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BOOK REVIEW

Ina Merdjanova, ed. *Women and Religiosity in Orthodox Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 287 + xix pp., \$35, ISBN: 9780823298617.

Reviewed by: Nadieszda Kizenko, professor, University at Albany

This collected volume amply fulfills the “Orthodoxy and Contemporary Thought” series mandate. Given its title, one would expect it to focus narrowly on issues of women and religiosity. While it does indeed offer fascinating glimpses of women engaging with a patriarchal religious tradition, it provides something far broader. Through the prism of women’s experiences, the book (with specialists in theology, anthropology, ethnography, history, sociology, and politics) shines a light on issues facing many Orthodox Christians: post-communist transformations, the challenge of global economic crisis, digitalization, media, underground movements seeking to pursue ‘authentic’ religion outside a ‘corrupt’ state church, revived monasticism, urban vs rural practices, environmental issues, Church-state-people relations, and national identity. With its deep look at 20th and 21st century changes in Orthodox religious life, this book should be required reading for anyone interested in religion and modernity.

One core issue is the variety of national religious and political experiences. Six of the countries described here—Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia—all experienced communism’s attack on religious institutions and practices. They experienced it to very different degrees. Monasticism and rural life, both ground out so cruelly in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in the 1920s and 1930s, could not only survive but apparently thrive in countries that became communist only after World War II. In fact, as Maria Bucur (“Gender and Religiosity in Communist Romania: Continuity and Change”) and Milica Bakić-Hayden (“Doubly Neglected: Histories of Women Monastics in the Serbian Orthodox Church”) show for Romania and Serbia, respectively, despite forced laicization in some areas, the number of nuns and convents in both countries went *up* during the communist period: as farms were collectivized, rural women could see convent life as offering real opportunities (a “peasantization” of monasticism familiar, as Scott Kenworthy and William Wagner have shown, from pre-revolutionary Russia and Ukraine). Being able to see and visit working monasteries meant that rural girls could, and did, think of monasticism as a real option: female monasticism (though not male monasticism) in fact increased in Romania

1938-1957. For some groups, the continuity under communism was more remarkable than the break.

Communism did bring some changes shared across countries. Religion's being relegated to "folk" custom meant its partial museumification, but also allowed it to survive. Religious practice moved outside the now-closed church and into the home, with laywomen rather than clerics becoming acknowledged virtuosi and religious specialists. In Georgia, discussed by Ketevan Gurchiani ("Women and the Georgian Orthodox Church"), as in Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia, women took charge of enforcing moral codes, sartorial habits, death rites, and religious food rituals—only to have these practices later dismissed by an eagerly re-institutionalizing, re-clericalizing (and hence re-masculinizing) post-communist Church as being irrelevant or nonessential. Seemingly unique to Georgia are the contemporary clairvoyants and fortunetellers who incorporate Orthodox elements into their rituals: they display icons and images of Patriarch Ilia II, they tell their clients to also consult priests, they do not work during Lent. This suggests that what the population valued under communism and continues to value now is Orthodox expertise, authenticity, and results (someone knowing "the ways of the ancestors"), rather than sacramentality as such.

Given that Orthodox hierarchs worked together with authorities in the communist countries studied here, the female expert practitioners' lack of clerical affiliation may have bolstered their credibility, rather than detracting from it. The Gagauz (Turkish-speaking Orthodox) followers of the charismatic elder Inokentie in Soviet Moldova described by James Kapalo ("Women and Orthodox Dissent: The Case of the Archangelist Underground Movement in Soviet Moldova"), for example, saved objects rescued from closed churches into private homes, resisted the new calendar, and insisted that, unlike the establishment Church which had caved to lax or atheist authorities, they (despite accusations of "sectarianism") were the true Orthodox, doing nothing different than what was done in normal Orthodox monasteries, above all keeping all four Church fasts as well as Wednesdays and Fridays. Like the female followers of Ioann of Kronstadt—and not unlike the Old Believers centuries earlier—this Archangelist underground movement rejected the roles of bride, mother, and housewife, becoming underground missionaries. The Khrushchev-era church closings of the 1950s-1960s—another element common to communist countries—spread their influence even further. Faced with churches in the pay of the state and charismatic virtuosi, the population had to determine whether maintaining access to power (as clerics could if

they collaborated with the state) was more important than maintaining rigor and “purity” (as female virtuosi with no access to institutional power could). In Romania and Moldova, as Maria Bucur shows, collaboration meant that the Orthodox Church could not only attain a stable position but also seize Greek Catholic properties, thus getting a competitive advantage in what had been a multi-confessional society.

