



**HAL**  
open science

# A resilient harmony, or how the politics of social inequality in post-Soviet Russian society have informed Orthodox parish life

Detelina Tocheva

► **To cite this version:**

Detelina Tocheva. A resilient harmony, or how the politics of social inequality in post-Soviet Russian society have informed Orthodox parish life. Tobias Köllner. *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe. On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, Routledge, pp.71-85, 2019, 9780367582463. 10.4324/9781351018944-5 . halshs-01968721

**HAL Id: halshs-01968721**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01968721v1>**

Submitted on 5 Oct 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Detelina Tocheva

tocheva.detelina@gmail.com

For citation: 2019, “A resilient harmony, or how the politics of social inequality in post-Soviet Russian society have informed Orthodox parish life,” in Tobias Köllner (ed.), *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, London: Routledge, pp. 71-85.

**A resilient harmony, or how the politics of social inequality in post-Soviet Russian society have informed Orthodox parish life**

### **Orthodox symphony unbound: from the policies of the elite to politics on the ground**

Recently, the idea of a symphonic relationship between state and church in countries with a dominant Orthodox church has most commonly been defined as the harmonious collaboration between these two centers where, respectively, political and religious power reside.<sup>1</sup> This commonsensical definition of symphony has come under scrutiny in different fields of the social-scientific study of the religious resurgence in postsocialist Eastern-European countries.<sup>2</sup> Most scholars note a specific entrenchment of the Orthodox churches in the political sphere and, reciprocally, the states’ interventionist approach to the Orthodox ecclesiastic organizations.<sup>3</sup> Consensus is sometimes the hallmark of this mutual influence.<sup>4</sup> But consensus

---

<sup>1</sup> There are no similarities between this contemporary definition and the Byzantine archetype of symphony formulated by the Emperor Justinian I in the sixth century (Kalkandjieva 2011; Hovorun 2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a broad picture of the relations between Orthodox churches and political transformations after 1989 within and beyond Europe, see Leustean (2014).

<sup>3</sup> About the political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchate of Moscow) in post-Soviet Russia and the irrelevance of the model of Byzantine symphony in that context, see Knox (2003).

is by no means the dominant model, as the essays in this collection show, let alone a self-reproducing principle.<sup>5</sup> The existing relatedness does not rule out the pursuit of different agendas by church and state officials. This relatedness often involves complex processes of negotiation that may result in compromise, as well as outright dissent.

Yet, the commonsensical contemporary view of symphony as ‘following of the same track’ verifies in different areas and at different levels in the postsocialist setting. More precisely, a specific kind of a harmonious movement unfolds within the social fabric of church life and society, far away from the highest political circles of the two organizations. In order to highlight this process, I move the focus from policies initiated by the headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereafter ‘ROC’, Patriarchate of Moscow) and the top state officials to the social fabric of the church and its distinctive embeddedness in society-wide politics.<sup>6</sup> I try to understand how and why some formal and informal complexes of relationships that determine the life of the ecclesiastic organization at its basic territorial level have directly replicated societal dynamics. In other words, I try to unpack the forms and reasons of this coincident politics. Undoubtedly, power and authority play a role, but this politics stretches far beyond the milieus of the official power holders.

Social differentiation along the lines of wealth, status and gender, and their interlocking dimensions, as they unfold in parish life, are placed the center of my study. I have found that, since the fall of the Soviet regime in 1991, Church politics at the parish level has reproduced some of the dominant trends of disparity in Russian society. The study of other spheres can lead to very different findings and to the conclusion that the operation of specific rules and ideas singles out the Church from the rest of society. This is the case, for example, in the sphere of human rights. For example, Alexander Agadjanian has demonstrated that the Human Rights Doctrine of the ROC, an important document published in 2008, presents the Church to its members as ‘an institutional, social and moral enclave, which uses the human rights rhetoric to create and protect its own niche, its own modest space within the global

---

<sup>4</sup> Kristen Ghodsee advanced the idea that a Byzantine symphonic model of consensus has been revived in postsocialist Bulgaria, a model that she called ‘symphonic secularism’. She included in this model not only the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the state, but also the religious minorities of the country and Bulgarian society altogether Ghodsee (2009).

<sup>5</sup> For the case of the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church, Papkova (2011) and Richters (2013) argued that the agendas of these two organizations diverge in many spheres and that the influence of the Church on society is rather weak.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Alex Agadjanian for having summarized my idea as ‘politics instead of policies’.

multicultural universe' (Agadjanian 2008: 18). In variance with the sphere of human rights, in the sphere of economic, social and gender inequality, the Church is precisely not an enclave. Throughout the post-Soviet period, within the structures of the parish and in inter-parish relationships, the Church has embodied some of the most widespread views about disparity and replicated society-wide dynamics of economic, social and gender differentiation. I call this coincident development in the politics of inequality *resilient harmony*.<sup>7</sup> It has resulted from a combination of choices made by the hierarchs of the ROC and grassroots engagement with growing Orthodoxy since the early 1990s in a context of overall policy-driven systemic transformation. In other words, the continuously interacting dynamics of church, state, and society directly inform the basic territorial level of the ROC, determining the structure and dynamics of the inequalities.

