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**THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD REDUX:
CONSTRUCTING THE NEW ORTHODOX WOMANHOOD BETWEEN
CRADLE AND CONVERT**

By Katherine Kelaidis

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In an era when questions of sexuality and gender dominate much of the debate in theological circles, regardless of religious or confessional affiliation, the meaning of Orthodox Christian womanhood remains a simultaneously over-discussed and under-theorized aspect of these conversations. This article attempts to address this discrepancy by articulating and problematizing some of the myriad of forces that are shaping the construction of Orthodox Christian womanhood and the identity of Orthodox Christian women today. In particular, we explore how the “Culture Wars” (a once largely American political phenomenon) have internationalized and become a major force in the articulation of gender both within Orthodoxy and as a point of interface between Orthodoxy and the wider world. This development has happened mainly through two threads: conversion by those from non-traditionally Orthodox backgrounds in North America (and to a lesser extent Western Europe) and the reemergence of Orthodoxy in post-communist, traditionally Orthodox lands. Both these phenomena have interacted with one another to create a radical new image of Orthodox womanhood, one projected as reactionary--or at least deeply conservative. In turn, this radical vision of the Orthodox woman, the creation of a small number of ideologically motivated actors (including high profile American Evangelicals, Russian Church leadership interested in exerting a global force, and disaffected mainline Protestant converts to Orthodoxy who have left their former denominations after progressive reforms), has helped to create an atmosphere that others have

found alienating. This has set up a collision course that will have serious implications for the Orthodox world in the years to come.

An influx of converts from non-traditionally Orthodox backgrounds into Orthodox Christian jurisdictions in the West, particularly in the United States, began in the late 1980s.¹ These converts, many fleeing the progressive reforms of their traditions of origin, frequently brought with them a socio-politically conservative understanding of gender and sexuality formed in the turmoil of the American culture wars. These expectations surrounding gender were often in sharp contrast to modernizing and assimilationist norms which had grown up in the immigrant communities that had historically been at the center of American Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, in the traditionally Orthodox Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union and attached satellite regimes led to a renewed public face for Orthodox Christianity in these countries, a public profile that has been largely used to advance a socially-conservative political agenda which, borrowing from the debates in the West, also focused intensely on issues of gender and sexuality. This, in part, included reasserting imagined views of “pre-communist” gender roles and womanhood.

Thus, both in its traditional lands and in the diaspora, Orthodox Christianity finds itself in a uniquely intense period of gender-based debate and tension. This article will focus on how these parallel historical developments have reshaped the normative vision of Orthodox womanhood. We will explore how a vision of women that posits itself as reactionary is, in fact, deeply radical and threatens to destroy the complex and multiple historical understandings of being a woman in the Orthodox tradition.

In the Beginning

Of course, it is difficult to speak about a contemporary shift in the construction of Orthodox womanhood without first looking to the past. We know (or at least should know) that this past in many ways provides even less clarity than the present, because the role and position of women in the Orthodox Christian lands and the diaspora has varied across time and space. There is, consequently, no single “Orthodox woman” of the past to whom we can turn as our starting point (in no small part the problem at hand, as we shall see). Here, however, because of

¹ For more on this phenomenon, see Amy Slagle, *The Eastern Church in the Spiritual Marketplace: American Conversions to Orthodox Christianity*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

the importance of both to idealized contemporary notions of the past, we focus on the Byzantine Empire and Imperial Russia.

In the patriarchal and militarized worlds of these two Orthodox Christian empires, the records of women's history are scarce on the ground and to the extent which they exist are almost exclusively the work of men, largely monastic men, who introduced the lives of women largely for rhetorical effect when making another argument. This is not to mention the ways in which the rising tide of monastic influence in certain periods also worked to erase the presence of women. And yet, this blotting out has always been far from complete and a picture of Orthodox women through history can still be reconstructed.

For the most part, premodern women in the Orthodox world were bound to the same fate of "biology as destiny" as other women. Most women married, most became mothers. This reality, however, did not necessarily result in anything that might even vaguely suggest a glorification of the roles of wife and mother. The complicated and frequently suspicious attitude of early Christians toward marriage has been well documented.² Likewise motherhood is seldom afforded the reverential treatment that it would come to enjoy in industrial and post-industrial societies. To be certain, elite men leave an extensive record of thanks for the influence of their mothers; but, as Kathleen Biddick has observed, female saints and mystics are frequently extolled for behaving in notably unmaternal ways, for example, abandoning children in order to enter into monastic life.³

The Byzantine's Slavic counterparts had a similarly fraught relationship with the most frequently occupied feminine offices of the medieval world. With their conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Slavic peoples inherited much of the Byzantine position on marriage and virginity. When adaptations were made, these almost always resulted in an even greater focus on sexual restraint and the forgoing of the worldly roles of wife and mother. When these positions were extolled, particularly in later Slavic texts, it was largely within the hagiographic tradition of the "holy housewives." These martyr tales are stories of women killed by abusive husbands and thus cast as horrific exemplars of the unbreakable bounds of Christian marriage. It is important to note, however, that alongside this seeming sanctification of marital abuse, the

² See, for example, David G. Hunter, ed. *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).

³ Kathleen Biddick, "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible," in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA, Medieval Academy of America, 1993), reprinted in Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press 1998), p. 155.

Slavic tradition did not unreservedly offer up the role of wife and mother as inviolable and inescapable. Russian hagiographies are, for example, just as full of saints intervening on behalf of battered wives (usually by offering them escape to the convent) as they are of women who died at the hands of their husbands.⁴ This once again points to the idea that whatever their sanctifying attributes, the roles of wife and mother were not essential, nor absolute.

