Muscovite Women in Religion

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

"Muscovite Women in Religion" is an examination not only of how the Orthodox Church and Russian society defined women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also how women engaged and experienced religion. This is a particularly interesting period in Russian religious history in general, because of many important religious developments that occurred during the Muscovite era, such as the expansion of monasticism, the establishment of a Russian patriarchate in 1589, witch trials in the seventeenth century, and a schism resulting in the establishment of the Old Believer sect that occurred in the 1660s. Muscovite women experienced religion in diverse ways. While peasant women in particular carried on pre-Christian traditions and practiced magic, upper-class women, particularly members of the tsar’s family, often had less syncretic religious experience. Women of all classes became nuns for various reasons, and the paper explores female asceticism in some detail. As virgins, nuns were associated Mary, the Mother of God. Mothers could also be identified with Mary, who, along with Eve, provided one of the two primary Biblical types that contributed to the Orthodox Church’s understanding of women’s roles. Of course, this phenomenon was not unique to Russian Orthodoxy, but was quite common throughout medieval and early modern Christendom. Arguing that patriarchy makes women’s religious experience fundamentally different from that of men, this paper examines the meaning of patriarchy and considers women’s particular experiences within this wider framework, highlighting evidence for female agency. This work is primarily a synthesis of research that has been done into Muscovite women’s religious roles, which is an area in which much remains to be done.
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A Note on Transliteration and Translation

For the sake of convenience and readability, I have chosen to transliterate Ә, Е and Ӗ as E. Soft vowels besides Е and Ӗ I have indicated with an I, i.e., ИА for Я, and so forth. Additionally, I have transliterated both И and І as I. I have generally refused to anglicize names where a more accurate transliteration would probably not obscure the understanding of the lay reader of some familiarity with Russian history, hence, Sofiia as opposed to Sophia and Aleksei as opposed to Alexei or Alexis. In the case of Peter the Great, however, I have made an exception to this rule and preserved the more conventional English form, as opposed to transliterating the name as Petr. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

—Christopher Stroop, May 11, 2003
Many important developments in religion marked the Muscovite period of Russian history. Muscovy’s rise and expansion brought with it an increase in the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. New titles came into use, such as tsar (the Russian variant of caesar) and autocrat (samoderzhets). These titles, as well as a new type of legitimacy rhetoric that began to emerge in the late fifteenth century, emphasized the supreme authority of the ruler and the state over which he—and until the latter part of the seventeenth century, the reigning figure theoretically, if not in practice, was invariably male—presided. The theory of Moscow as the Third Rome made clear that the tsar’s authority was derived ultimately from God. As the guardian of true Christianity, the tsar obviously depended on the church for legitimacy, and, as would be expected, the church played an important role in affairs of state. In addition, the establishment of a Russian patriarchate in 1589 augmented the prestige of the Russian Orthodox Church at home and abroad. During the late seventeenth century, a schism over liturgical reforms resulted in the emergence of the Old Believer sect, which consisted of those who preferred to maintain previous forms. Although these “schismatics” were violently confronted during the 1660s and 1670s, their movement has survived into the twenty-first century.¹

¹ At some point after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Russian theologians began developing the theory that Moscow was the Third Rome. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Walter G. Moss, A History of Russia: Volume I, to 1917 (Boston: McGraw-Hill 1997), pp. 100-101, 208. According to Moss, “By the 1520s [the theory] meant that the first two Romes (Rome and Constantinople) had both fallen as God’s punishment... and that Russia was now the Third (and final) Rome. In other words, the Christian Russians were God’s final chosen people.” On the use of the titles tsar, autocrat, and imperator during the reign of Ivan III, see S. M. Solov'ev, Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen, kn. III (toma 5-6), 1463-1584 (Khar’kov: Izdatel’stvo AST, 2001), pp. 188-189. (Solovev’s Istoriia Rossii was originally completed at the rate of one volume per year during the period 1851-1879.) On the period of rapid expansion of Russian monasticism which began in the fourteenth century and had ended by 1533, see Moss, pp. 119, 207. On the development of theory regarding the possibility of women serving as regents and dynastic links, see Isolde Thyret. Between God and Tsar: Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia (Dekalb: Northwestern University Press, 2001), chapter 3. Although previous Muscovite women had exercised political power in times of crisis—for example, as Thyret notes, Irina Godunova’s name appeared in
Although the church struggled against schism and syncretism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on the whole it enhanced its practical authority in the lives of many individuals by acquiring a great deal of land and establishing new parishes, monasteries, and convents. 2 A greater physical presence in the expanding Russian state brought more and more of the population under the direct influence of the clergy and allowed for more direct confrontation with pre-Christian traditions officially condemned by the church. 3 Parish priests, who did not preach sermons, nevertheless had important impacts on their parishoners’ lives as confessors, confidantes, and administrators of the sacraments, although they were sometimes more tolerant of syncretic practices than those above them in the church hierarchy. 4 Peter the Great’s reign at the turn of the eighteenth century represents the transition from Muscovite to imperial Russia. It also brought many important social changes, including, of course, the beginning of significant changes in the relationship between church and state. The state’s power increased at the expense of the church’s, and monasticism was severely limited.

official court documents—Sofiia Alekseevna, who became regent for her younger brothers Ivan and Peter in 1682, claimed far more authority for herself than had any previous Muscovite woman. Therefore, she should be regarded as the first true female regent in Russia since Olga of Rus. On church reforms and Old Believers, see Moss, pp. 208-11.

2 Naturally, the historian must be careful not to apply ahistorical standards to the study of religion. In the Muscovite case, the presence of an established organization dictating religious orthodoxy, however, certainly allows for the use of terms such as syncretism within their appropriate historical context. For a case in which one historian rebuffs another for applying inappropriate religious definitions, see Cemal Kafadar’s critique of Rudi Paul Lindner’s work on gazi warriors on the early Ottoman frontier in Kafadar’s Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 52-55.