Below, I begin with an ethnographic note about two neighbouring parishes that shows how precisely in this case the most common dynamics and criteria of economic and social differentiation have permeated the very functioning of the ROC's basic territorial level.<sup>8</sup> Then I proceed to a detailed examination of social stratification, Church decisions and the concrete dynamics whereby the gap between well-off and worse-off parishes, between influential and modest ones, has practically taken root. Furthermore, I demonstrate that differentiation along the lines of gender is enmeshed in the structure and operation of internal church inequalities, with the low-paid and precarious work of women being instrumental to the everyday operation of the churches. My analysis draws mainly on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Orthodox parishes in a city of around 88,000 inhabitants, in the region of St Petersburg, which began with a one-year fieldwork in 2006-2007 and shorter additional trips in the following years.<sup>9</sup> I also refer to official Church documents.

## **Unequal parishes**

---

<sup>7</sup> I prefer 'harmony' to 'symphony' in order to avoid any possible association between the situation that I examine and the Byzantine ideal.

<sup>8</sup> Monastic institutions need a separate analysis. I also leave out of the scope of this chapter Orthodox charitable organizations, rehabilitation centers and programmes. For more detail on the number and types of official sub-organizations and formally established centers affiliated with the ROC, see <http://www.diaconia.ru/vicepremer-rossii-olga-golodec-vstretilas-s-uchastnikami-v-obshhecerkovnogo-sezda-po-socialnomu-sluzheniyu>

<sup>9</sup> I do not provide the name of the city and the names of my informants in order to protect their privacy.

After 1991, deep inequalities took root in Russian society – along the lines of income, wealth, status, gender, ethnicity, housing, geographical region, all having interlocking dimensions.<sup>10</sup> The levels they have reached in Putin’s era are particularly high: ‘Currently, Russian society faces unprecedentedly high levels of income and wealth inequality, which is exacerbated by high levels of spatial and social inequality’ (Oxfam 2014: 31). The NGO Oxfam made this assessment in a report drawing on extensive statistical data. Further, the report claims that the actually implemented state policies are unlikely to remedy the situation. The magnitude of inequality in contemporary rural Russia is also stunning (Wegner 2014). Notably, social and economic disparities have been one of the most sensitive issues for the population over the last 25 years.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the place that one occupies in relation to the market and to the political authority largely determine her position in Russian society. I claim that these two criteria directly influence the extant inter-parish disparities. In fact, processes that are usually approached as specific to the realm of the post-Soviet Orthodox religion, such as large-scale church (re)construction, the expansion of church commerce, the new canonizations and dynamics in the worshipping of saints, are deeply enmeshed in dynamics of inter-parish differentiation.

There is a large spectrum of degrees of material wellbeing on which the parishes of the ROC can be situated. Here I bring a short ethnographic account of two urban parishes which, in the local context, have cultivated opposed identities based on their different economic wellbeing. These two parishes could be placed in the well-off zone of the spectrum, even though certainly not on its extreme. Indeed, if there are no starving priests in these churches, and the buildings and beautification are of reasonable quality, they cannot compete with their homologues directly placed under the authority of the highest hierarchs of the ROC. Neither could they compete with churches strongly supported by top state officials and the wealthiest businessmen, or those that have become flourishing pilgrimage destinations. Yet, an analysis of the differences between these two local parishes sheds light upon the forms and dynamics of disparity, and their centrality in church life, as well as upon the ways in which they are inbuilt in the encompassing social fabric of Russia’s unequal society.

---

<sup>10</sup> In some respects, this was in continuity with Soviet trends (McAuley 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Although inequalities along the lines of material wellbeing and status characterized the late Soviet period, Soviet Russia was far more homogenous than post-Soviet society. Sociological surveys conducted in the 1990s found that a large majority of Russians expected ‘equality of material life’ (Shlapentokh 1999: 1172) and social justice, while polarization was thriving, with the political elites holding popular ideas of equality in almost complete disdain (Shlapentokh 1999).