Even the wifeness and maternity of the Mother of God was much more fraught in the medieval East than in the West (and, frankly, much more fraught than contemporary commentary would have one believe). While in the Latin world she most often was ascribed the honorific *Mater dei* (Mother of God), in the largely Greek-speaking East, she was more commonly *Θεοτόκος* (the one who bears God). These two honorifics, while denoting the same Christological concept (ie the existence of the divine nature of Christ), provide a subtle linguistic shift with respect to the role of Mary herself. In the West, Mary is decidedly and expressly a “mother”; in the East, she bears God without necessarily “mothering.” Likewise, the 6th-century *Akathist to the Theotokos*, still one of the most important Marian devotions of the Eastern Orthodox Church, extolls Mary with a number of titles, including “heavenly ladder”, “source of milk and honey,” “ark made golden by the Holy Spirit,” and even “Virgin and Bride.” Nonetheless, this influential liturgical piece is almost entirely devoid of explicit references to Mary in the role of “mother.”⁵

The position of Joseph of Nazareth in Eastern Christianity also reflects a lack of focus on conventional family roles and norms within Marian veneration. While from early centuries, Latin Christians spoke of “Saint Joseph” (Sanctus Iosephus) who was the “*sponsus*” (spouse) of Mary, he enjoyed no such position in the East. Instead, he was merely *Ἰωσήφ ὁ μνηστὴς* (Joseph the Betrothed), a title that focuses on the fact that the marriage was never consummated, thus preserving Mary’s virginity and excluding her from the position of earthly housewife.

The Virgin Mary is not the only holy woman whose Eastern Christian depiction defies the roles of wife and mother. The hagiographies and histories of the Orthodox world are filled with the stories of women with both independence and power, many of whom are viewed as taking on masculinity through their pursuit of virtue. This includes the largely masculine exercise

⁴ Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Russian History* 25, no. 1/2, “Festschrift” For Aleksandr’ Aleksandrovich Zimin (1920-1980)” (1998): p. 133-144.

⁵ Gilles Gerard Meersseman, ed. *Hymnos Akathistos: Die älteste Andacht zur Gottesmutter: Griechischer Text, deutsche Übersetzung und Einführung von GG Meersseman* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1958).

of political power. It is not outlandish to suggest that the names of Orthodox empresses echo louder through the halls of history than those of their fathers, brothers, and husbands: Theodora, Irene, Olga.⁶

In summary, while most women in the medieval Orthodox world would inevitably end up fulfilling the roles of wife and mother, the larger social attitude towards these roles was much less universal and there is little in the medieval tradition to suggest that these domestic roles were seen as the purpose *par excellence* of women's lives. In fact, to the contrary, it could even be argued that the occupation of these normative family roles was instead seen as a concession, a reduced state of holiness made inevitable by the existence of worldly demands.

The Development of the Cult of Domesticity and Early Modern Articulations of Gender

Outside of the Orthodox world, the ambiguous medieval notions of women's proper role began to give way in large part as a result of industrialization. As men were increasingly forced out of traditional domestic economies into factories and other public work spaces from the early 18th century onward (spaces that were frequently dirty and dangerous), the "home" began to take on an increased symbolic importance as a refuge from the precarities of the new economic realities. As the home became the safe haven of the industrializing world, women (who largely remained within the domestic economy in no small part because of the time consuming demands of household labor) began to see that domestic role exhaled in a way which had not previously been true. If before the role of wife and mother had been an unfortunate default position in women's lives and nearly always indicative of diminished opportunities for holiness, in the harsh light of emerging industrialization, these roles, removed from the grime of the factory and the rough-and-tumble of nascent capitalism, were to be seen as the very space in which piety, holiness, and virtue might be cultivated. In some sense, the family home of the 18th and 19th centuries became what the monastery had been in the Middle Ages: that place sufficiently removed from the evils of the world whereby its occupants might be made virtuous enough that their virtue could be spread out into the world in order to counteract its evil.

⁶ For more on imperial women in Byzantium see the following: Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*. (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Judith Herrin, Averil Cameron, and Amélie Kuhrt, *In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

However, unlike medieval monasticism, which had largely been a masculine affair, the modern home was a feminine sphere. In fact, in the wake of industrialization, the notion of “separate spheres” became one of the most pronounced aspects of gender role construction in the West.⁷ Men and women, it was declared, were ordained by God and nature to occupy different spaces in the world. Men were to have a public life; women were to remain in the private world. This separation both resulted from and in the nature of women who were simultaneous both too weak for the harsh public world, but also too virtuous for it. This paradoxical relationship is, in part, what Barbara Welter termed “The Cult of Domesticity”.⁸

Two historical realities about the milieu in which these new, modern notions of gender, particularly of the role of women, were evolving are significant to the current discussion: the co-chronological development of the “Cult of Domesticity” with fundamentalist evangelical Protestantism and the relatively late arrival of industrialization to traditionally Orthodox lands. The first issue is the co-development of the idea of separate spheres with fundamentalist, Evangelical Protestantism, especially in the English-speaking world. Evangelicalism as a distinct religious phenomenon emerged in Britain and the United States in the 1730s and can be viewed in large part as a response to the failure of mainline denominations (largely the Church of England) to adequately engage with the challenges of both industrialization and the Enlightenment. This parallel development “baked in” the ideology of separate spheres to Evangelical Protestantism in significant ways, ways which continue to have serious consequences as explored below. Secondly, it is important to note that while Western Europe and North America were in the throes of emerging modernity, traditionally Orthodox lands often remained behind. Most of the former Byzantine Empire remained under Ottoman control and Imperial Russia confronted modernity in fits and starts, never quite able to succumb to the influence of reform-minded tsars like Peter and Catherine.

Communist Family: Soviet Pro-Natalism and Beyond

Russia’s late arrival to industrialization and capitalism is one of history’s great ironies, of course. When the Marx-inspired revolution came in 1917, it did not erupt in Britain, France, or the United States where the deplorable conditions of the factory worker had inspired the German

⁷ For more, see, Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁸ Barbara Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860. American Quarterly*. 18, no. 2, Part 1 (1966): 581-606.

philosopher's revolutionary zeal, but instead the worker's revolution arrived in the still-nearly-feudal Russian Empire. Like the monarchy and the Church, the family was targeted by the new regime for liberation. Under Lenin, divorce laws were relaxed, abortion legalized, and gender equality mandated by the law.