Beneath this sweeping story lie the lives of individual Russians—lives which were, in diverse ways, affected by religion, as well as by the political and religious developments that occurred during Muscovy’s rise, expansion, and times of crisis. As Delaney relates, a patriarchal social order is “at once sacred and secular,” and scholars too often regard the influence of the sacred as tangential to the secular forces of politics and economics. A failure to recognize the power of religion in and of itself, however, is not only a failure to recognize the significance of religion in a society’s construction of cultural and social norms, but is also tantamount to a partial dehumanization of the people under study. Religion profoundly affects individuals’ lives, and since the three great monotheisms of the modern world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—support a patriarchal social structure, they have a considerable impact on the understanding of gender roles among their practitioners.

The existence of patriarchy in a society makes women’s religious experience fundamentally different from that of men, and this reality provides the reasoning behind studying Muscovite women in religion. As Delaney observes, theology is presented within a gendered framework in the Bible. It is important to be aware of the ways in which theology and religious understanding contribute to the cultural construction of gender roles. To consider the writings on women produced by the Russian Orthodox Church, however, is to tell only a fraction of the story, for much is to be found in the experiences of women at all levels of society. Additionally, there is too much evidence to deny categorically female agency in the establishment of women’s roles in religion in

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6 Delaney, p. 156.
general, and in Muscovite society in particular. For example, royal women used religious rhetoric to help carve out their roles as intercessors and benefactresses, and peasant women clearly adapted their often syncretic religious understanding to help them achieve their own ends. Although the lack of sources makes it difficult to find the individual voices of many Russian women, their recorded actions, to some extent, speak for them, allowing for some general conclusions to be drawn.

Of course, no society or institution remains entirely static over time, and, while the Muscovite period of Russian history provides an intriguing timeframe in which to consider religion, the reader should keep in mind the nonlinear development of religious and social norms. In examining women's religious experiences, it is also important to avoid two tendentious extremes that have emerged within scholarship. Without too much oversimplification, their arguments might be summarized, respectively, as either the demonization or the glorification of the changes wrought in women's lives through the expanding influence of Russian Orthodoxy. While it is important to examine those changes, in the end, it is impossible to state definitively whether Orthodoxy had a net positive or negative impact on the lives of Muscovite women, and it is more productive to study the ways in which these women understood and were affected by religion. This assertion is not meant to imply that Orthodox writings and attitudes were not misogynistic. Nevertheless, many women found meaning in religion, and their entire range of experiences should be taken into account along with the ways in which the church and state defined women.

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7 On royal women, see Thyrêt, pp. 6, 15. For examples of female agency in a religious context among lower-class women, see Levin in Russia's Women, pp. 44-59.
8 On these scholarly tendencies, see Thyrêt, p. 9.
The efficacy of studying the religious experiences of Muscovite women as a group should be clear from the patriarchal attitudes found in Russian Orthodoxy. However, this line of reasoning should in no way imply that women's experiences were uniform. Naturally, many factors affected an individual woman's religious experience, including but by no means limited to class, kinship and parentage, geographic location, the precise time at which she lived, and her own personality. A thorough study would have to include the widest array of religious experiences possible, from the practice of magic and syncretism between pagan traditions and Christianity, to the ascetic life of the nun and the experiences of court women with close ties to the church hierarchy, to the experiences of female "heretics" in the Old Believer sect. Such an exploration is not yet possible. As in Russian women's history in general, women's religious experience is an area in which much work remains to be done. The observations and conclusions presented here, therefore, do not represent a comprehensive treatment of the issue, but rather an attempt to synthesize some of what is currently known about Muscovite women within the context of religion, analyzing this knowledge with specific attention to Muscovite patriarchy.

Historians of Russia often use the word patriarchy to describe Muscovite society, yet rarely give attention to the precise meaning of the term. According to Delaney, the essence of patriarchy is the association of the male with the creative power of the divine, and the resultant association of the female with the subordinate role of the creation. A woman does not actively contribute anything to her offspring, but instead simply...
nourishes the "seed" that comes from a man. This "theory of procreation" has resulted in the construction of hierarchical societies in which fathers ostensibly rule their families with absolute authority, men of lower ranks submit to those of higher ranks, and women of all social ranks submit to men. Although the universality of some aspects of Delaney's definition might be called into question, clearly, patriarchy is more than social and political domination by males. Culture imbues behaviors with significance that transcends those behaviors per se. In Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities and societies, the meaning of male dominance is derived from patriarchy, i.e., from a religious understanding of male authority and the "theory of procreation" identified by Delaney as first appearing in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Within such a framework, religious ideas provide many of the reasons that women are sometimes considered inferior to men and generally denied the right to the same kind of authority that men are able to possess. In Christianity's particular case, marriage is generally understood as an illustration of Christ's relationship to the church, with Christ as the head and the church as his body and bride. This is a direct association of the man with the divine and the woman with the creation, which clearly lays out a patriarchal structure for marriage, in which authority belongs to the husband. Given the male's perceived precedence in reproduction, it is also natural that in patriarchal societies a person's identity is derived primarily from his or her father's.\textsuperscript{10}

Russia, of course, provides a clear example of patrilineal identification through the convention of the otchestvo, the patronymic second name. In addition, in Muscovy as

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in imperial Russia, authority theoretically rested ultimately with the tsar, the father of his people, although regencies and political turmoil marked much of the Muscovite period. In addition, men were given extensive authority over their wives, as revealed in the sudebniki and church documents, of which Domostroi, a treatise written describing the proper family experience for upper-class Muscovites, provides one important example. Russian patriarchy was often harsh. For example, in a study of seventeenth-century spousal abuse, Kollmann notes, “the idea that a wife might strike or injure her husband was so alien that the Domostroi does not even bring it up. On the other hand men were given not only the right, but the responsibility, to use violence to inspire... piety, humility and submission.” Moreover, female sexuality was feared, and women’s honor fiercely guarded, as a woman’s purity was essential in securing a marriage that would be favorable to her family. The roles dictated for women by Muscovite patriarchy, such as intercessor for the realm and the tsar’s family, pious and obedient wife and mother, nun (monakhniia), benefactress, family link through marriage—or, on the other end of the spectrum, the roles of witch and conniving temptress—were clearly defined by a culture in which patriarchal values were assumed. Like medieval Christendom generally, Muscovite society tended to associate women with one of two Biblical types, Mary or Eve, as the social roles laid out for women reflect, and this is further evidence of the pervasiveness of religious thought in Muscovy’s patriarchal system.12