In the city where I conducted most of my research, the central church is the centre of the largest parish and the centre of the deanery. I call it ‘central’ because it is centrally located on the main pedestrian street. This church remained open during Soviet times, has maintained strong relationship with the local authorities, and benefits from businessmen’s large donations. Wealthier local families tend to choose this church to celebrate weddings and baptisms. The rector of this church, who is also the head of the deanery, has good connections to the hierarchs in St Petersburg. Members of the city government and important businessmen usually attend major celebrations in this church. The strong bounds between this church and local men in power is also expressed on a more private terrain. For instance, during a relatively modest, but open to the public, ceremony in the church for the fiftieth birthday of the rector, the most prominent businessmen and the head of the city’s administration came to congratulate him and to offer him flowers.

A church that keeps the relics of a saint is nowadays not only more prestigious on the scale of spirituality, but it tends also to be economically more prosperous, because it attracts pilgrims. None of the local churches could boast the relics of a saint before 2007. The rector of the central church initiated a process of canonisation of a new martyr saint, a local nun who passed away while she was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities during the bloody repressions against religion in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to his influential connections with the hierarchy in St Petersburg, the canonisation succeeded. The new female saint was recognised as an ‘all-people revered martyr’ (*vsenarodnaia prepodobnomuchenitsa*) in 2007. The church obtained the relics, brought there during an impressive ceremony co-organized by the city government. Soon after, groups of pilgrims started visiting this church.

The second largest church of city where I did field research was rebuilt by local enthusiasts during ten years, starting from the beginning of the 1990s when the building was given back to the ROC.<sup>13</sup> This church, first erected little before the 1917 revolution as the urban representation of a convent (*podvorie*), was closed down during Stalin’s repressions in the

---

<sup>12</sup> In the year 2000, the Council of Archbishops canonized 860 new martyrs and confessors. By 2015, the ROC had canonized 1,776 new saints. The new martyr saints are those who fell victim of violent death under the Soviet anti-religious repressions. The category of saints confessors encompasses persons who stood for their faith under the regime but their death was not caused by the authorities (Rousselet 2007, 2011; Kormina 2013; Christensen 2015).

<sup>13</sup> For another case study of an enthusiastic church rebuilding, see Kormina and Shtyrkov (2015).

1930s. Locally, this church has a very different image from the central one.<sup>14</sup> It is frequently mentioned in both churches that the salaries are lower in this reopened church. The central church is said by local people to offer expensive services and items, while the reopened one is said to be cheaper, less central, ‘village parish’ (*deverenskii prikhod*) and overall poor. In contrast, it is usual to hear comments pretending that the central church would find all possible ways to make money. Members of the core community of the rebuilt church felt as victims of the dominant position of the central church when the powerful deanery rector took over the process of canonisation of the new saint. Indeed, the saint, during her life, was a nun and belonged to their church, which was then an urban church part of a distant convent.

The difference that local people and committed churchgoers saw between these two churches belongs to a wider pattern. During the early period of Orthodox revival, social-economic differentiation took a specific form. On the one hand, there were spontaneous initiatives of church (re-)building by local enthusiasts with scarce resources (Tocheva 2011; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015: 37-41). On the other hand, churches were rapidly erected thanks to generous donations made by businessmen, often with a political intent. These two contrasting versions of church construction were given distinct moral assessments. Churches built with money donated by rich businessmen were said to be ‘built with gold’, while churches built with benevolent labour of worse off enthusiasts were said to be ‘built with tears’ (Benovska-Sabkova et al. 2010: 19; Köllner 2011). In this locality, the popular perception of church construction as the embodiment of economic differentiation has been replaced by new controversies around the canonisation of new martyrs.

Such strong dichotomy between two churches is not necessarily found in every locality. Nonetheless, this example of differentiation of two neighbouring parishes illustrates a much wider situation. There is a clear divide everywhere between, on the one side, parishes that are well-connected, generously supported by donors and successful in selling items and providing religious services and, on the other side, parishes that are less privileged in terms of income from trade, donations and in terms of influential connections.

The gap between well-off and worse-off parishes has become a durable characteristic of the post-Soviet ROC. The contemporary situation is reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary state of affairs where the material wellbeing of the parishes varied widely from one locality to another and from one church to another (Bernshtam 2005: 134-147; Freeze 1983: 51-101; Rozov

---

<sup>14</sup> This case is discussed extensively in Tocheva (2011).

2003: 39-40 passim; Shevzov 2004: 54-94). There are several substantial differences, however.