However, the Revolution, the famines of the late 1920s and 1930s, the purges of the 1930s, and the Second World War were nothing short of demographic disasters for the Soviet Union. The result was the implementation of pro-natalist policies and propaganda. These efforts, which reached their zenith under Joseph Stalin, were occasionally revived throughout the Soviet era. By the 1930s, abortion had been re-criminalized and divorce made more difficult. In 1923, Aleksandra Kollontai had declared that the Soviet Union would "lift the burdens of motherhood from women's shoulders and transfer them to the state."⁹ By the 1930s, Soviet propaganda was glorifying motherhood, which it posited was the foundation of strong families, as the most significant way in which women could serve the state. Instead of the state taking the burden of motherhood from women, the state would demand that she alone bore the burden in the service of the state.

Soviet propaganda campaigns ironically mirrored much of the gender essentialism and "separate spheres" ideology which capitalism had given birth to in the West. Motherhood became the duty of the revolutionary woman, the highest sacrifice that she could make for the state. Not only did the Soviet state elevate the position of mothers from the 1930s onward, the role of wife also enjoyed new-found prestige. The *obschestvennitsa*, a movement of the wives of leading workers, exalted the role of wife as a critical supporter of the male worker in the socialist state and imbued her with much of the virtue-enhancing sanctity that can be seen in the Cult of Domesticity.

While this positioning echoed some of the hagiographic traditions around "holy housewives," it was still a radical departure from the broader (and not nearly as complementary) Orthodox understandings of motherhood that had been inherited from Byzantium and reigned supreme in Holy Mother Russia. And when the Soviet state eventually collapsed, it would be a fight to see which model would emerge as dominant.

⁹ Cited in David L. Hoffmann, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in its Pan-European Context." *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (2000): 35-54, p. 35.

Fleeing and Exporting the Culture Wars

As the Soviet Union was vacillating between various levels of natalism throughout the 1960s, the West was experiencing a social, and sexual, revolution. The legalization of hormonal birth control in many parts of the West unshackled women from the constant threat of pregnancy and helped shape a growing movement for gender equality, both in and out of the bedroom. Shifting gender and sexual norms not only affected the status of women, but also created a space for the public participation of openly gay and lesbian people. From every side, the “separate spheres” which had underpinned Western culture since the Industrial Revolution were starting to come undone. Furthermore, the racial hierarchies that had been created in the wake of colonialism were also starting to face increasing opposition. Particularly in the American context, this battle of racial equality had proven damaging for much of the modern Evangelical Movement which in its southern American stronghold had staked its political fortunes first on the cause of slavery and then segregation. With the battle for legal segregation lost, the Evangelical Movement was forced to stake out new political territory. The emerging debates over gender and sexuality, entered into via the national legalization of abortion in the United States in 1973, provide just the opportunity to make that shift.¹⁰

American Protestantism, both mainline and evangelical, was rocked by social upheaval of the mid-20th century. While Evangelicals increasingly embraced an open, even brazen political conservatism, many mainline Protestants gradually began a process of reform. The ordination of women, the greater inclusion of LGBT people, the relaxing of traditional teachings around sexuality and birth control have been the trajectory of mainline Protestant denominations across the United States for the better part of 40 years now, including the Episcopal Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the United Methodist Church. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of the conservative adherents of these progressive denominations were on the hunt for new faith communities. Moreover, the heavily-politicized and increasingly reactionary American Evangelical movement found some among going in search of the “ancient Church” as a sort of ultimate, Platonic form of true conservatism, both theological and

¹⁰ The Civil Rights Movement and the re-orientation of political American Evangelical Christianity is outside the scope of the present essay but has been the topic of significant discussion. For more see the following: Antony W. Alumkal, "American Evangelicalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: A Racial Formation Theory Analysis." *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 3 (2004): 195-213.

political.¹¹ Up until this point, Orthodox Christianity in the United States had been almost exclusively (with the exception of early Russian missionary work in Alaska) an immigrant church. And Orthodox churches across the country functioned as much as community centers as religious institutions. In this context their engagement with cultural norms had been largely in the context of assimilation, not by way of staking out a proactive position. Nonetheless, many of these disaffected American Protestants, the vast majority without any traditionally Orthodox background, found their way into Orthodoxy. This influx of American converts (the exact number of American Orthodox converts is hard to pin down but estimates are around 150,000 of the roughly 800,000 Orthodox Christians in America are converts) included on occasion the conversion of whole parishes into the jurisdiction of an Eastern bishop. The Orthodox jurisdictions receiving these converts varied greatly across America's hodgepodge ecclesiastical landscape, dictated largely by a calculus of language, culture, and numbers. The Antiochian Archdiocese of North America and the Orthodox Church in America, two jurisdictions which were both relatively small and had a long tradition of English-language liturgical celebration, were the entry point of many of the new converts. By the early part of the 21st century, many of these jurisdictions had entire parishes that were almost exclusively made up of those from convert backgrounds as well as an average of 50% convert attendance at more traditional "ethnic" parishes.¹²

This large influx of explicitly politically conservative, formerly Protestant converts into generally smaller Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States inevitably has had an impact on the character of these jurisdictions and American Orthodoxy more broadly. This impact might even be disproportionately felt, due to the fact, that converts to Orthodoxy are overrepresented in self-identified Orthodox media. Ancient Faith Radio, for example, the brainchild of two American adult converts to Orthodoxy who spent the better part of their adult lives working in the media wing of the Evangelical Christian juggernaut of the Moody Bible Institute, is now an official ministry of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North and South America, and boasts many converts among its regular commentators and guests. This is, in no small part, because many of these

¹¹ These convert movements also sparked a cottage industry in Orthodox conversion memoirs the most famous of which is Peter E. Gilquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2000).

¹² Alexei Krindatch, (2010) *Go and Make Disciples: Evangelization and Outreach in US Orthodox Parishes*: <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/assets/files/docs/research/EvangelizationStudyReportFinalRev4.pdf> Accessed 13/10/2019.

converts brought with them to Orthodoxy the sleek media know-how that had defined much of modern Evangelical Christianity, replete with its television stations, radio stations, and film studios.

