

Anthropology Revisited: Review of Thomas and Narinskaya, *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*

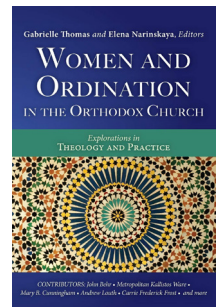
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Despite being filled with political division and social upheaval, 2020 proved to be an excellent year for publications in the field of Orthodox Christian Studies. One important text rises like cream to the top. Gabrielle Thomas and Elena Narinskaya's edited volume *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church: Explorations in Theology and Practice* wrestles with possible solutions to the seemingly ontological problem of women's ordination. While theologians and historians are represented in the book, it lacks much needed input from sociologists and anthropologists. Nevertheless, this collection provides a fairly holistic examination of the issues surrounding the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church, drawing in ecumenical voices to provide a rich conversation about female religious vocations across Christian traditions. With a tripartite thematic arrangement, the volume remains true to its subtitle, using its three distinct sections to explore the interplay of theology and praxis in debates surrounding the possibility of women presiding at the holy altar.

Beginning with an exploration of theological anthropology, the first section of the book incorporates chapters on Christology, language, and ontological freedom. These opening

chapters provide a rich overview of some of the theological complexities swirling around women's ordination, from semiotic questions about image and incarnation to interrogations of marriage, martyrdom, and gender roles to women's leadership in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Conversations regarding the historical female diaconate comprise the second and largest section of the volume. There is more historical analysis of women's ordination to the diaconate than the presbyterate, so perhaps this section attempts to marshal these resources to provide a strong historical scaffolding for the theological and pastoral arguments that open and close the volume. Those who have followed the debates over the revival of deaconesses in Orthodox Christianity know all too well the heated "culture war" rhetoric that surrounds the topic. Thus, it is not surprising how much of the volume is devoted to addressing the historical roles that deaconesses played in the Church. Continually reinforcing the history of female service to the Church is vital in dismantling the theologically flimsy barriers that prevent women from fully being part of Orthodox religious leadership.

The smallest but perhaps most needed section, on contemporary practice,



Gabrielle Thomas and Elena Narinskaya, eds., *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church: Explorations in Theology and Practice*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020.

closes out the edited collection. In a volume filled with strikingly lucid chapters offering theological and historical arguments regarding female ordination, Paul Ladouceur's contribution deserves extra praise for its engagement of both theological and practical issues, and for its helpful categorization of the arguments for and against ordination. Shockingly little is written about contemporary Orthodox women and how they understand their religious vocations within a church that confines them to the peripheries of service. While the essays in this section provide critical insight into the practicalities of female ordination, readers do not have a chance to hear what Orthodox women broadly have to say about this topic. The inclusion of qualitative data or oral histories would have allowed Orthodox women's voices and ideas about ordination to come to the fore. As an anthropologist of Orthodox Christianity who works on gender politics, I would underscore that inclusion must be intersectional. Certainly, the growing prominence of Orthodox women scholars means that the voices of some women do register at the institutional and ecclesiastical levels. Yet intersectionality demands that we acknowledge and interrogate issues of class, race, education, geography, and other shaping social phenomena that affect how women understand and inhabit their lifeworlds. To focus on the voices of Orthodox women *scholars* negates the tenets of feminist inclusion. We need to hear from average Orthodox women, not as subjects but as empowered, voiced collaborators.

While the entire volume is a remarkable contribution to Orthodox theological anthropology, I am reminded once again how great the need is for qualitative researchers to be included

in conversations about both Orthodox theology and lived practices. As many scholars in this volume note, the question of ordaining women cannot be approached through theological, historical, or pastoral frameworks alone. Rather, methods should take into consideration the wide variety of social, cultural, biological, and spiritual complexities that are entangled with what it means to be a woman. Instead of debating the theological issues and perpetually looking for historical validation of women's leadership, we need to understand what liturgical and ecclesiastical restrictions mean in the lives of women today, what this might mean for the next generation of women, and what it will mean for the Church going forward. In the introduction to the volume, Thomas and Narinskaya note that the aim of Orthodox theology is to move beyond current socio-political ideas and events (xv). Yet Orthodox theology must nevertheless consider the contemporary moment and engage with issues that concern the members of its polity. Orthodoxy has nothing to fear from interrogating the gaps in its theological anthropology and thinking through how it might be more relational, more human, more engaged with the world. Without understanding the social, cultural, and familial aspects of life, theology cannot reach people where they are, nor can it flourish. Without anthropology, theology does not have flesh in the world.

While Orthodox theological anthropology needs anthropologists and this volume could have benefited tremendously from their input, the collection nevertheless does immeasurable work on behalf of Orthodox women. Healthy debate and dialogue are key to productive and vibrant theologies of the body in al-

most every Christian tradition except Orthodoxy. Orthodox theology is strong enough to have this conversation, and it benefits when the voices, ideas, and wisdom of women are included in broader dialogues about liturgical and ecclesiastical life. If Orthodox theologians are willing to do the constructive work of talking with typical Orthodox women in different social, cultural, and geographical contexts, understanding their experiences of life in a patriarchal church and their views of religious service and vocations, then we can begin to delve deeper into the issues of gender inequality and inequity that seem to scare many theologians away at their very mention. For too long, the

question of women's ordination has been pushed to the margins of Orthodox theology. This book gives voice to the issues around gender and religious service in ways that will impact Orthodox theological anthropology for years to come. In a religion that seems to be preoccupied with marking gender difference through what one can and cannot do ecclesiastically on the basis of biological sex, perhaps the most efficacious argument in this volume comes from a singular line in Luis Josué Salés's chapter on the role of women in Pauline and pseudo-Pauline literature, in which he writes, "Put bluntly, women's ecclesiastical leadership is apostolic tradition" (73). *



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