An important specificity of the post-Soviet Orthodox resurgence resides in the unprecedented policy of church (re)construction, a process along which inter-parish differentiation emerged already from the early 1990s. The number of parishes belonging to the ROC grew dramatically in the post-Soviet period. There were less than 7000 parishes on the territory of the Soviet Union in 1988, the year of the celebration of the Millennium of the baptism of Rus', which marked the beginning of the so-called Orthodox rebirth. According to a recent official Church report, there were 35 496 parishes in the beginning of 2015.<sup>15</sup> A new impulse was given to church construction directly from the top around 2015.<sup>16</sup> During a recent meeting of the hierarchs of the ROC, held in February 2015, Patriarch Kirill emphasized that one of the most central tasks of the Church must be to build new churches and to contribute to a more dynamic parish life, with the integration of new members as a key mission.<sup>17</sup> My ethnographic example above depicts a local configuration in which the established church is clearly more prosperous than the one rebuilt with enthusiasm and scarce resources. But there is material inequality among the new churches too, and at the same time, the status of an older church does not guarantee economic ease.

It is reasonable to ask how deep material inequality within the ROC is possible in the context of overall supportive state policies. I will first sketch the general terms of state policies and will turn then to the specific Church regulations and internal politics. On the one hand, the constitutional separation between the Church and the Russian state was adopted during the revolutionary period in 1918. This separation has remained unchanged in the post-Soviet constitution of 1993. This means that the state does not collect taxes for the Church. On the other hand, however, Presidents Putin (2000–08, 2012– present) and Medvedev (2008–12) did much to facilitate 'the rebirth of Orthodoxy', not least regarding the church economy. The

---

<sup>15</sup> See Patriarch Kirill's report: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3979067.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Civil protests have arisen around the "Programme 200", aiming to erect in Moscow 200 new churches "within walking distance". See <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=112120>. In other large cities too, local dwellers opposed church construction. About controversial church construction in Saint-Petersburg, see <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=112153>. About the controversy around the 'transfer for use during 49 years' to the ROC of the St Isaak Cathedral in St Petersburg, a building that belongs to the city and is of high cultural and artistic significance to its population, see, for example, <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=126915>.

<sup>17</sup> Meeting of the Archbishops on 2 February 2015. Source: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3977933.html>.



state has started providing substantial support for church renovation in the case of buildings recognized as cultural heritage sites. Furthermore, the ROC has become the largest real estate owner in the Russian Federation since the Law on the Transfer to the Religious Organizations of Property of Religious Significance under State or Municipal Ownership came into force on 3 December 2010.<sup>18</sup> Noteworthy is the fact that these policies are in favour of real estate acquisition, but do not support the material base that makes the life of the parishes practically possible. In this latter respect, key aspect of state policy is treating church money as a donation (*pozherstvovanie*) free from income tax, including all income from goods and rituals for religious use, which comprises virtually everything. But this disposition plays a role only once the church has earned income.

The most important source of inter-parish economic inequality is the fact that every parish is a self-provisioning unit. Moreover, there is no top-down allocation of resources, excepting in two marginal cases mentioned below. The parish, through the deanery, hands over part of its income from commerce and donations to the diocesan bishop, who is directly accountable to the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, but receives no money from it. Church regulations stipulate that it is the parish members who are obliged to provide for their clerics and for the upkeep of their church.<sup>19</sup> Still, there is no official parish affiliation; lay parish membership takes place only on a voluntary basis. There are no registers of church members (see also Agadjanian 2011: 27–28).<sup>20</sup> Under the conditions of self-sustaining parishes, the salaries of the priests and other parish employees directly depend upon the income of the parish, which often boils down to income from sales and donations made to the church or to the priests in person. The diocesan bishop defines the tax that each parish pays. After important amendments of the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2008 and 2011 under Patriarch Kirill's ruling, the tax burden on the parishes has significantly increased. This new situation directly derives from the Patriarch's attempt to strengthen his own and the Holy Synod's power upon the two lower levels, the eparchies and the parishes, (and monasteries, educational institutions, etc.), as Kathy Rousselet has argued (2013).<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Source: <http://www.rg.ru/2010/12/03/tserkovnoedobro-dok.html>.

<sup>19</sup> This 'obligation' of the laity is specified in point 3.33 of the Statute of the Parish. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/133141.html>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/133141.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/ustav/xiv/>, <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/ustav/xiii/>, and <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/ustav/xviii/>.

Consequently, the higher the turnover of a given church, the higher the income of the staff it employs, officially or not, and the larger the number of parish workers. In addition, good connections to political and economic leaders provide better access to economic resources and visibility in the public media.