In addition to this media savviness, many of these converts, refugees from the Culture Wars in their previous faith traditions, brought with them the baggage of those battles--battles largely focused on gender and sexuality. They also brought with them the language of womanhood inherited from the Industrial Revolution and the Cult of Domesticity. The blog of popular Orthodox commentator Fredrica Matthewes-Greene, a former Episcopalian, provides a case study in this importation. Titles among the sixty-three blogs filed under "Marriage and Family" include "The High and Holy Calling of Being a Wife", "The Role of Men", and "Dating vs Courtship". The last piece in particular, an exhortation to move from a "dating culture" to a "courtship" model, is borrowed heavily from contemporary currents in American Evangelical Christianity widely-known as "purity culture."¹³ Matthewes-Greene also maintains blog categories under the headlines "Gender" and "Pro-Life". Time and time again, she wades into the Culture Wars, using language of separate spheres and the exalted roles of wife and mother. In terms of gender paradigms at least, Matthewes-Greene's blog is as American and Protestant as they come.

The Return of Holy Mother Russia and the Emergence of the Holy Russian Mother

At the same time that the first large influx of American Protestants was converting to Orthodox Christianity, the Soviet Union was collapsing. While it is common to acknowledge that the collapse of communism signaled the grand re-entry of the Russian Orthodox Church into Russian political life, it is just as important that the end of communism also opened the doors for Protestant missionaries to enter Russia. These missionaries, largely from the United States, brought with them a traditional animosity to Orthodoxy, inherited in no small part from the anti-Catholicism of their ancestors. But they were also savvy and saw the fall of the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity for spreading their political gospel as much as their religious one. As early as

¹³ For more on purity culture and the American Evangelical Movement see Courtney Ann Irby, "Dating in Light of Christ: Young Evangelicals Negotiating Gender in the Context of Religious and Secular American Culture." *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2014): 260-283.

1992, American Evangelicals had been invited by Russian government officials to provide “moral education” in Russia’s state schools, via the training of teachers.¹⁴

In many ways Russia was the perfect ground for American Evangelicals next battle in a war that they increasingly saw in global terms. Russian society was still deeply conservative but had been stripped of some of its Orthodox memory and past by seventy years of communism. That being said, while it was easy for American Evangelicals to insert their values into the Russian context, their identity was another matter. Being Orthodox had been synonymous with being Russian for centuries before communism and even in the wake of the communist calamity, most Russians still identified themselves as Orthodox, regardless of their religious beliefs. Victory would not come through beating them, but joining them. And in the early 2000s, Russia provided two perfect allies to join. The election of Vladimir Putin as the President of the Russian Federation in 2000 and the elevation of Patriarch Kirill to the apostolic throne of Moscow in 2009 provided the indigenous conduits by which the America Evangelical weaponization of Russian Christianity for the Culture Wars might be completed.

Born Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev in Leningrad in 1946, Patriarch Kirill has, among things, hosted a religious-themed television program since 1994. He has also waded into the Culture Wars on an international stage in a way that no high ranking Orthodox cleric has before him. He has been a strong opponent of LGBT rights and has pushed what is essentially a Russianized version of separate spheres ideology, particularly with its emphasis on women as guardians of moral virtue. For example, the Russian Church has offered its tacit support to the decriminalization of domestic violence in Russia and offered a 2015 explanation for domestic violence that said, in part, “We think that the term ‘domestic violence’ is connected to ideas of radical feminism where a man is often portrayed as a potential aggressor...”¹⁵ In 2011, the Patriarch’s close associate sparked controversy when he suggested that women provoke rape by “indecent apparel” and drunkenness.”¹⁶ Patriarch Kirill has also helped to organize forums on the

¹⁴ For more on this fascinating story see Perry Lynn Glanzer, *The Quest for Russia's Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ “Пояснения в отношении оценки Патриаршей Комиссией по вопросам семьи, защиты материнства и детства термина ‘насилие в семье’, иных аналогичных терминов и связанных с ними концепций и подходов.” Русская Православная Церковь. <http://pk-semya.ru/dokumenty-komissii/item/2136-poyasneniya-nasilie.html> Accessed 13/10/2019.

¹⁶ Ellen Barry, “A Dress Code For Russians? Priest Chides Skimpiness.” *The New York Times*. 18 Jan 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/19/world/europe/19russia.html>. Accessed 11/10/2019.

“sanctity of motherhood” where delegates hold discussions “on the Centuries-Old Family Traditions as the Foundation of Russia’s Future.”¹⁷

These statements would be damaging enough if isolated to the Patriarch’s canonical sphere of influence; however, Russia and her religious leaders have been rewarded for the extent to which they have adopted and promoted mainstream traditionalist attitudes toward gender, both at home and abroad. Many conservative Christians in the West have come to view Russia as the last outpost of true Christendom. This view has, in turn, allowed Vladimir Putin to wield the influence of the Orthodox Church as a weapon of Russian soft-power, thus expanding the Patriarch’s influence abroad. The gender ideals imported into Russia after the fall of communism are now being exported abroad as quintessentially Russian, and thus Orthodox, values.

The Orthodox Woman Today

The twin forces of American Evangelicalism and Russian Orthodoxy’s revised conservatism have come to dominate the construction of modern Orthodox women. The contemporary Orthodox woman in her normative form is a wife and mother *par excellence*. She is dutiful, domestic, and the progenitor of many children. She forswears contraception. She veils her hair in church and perhaps outside of it. She is, as Patriarch Kirill and his ally suggested above, the guardian of men’s morality, preventing men from falling into sin as a result of *her* lack of virtue. Perhaps most importantly of all, she stays confined to her proper role and does not seek the ecclesiastical power that her mainline Protestant counterparts have achieved. She is victor in the Culture Wars by force of example alone. These characteristics are, importantly, in this imagined form, decidedly not a response to modernity. In fact, through an idealized interpretation of the past, the six hundred years of modernity are swept away and the values which modernity, both capitalism and communism, created with respect to gender are transposed onto the “holy Orthodox Empires” of yore. Gone are the complex and multifaceted views of women from the past: Some mothers and wives yes, but also martyrs, monastics, and empresses. In this usable past, all are virtuous mother and wives.

