

The Attitude of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Towards Women*

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1. The Historical Background of the Ukrainian Orthodox Tradition

The attitude of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church towards women was influenced by the positive role and image of women in the Eastern Slavic pagan tradition. In the pantheon of East Slavic deities the Mother Earth goddess played an important role and there is also evidence of a matriarchal society¹. This contrasts sharply with Greek pagan society which suffered from dualism and saw women as inferior². At the beginning of church history in Ukraine we are confronted with the strong image of St. Olha. The Primary Chronicle describes St. Olha as „wiser than all men“³. After the death of her husband, Prince Ihor in 945, she served as regent for her son Prince Sviatoslav and thus was ruler of Kievan Rus'. In 955 she was baptised into the Christian faith in the Eastern rite. She was instructed by the Patriarch of Constantiople in church doctrine and prayer and „like a sponge absorbing water, she eagerly drank in his teachings“⁴. St. Olha was an example and inspiration to her people not only in the secular realm, but also in Christian character. She was their political and also their religious leader. After her death, her people took comfort in the fact that she continued to pray on their behalf:

„Olga (sic) was the precursor of the Christian land, even as the dayspring precedes the sun and as the dawn precedes the day. For she shone like the moon by night and she was radiant among the infidels like a pearl in the mire, since the people were soiled, and not yet purified of their sin by holy Baptism. But she herself was cleansed of this sacred purification ... Thus we may say to her, „Rejoice in the Russians' Knowledge of God“, for we were the firstfruits of their reconciliation with him.

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¹ Petro B.T. BILANIUK, *The Apostolic Origin of the Ukrainian Church*, Toronto: Copyright, author, 1988, 25–58; Joanna HUBBS, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

² These pagan views continued to influence the early Church fathers to some extent. Rosemary RADFORD REUTHER, *Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church*, *Religion and Sexism Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. R. R. REUTHER, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974, 150–183.

³ *The Russian Primary Chronicle. The Laurentian Text*, Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953, 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*

She was the first from Russia to enter the Kingdom of God, and the sons of Russia thus praise her as their leader, for since her death she has interceded with God in their behalf."⁵

St. Olha is honoured by the whole Orthodox Church, not just the Ukrainian Church, as „Equal to the Apostles“⁶. She was given this title because like the apostles, she was a „pure guardian of the law and teacher of the Christian faith“ to Kievan Rus⁷. Like the Apostle Paul she was „lifted up ... on the wings of the knowledge of God ... higher than the visible world“⁸. She was „as strong as a lioness“ and her glorious memory will always shine forth in the land of Ukraine⁹. A special service, a Canon to St. Olha, was composed to be celebrated yearly on the anniversary of her death July 24th¹⁰. The service continually praises her as „wise in the knowledge of God“ and outlines the glorious exploits of her life. Thus, St. Olha set an example for Ukrainian Orthodox women as a strong active person both in worldly affairs and in religious endeavours.

The grandson of St. Olha, St. Volodymyr, officially introduced Christianity as the state religion in 988. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantiople inherited the rites and sacraments of the Greek Orthodox Church. We read in Gal. 3,28 “... there are no more distinctions between male and female, but all are one in Christ“. This means that the Kingdom of God is open to all. Both women and men are baptised, chrismated and partake of Holy Communion. These three sacraments make women and men members of the holy Orthodox Church and also members of the Royal Priesthood of Believers¹¹. Both women and men are concelebrants of the Divine Liturgy, for a liturgy cannot be celebrated by a priest alone. By tradition women in Ukraine stand and pray on the lefthand side of the Church and men on the righthand side¹². One of the benefits of this custom is that it emphasises the symbol of the church as the family of God. Rather than worshipping as a biological group we worship as members of the family of God and have a sense of the ties that bind us in Christ. In Ukraine it was common for both women and men to chant the services. Paul of Aleppo who visited Kozak Ukraine in the 17th century noted the participation of the women:

⁵ Ibid. 86–87.