Against the background of this instituted inequality, the hierarchs of the post-Soviet ROC have never supported any model of top-down redistribution of resources. Overall, their commitment in terms of material support is limited to providing the basic liturgical material to the parish churches.<sup>22</sup> It is only recently that the idea of controlling the material conditions of the parish clergy and church workers has received official support from the top hierarchs of the Church. In 2013, the Council of Archbishops adopted a statement about the material and social support to be provided to ‘servants of the sacred’, church servants, workers in the religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, and members of their families. Their statement recommends creating commissions at the level of the eparchy to identify problems and find solutions. For example, the commission should find ways of providing support to clergy and church workers living under the state-defined subsistence minimum, and guarantee income to the family members of clergymen and church workers who are deceased or temporarily unable to serve. The document also formulates an expectation that the parish rectors should prevent substantial differences from arising between the salaries of parish priests, and that the rectors should provide adequate official payment for other positions, such as parish bookkeepers and choir directors, taking levels of education into account. The priests heading a deanery should report to the eparchy about the payments provided to their clergy and workers.<sup>23</sup> These dispositions, however, do not imply that the Church hierarchy has taken any further control over the kinds and levels of various material resources available to a parish or over the overall parish incomes. More importantly, there are no guidelines, let alone formal rules, for preventing clerics and other church workers from entering poverty in the first place.

In these circumstances, unequal access to resources from trade, paid-for rituals and services, donations and relationships with influential persons, plays a fundamental role in the ongoing dynamics of inter-parish differentiation. Some priests have openly criticized these conditions

---

<sup>22</sup> The clergy is entitled to a minimal old-age pension, provided by the state to everyone who has reached retirement age. During my fieldwork, I found that in the St Petersburg region, the parish usually adds an extra pension, the size of which varies from one parish to another.

<sup>23</sup> Source: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2775729.html>.

that de facto oblige the parish priests to endorse the role of businessmen.<sup>24</sup> Institutionally enshrined unequal access to material resources means that deep economic disparities lurk behind much publicized policies of church construction and ‘restitution’ of real estate property to the ROC.

Trying to keep up with the ‘law of the market’, small churches in remote places strive to establish themselves as pilgrimage destinations. Usually, they advertise a ‘holy spring’, a local saint, an spiritual guide (known as *starets*), and the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Some are relatively successful in attracting visitors, others much less. Since the parishes directly depend on their turnover, the post-Soviet growth of the Church meant an unprecedented growth in trade. The churches offer a large range of cheap and expensive rituals<sup>25</sup> and items for religious use.<sup>26</sup> They have specialized in catering for a variety of faithful. For the committed and less committed Orthodox, participation in religious life involves, in one way or another, what is commonly, and imperfectly for the case in hand, termed ‘consumption’: buying religious items, paying for specific clerical services and rituals. Society-wide inequalities along the line of wealth and status translate into distinctive uses of Orthodoxy. Part of the top clergy caters for the economic and political elite. Wealthy businessmen have their ‘private’ confessors to whom they make donations; top political leaders have their own spiritual advisors. The companies organizing pilgrimages offer another example. Cheap pilgrimages, massively advertised in the parishes and typically using for transport old buses, have little in common with expensive pilgrimages for pious and well-off people to prestigious destinations, including abroad.<sup>27</sup> Even some saints ‘specialize.’ Kormina and Shtyrkov (2011) show that among the faithful who worship Saint Xenia of Petersburg, women, especially singles, elderly, and the needy are overrepresented. In all these respects, one’s position in society determines one’s access to specific Church services, activities and goods.

---

<sup>24</sup> Source: <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=116006>.

<sup>25</sup> The most frequently listed rituals are: baptism; marriage; funeral service at the cemetery or in the church; mentioning of the name of a person in prayers at the altar during forty days, six or twelve months; single mentioning of the name of a living or deceased person in different kinds of prayers; individual prayer for a living or deceased person; the blessing with water of apartments, houses, offices, cars; photograph and video recording of a ceremony.

<sup>26</sup> The main producer of religious paraphernalia is the factory Sofrino (*sofrino.ru*), belonging Patriarchate of Moscow.

<sup>27</sup> Mount Atos in Greece and Bari in Italy, where the relics of Saint Nicolas of Myra are kept, are among the prestigious destinations.

## Women in parish life: visible, active, unrewarded

The second kind of embedded disparities addressed in this chapter are those running along the lines of gender. Women participate in mass in crucial areas of the post-Soviet ROC, ranging from head positions in the most popular Orthodox media to parish education and door-keeping. The female Orthodox elites have eagerly assumed important, new roles. Women are particularly active as leaders in Orthodox publishing and media (books, newspapers, Internet publications). As Nadieszda Kizenko has recently emphasized, the significant participation of such women in the Orthodox revival has contributed to the expression of different opinions and more generally to the emergence of complex, multivocal post-Soviet Orthodoxy (Kizenko 2013). Feminization has also taken place beyond the elite circles. Lay women play a key role as informal parish elite, in particular in parish education. But no matter what the specific job they occupy and no matter how high the esteem in which fellow parishioners and priests hold them, they are given modest material rewards and no recognition within the official hierarchy of the Church.<sup>28</sup> Below, I demonstrate how parish jobs reserved for women, far from being some sort of an isolated employment cluster governed by its own rules and logics, represent in a nutshell various combinations and levels of the discriminatory criteria of gender and age, characteristic of the Russian employment market. The female parish hierarchy is totally informal but quite consequential. Very low-paid jobs are reserved for elderly, retired women. Middle-level service, bureaucratic and commercial jobs are reserved for the middle-aged, preferably for those considered trustworthy by the parish rectors. The more prestigious positions of catechist, parish school leader, pilgrimage organizer, or head of the parish newspaper (these often overlap in practice), are occupied by women with a degree from the university. There is no statistical data about the level of women's salaries and their general

