings (Chicago, 1957), 523.

44 See Tenšek, *L'ascetismo*, 17–28.

45 Joannou, *Discipline*, 91; *The Rudder*, 524.

46 Tenšek, *L'ascetismo*, 28.

47 Joannou, *Discipline*, 94; *The Rudder*, 527.

48 On the later development in Byzantium see P. Viscuso, "Purity and Sexual Defilement in Late Byzantine Theology," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 57 (1991): 399–408.

purity."⁴⁹ The earliest canon restricting women in a state of "impurity" (ἐν ἀφένδρω) is Canon 2 of Dionysius of Alexandria († ca 264), written in 262:

Concerning menstruous women, whether they ought to enter the temple of God while in such a state, I think it superfluous even to put the question. For, I think, not even themselves, being faithful and pious, would dare when in this state either to approach the Holy Table or to touch the body and blood of Christ. For not even the woman with a twelve years' issue would come into actual contact with Him, but only with the edge of His garment, to be cured. There is no objection to one's praying no matter how he may be or to one's remembering the Lord at any time and in any state whatever, and petitioning to receive help; but if one is not wholly clean (ὁ μὴ πάντῃ καθαρὸς) both in soul and in body, he shall be prevented from coming up to the Holy of Holies.⁵⁰

Note that Dionysius, like the Syriac *Didaskalia*, refers to the woman with the flow of blood in Mt 9:20–22, but comes to precisely the opposite conclusion: that a woman *cannot* receive communion.

It has been suggested that Dionysius was actually forbidding women to enter the *sanctuary* ("altar") and not the church proper.⁵¹ This hypothesis not only contradicts the text of the cited canon; it also falsely presumes that the laity once received communion in the sanctuary. Recent liturgical scholarship has dispensed with the notion that the laity ever received the sacrament in the sanctuary.⁵² So Dionysius meant precisely what he wrote, and precisely as many

49 Cf. H. Hunger, "Christliches und Nichtchristliches im byzantinischen Eherecht," *Österreichisches Archiv für Kirchenrecht* 3 (1967): 305–25.

50 C. L. Feltoe (ed), *The Letters and Other Remains of Dionysius of Alexandria* (Cambridge, 1904), 102–3. For date and authenticity, see P. Joannou, *Discipline générale antique (IVe–IXes.)* 1–2 (Grottaferratta-Rome, 1962), 2, 12. Translation adapted from *The Rudder*, 718.

51 Patriarch Pavle, "Mozhet li zhenshchina," 24.

52 R. F. Taft, *The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites* (Rome, 2008), 205–7 (in press).

generations of Eastern Christians have understood him:⁵³ a menstruating woman is not to enter “*the temple of God*,” for she is “not wholly clean (ὁ μὴ πάντα καθαρὸς) *both in soul and in body*.” One wonders whether this suggests all *other* Christians are wholly “clean,” or *katharoi*. Hopefully not, since the Church denounced “*those who call themselves katharoi*” or “the clean ones,” an ancient sect of the Novatians, at the First Ecumenical Council, Nicaea I in 325.⁵⁴

Orthodox commentators of the past and present have also explained Dionysius’ canon as somehow connected to a concern for begetting children: the twelfth-century commentator Zonaras (post-1159), while rejecting the concept of “ritual impurity,” comes to the bewildering conclusion that the *real* reason for these restrictions against women is “*to prevent men from sleeping with them ... by way of providing for children being begotten*.”⁵⁵ So, women are stigmatized as “impure,” banned from church and Holy Communion *to prevent men from sleeping with them*? Leaving aside the sex-only-for-procreation premise of this argument, it raises some other, more obvious questions: Are men somehow more likely to sleep with a woman who has gone to church and received the sacrament? Why, then, must the woman abstain from communion? Some priests in Russia offer another explanation: women are too *tired* in this state to listen attentively to the prayers of the liturgy and therefore cannot prepare themselves sufficiently for Holy Communion.⁵⁶ The same reasoning is proposed for women who have given birth: they need to rest for forty days.⁵⁷ So should communion be withheld from all tired, ill, elderly, and otherwise weak people? How about the hearing-impaired? Be that as it

53 See the commentary of Theodore Balsamon (ca. 1130/40–post 1195) on this canon: *In epist. S. Dionysii Alexandrini ad Basilidem episcopum*, can. 2, PG 138: 465C–468A.

54 Can. 8, Rallis-Potlis II, 133.

55 English translation in *The Rudder*, 719. Zonaras is repeated verbatim by Patriarch Pavle, “Mozhet li zhenshchina,” 25.

56 Klutschewsky, “Frauenrollen,” 174.

57 See the questions-answers of Fr Maxim Kozlov on the website of the St Tatiana Church in Moscow: www.st-tatiana.ru/index.html?did=389.

may, there are several other canonical texts restricting women as "impure": Canons 6–7 of Timothy of Alexandria (AD 381), who extends the restriction to baptism⁵⁸ and Canon 18 of the so-called Canons of Hippolytus, regarding women who have given birth and midwives.⁵⁹ Both these canons, like Canon 2 of Dionysius, are notably of Egyptian provenance.