10 Delaney, pp. 29-34, 156-58. On the husband being considered the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church in the Muscovite context, see Boškovska, pp. 53-54. In the New Testament, see in particular Ephesians 5:22-33.
12 Thyret explores the role of the tsaritsa as intercessor in great detail, noting not only how much of her position was derived from religion, but also how various tsaritsy took it upon themselves to help define their roles. See, for example, pp. 6-7 as well as chapter 2. On women’s honor, see Nancy Shields.
Women could be associated with Mary through virginity or pious motherhood. As non-sexual females, nuns were identified with the virginity of Mary and represented one facet of the Orthodox Church’s feminine ideal. Mary’s motherhood was, of course, also idealized, as myriad bogomater’ (Mother of God) icons attest. Nevertheless, the church’s official position remained that all sex was sinful, despite the fact that the women under its jurisdiction did not have Mary’s privilege of achieving motherhood without sexual intercourse. While virginity and motherhood were good, female sexuality was dangerous, and as a result, the Church’s understanding of women vacillated between the archetypes provided by Mary and Eve. As Kollmann remarks, “tales and hagiography pictured women mainly as pious and nurturing mothers or evil seducers, with a rare crafty and wise woman challenging the stereotypes.”13 The inherent tension in Russian Orthodoxy’s perception of women is one manifestation of a centuries old dichotomous understanding found in many Christian cultures.14 This situation’s historical background helps one to understand its place within Muscovite patriarchy.

According to one text, “early Christian writers tended to concentrate on Eve’s secondary status at creation (Genesis 2) and her primacy in the first sin (Genesis 3) to justify their views of the subordination of women.”15 These themes and their implications were developed throughout Christendom during the medieval and early modern eras. St. Jerome (c. 327-420) was among the early Christian writers to champion

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13 Kollmann in Russia’s Women, p. 61.

14 On this, see Atkinson in Women in Russia, p. 14.

the concept of Mary’s perpetual virginity and the superiority of virginity for the Christian, and his life coincided with the remarkable growth of Christian asceticism following Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313. Extremely distrustful of female sexuality, Jerome nevertheless befriended women who renounced sex for asceticism, and he articulated well the previously mentioned tension between Mary and Eve. In a letter to a woman named Eustochium, Jerome wrote, “Death came through Eve: life has come through Mary.” St. Augustine (354-430) was another important early church father who helped shape church traditions surrounding Mary. His association of sexual intercourse with original sin contributed to the development of the idea that Mary was sinless. Because of this idealization, Mary’s ability to function as a positive example for ordinary Catholic and Orthodox women has been called into question, since no other women can ever “aspire to her divinely given freedom from original sin any more than they can hope to achieve simultaneous motherhood and virginity.”

In medieval Russia, the Orthodox Church’s austere teachings regarding the sinfulness of sex made Muscovy ripe for embracing traditions reinforcing the sinlessness and perpetual virginity of Mary. As Levin observes, the Russians subscribed to the widespread medieval belief that Jesus was born not through Mary’s vagina but through her ear. This peculiar idea actually makes sense given Christian theology. It explains how Mary’s virginity could remain intact despite the birth of the child. In addition, because Jesus was the Word of God, like sound he became known through the ear.

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16 Trans. F. A. Wright, quoted in Women and Religion, p. 46. See also the discussion of Jerome, pp. 38-46.
17 Women and Religion, p. 16: “By the eleventh century, it was popularly believed that Mary also had a sin-free status, although it was not until 1854 that the Vatican decreed as a dogmatic pronouncement that Mary was ‘immaculately conceived’ by her parents.” See also footnote 24, which explains that this “immaculate conception” did not mean that no sexual intercourse was involved, but rather that God kept the transmission of original sin from occurring.
Since "pain in childbirth was a consequence of the fall," the Church also believed that Mary’s labor was painless.\(^\text{18}\) As is the case in many cultures, the traditional Russian understanding of virginity entails the possession of an intact hymen. Of course, this understanding is in conflict with modern gynecology, which has demonstrated that hymens are far from uniform and not even present in every woman, and that they may in fact be broken in many instances by non-sexual activities. In spite of their inability to emulate Mary in every respect, however, Muscovite women of all classes were drawn to her for inspiration, and peasant women fused beliefs pertaining to her with traditions associated with the Slavic creator deity Rod and the Rozhanitsy, goddesses or fairies associated with Rod. Women also combined beliefs regarding Mary with traditions originally associated with "the pagan cult of the Moist Mother Earth."\(^\text{19}\)

If these represent some of the ways in which the Orthodox Church and Muscovite women understood Mary, Atkinson reminds the reader that "alongside Mary the Mother was the image of Eve, the Temptress." In spite of the fact that "the Church venerated the mother of God and projected a positive view of woman as mother," women in general, and their sexuality in particular, seem to have been viewed with increasing suspicion by the Church during the Muscovite period. Atkinson has identified changing associations that reflected a shift in society’s views of women from the Kievan to the Muscovite period. In her words:

\(^{18}\) Levin in *Russia’s Women*, pp. 46-47. While Levin’s analysis of Mary’s significance in Muscovy is quite cogent, as is her article in general, her references to "Christian theology," which presumably mean Orthodox theology, could be a bit misleading. Christendom, of course, has contained a great diversity of conflicting dogma almost since its inception, with extreme fragmentation occurring after the Reformation. While both Catholic and Orthodox believers accept the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity, Protestants reject it. Since Levin’s article deals with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in addition to earlier periods, an inclusion of Protestant theology under the heading of Christian would be historically appropriate.