---

<sup>28</sup> These women find no recognition in the hierarchy of the institution, however with the notable exception of the monastic sphere. Women have been active in the establishment of sisterhoods and the revival of monasticism (Medvedeva 2015). In addition, the wives of the priests hold a semi-recognised position known as *matushka*. Western Orthodox theologians have argued in favour of the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. Karras (2008) offers a well-argued example, including an extensive overview of the theological literature. In Russia, the issue hardly appears in public debates. Among the teachers, the parish clergy and the parish activists, I have never heard anyone even vaguely approaching the topic of the ordination of women.

employment conditions in the parishes. Nonetheless, direct observation and the interviews I have conducted show that they are given meagre economic reward.

On the most unprivileged side, women usually occupy door-keeping functions, essential to the practical life of every church. Such jobs link low-paid service work to old age. These women may also sell in the church shop (*svechnitsi*), but most often they work as cleaners (*uborchitsi*). Such women are sometimes empathically called ‘little grannies’ or ‘little old ladies’ (*babushki, starushki*). On the negative side, they are also perceived as grumpy, sanctimonious zealots who feel confident enough to use disparaging remarks in order to correct the visitors’ behavior in the church. They became inextricably linked to the image of the Church under Soviet rule. Elderly women were indeed overrepresented among churchgoers. The combination of old age and female gender made them relatively immune to the official expectation addressed to every single member of the Soviet society to profess atheism. Immediately after the liberalization of religious practice, these were precisely women occupying low level service jobs in churches who assumed the informal office of teachers of correct behaviour in a church. Even today, an occasional visitor entering a church is more likely to see such women rather than the priests. Yet, their role as informal guides has been significantly eroded with the expansion of priestly guidance, Sunday schools and others Orthodox classes, and especially authoritative Orthodox publications. They mostly tend to withdraw to technical tasks.

Some of these women are employed occasionally, some on a permanent basis, some on an official contract, others outside of any such formal frame. In the latter case, the church declares officially that they work as volunteers. In fact, they do receive payments, and among priests these payments are considered as a normal reward for their work. Whether stable income or occasional payment from helping in the church and cleaning during important celebrations, this payment is always a welcome addition to their tiny pensions. They are even more attractive in the context of growing insecurity regarding elder care. Indeed, in Russia, the search for welfare arrangements beyond the public services has been rapidly expanding as a result of the shrinking state support that goes together with the implementation of neoliberal schemes in the welfare sector (Caldwell 2007; Hemment 2012). This encompassing context has made the working elderly, especially women, an intrinsic feature of Russian society. The place such women occupy at the bottom of the informal church hierarchy directly replicates the one that Russian society has ascribed to them with an unvoiced agreement also outside of

the walls of the church, that of low-paid, mostly undeclared jobs. Often, their work is absolutely crucial for the practical operation of the church.

On the more prestigious side, one finds the jobs of church shop seller, bookkeeper, secretary and other middle-level bureaucratic jobs. Jobs at the church stall are often held by the wives of the priests or by middle-aged women, considered pious and trustworthy by the priests. Bureaucratic tasks are also reserved for women who are closer to the priests. Some have work experience from the private sector as bookkeepers or secretaries.

The case of women catechists is particularly interesting. They are on the top of the informal female hierarchy in the parishes. Sunday schools and classes for adults have been now established in nearly every parish. Agata Ładykowska and I have shown that in post-Soviet Orthodoxy the clergy and the laity have endowed women teachers of Orthodoxy with unprecedented credit and didactic authority (Ładykowska and Tocheva 2013). This authority is founded in professionalism; priests and the laity recognize these women's educational and organizational expertise. Frequently, the same women act as the actual managing directors of the Sunday schools, although priests are the official heads. It is usual for a Sunday school teacher to take care of the parish newspaper and to organize public events in the parish. I came across several cases where a female teacher, or a woman acting as the managing head of the Sunday school, had graduated as an Orthodox choir director in St Petersburg and indeed directed a church choir. Some of these women, usually well-educated and appreciated by the priests, also work as parish bookkeepers.