In Bulgaria (described by Ina Merdjanova), collaboration and internal scandal did real damage to “the most discredited institutional church.” As in Romania, the state paid Orthodox clerical salaries before and after communism. When complicit church leaders refrained from criticizing such state policies as 1990s neoliberal economic restructuring and its disastrous social costs, they lost much of their spiritual credibility. Clerics hurling recriminations and excommunications at one another because of ties with the former regime further discredited themselves in the eyes of faithful: now, only 15% of Bulgarians (as opposed to 59% of Greeks and 50% of Romanians and Georgians) see religion as “very important.” If one takes monasticism as an indicator of especially earnest Orthodox piety, Bulgaria is again a negative outlier: although (as in other countries) female monastics in Bulgaria outnumbered male monastics both under and after communism, the number of monastics overall fell by one-third after communism. However, despite its lack of public trust in many areas, the Bulgarian Church can still muster powerful support when it insists on traditional gender roles: in 2018, by focusing debate on concept of gender identity, it blocked the passing of the Council of Europe Convention against domestic violence and violence against women. With all this, it comes as a surprise to learn that since 1989, more women have studied Orthodox theology in Bulgarian universities than have men—but there are no jobs for them afterwards, except perhaps as administrative staff in the Bulgarian Holy Synod.

Such opportunities for women’s Church employment seem strongest in Russia. Detelina Tocheva (“Lay Women and the Transformation of Orthodox Christianity in Russia”) explores the full range of laywomen who work for the Russian Orthodox Church as parish schoolteachers, pilgrimage and event organizers, choir directors, journalists, and PR specialists. Bookkeeping, mentioned as a female Church profession in all the post-communist countries here, is a particularly fascinating invisible yet vital occupation, as its numbers define the Church economy at every level, including how much a parish should contribute to central coffers. The Church-as-employer offers women job opportunities, social integration, and social recognition. Most surprising is that in

Russia, being a skilled female Church professional has normalized the previously stigmatized status of being a single mother (one-third of all Russian Orthodox mothers are single, far higher than other Orthodox countries). Has this, however, “generated a tentative cultural turn?” At times of peace and prosperity (as when this book was written), perhaps. The example of Greece, however, shows that a time of crisis, women’s gains in the Church can vanish. Moreover, as in Orthodox Judaism, it is perfectly possible for women’s “practical” activity to reinforce traditional gender roles. This seems to be the position of the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy with its continued emphasis on the “traditional” family (uniquely for Orthodox countries in the economic and political turmoil of the 1990s, the last Romanov family were presented as an ideal). Official Church documents and declarations, such as the 2000 Basis of Social Concept, warn women against neglecting motherhood in pursuit of career—but offer no guidance for how women should combine demanding jobs with motherhood. What use is a “tacit cultural, though not doctrinal, turn in the Church,” if it does not trickle upwards into theology? Can software ever become hardwiring?

Different answers to these questions come from countries with significant Orthodox populations who have not experienced communist persecution. Finland, existing as it does on the borders of both the Russian Federation (earlier the USSR) and the EU, as Helena Kupari and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir (“Women as Agents of Glocalization in the Orthodox Church of Finland”) show, is unique in combining Finnish, Karelian, Russian, and Ukrainian Orthodox identities and in having Orthodoxy be an official church, but a minority one. Their article includes the impact of transnationalization and increased migration within Europe, something relevant to many Orthodox populations in the Americas as well. By studying two different generations (older Karelian women dislocated from the majority Orthodox eastern part of Finland, younger women of both Finnish and migrant Russian/Ukrainian backgrounds), they also focus less on politics and more on such “non-cognitive” experiences as the liturgy, domestic, and parish activities, as well as tensions between different “waves” of emigration, which emerges in everything from how one dresses to competition over children’s Christmas pageants (again something shared by Orthodox populations worldwide). It emerges, for example, that for older generations, hearing the tunes one remembers from childhood is more important than the language in which one hears them. Similarly, key icons (the Karelian Mary, the Evacuee Christ distributed to refugees) evoke and soften memories of displacement. In a social context where same-sex marriages are not only legal but held up as a positive value and where women in the largest (Lutheran) state church can be ordained, Finnish

Orthodox women argue that the veneration of Mary and female saints makes Orthodoxy more inclusive—raising the question of what kind of inclusiveness (ordination and power versus symbolism) is in fact more important.