⁶ E. E. GOLUBINSKII, *Istoriia Kanonizatsii Sviatykh v Russkoi Tserkvi*, rpt. Gregg International Publ. Ltd.: West Mead, Farnborough, Hants, England, 1969, 56–58.

⁷ *Myniia Miesiats Iulii*, Kiev: V Typografii Kievo–Pecherski Lavry, 1894, 110.

⁸ Ibid. 111.

⁹ Ibid. 110.

¹⁰ Ibid. 111–118. A canon is an extended poem of 9 odes or songs.

¹¹ Militza ZERNOV, *Women’s Ministry in the Church*, *Eastern Churches Review* 7/1 (1975) 35.

¹² Apparently, in Kharkiv province in the 19th century men stood at the front of the church while women were relegated to the vestibule. However, this practice was not common throughout Ukraine. Christine WOROBETZ, *Temptress of Virgin? The Precarious Sexual Position of Women in Postemancipation Ukrainian Peasant Society*, *Slavic Review* 49/2 (1990) 230.

„We observed an excellent custom throughout all these regions of the ... Kozaks. All except a very few of them know the prayers by heart, and the order of the service, and the chanting, even to the greater part of the women and girls. Besides this, the priest instruct even the orphan children.“¹³

All forms of lay services in theory are open to women. Female saints, both married and unmarried, are equal in dignity to male saints and are worthy of the same veneration. Of the female saints canonised by the Eastern Slavic Churches most were married¹⁴. St. Paraskeva Piatnitsa is the most popular of the female saints inherited from the Greeks. Many churches in Ukraine were named in her honour. She was venerated by women as the patron of „women’s work“ and by men as the patron of trade and commerce¹⁵. St. Barbara, St. Catherine and St. Anastasia were also popular. There were also many churches in Ukraine named after St. Sophia, the personification of Divine Wisdom.

In the Office of Oblation or Proskomidiya, in preparation for the celebration of the Divine liturgy, the Eastern Slavic Churches added female saints to the commemoration of the saints. When preparing the fourth particle of the holy bread the Slavic texts add to the list of male martyrs commemorated „Thekla, Barbara, Kyriaka, Euphemia, Paraskeva, Katherine; and all other holy martyred women“¹⁶. In addition to the devout and God-bearing fathers commemorated, the Slavic texts for the fifth particle have „our devout mothers in God, Pelegia, Theodosia, Anastasia, Eupraxia, Fevronia, Theodulia, Euphrosyne, Mary of Egypt: and all of our holy and devout mothers“¹⁷. This addition of the names of the female saints who actively served Christ and His Church is an important break with Greek Tradition and helped to reinforce the role of women in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Ukraine also inherited from the Greek Orthodox Church, rules of „ritual uncleanness“ and ritual purification for both women and men based on laws from the Old Testament¹⁸. However, over the passage of time, the rules for men fell into disuse while those for women remained. It is interesting to note that men, who made

¹³ Testamonies Concerning the Patriarch Nikon, the Tsar, and the Boyars From the Travels of the Patriarch Macarius of Antioch, The Patriarch and the Tsar 2, trans. William PALMER, London: Trubner & Co., 1873, 4.

¹⁴ GOLUBINSKII.

¹⁵ Leonid OUSPENSKY & Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Meaning of Icons*, rev. ed., Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982, 136. St. Paraskeva is associated with Friday, which was marketday in East Slavic countries.

¹⁶ *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, trans. Isabel HAPGOOD, rev. ed., Englewood, N.Y.: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 1975, 73. This translation was made in 1906 of the services of the Russian Orthodox Church used in Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia. Svata Sluzhba Bozha, trans. into Ukrainian by Ivan OHIENKO, n.p.: Z Drukarni Stavronygiys’koho Instytutu, 1922, 14.

¹⁷ Service 73. Svata 14–15.

¹⁸ Stanley S. HARAKAS, *The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers*, Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Co., 1987, 174–176.