\(^{19}\) Levin in *Russia’s Women*, p. 47.
Women were associated with sin. The warmth of sexual attraction was no longer associated with sunshine; it was connected now with hellfire. The only good woman was the desexualized female: the elderly saint, or the virgin. Mothers and wives gained approbation to the extent that they were self-effacing and dedicated to their husbands and children.... The ascetic outlook condemned sex as sinful but was forced to accept it within marriage as a necessary evil.

Even this grudging acceptance, however, was curtailed. There were many days in the year in which sexual relations were proscribed on pain of punishment. In addition, the Church announced to would-be “sinners” that any children conceived on these days would not be normal. Another change identified by Atkinson as a reflection of the decreasing status of women in the eyes of the religious establishment is found in the etymology of the word “sly” (khitryi) and its derivatives. Women in Rus could be held in high regard “for qualities of the mind,” with Olga providing the prime example. By the Muscovite period, however, the word khitryi had acquired a derogatory connotation. Rather than clever, as it had implied previously, it was now used to imply that women were crafty and cunning, like Eve.20

The religious establishment’s fear of women as latter-day Eves, and sexuality in general, is also evident in Muscovy’s understanding of ritual impurity. Menstruation and postpartum bleeding were both believed to make women ritually impure, as was the process of childbirth. As Levin relates, “the dominant tradition of Orthodox canon law decreed a forty-day period of sexual abstinence after childbirth.” However, at least some bishops allowed for flexibility in this regard, except in the cases of priests and their spouses. (Priests were also forbidden to conduct mass if they had had sexual intercourse the night before.) Nevertheless, this flexibility did not extend to entry into the church before the forty days had passed, however, even on Easter, when, in Levin’s words,

20 Atkinson in Women in Russia, pp. 14, 16.
“persons under severe penance were permitted communion.” The child’s baptism was also supposed to wait until the fortieth day. When the mother or the child’s life was in jeopardy during or after the process of giving birth, however, exceptions could be made to allow for communion or baptism, or both, to occur quickly. To take communion, however, the mother had to be moved from the place in which she had given birth. This was necessary in order for a priest to come into her presence, since even the building in which the birth occurred was considered impure, as were the mother, the child, and any others who attended the birth. In spite of this strictness, which in this instance did not work in the mother’s favor, new mothers were also granted some leniency in other circumstances. For example, they were allowed to refrain from observing the rigorous fasts associated with Lent, and no woman sentenced to death would have her sentence carried out until she was ritually pure and able to receive communion.21

These aspects of ritual impurity are an indication of the church’s ambivalent stance toward childbirth. According to Pushkareva, “Orthodox clerics… encouraged couples to have many children.”22 Still, the fact that childbirth was tied to sex, which was invariably considered sin, tainted the process of delivery itself. Nevertheless, Levin argues that concepts of ritual impurity actually “served medieval Russian women well.” These concepts helped women maintain autonomy over the process of childbirth and gave them opportunities to recover from it, since “a woman who contaminated everything she touched could not be expected to work for her husband and family.” Although belief in ritual impurity related to vaginal bleeding and childbirth may be viewed as demeaning to women, these beliefs seem to have met little resistance from Muscovite women, quite

22 Pushkareva in Russia’s Women, p. 39.
possibly because of the tangible benefits they derived. Women may have simply appropriated religious misogyny to their own ends.23

Muscovite women experienced and engaged with religion in diverse ways. Therefore, they should not be dismissed as mere passive victims of a patriarchal system, even if most of them would never have questioned many of that system’s assumptions.24 Women found meaning in religion through the syncretic practices and magic that the Orthodox Church fought so hard to wipe out, as well as through high church ritual. Muscovite women also helped to shape the religious roles their society allowed them. In some cases, Orthodoxy actually helped provide a basis for women to experience authority that could supplement, rather than subvert, the patriarchal order. The church was, in Thyret’s words, “[i]n principle suspicious of women with authority.” Nevertheless, “the Orthodox church supplied the religious symbolism that broadened the scope of the tsaritsy’s influence.”25 In addition, the Church also gave a very few women the opportunity to exercise authority in convents as abbesses (igumen’i), and gave to nuns of varying ranks—still a small percentage of the population—the ability to choose not to participate in marriage and child rearing, on which most women’s lives were centered.

Of course, not every scholar sees female asceticism as representing progress or as beneficial to women.26 In Muscovy, life in a convent could be harsh, but some who freely chose the ascetic life—there were also many who were forcibly tonsured—must have found spiritual meaning in it. In more worldly terms, taking the veil might also provide an escape from a bad marriage, and one that could be easier to obtain than

23 Levin in Russia’s Women, p. 58.
24 For example, Boškovska cites primary source evidence to argue that, by some point in the seventeenth century (and probably earlier), women and men had both “internalized” the idea that a husband was the head of his wife as Christ was head of the church (p. 54).
divorce. Wealthy Muscovite women could also become connected to convents without taking the veil, namely by making donations as an expression of piety, an act by which they placed themselves in the public sphere. While some women found opportunities to wield authority or participate in public life through Orthodoxy, society did limit such prospects. In addition, the misogyny that was integral to the Orthodox Church often resulted in a repudiation of female authority, as many changes that came about through increased ecclesiastical influence reveal.