St Gregory the Great

Things were not much different in the West, where church practice generally viewed menstruating women as "impure" until the turn of the sixth/seventh century.⁶⁰ At this time St Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome (590–604), the Church Father to whom tradition ascribes (wrongly) the composition of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, expressed a different opinion on the matter. In 601, St Augustine of Canterbury, the "Apostle of England," (ca 604) wrote to Gregory and asked whether menstruating women should be allowed to go to church and receive communion. I shall cite Pope Gregory's response at length:

A woman should not be forbidden to go to church. After all, she suffers this involuntarily. She cannot be blamed for that superfluous matter that nature excretes. . . . She is also not to be forbidden to receive Holy Communion at this time. If, however, a woman does not dare to receive, for great trepidation, she should be praised. But if she does receive she should

58 CPG 244; Joannou, *Discipline II*, 243–244, 264.

59 W. Riedel, *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen des Patriarchats Alexandrien* (Leipzig, 1900), 209. See English translation in P. Bradshaw (ed), *The Canons of Hippolytus*, English trans. by C. Bebawi (Bramcote, 1987), 20.

60 P. Browe, *Beiträge zur Sexualethik des Mittelalters, Breslauer Studien zur historischen Theologie XXIII* (Breslau, 1932). Cf. also R. Meens, "Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great in the Early Middle Ages," in *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, ed R. N. Swanson, *Studies in Church History* 32 (Cambridge, 1996), 31–43. On the development of the concept of "ritual im/purity" in the West in connection with priestly celibacy, see H. Brodersen, *Der Spender der Kommunion im Altertum und Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeitshaltung*, UMI Dissertation Services (Ann Arbor, 1994), 23–25, 132.

not be judged. Pious people see sin even there, where there is none.

Now one often performs innocently that which originates in a sin: when we feel hunger, this occurs innocently. Yet the fact that we experience hunger is the fault of the first man. The menstrual period is no sin; it is, in fact, a purely natural process. But the fact that nature is thus disturbed, that it appears stained even against human will—this is the result of a sin. ...

So if a pious woman reflects upon these things and wishes not to approach communion, she is to be praised. But again, if she wants to live religiously and receive communion out of love, one should not stop her.⁶¹

In the Early Middle Ages the policy laid down by Gregory fell into desuetude⁶² and menstruating women were restricted from communion and often instructed to stand before the entrance of the church. These practices were still common in the West as late as the seventeenth century.⁶³

"Ritual Impurity" in Russia

As for the history of such practices in Russia, the concept of "ritual im/purity" was known to the pagan Slavs long before their Christianization. Pagan Slavs, like ancient pagans in general, held that any manifestation of sexuality was ritually defiling.⁶⁴ This belief remained virtually unchanged in Old Rus' after its baptism.

61 PL 77, 1183. On authenticity see Browe, *Beiträge*, 10, reference 67.

62 For more on this see H. Lutterbach's book, *Sexualität im Mittelalter. Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbüchern des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 43 (Köln, 1999). On the debate in the West as to whether menstruating women could take part in liturgical life, see: J. Flandrin, *Un temps pour embrasser: Aux origines de la morale sexuelle occidentale (VIe–XIe s.)* (Paris, 1983), 11, 73–82.

63 Ibid, 14. For more on the development of the concept of "ritual im/purity" in the West see G. Muschiol, "Reinheit und Gefährdung? Liturgie im Mittelalter," *Heiliger Dienst* 51 (1997): 42–54, and, most recently, T. Berger, "The Challenge of Gender for Liturgical Tradition," *Worship* 82/3 (2008): 243–61, esp 245–47.

64 E. Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700* (Ithaca-

The Russian Church had particularly strict rules concerning female “impurity.” In the twelfth century “Inquiry of Kyrik,” Bishop Nifont of Novgorod (1130–1156) explains that if a woman happened to give birth to a child inside a church, the church had to be sealed for three days, then re-consecrated by a special prayer.⁶⁵ Even the wife of the tsar, the tsaritsa, would give birth outside her living quarters, in the bathhouse or “myl’nja” (*bania*) so as not to defile an inhabited building. After the child had been born, no one could leave or enter the bathhouse until the priest had arrived to read the “cleansing” prayer from the *Trebnik*. Only after this prayer had been read could the father enter and see his child.⁶⁶ If a woman’s period began while she was standing in church, she had to leave immediately. Failure to do so resulted in a penance of six months fasting, with fifty prostrations a day.⁶⁷ Even when women were not in a state of “impurity,” they received communion not at the “royal” doors with the male laity, but separately, at the northern doors.⁶⁸

The prayers of the Trebnik

The special prayer of the *Trebnik* or *Book of Needs* of the Russian Orthodox Church, read even today on the first day upon the birth of a child, petitions God to “cleanse the mother of all defilement” (*ot skverny ochisti*) and continues: “... and forgive your handmaid [mother’s name] and all the house in which the child has been born, and all who have touched her, and all who find themselves here ...”⁶⁹ One might ask, why do we ask forgiveness for all the house, for the mother, and for all “who have touched her”

London, 1989), 46.