Women engaged in parish education often combine two or more jobs in order to make a living, one in the parish (which is often already a combination of several jobs) and one in a state school or university, often also as part-time medical staff, secretary, or employee in a private company. These experiences largely resonate with those of women in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Gal and Kligman 2000). Nevertheless, they choose to work in this sector, because they see it as a morally higher, cultured enclave amidst Russia's rude, often brutal relationships. Their commitment to spreading the faith is for them a way to reach out to the youngest generations whom they aspire to teach amiable social relationships, and to thus improve society.

The parishes have reproduced the striking discrepancy characteristic of employment in Russia between high female participation and low payment. In the sphere of parish schooling, it has

also reproduced the ambivalent legacies of female participation in Soviet education. On the one hand, this strongly feminized profession still holds the high symbolic status acquired in Soviet times. On the other hand, however, throughout the Soviet period women have always occupied lower professional positions and have received lower salaries. Despite the fact that official Soviet discourses emphasized women's emancipation, state policies were far from emancipatory, which was visible already from the postwar period (Lapidus 1978; Engel 2004; McMahon 1994). In practice not only did women grapple with the double burden of reproductive matters (childrearing and housekeeping) and of participating in salaried labour, but also occupied the most poorly paid jobs (Lapidus 1978: 143, *passim*, 172, 185-187). Salaries in Soviet education gradually decreased in comparison to the national average (*Ibid.*: 190-191). Beyond the sphere of education, the Gorbachev period and the later economic changes brought the feminization of poverty (Pilkington 1996). This trend has continued in the Putin-Medvedev era:

Although there is no noticeable gender gap in employment rates in Russia, the gender pay gap remains very high; on average, women are paid 64 per cent of the pay of men for their work. This gap is related to relatively high levels of gender segregation in Russia's labour market, where women traditionally dominate in lower-paid public sectors; for example, the number of women working in the healthcare sector is almost four times higher than the number of men and in education there are more than five times more female than male employees. [...] women and men are paid differently even when they do exactly the same work (Oxfam 2014: 21).

## Conclusion

I have argued that resilient harmony is the consequence of specific configurations of politics at different levels and kinds. Criteria of economic and social differentiation at work in Russian society have provided a blueprint for the social fabric of the ROC, and inter-parish disparities more specifically as the Orthodox Church expanded after 1991. The ambivalences of the structural and symbolic unequal position of women in Russian society have been replicated on church grounds. I have demonstrated two things. First, in these two areas, resilient harmony between church and societal developments appears as an unintended result,

rather than as an outcome of the pursuit of a symphonic model of a sort. Second, the study of this unwittingly achieved harmony can help renew the organizational analysis of the ROC. And perhaps it can be extended to the analysis of other dominant Orthodox churches in postsocialist Eastern Europe.

## References

- Agadjanian, Alexandr. 2008. Russian Orthodox vision of human rights. In Makrides Vasilios, ed. *Erfurter Vorträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums*. Erfurt: Universität Erfurt Religionswissenschaft Orthodoxes Christentum, 26.
- Benovska-Sabkova, Milena, Tobias Köllner, Tünde Komáromi, Agata Ładykowska, Detelina Tocheva, Jarrett Zigon. 2010. 'Spreading grace' in post-Soviet Russia. *Anthropology Today* 26 (1): 16-21.
- Bernshtam, Tatiana A. 2005. *Prihodskaia Zhizn' Russkoi Derevni: Ocherki po Tserkovnoi Etnografii*. Saint Petersburg: Ethnographica Petroplitana, Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2007. Elder Care in the New Russia: The Changing Face of Compassionate Social Security. *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 50: 66–80.
- Christensen, Karen. H. 2015. *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia: Soviet Repression in Orthodox Memory*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Copenhagen.
- Engel, Barbara Alpern. 2004. *Women in Russia, 1700-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeze, George. 1983. *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia. Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gal, Susan. and Gail Kligman, 2000. *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hemment, J. 2012. *Nashi*, Youth Voluntarism, and Potemkin NGOs: Making Sense of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Russia. *Slavic Review* 71 (2): 234 –260.



Hovorun, Cyril. 2017. Is the Byzantine ‘Symphony’ Possible in Our Days? *Journal of Church and State* 59 (2): 280-296.

Kalkandjieva, Daniela. 2011. A Comparative Analysis of Church-State Relations in Eastern Orthodoxy: Concepts, Models, and Principles. *Journal of Church and State* 53 (4): 587-614.

Karras, Valerie A. 2008. “Orthodox Theologies of Women and Ordained Ministry.” In Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth H. Prodromou (eds.), *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press: 113-158.