Expanding church influence was an important factor in the on-going Christianization of wedding ceremonies that had begun following the Christianization of Rus in the tenth century. As Boškovska observes, in the seventeenth century, “the church tried not only to achieve a monopoly over matrimony, but also took pains to enforce its vision of the ideal marriage.” The church’s vision, of course, granted husbands absolute authority over their wives, illustrating the relationship between Christ and the church. One manifestation of the shift in wedding ceremonies toward Orthodoxy was the disappearance or adaptation of older Russian wedding practices. The ritual breaking of a cup, originally performed to bless a married couple with happiness, had by the sixteenth century become a contest to determine which spouse would master the other. By the

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26 For a discussion of this, see Women and Religion, p. 3.
27 Boškovska, pp. 89-92.
28 On these donations, as well as asceticism and female piety in general, see Claire Claus, Die Stellung der russischen Frau von der Einführung des Christentums bei den Russen bis zu den Reformen Peter des Grossen (Ph.D. dissertation. Munich: Universität Basel, 1959), pp. 156-189. Claus’ comments about donations made by women and their significance invite further study of this phenomenon. Leslie P. Peirce has given the pious donations of elite Ottoman women particular attention in her The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Amy Singer’s Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem (SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). It is likely that similar work could be undertaken on the significance of various types of religious donations among elite Russian women in the Muscovite period.
29 Boškovska, p. 53.
seventeenth century, however, the practice seems to have vanished—a sign, according to Pushkareva, of increased patriarchal authority. Practices suggesting that a wife might dominate her husband seem to have largely disappeared as the more extreme form of patriarchy sanctioned by the church gained ground among the populace.  

In spite of all attempts to stamp out syncretism, sorcery and all remnants of paganism, pre-Christian traditions remained an important element in the beliefs and practices of many people, almost certainly a majority of the population. Women in particular preserved many pre-Christian practices in what Levin has referred to as “women’s spirituality.” This phenomenon is particularly visible in practices surrounding childbirth. As Levin notes, “Dvoeverie (dual-faith) … describes childbirth rituals of pre-Petrine Russia well.” Due to Muscovy’s adoption of Judeo-Christian concepts of ritual impurity, childbirth, generally attended by midwives, was left largely to women. Nevertheless, women’s continued practice of pre-Christian childbirth rituals did not constitute an attempt on their part to subvert the social and religious order. In fact, they considered themselves “good Christians by virtue of their own baptism and adherence to the Orthodox faith.”

Women’s peculiar spirituality was, according to Levin, a result of their lack of education. While ignorance may help to explain why women in particular maintained pagan traditions, it is also generally impossible for a new religion to erase all vestiges of older traditions, even over centuries, and such mixing of the new with the old was certainly prevalent in Muscovy. Levin also indicates that many parish priests participated

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30 On which, see Natalia Pushkareva, “Women in the Medieval Russian Family of the Tenth through the Fifteenth Centuries,” in Russia’s Women, pp. 30-37.
31 Eve Levin, “Childbirth in Pre-Petrine Russia: Canon Law and Popular Traditions,” in Russia’s Women, pp. 44-46.
in non-canonical practices involving childbirth, and writes: “where the scholar might see widespread evidence of *dvoeverie*, the medieval Russian laity and parish clergy saw only their own true faith, Russian Orthodoxy.”

As Levin points out, certain pagan traditions surrounding childbirth in Russia were endowed with Christian meaning and maintained in Muscovy without ecclesiastical opposition. For example, “a service of the blessing of the cradle found its way into the priestly service books of the seventeenth century, indicating the Christianization of the custom.” In fact, “amulets, bathhouses, and cradles clearly emerged from pagan antecedents.” However, clearly non-canonical practices could not be condoned by the church, and the magic often employed by women during and after childbirth fell into this category. These practices included the use of herbal potions and spells meant to ease the process of giving birth or postpartum difficulties. In addition, women carried on many pagan traditions surrounding the afterbirth. The placenta might be buried under the house, placed in a casket and kept in front of the icons in a home, or even eaten—in order either to induce or prevent conception. (Both variants of this belief are documented.) Moreover, the placenta or caul might be placed on a church altar, and the caul sometimes baptized. This practice naturally required the complicity of a parish priest, who thereby defied the church’s “strong condemnation” of it. In Muscovy, heterodoxy affected even the lower clergy in at least some cases.

While women were often officially deprecated for practicing magic, non-canonical practices may have been more acceptable in them than in men, although at first glance this may seem counterintuitive. After all, as Atkinson observes, there was a shift

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32 Levin in *Russia’s Women*, p. 59.
33 Levin in *Russia’s Women*, pp. 45, 51-54.
in society’s perception of magic used by women from the Kievan to the medieval period. Where previously a woman with magical powers might even have been canonized, magic in women had come to be viewed as inherently evil.\textsuperscript{34} Even though the church and state instituted increasingly harsh punishments for practitioners of magic during the Muscovite period, the practice remained widespread. According to Kivelson, “the state began to share the church’s concern about pagan survivals” from approximately 1551, the year in which the Stoglav Council—a significant gathering of church leaders—occurred. Tsar Aleksei (reigned 1645-76), the second tsar of the Romanov Dynasty, is known for taking measures in this regard. Early in his reign, Aleksei outlawed the skomorokhi (wandering minstrels) in part because they were associated with paganism—later they were also excommunicated by the church—and Aleksei issued decrees outlining strict penalties for practitioners of magic and their patrons. In 1653, he “ordered the tools of black magic and the sorcerers who employed them burned.” Other punishments for witches “ranged from exile to live burial to nonspecific execution.” It is important to note, as Kivelson does, that the state’s more vigorous action against magic and paganism in the seventeenth century accompanied the “growth of the state’s bureaucratic and judicial machinery,” which itself could only have occurred in the relative calm the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty brought after the turbulent rule of Ivan the Terrible and the ensuing Time of Troubles (smutnoe vremia).\textsuperscript{35}

Although magic in women was strongly condemned, the intriguing fact remains that the vast majority of witch trials in Muscovy involved accused men rather than women. According to Kivelson, surviving records indicate that during the seventeenth

\textsuperscript{34} Atkinson in \textit{Women in Russia}, p. 16. 
\textsuperscript{35} Kivelson in \textit{Russia’s Women}, p. 80.
century the ratio of men to women who were brought to trial as witches was "nearly seven to three," whereas, "From New England to Poland approximately 80 percent of accused witches were female."\textsuperscript{36} This divergence is striking, even Iceland, Finland, and Estonia also prosecuted more men than women on the whole (although percentages varied according to time and locality—and in no case was the male gender bias so strong as in Muscovy).