¹⁷ “4th Forum on ‘The Sanctity of Motherhood’ opens in Kazan.” The Russian Orthodox Church: Department of External Church Relations. 27.11.2015. <https://mospat.ru/en/2015/11/27/news125573/>. Accessed 10/10/2019.

All-American (Orthodox) Girl

In the American context (as elsewhere), this contemporary construction of Orthodox womanhood has been rift with conflict across the lines of traditionally Orthodox ethnic groups and between convert and “cradle” communities. While much of this conflict is subtle, manifestations of this conflict can be seen in a few explicit symbols and debates: the veiling of women, issues related to reproductive freedom, and the ordination of women to the diaconate (and even priesthood). These three areas of contention also demonstrate the ways in which the new Orthodox womanhood is coming to bear on communities in the United States and into the lives of real Orthodox women.

“On Account of the Angels” (in America): The Case of the Headscarf in American Orthodoxy

The veiling of women (particularly during worship) was a fairly pancultural expression of feminine identity just a century ago. Not only Christian women across confessional borders, but also Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh women were mandated to cover their hair as an act of modesty and arguably submission both during worship and in the conduct of their daily lives. The veil remained, for example, a mandatory part of Catholic Mass attendance until the Second Vatican Council.

In the United States, most Protestant women abandoned the veil for the more stylish and seemingly modern cover of hats early in the 19th century. This singled out the headscarf proper as the domain of certain, usually suspect, immigrant groups. Although these groups were initially Catholics, by the early 20th century Jewish and Orthodox Christian migrants had begun to enter the United States in large numbers. Early 20th-century Orthodox Christian migrants to the United States were predominantly of Greek and Syrian extraction. The women from these communities came from cultures in which the headscarf was not only still being worn as part of worship but in daily life. While many women in these communities might continue to cover their hair in public for a few years after immigration, or even their whole lives, their daughters were by and large discouraged from taking up the practice. In these communities, the “unveiling” of the community’s women was seen, particularly by the women within these communities, as a significant step toward assimilation.¹⁸

¹⁸ See: “Women” in the Frank Kamberos Oral History Collection. National Hellenic Museum. Chicago, IL.

As might be expected, the removal of headcovering during worship came slower than in daily life. However, by the early 1940s, most Greek women in the United States, particularly those who had been born in the country, had discarded the headscarf for hats during liturgical attendance.¹⁹ Syrian women followed a similar pattern. When, in the 1960s, other American women began to attend worship services with bare heads, women in these communities followed suit.

This pattern was in sharp contrast to America's growing Russian immigrant community. Beginning with the Russian Revolution in 1917 and continuing throughout the 20th century, Russian immigrants arrived in the United States, largely fleeing the Soviet regime. Unlike their Greek and Syrian counterparts, who were arguably running toward something (i.e. "The American Dream"), these Russian immigrants were running *away* from Soviet communism. While the Greeks and Syrians came to America seeking a new life, these Russian immigrants came because their old way of life was fundamentally threatened. This led to a greater conservatism within Russian immigrant communities and in Russian liturgical practice in the United States. Consequently, the headcovering remained and continues to remain a widely practiced part of women's worship in the Russian heritage churches within the United States. This pattern, not insignificantly, has repeated itself across traditionally Orthodox immigrant communities. Communities that arrived largely as economic migrants (Greeks, Syrians, Ethiopians) assimilated many of their liturgical practices and quickly discarded mandatory--or even widespread--headcovering. Communities that arrived largely as refugees, particularly from the anti-religious communist regimes, (Russians, Romanians, Serbs) maintained non-assimilated liturgical practices, including requiring the mandatory veiling of women.

This division was not of much consequence, however, given the siloed nature of American Orthodoxy, until the wave of conversions into Orthodoxy beginning in the late 1980s referenced above. Several features affected how these new converts were enculturated into Orthodox practice. First, it is not without importance that many converts came and continue to come into the Orthodox Church via the direction of monastic clergy. Within monastic communities, liturgical practices, particularly around gender, have always been deeply conservative. The veiling of women in monasteries in the United States, as throughout the rest of

¹⁹ Ibid. Also note, the adoption of hats by Greek Orthodox women followed a similar pattern of assimilation seen in Greek Orthodox liturgical practices in the United States which included the addition of pews into church building, the adoption of mixed-sex choirs, and the introduction of organ music.

the Orthodox world, is *de rigueur*. Moreover, these converts largely came into Orthodoxy explicitly seeking a conservative, “authentic” Christianity that would be an expression of their distinctness from the larger, changing culture. Unlike the immigrant communities that formed the core of Orthodox America, most of which were deeply committed to assimilation into American life, American converts to Orthodoxy were instead equally committed to making themselves distinct from the larger American culture. Finally, many of the initial converts to the Orthodox church came in via Russian tradition jurisdictions where the headcovering was still common. Those who entered into the Syrian Antiochian Archdiocese (where assimilation had largely blotted out the practice) entered, at least early on, as whole parishes. In these cases, the headcovering was frequently adopted (or returned) as an act of defiance against the former tradition. Notably, when this happened, it was not the stylish, Western “Sunday hat,” the most likely liturgical accessory abandoned by the grandmothers of these recent converts, but instead the much older, seemingly more “Orthodox” headscarf that reappeared. Perhaps even more oddly, some of these women, particularly the most politically conservative of them, began to practice head covering as a constant part of daily life, something that has been abandoned by most women from traditionally Orthodox backgrounds, particularly in the United States, for well over a century.