Kizenko, Nadieszda. 2013. Feminized Patriarchy? Orthodoxy and Gender in Post-Soviet Russia. *Signs* 38 (3): 595-621.

Knox, Zoe. 2003. The Symphonic Ideal: The Moscow Patriarchate’s Post-Soviet Leadership. *Europe-Asia Studies* 55 (4): 575-596.

Köllner, Tobias. 2011. Built with Gold or Tears? Moral Discourses on Church Construction and the Role of Entrepreneurial Donations. In Jarrett Zigon (ed.), *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia*. New York: Berghahn Books: 191-213.

Kormina, Jeanna. 2013. Canonizing Soviet Pasts in Contemporary Russia: The Case of Saint Matrona of Moscow. In J. Boddy and M. Lambek (eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, pp. 409–424. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Kormina, Jeanne and Sergey Shtyrkov. 2011. St. Xenia as a Patron of Female Social Suffering: An Essay on Anthropological Hagiography. In Jarrett Zigon (ed.), *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia*. New York: Berghahn Books: 168-190.

Kormina, Jeanne and Sergey Shtyrkov. 2015. Eto nashe iskonno russkoe, i nikuda nam ot etogo ne det’sia: predystoria postsovetskoi desekuliarizatsii. In Jeanne Kormina, Alexander Panchenko and Sergey Shtyrkov (eds.), *Izobretenie religii: desekuliarizatsia v postsovetskom kontekste*. Saint-Petersburg: European University at Saint-Petersburg: 7-45.

Ładykowska, Agata and Detelina Tocheva. 2013. Women Teachers of Religion in Russia. Gendered Authority in the Orthodox Church. *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 162: 55-74.

- Lapidus, Gail Warshofsky. 1978. *Women in Soviet Society. Equality, Development, and Social Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leustean, Lucian N. (ed.). 2014. *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- McAuley, Alastair. 1979. *Economic Welfare in the Soviet Union: Poverty, Living Standards and Inequality*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McMahon, Patrice. 1994. The Effect of Economic and Political Reforms on Soviet/Russian Women. In Aslabeigui, A, Pressman S., G. Summerfield (eds.), *Women in the Age of Economic Transformation: Gender Impact of Reforms in Post-Socialist and Developing Countries*. London: Routledge: 59-73.
- Medvedeva, Ksenia. 2015. The Landscape of a Religious Workspace: The Case of a Russian Christian Orthodox Sisterhood. *Russian Sociological Review* 14 (2): 70–81.
- Oxfam. 2014. *After equality: Inequality trends and policy responses in contemporary Russia*. Discussion paper. May 2014. Accessed from: [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/dp-after-equality-inequality-trends-policy-russia-100614-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/dp-after-equality-inequality-trends-policy-russia-100614-en.pdf)
- Papkova, Irina. 2011. *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pilkington, Hilary (ed.). 1996. *Gender, Generation and Identity in Contemporary Russia*. London: Routledge.
- Richters, Katja. 2013. *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*. London: Routledge.
- Rousselet, Kathy. 2007. Butovo : La Création d'un Lieu de Pèlerinages sur une Terre de Massacres. *Politix* 77 (1): 55–78.
- . 2011. Constructing Moralities around the Tsarist Family. In J. Zigon (ed.), *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia*, pp. 146–167. New York: Berghahn Books.
- . 2013. L'autorité Religieuse en Contexte Post-Soviétique : Regard sur le Fonctionnement des Paroisses Russes Orthodoxes. *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 162: 15–36.

Rozov, A. N. 2003. *Sviashchennik v Dukhovnoi Zhizni Russkoi Derevni*. Saint Petersburg: Aleteia.

Russian Orthodox Church. 2000. *The Basis of the Social Concept*. Accessed from: <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>

Shevzov, Vera. 2004. *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shlapentokh, Vladimir. 1999. Social Inequality in Post-Communist Russia: The Attitudes of the Political Elite and the Masses (1991-1998). *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (7): 1167-1181.

Tocheva, Detelina. 2011. Ot Vosstanovleniia khrama k Sozdaniiu Obshchiny: Samoogranichenie i Material'nye Trudnosti kak Istochniki Prihodskoi Identichnosti (From the Rebuilding of the Church to the Creation of a Community: Self-Limitation and Material Hardship as Sources of Parish Identity). In Alexander Agadjanian and Kathy Rousselet (eds.), *Prihody i Obshchiny v Sovremennom Pravoslavii: Kornevaia Sistema Rossiiskoi Religioznosti (Parishes and Communities in Contemporary Orthodoxy the Basic System of Religiosity in Russia)*. Moscow: Ves' Mir: 277-297.

Wegner, Stephen K. 2014. *Rural Inequality in Divided Russia*. London, New York: Routledge.