Among the societies that exhibited a male gender bias in witch trials, there were significant differences, and these illustrate the unique nature of the Muscovite case. In Iceland, Finland, and Estonia, folk belief seems in general to have associated the supernatural more with men than with women, something that was not the case in Muscovy.\textsuperscript{37} The occurrence of a male gender bias in other regions, therefore, does not suffice in explaining why men bore the brunt of the Russian witch persecutions, and this supports the hypothesis that the persistence of folk beliefs regarding women may have made them less likely than men to be punished for non-canonical practices. Given the religious turmoil surrounding the church reforms instituted in the 1660s and a contemporaneous, general sense of religious fervor, it should also come as no surprise that Russian witch persecutions were then at their height. Interestingly witch trials also peaked in Finland at this time, where, unlike in the past, more women than men were accused and put to death. This trend reversed itself again in the 1690s. According to Heikinnen and Kervinen, "modern European witch doctrine" probably superseded the older Finnish association of men with the supernatural, but a similar influence of Western

\textsuperscript{36} Kivelson in \textit{Russia's Women}, pp. 74-5.
European ideas did not take hold in Muscovy, where, according to Kivelson, there was “far less emphasis on heresy and elaborate demonology” than in the West. 38

Further evidence of possible societal ambivalence towards women’s non-canonical practices is found in the etymology of the word baba. As Levin relates, “the word baba in medieval Russian texts on childbirth had three meanings. First, it was a derogatory term for an old woman who engaged in witchcraft.” It could also mean midwife or wetnurse. Furthermore, “the three definitions of the word baba indicate that the three roles were not entirely distinct.... Certainly the midwife would have experience with spells and potions, which made her a target for ecclesiastical complaints about her ‘evil’ influence.” Peasant women commonly practiced healing through potions and spells, and used magic for other purposes, such as enticing men and facilitating childbirth. Interestingly, spells used by women and men sometimes contained Biblical or Orthodox imagery, although most of their images came from nature. In addition to those used in association with childbirth, spells meant to instill carnal desire in a man or woman, something wholly at odds with Orthodox teaching regarding sexuality, were commonly used. Men might also use magic in an attempt to increase their prowess on the battlefield. The fact that magic spells often appealed to God is an indication of the syncretic religious understanding found among the peasantry, which the Orthodox Church was never able to stamp out. 39

Another way in which many Muscovite women’s religious expression was syncretic involved the association of Mary with fertility, particularly with practices

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dedicated to Rod and the Rozhanitsy, as previously mentioned. These deities watched over the harvest and guarded lineage. In Levin’s words:

Mary and Rod are similar in that both celebrate miraculous fertility. Thus women celebrated the festivals of the church in honor of Mary, in particular the Nativity of the Virgin on September 8, by preparing a ‘second feast’ of bread, honey, cheese, and kasha for Rod and the Rozhanitsy. They brought the same foods to a new mother shortly after the birth.\(^{40}\)

Pushkareva also comments on these divine beings, noting that “the church’s struggle with sorcerers and healers was also an attempt to wipe out the remnants of the cult of the Rozhanitsy... and the rituals connected with childbirth.”\(^{41}\) Fascinatingly, the root “rod” or “rozh” can still be found in almost all Russian words associated with birth, family ties, lineage, and gender.

Most Muscovite women’s religious experiences involved both pagan and Christian traditions. On the other end of the religious spectrum, however, a few women dedicated their lives to Orthodoxy by taking the veil. Even though this decision allowed them to eschew family life and, to some extent, patriarchal authority, it should not be assumed that such factors were always an important consideration for women who became nuns. Given the importance of motherhood in Muscovite society and the austerity of the cloister, spiritual motivation certainly must have been a factor for some women who willingly entered convents. Of course, choosing asceticism might also involve extenuating circumstances or a variety of ulterior motives, and in many cases tonsure was not a choice at all. Forced tonsure could occur for a number of reasons. For example, courtiers who fell out of favor might be exiled to convents or monasteries.

\(^{39}\) Levin in *Russia’s Women*, pp. 50. Kivelson in *Russia’s Women*, pp. 80, 82. On women’s use of various types of magic, see Pushkareva in *Russia’s Women*, pp. 34-35, 39. See also Atkinson in *Women in Russia*, pp. 16-17.

\(^{40}\) Levin in *Russia’s Women*, p. 47.
Moss notes that Ivan IV began to use cloisters as a punishment more often from the early 1560s. In addition, women could be exiled to a convent for adultery, where they would remain if not reclaimed by their husbands within a two-year period. Even though adultery was one of the few grounds on which women could file for a divorce from their husbands, adulterous men were not similarly punished, and, as Atkinson has observed, “An unwanted wife could thus be disposed of quite simply since ‘witnesses’ were easily purchased.”

According to Boškovska, forced tonsure is mentioned often enough in surviving sources to indicate that it was a very real threat for many married women of all social classes. Particularly those who were in ill health or who “failed” to bear children might find themselves banished to a convent, a fate most apparently wished to avoid. In Boškovska’s words, “sickness was by far the most frequent reason that married women entered a cloister.” During the seventeenth century, the practice of forced tonsure was so notoriously abused that the church felt compelled to take direct action against it on more than one occasion. Throughout most of the seventeenth century, the entrance of one partner into monastic life would not only absolve the marriage, but also allow the other partner to remarry. In 1667, the church addressed this situation by requiring the consent of the both parents and the spouse of a young married man or woman who wished to enter a cloister due to sickness or a desire to end the marriage. (Previously, the consent of the spouse was considered sufficient.) This new requirement apparently failed to solve the problem, however, and in the early 1680s Patriarch Ioakim declared that a man or

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41 Pushkareva in *Russia's Women*, p. 39.
woman who had a former partner living in a cloister would no longer be able to
remarry. 43