The internet has been a gathering place for women dedicated to this practice and has created a space in which the practice is encouraged as part of a larger “return to femininity.” Take, for example, this anonymous blog published on the well-trafficked *Orthodox Christian Information Center* by a woman calling herself “Elisabeth,” which declares the following:

In 1995 I was chrismated Orthodox and was surprised to find myself again the only woman wearing a head-covering in my parish. An Orthodox sister told me, with a nod to my scarf, “We don’t have to wear that anymore.” I smiled and said, “I know, but I want to.” St. Paul had said “ought,” not “must.” It was my voluntary obedience, even if I didn’t understand the “why’s.” By now I had no intention of giving up the benefits. I felt blessed and protected, feminine, and, paradoxically, confident and free—in the presence of guardian and ministering angels.²⁰

Here the veiling of a convert woman becomes not only an assertion of her new Orthodox Christian identity, but also a not so subtle cue to her “cradle” fellow worshipers that not only has

²⁰ “Elisabeth”. “On Account of the Angels: Why I Cover My Hair” *Orthodox Christian Information Center*. Nd. <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/headcoverings.aspx>. Accessed 30/09/2019.

she found a more *Orthodox* expression of worship, but also a more *feminine* form of worship. And that in that “reclaimed” femininity there is an opportunity for greater spirituality.

This, significantly, is not just a position taken up by the most conservative voices in the American Orthodox world. A post by Giacomo Sanfilippo on his blog *Orthodoxy in Dialogue* takes a similar tack. Sanfilippo and *Orthodoxy in Dialogue* are seen by many, particularly the most conservative converts to Orthodoxy, as the outer fringe of progressive Orthodoxy. Yet here he deploys the rhetoric of virtue-inspiring femininity vis-a-vis the veil that is clearly a product of negative Western reactions to shifting gender norms. While coming to great lengths to state that he would never require women to put on the veil, he does write the following:

I loved the more traditional—dare I say more *spiritual*—ambiance created by the near universal use of the headscarf by the women and girls at Holy Trinity. I never sensed on their part any feelings of being “oppressed” or “unmodern,” any obsequiousness or lack of self-confidence in their dealings with their husbands and the other men of the parish; nor did I detect any sign of arrogance or condescension toward the women on the part of the men.²¹

Beyond the absurd notion that a man, especially a man who is an outsider in what is by his own account a highly traditional and insular community, would have any access to the nature of the relationships between men and women in that context or to whether or not these women felt oppressed, is the notion that the covering of women lends greater spirituality. This encourages the implication that a veiled Orthodox woman is more authentically Orthodox in a meaningful way than women who, largely as a product of a dynamic history, have taken off the veil.

Across ideological lines, and as seen in both the case of those from traditionally Orthodox backgrounds in which the head covering was maintained and in the case of converts who adopted the headcovering, the veiling of women has become a visible symbol of an Orthodox womanhood in which women became the standard-bearer and visible representative of Orthodox defiance against the liberalization of the wider culture and a carefully constructed “Orthodox” femininity becomes the most visible symbol of Orthodox difference to the wider world. In this way, the re-veiling of American Orthodox women is strikingly similar to what has occurred among Muslim women throughout the world. While by the middle of the 20th century,

²¹ Giacomo Sanfilippo. “Headscarves: Some Thoughts on Orthodoxy and Culture. *Orthodoxy in Dialogue*. 6 July 2018 <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2018/07/06/headscarves-some-thoughts-on-orthodoxy-and-culture-by-giacomo-sanfilippo/>. Accessed 09/10/2019.

most modern Muslim women had taken off the *hijab*, in the wake of Arab nationalism, growing Islamic fundamentalism, and the Iranian Revolution, the headscarf was reintroduced and re-adopted by Muslim women, quickly becoming the symbol *par excellence* of Muslim identity in the larger world.²² This similarity points to the way in which the Cult of Domesticity and its focus on “contagious” female virtue had influenced contemporary, fundamentalist conceptions of womanhood across religious boundaries.

Mandated Motherhood: The Shifting Terrain of Abortion and Birth Control

Another debate, one with much deeper ethical and theological considerations, in which the reshaping of Orthodox womanhood has become particularly relevant is in the conversation around reproductive freedom within the Orthodox Church. “Abortion and gay marriage” are the omnipresent stakes of the American Culture War. These two issues, tangentially related by the ways in which they question traditional gender roles, but otherwise widely dissimilar, have become the two most important markers of identity within American political life and there is the widespread assumption that one’s opinion on one issue inevitably leads to a paired opinion on the other. It was via the national legalization abortion in 1973 that Evangelical Christians transitioned from a political posture primarily concerned about maintaining segregation to one primarily concerned about maintaining traditional gender boundaries and norms. So it should come as no surprise that when Evangelical Protestants came to convert to Orthodoxy in large(r) numbers, they brought with them this cultural battle. We will leave here the issue of more complicated and fraught issue of abortion and instead focus on how anti-abortion rhetoric and pro-natalist rhetoric in the dialectic of the New Orthodox Womanhood has resulted in a renewed focus on the use of birth control by Orthodox women. It can be argued that the position of the Orthodox Church on the use of artificial birth control is ambiguous at best. The early Church Fathers could simply not have conceived of non-abortifacient birth control as it now exists and so are silent. And while there were a handful of early 20th-century Orthodox condemnations of hormonal birth control, for example by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1937, Orthodox churches across jurisdictional lines largely stayed out of the debate on birth control as it raged in many mainline Protestant jurisdictions. In fact, it can be argued that the Orthodox position toward

²² For more on Muslim women and the veil see the following: Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010) and Moodfa Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough, *The Muslim Veil in North America*. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2003).

artificial birth control began to moderate throughout the middle of the 20th century, as the practice, at least with respect to married couples was increasingly seen as a private, pastoral matter.