65 *Voprosy Kirika*, in *Russkaia Istoricheskaia Biblioteka VI* (St Petersburg, 1908), 34, art. 46.

66 I. Zabelin, *Domashnii byt russkikh tsarei v XVI i XVII stoletiiakh* (Moscow, 2000), vol. II, 2–3.

67 *Trebnik* (Kiev, 1606), f 674v–675r. Cited by Levin, *Sex and Society*, 170.

68 B. Uspenskii, *Tsar’ i Patriarkh* (Moscow, 1998), 145–46, n.3 and n.5.

69 “Molitva v pervyi den, po vnegda roditi zhene otrocha,” *Trebnik* (Moscow, 1906), 4v–5v.

(*prikosnuvshimsia ei*)? Well, I know that the levitical laws contained the notion of *impurity by contact*. So I know why the faithful of the Old Testament would consider it a sin to touch the “impure.” And I know that the pagans feared the flow of blood both at childbirth and menstruation, since they believed it was inviting to the demons. However, I cannot tell you why the faithful ask forgiveness for *touching* or *being* a woman who has given birth *today*, because I do not know.

Another set of prayers is read forty days later, when the mother is allowed to come to church for the rite of “churching” (*votserkovlenie*). On this occasion the priest prays for the mother as follows:

Cleanse her from every sin and every defilement (*ot vsiakiia skverny*) ... that she may be counted worthy to partake uncondemned of the holy mysteries. ... Wash her from bodily defilement (*omyi eia skvernu telesnuiu*) and spiritual defilement (*i skvernu dushevnuuu*) in the completion of forty days, making her worthy of the communion of your precious body and blood ...⁷⁰

Today it is often said that a woman stays out of church for forty days after giving birth because of physical fatigue. However, the cited text speaks not of her capacity to participate in liturgical life, but of her worthiness. The birth (not conception) of her child has, according to these prayers, resulted in her physical and spiritual defilement (*skverna*). This is similar to the reasoning of Dionysius of Alexandria about menstruation: it makes a woman “not wholly clean both in soul and in body.”

Recent developments in other Orthodox Churches

Not surprisingly, some Orthodox Churches are already moving to modify or remove euchological texts based on dogmatically indefensible concepts of childbirth, marriage, and “im/purity.” I cite the decision of the Holy Synod of Antioch held in Syria on May 26, 1997, under the leadership of His Beatitude, Patriarch Ignatius IV:

⁷⁰ “Molitvy zhene rodil’nitse po 40-ti dnekh,” *ibid*, 8–9.

It was decided to give the Patriarch authorization to modify the texts of the small euchologion concerning marriage and its sacredness; prayers connected with women who give birth and enter church for the first time; and texts connected with the funeral service.⁷¹

A theological conference convened on Crete in 2000 came to similar conclusions:

Theologians should ... write simple and appropriate explanations of the churching service and adapt the language of the rite itself to reflect the theology of the Church. This would be helpful to men and women who need to be given the true meaning of the service: that it exists as an act of offering and blessing for the birth of a child, and that it should be performed as soon as the mother is ready to resume normal activity outside her home. ...

We urge the Church to reassure women that they are welcome to receive Holy Communion at any liturgy when they are spiritually and sacramentally prepared, regardless of what time of month it may be.⁷²

An earlier study of the Orthodox Church of America also offered a fresh Orthodox perspective on "ritual im/purity":

... ideas that women with their menstrual periods should not receive holy communion or kiss the cross and icons, or bake the bread for the eucharist, or even enter the nave of the church, not to speak of the altar area, are ideas and practices that are morally and dogmatically indefensible according to strict Orthodox Christianity [...] Saint John Chrysostom condemns those who propagate such an attitude as unworthy of the Christian faith. He calls them superstitious and the supporters of myths.⁷³

71 Synek, "Wer aber nicht," 152.

72 Eadem, 148.

73 Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America (ed.), *Women and Men in the Church. A Study on the Community of Women and Men in the Church* (Syosset, NY, 1980), 42–43.

Conclusion

I shall conclude briefly, since the texts have spoken for themselves. A close look at the origins and character of the concept "ritual im/purity" reveals a rather disconcerting, fundamentally non-Christian phenomenon in the guise of Orthodox piety. Regardless of whether the concept entered church practice under direct Judaic and/or pagan influences, it finds no justification in Christian anthropology and soteriology. Orthodox Christians, male and female, have been cleansed in the waters of baptism, buried and resurrected with Christ, who became our flesh and our humanity, trampled death by death, and liberated us from its fear. Yet we have retained a practice that reflects pagan and Old-Testament fears of the material world. This is why a belief in "ritual im/purity" is not primarily a social issue, nor is it primarily about the depreciation of women. It is rather about the depreciation of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and its salvific consequences.