While a husband might use the threat of forced tonsure as a means of exerting
power over his wife, he might also threaten to become a monk himself, thus freeing
himself from his worldly responsibilities. Surviving records do not indicate that wives
behaved similarly, probably because, officially, a husband’s consent was required for a
married woman to take the veil, in addition to that of the archbishop. Nevertheless,
choosing monasticism seems to have been a relatively easy way for both husbands and
wives to end a marriage, although wives, who often had little chance of getting a divorce,
resorted to it most frequently. In addition to gaining the consent of her husband and the
archbishop, a wife who took the veil was supposed to be tonsured in a convent, with
witnesses present, although the ritual sometimes took place in an unauthorized manner.
Likewise, in at least one instance cited by Boškovska, in 1628, a noblewoman was
tonsured in her husband’s absence without consulting him, thus bypassing the need for
his consent. The stated reason for her tonsure was illness, but one wonders if she simply
wanted out of her marriage. Normally, a married woman would take her dowry with her
into the convent, and, in most cloisters, nuns were required to look after their own
financial affairs. Interestingly, in cases in which a woman, due to the nature of her
dowry, was not able to take it with her, it seems that men were held liable to provide for
their ex-wives. Some, however, were certainly not supported as they should have been. 44

In Claus’ words, the nun’s life “was for the most part unenviable, to judge from
the reports we possess.” Nevertheless, in the sixteenth century, nuns were able to leave

43 Boškovska, 88-92.
44 Boškovska, 88-92.
their convents and receive visitors more often than they previously had. Their generally unpleasant circumstances, however, explains in part why Muscovite women usually entered convents only at a very young or a very old age. A young woman in Muscovite society was essentially powerless, and, as previously mentioned, might very well have the ascetic life forced upon her. Older women, however, and especially landowning widows, had more autonomy, and potentially more reasons for choosing to enter a convent, probably often including a desire to devote themselves to spiritual matters in their old age. In some cases, extenuating circumstances created exceptions to the general age pattern. For example, after Muscovy's incorporation of Pskov in 1510, many men and women turned to asceticism in an apparent attempt to avoid being forcibly resettled. Nevertheless, even the cloisters could not always protect their residents from external events, and some nuns suffered death as martyrs when their convents were plundered.45

Although little is known about the particulars of the lives of Muscovite nuns, some general comments can be made. Russian convents offered women four levels of asceticism. The first level, poslushnitsa, was really a preliminary stage in which a woman prepared to become a nun.46 She retained the right to leave the convent until she was consecrated as a nun, which represented the second level of asceticism. Nuns of the third and fourth levels were called skhimnitsy, as they had taken the vows associated with the lesser or greater schema (malaia skhima, velikaia skhima). According to Klaus, nuns of these ranks were considered to have the status of angels (be in an “engelgleichen Stand”). Naturally, each rank demanded further dissociation of the nun from the things of the world, and attainment of the greater schema could be achieved only through “a

42 Claus, pp. 172-73, 177-79.
46 Poslushnitsa literally means “obedient woman.”
thirty-year flawless cloister life,” in the words of Claus. Nuns who reached this status had to refrain from social intercourse generally, even with other nuns. They never again left the convent, and they practiced a strict regime of prayer and fasting. While all nuns dedicated a great deal of time to various spiritual observances, they also undertook different types of handiwork, for which some convents became well known. Such convents sometimes profited greatly from the nuns’ work. In other convents, however, nuns were reduced to begging for food, a situation that was particularly problematic in the sixteenth century. A church synod attempted to remedy this situation in 1551 by forbidding nuns from begging and dividing the beggar-nuns among various cloisters. The healthy would work off the cost for their entry into the convent, while the state subsidized the cost for the elderly and infirm.47

Convents represented entire communities, and larger ones might contain postushnitsy, nuns of various ranks, wealthy women in residence with their servants, farmers and handworkers, and in some cases even nuns who had been expelled from other convents. Guests, poor people seeking charity, and pilgrims, who were attracted particularly to sites at which miracles were reputed to have occurred recently, supplemented the ranks of these permanent community members. In addition, it was possible for convents to be bestowed upon other convents.48 Naturally, there were vast differences between wealthy convents, in which women of higher birth and means were found, and poorer convents, and life in a particular convent also changed over time.

47 Claus, pp. 174-77, 180, 182. Boškovska, p. 424. For general information on levels of asceticism and terminology associated with Russian monasticism, see also G. N. Skliarevskaja. Slovar' Pravoslavnoi Tserkovnoi Kultury (St. Petersburg: Nauk, 2000.)
48 Claus, p. 163, 179.
According to Claus, little information is available about convents for women of simpler means, and the details about nuns’ ways of life in general also remain, for the most part, obscure. This situation is unfortunate if not unexpected. In addition, significant variation certainly existed from convent to convent, due not only to differing degrees of wealth and influence, but also to the lack of monastic orders in the Orthodox Church. Despite the existence of general codes setting forth guidelines for monastic life, such as Koinobia, the lack of specific orders allowed for more autonomy in individual cloisters than was the case in Catholicism.49

Prior to the sixteenth century, women who took the veil shared cloisters with monks, with male abbots possessing authority over both groups. Although a few such Doppelklöster persisted into the seventeenth century, the church already had declared them indecent and forbidden by the first half of the sixteenth century. In Claus’ words, “as the Doppelklöster were, since the beginning of the sixteenth century, no longer able to continue, a supplementary number of Frauenklöster had to be founded.” This development certainly represents what Atkinson calls a “new ethic of asceticism” that “diabolized sex,”50 but it also created a new opportunity for women to exercise authority as abbesses, who were in some cases elected by a convent’s nuns. The more significant convents were by the sixteenth century generally under the strong influence of nobles and the tsar, and these powerful men exercised the right to appoint abbesses, as well as abbots of important monasteries. Interestingly, abbesses of these politically significant cloisters, such as the Novodevichij Convent in Moscow, had to be talented, educated, and wealthy.