One example of this moderation, particularly significant to American Orthodox circles, can be seen in the revisions made to Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Way*. A modern classic in Orthodox Christian English-language literature, the book (along with his also seminal *The Orthodox Church*) has been standard reading for English-speaking Orthodox Christians, both cradle and convert, for over half a century. Moreover, Metropolitan Kallistos's books have largely been understood as a touchpoint for normative practices within Orthodoxy. Regarding birth control, the 1963 edition of *The Orthodox Way* reads simply, "Artificial methods of contraception are forbidden in the Orthodox Church."²³ However, by the 1984 edition this explanation had been expanding to read the following:

The use of contraceptives and other devices for birth control is on the whole strongly discouraged in the Orthodox Church. Some bishops and theologians altogether condemn the employment of such methods. Others, however, have recently begun to adopt a less strict position, and urge that the question is best left to the discretion of each individual couple, in consultation with the spiritual father.²⁴

Yet even this couched explanation was replaced just ten years later in the 1993 edition which reads in this nuanced and (frankly) non-committal way:

Concerning contraceptives and other forms of birth control, differing opinions exist within the Orthodox Church. In the past birth control was in general strongly condemned, but today a less strict view is coming to prevail, not only in the west but in traditional Orthodox countries. Many Orthodox theologians and spiritual fathers consider that the responsible use of contraception within marriage is not in itself sinful. In their view, the question of how many children a couple should have, and at what intervals, is best decided by the partners themselves, according to the guidance of their own consciences.²⁵

These revisions to *The Orthodox Way* chart the growing nuance and discretion taken to the issue of hormonal birth control in the Orthodox Church in the English-speaking, particularly the United States, throughout much of the 20th century. However, with the infusion of culture warrior American converts into the mainstream of Orthodox life, the clock began to turn back on the American Orthodox attitude toward birth control. Ancient Faith Radio, for example, has

²³ Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. 1st Edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 302

²⁴ Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. 2nd Edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 302.

²⁵ Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. 3rd. Edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 296.

frequently hosted blogs and podcast in which contraception is unequivocally condemned.²⁶ Notably, the rhetoric surrounding the condemnation of birth control shifted away from the notion that sexual contact, even within the context of marriage, should be limited (the root of the traditional Orthodox position on contraception), a pro-natalist glorification of motherhood and an emphasis on motherhood and mothering as the height of female identity and the ends of feminine activity, including all sexual activity.

While there has been a definite shift in the rhetoric around contraception in the Orthodox Church, particularly in the ever influential “non-official” channels, the waters are ever more murky in terms of practice. While studies have indicated that American Catholic women, who belong to a tradition with a much more pronounced opposition to contraception, practice it at incredibly high rates, no similar studies have been conducted among American Orthodox Christian women; however, an antidotal look at birth rates among women from traditionally Orthodox backgrounds over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries suggests that contraception is widely used. This has happened both as a matter of assimilation and as a result of an increasing educational and professional success among women from these immigrant backgrounds. It is worth noting that the large family sizes and the lack of educational opportunity afforded to women were among the chief slurs uttered against Southern and Eastern European immigrants (who were frequently Orthodox) upon their arrival in the early 20th century. The use of contraception to achieve both of these goals was both a matter of personal fulfilment and social survival for these first immigrant women and their daughters.

Much like in the case of the headscarves, when American converts arrived to Orthodoxy, they were not interested in assimilation as the immigrant women had been but in signaling their difference. In this climate, the creation and rearing of large families, particularly among Orthodox converts, has become yet another marker of both Orthodox and a more broadly conservative identity. More sinisterly, the use of contraception has become a gatekeeping mechanism used to punish or exclude, particularly from the Eucharist, women seen as too “progressive”, as “feminist,” or as not otherwise conforming to understood norms of the

²⁶ See, for example, “Birth Control and the Orthodox Christian.” *Ancient Faith Ministries*. 26 July 2012. https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/morningoffering/birth_control_and_the_orthodox_christian. Accessed 10/10/2019 and “The Meaning of Sex.” *Ancient Faith Ministries*. 18 March 2011. https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/frederica/the_meaning_of_sex. Accessed 10/10/2019.

contemporary version of Orthodox womanhood in which mothering is seen as a goal, an end in itself, and a way to virtue.

A Priesthood of All Believers: The Rhetoric of Women's Ordination and Women in Theology

For well over a millennium Orthodox women could be ordained to the diaconate. This is not a question, but a historical reality. The practice largely died out in late Byzantium, though it has at certain times and places been revived. Orthodox women have never been ordained to the sacerdotal priesthood. This is also a historical fact. Finally, it is not in question that the ordination of women was one of the modernizing trends which has caused a great deal of strife within mainline Protestant denominations in recent history and that many of those American converts to Orthodoxy fled their tradition upon the ordination of women to the clergy. Many of these converts have reshaped the conversation around women's ordination in a way that is not dissimilar from the debate around contraception. In both instances, what was once a realm of gradual transformation within American Orthodox communities has been swept up in the debates of the Culture War and been infused with modern Western notions around gender and femininity. In the case of contraception, this was the sanctification of motherhood. In the case of ordination, it is the notion of "separate spheres".

There was in the middle of the 20th century a fairly robust debate around the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. The issue of women's ordination was (and is) importantly, in the Orthodox context at least, intimately tied to the issue of theological education. And it must be understood that historically denying women access to some form of ordination has also meant denying them access to a theological education. So, in the middle of the 20th century, if nothing else, many conceded that renewing the female diaconate was an advisable step. Moreover, there was increasingly opportunity for women to obtain a theological education, in no small part due to the understanding that women might at some point take on more official positions within the Church. St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, the flagship educational institution of the Orthodox Church in America, founded by the acclaimed Father Alexander Schmemmann, admitted female students from the 1960s. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese's seminary, Holy Cross, admitted its first female student in the 1980s. As early as the late 1970s, there were serious theological

dialogues occurring around the issue of women's ordination to the diaconate and to the priesthood.