At the different ends of the circle—and showing the range of Orthodox women’s experiences—are Greece (discussed by Eleni Sotiriou, “Women and Greek Orthodoxy in the Twenty-First Century: Charting Elements of Change”) and the United States (Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, “Head Coverings, Vaccines, and Gender Politics: Contentious Topics among Orthodox Christian Women in US-based Digital Spaces”). Greece is unique among historically Orthodox countries in having no politically enforced secularization and enjoying a stable position since establishment of modern Greek state in the early nineteenth century. Precisely because of this stability, the 2008 economic crisis came as such a shock, bringing poverty, violence, the sudden reversion to a promotion of traditional gender roles (women were blamed as being spendthrifts), and the consequent rebellion of women under forty. As Sotiriou shows, sociological analyses must include both age and gender as factors. When Greece was prosperous, women could advance; when things went bad, it was men, and especially young men, who had to be protected. Indeed, young men felt that they were the prime victims of the crisis and started joining the clergy in record numbers (a threefold increase), going to church more, and even starting to participate in Sunday school teaching and philanthropy. Elderism and prophecy became stronger—and were also limited to men. This article thus underscores the need for truly *gendered* studies of Orthodoxy, including what Orthodoxy means for lay *men*, who have been mostly neglected in the scholarship. Faced with the Church’s support of traditional gender values and insistence on domestication of women, younger women rebelled, in some cases stopping the baptism of their children. It will be curious to see what the long-term impacts of this crisis (not to speak of Covid and its impact on tourism) will be on gender patterns in Greek Orthodoxy.

Two areas where women’s Orthodox experience does thrive in Greece are monasticism and the digital sphere. Sotiriou’s Greek convents are a far cry from the rural profile of Romania and Greece: their international nuns (drawing in large measure on converts from abroad—something unheard-of in male Greek monasteries) have open visiting hours, take part in international conferences, and write about monasticism as the ideal way of pursuing spiritual equality and perfection: free from male custodianship and housework, nuns can work to sustain their own communities, which includes ecology and sustainable organic farming (it would be

curious to know if nuns also produce liturgical texts like the *eco-molieben* liturgical service for the Church New Year). Sotiriou also discusses religious female bloggers including a priest's wife, a Sunday school teacher (who mostly support male religious authority), and an older, more rigorist, woman who calls herself a "grandma holy fool" and thus seems more free to criticize both clergy and the culture of late modernity for its lack of rigor. This digital space allows women to make their own narratives public and to have more agency and voice (and, literally, more followers) than they do offline. At first glance, in their insistence on "traditional Orthodox values" they seem a 21st century version of the rigorist Gagauz people. But, as they offer curated copy and musings rather than individual advice, and as they remain safely anonymous (as opposed to Sister Vassa, a ROCOR nun based in Vienna with her own podcast), it seems a stretch to call their activity 'digital elderism.'

Sarah Riccardi-Swartz examines US women's digital activity from (mostly conservative) online communities rather than individual blogs, regarding them as specific, recent form of female empowerment, though within self-imposed limits. Even before Covid, banned topics included head coverings, vaccines, and politics. Given that 61% of her survey respondents marked themselves as being converts, this sample seems a little self-selecting, as does presenting ROCOR voices only through such converts and women from Russia or Ukraine, thus neglecting the American-born 'cradle' Orthodox who are its mainstay ("Coffee with Sister Vassa" and the Axia women's online group would be obvious contrasts). But the conservative voices Riccardi-Swartz presents, and their concerns, are real. Whether the digital realm transforms or supplements women's religious experience, and what kinds of community emerge online, and whether this will mean any change in Orthodoxy's "hardwiring," will be key questions for the future.

This volume, in short, is both a welcome contribution to the scholarship on women in religion and an essential guide for anyone thinking about the present state and future possibilities of Orthodox Christianity. Its rich footnotes are a superb state-of-the-art resource for anyone wanting to dig deeper into both theoretical and country-specific literature. As its editor notes, how Orthodoxy deals with its "woman question" also reflects Orthodoxy's struggle with human rights writ large, even as politically conservative Orthodox denounce gender equality as tool of Western hegemony aiming to destabilize "local [patriarchal] values and traditions" (3). Of course, no book under 300 pages can cover everything. One would like to see similar attention devoted to such areas as Arabic-speaking Orthodoxy, Latin America, Belarus, and Ukraine. Still, this book

captures many Orthodox women as they are in this moment of transition, whether in official tonsured or liturgical roles (nuns, singers, readers), non-liturgical employees (bookkeepers, secretaries, managers, journalists, public relations promoters, teachers), “traditional” freelancers (clairvoyants, healers, curse-removers), or as new “digital” freelancers. No one seriously engaged with Orthodoxy can ignore either them—or this book.