49 Claus, pp. 162, 179.
50 Atkinson in Women in Russia, p. 14. According to her, “similar attitudes [towards sex] are discernible in late Kievian literature, but only with the social extension of the church do they appear to have gained popular currency.”
Their connections to nobility and royalty gave them important political and diplomatic functions. Claus suggests that this development provided a positive opportunity for upper-class women to escape seclusion in the terem, or segregated women's quarters in the homes of upper-class Muscovite families. More recent scholarship suggests, however, that the terem by no means completely denied upper-class women, particularly those of the tsar's family, from participation in the public sphere. Furthermore, upper-class women in general were probably neither as ignorant nor as isolated as most scholarship surrounding the terem asserts. 51

One way in which well-to-do women could participate in the public sphere, and also become connected to convents without necessarily taking the veil, was through pious donations. A woman could give a vklad (literally contribution), which would give her the right to spend her old age in the convent for which she acted as benefactress. She would also be buried there, and pominki (memorial church services) would be held for her for an indefinite period after her death. In the sixteenth century it became customary, at least in Pskov, for women to present a vklad on entering a convent. Female donors who had their own property often bequeathed their estates or portions of them to the convents to which they had given a vklad, and this choice often resulted in disputes between the convents and the families of the deceased. Wealthy women might also donate a dannaiia gramota (literally given deed or charter) to a convent, a grant which did not entail the stipulations associated with the vklad. Ivan IV's first wife Anastasiia was known for making such

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51 Claus, pp. 166-167, 186. Kollmann has produced a study of the seclusion of upper-class women, "The Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women," in Russian History/Histoire Russe (10, 2, 1983), pp. 170-87. Thyrêt, however, stresses evidence for the significant public roles of the tsaritsy, in spite of their seclusion in the terem. See also Boškovska, pp. 209-22, for a good deconstruction of what she calls the "myth of the terem" and an analysis of the probable extent to which upper-class Muscovite women actually had freedom of movement.
donations, and some convents became wealthy through the beneficence of such prominent women.\textsuperscript{52}

Outside the role of nun or benefactress, women were generally excluded from church service due to their ostensible ignorance. Nevertheless, they were also able to serve the church as bakers of sacramental bread for the eucharist. While baking was not undertaken only by women in Muscovy, widows were employed to bake sacramental bread. According to Boškovska, these women "were mostly elected by the parish and then appointed by the archbishop," and the position was particularly attractive to widows due to the income it secured them. While the employment of women for this purpose by an organization "which otherwise barred women from all offices" may seem strange, it is almost certainly explained by the fact that as post-sexual women, widows could be expected to be ritually pure, something that was necessary for such a holy undertaking.\textsuperscript{53}

Interestingly, women seem to have been more highly regarded among the Old Believers (starovertsy) than among the Russian Orthodox in general, as Old Believers more commonly educated both sexes. Women of various social strata refused to adopt the reforms instituted by Patriarch Nikon, sometimes taking the initiative in this process, which often split up families. Generally, the pro-Greek Nikon sought to align Russian church ritual with older Byzantine forms, which had been improperly translated in Russian texts. Whereas the church's official position was that those who refused to adopt the reforms were heretics, the Old Believers feared that changing their rituals would lead to damnation. Since the church and state worked together to institute the reforms,

\textsuperscript{52} Claus, pp. 162-63. On the conflicts between convents and donors' families, see p. 162, footnote 7. Interestingly, although private property was supposed to be abolished in convents and monasteries according to Koinobia, women who left convents sometimes demanded their vklad back. See p. 184.

\textsuperscript{53} Boškovska, pp. 417-421.
however, the Old Believers became fugitives. They were frequently arrested and persecuted, and the fact that many women were found among their number is one example of a behavior that women have often exhibited in Russian history—maintaining the old in the face of the new. Just as women, along with men, preserved pre-Christian ritual in Orthodoxy through syncretism, women also preserved older Russian forms of religious ritual in the face of reforms from above. In addition, the fact that women were willing to defy husbands and fathers as well as to risk persecution over a religious controversy attests to both female agency and the strong spiritual motivation some women had for their behavior.  

In a variety of ways, then, the women of Muscovy found meaning in religion, even as they found themselves facing increasing religious misogyny as the Orthodox Church expanded its authority. Peasant women’s syncretic and magical practices helped to ease the harsh realities of their lives. Since men remained largely aloof from the process of childbirth as a result of the Orthodox Church’s strict beliefs regarding ritual impurity, peasant women’s syncretic religious understanding is particularly evident in practices surrounding childbirth. Meanwhile, upper-class women, and tsaritsy in particular, helped carve out roles for themselves as pious benefactors and intercessors. The church was able to accept these roles, even as they drew women into the public sphere. The church also sanctioned female authority for abbesses, who presided over the convents that replaced the Doppelklöster of previous centuries. Nevertheless, the church continued to fear women’s sexuality and to support absolute patriarchal authority, even

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54 Boškova, pp. 428-436.
sanctioning wife-beating, so long as it was conducted without anger and with "just" cause.

As the social roles of Muscovite women reveal, the Orthodox church's attitude toward women lay in its particular understanding of the Biblical archetypes of Mary and Eve. Women might emulate the former through asceticism or pious motherhood, but their affinity to the latter made them generally suspect. In addition, the Bible and Christian tradition had clearly defined women and men within a patriarchal framework. Patriarchy, at least as it is known among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, always entails both the spiritual and the secular. Indeed, the two are so intertwined as to become virtually inseparable, and it is the patriarchal understanding of gender roles that sets women's religious experience apart from that of men. To understand Muscovite patriarchy as it is laid out in church writings, however, provides only a partial understanding of Muscovite women. A much fuller understanding may be found by comparing those writings to the recorded religious experiences of women themselves. As healers, heretics, nuns, tsaritsy, or even bakers of sacramental bread—indeed, as any variety of Christian that could be found in Muscovite society—women engaged, reacted to, and experienced religion, sometimes helping to define their own roles in the process. When their roles in Muscovite patriarchy and religion are considered, their experiences should be taken into account. Much may yet be learned from them as new sources are exploited, and previously used sources read in new ways.
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