But none of this early promise has manifested as change and arguably the conversation about official roles for women within the American Orthodox Church is going backward. Today there are ten Orthodox theological schools in America, but there are fewer than five women with terminal degrees combined teaching theology at these institutions. Most Orthodox women theologians teach outside of Orthodox institutions and, furthermore, obtain their theological educations outside of explicitly Orthodox contexts. Moreover, the conversation on the ordination of women, even in the historically attested to institution of the diaconate, has largely become bogged down in Culture War rhetoric. This can be seen, bizarrely enough, in the American reaction to the ordination of women to the diaconate in the Congo by the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Take, for example, this blog posted by Father Lawrence Farley to *Ancient Faith Ministries* blog on January 26, 2018 entitled "Looking Down the Road to LMNOP":

It panders to the feminist vision of "empowering women" by erasing gender distinctions, and reconfiguring Church praxis so that it conforms to secular norms. But the real problem with the whole project lies elsewhere, *for the engine driving it is modern feminism*, not ancient Tradition, and thus it involves ignoring and eroding parts of that Tradition. The final result will not simply be more women serving liturgically and in ordained ministry, but further betrayals of Tradition and embraces of secular modernity. We don't have to guess where it leads; the Anglican church and others like it have kindly given us abundant demonstration of it in our own generation.

This was foreseen by the late Fr. Thomas Hopko, of blessed memory. When interviewed by *AGAIN Magazine* some decades ago about this very question, he said, "Many years ago when women's ordination was first being discussed in the Faith and Order Commission in the World Council of Churches a Russian Orthodox priest, Father Vitaly Borovoy, said, 'The Russians have a saying. If you say A you have to say B; if you say B then you have to say C. I'm interested in where you get when you're at LMNOP.' His [Fr. Vitaly's] point was, of course, if you take a step in a particular direction, you must see the full implication of where you are going."

When Hopko first made these statements, the denominations which embraced the ordination of women had yet not embraced same-sex marriage or begun to eliminate or limit masculine references to God. If the ordination of women were the "A" to which Frs. Vitaly and Thomas referred, these later moves would be a "D" or a "E", since they came only a few decades after the normalization of the ordination of women. But they came surely nonetheless, despite the assurances given as part of the required "adequate preparation and education" that no further changes or erosion would be forthcoming. And the ordination of women began with the restoration of deaconesses. In

Anglicanism, deaconesses (once sharply distinguished from deacons) were declared by the preparers and educators to be actual deacons, whether the new female deacons liked it or not (some did not). But, they said, it would never lead to female priests. Until, of course, it did, but this would never lead to female bishops. Until, of course, it did.

Then, since gender did not matter, it was discovered as modern society continued in its erosion of Christian tradition, that—well, gender didn't matter, so a priest could be homosexual or lesbian. Episcopal priest Gene Robinson, for example, after being married with children, “came out” in 1986, (ten years after his church voted to ordain women), met his gay partner Andrew the next year, moved in with him the year after that (having their house blessed by their bishop), and was elected bishop in 2003. They were legally married in church in June 2003 (Robinson said that “I always wanted to be a June bride”). They divorced in 2014.

Those asserting that such *a progression from women's ordination to same-sex marriage* could not happen in Orthodoxy are guilty of magical thinking, and need to produce evidence that American Orthodox are somehow immune to such sweeping cultural shifts as have effected (*sic*) everyone else. *Ad hominem attacks on former Anglican convert clergy sounding the alarm and suggesting that they suffer from a kind Episcopalian Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome do not constitute evidence, and are scarcely worthy of a reply.*²⁷

This blog is reproduced in such large part above because of the extent to which it exemplifies how this argument has been reframed from its original context in the early part of the 20th century, when, in American Orthodox communities, it was occurring almost exclusively among the descendants of immigrants in what was still a church body collectively characterized by its immigrant identity. Today, for people like Father Lawrence and others (primarily those who have been shaped by Culture War conflict within their tradition of origin), the ordination of women (and by extension the inclusion of women in the formal theological life of the Church) has become a proxy for everything related to shifting gender norms in society, a step on to the “slippery slope” toward “same-sex marriage...and (limiting) masculine references to God.”²⁸ A rigid conception of gender roles, divided into that very modern, very Western notion of separate spheres must be maintained, in this view, in order to prevent a complete coming apart of gender altogether. Moreover, perhaps even more foreign to a tradition in which some sort of gender ambiguity was in fact praised, is the idea that

²⁷ Emphasis is mine. Lawrence Farley, “Looking Down the Road to LMNOP.” *Ancient Faith Ministries*. 26 January 2018. <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/nootherfoundation/deaconesses-looking-road-lmnop/>. Accessed 09/10/2019.

²⁸ It perhaps goes without saying that the last fear related to limiting masculine references to God seems particularly petty, to say the least.

maintaining gender norms in some sort of sacred obligation a hill on which the defense of Holy Tradition must die. Just as in the case of headscarves and contraception, it is women who bear the brunt of this defense. It is women who are excluded not only from ordained ministry, but frequently from an explicitly Orthodox theological education as well. The New Orthodox Woman is to be wife and mother, but never deaconess or priest or, perhaps even, theologian. To be any of these would mean to threaten the very foundation of the Christian anthropology that has been constructed in the light of modernity.

Conclusion

This new version of Orthodox womanhood has consequences. The idealized modern Orthodox woman is just that: modern. And just perhaps, for an ancient faith, therein lies the problem. The co-option of contemporary Orthodox womanhood is part of a larger struggle within the Orthodox world. It is a struggle to maintain what makes Orthodoxy unique in the face of an increasingly global movement deeply invested in the cultural battles of the day. Reimagining, redefining, and reclaiming Orthodox womanhood in all its complexity and uncertainty is essential for maintaining Orthodox identity in the 21st century.

Contemporary debates in the American Orthodox Church which focus on women, debates that include the wearing of the veil, contraception and women's place in the ordained ministry, all draw heavily on notions of gender and particularly of female gender expression which evolved in the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath. It is a world very foreign to that in which Orthodox norms and Orthodox anthropology first evolved and it is a very transitory context. Samuel Callen, the famed Presbyterian minister, warned that "The Church that weds itself to an age will be a widow in the next." This warning is frequently issued against those seeking reform in their faith traditions, but in the Orthodox context of gender it might well be a warning of a different kind. The traditions and history of the Orthodox Church provide rich ground to explore how to be a woman in the world. When the tradition is surrendered to the narrow demands of a very recent, and to Orthodoxy largely foreign cultural conflict, we risk losing this rich tradition. This tradition can provide true sustenance to women, and men, and must be preserved, no matter the forces that would seek to rip it away.

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