

RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY AND WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA*

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On 8 November 1885, the feast day of Archangel Michael, the Abbess Taisiia had a mystical experience in the midst of a church service dedicated to the tonsuring of sisters at Leushino. The women's religious community of Leushino had recently been elevated to the status of a monastery.¹ Conducting an all-women's choir on that special day, the abbess became exhilarated by the beautiful refrain of the Cherubikon hymn, "Let us lay aside all earthly cares," and envisioned Christ surrounded by angels above the iconostasis. She later wrote, "Something was happening, but what it was I am unable to tell, although I saw and heard everything. It was not something of this world. From the beginning of the vision, I seemed to fall into ecstatic rapture. . . . Tears were streaming down my face. I realized that everyone was looking at me in astonishment, and even fear...."² Five years later, a newspaper columnist witnessed a scene in a church in the Smolensk village of Egor'-Bunakovo in which a woman began to scream in the midst of the singing of the Cherubikon. He described "a horrible in-

*This book chapter is dedicated to the memory of Brenda Meehan, who pioneered the study of Russian Orthodox women religious in the modern period.

¹ The Russian language does not have a separate word such as "convent" or nunnery" to distinguish women's from men's monastic institutions.

² *Abbess Thaisia*, 194; quoted in Meehan, *Holy Women of Russia*, 126.

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human shout” that crescendoed into five minutes of screaming before the woman fell down exhausted and sobbing. Several observers fled the church, others fainted, and still others clustered around the afflicted woman.³ While the Abbess Taisiia had a religious experience of deep faith, the Smolensk peasant woman believed herself to be possessed by demons. In the midst of sacred space and time marked by not only the holy liturgy but also the singing of the Cherubikon, both women had other-worldly experiences.

Joining communicants on earth to angels around the heavenly throne, the Cherubikon celebrates a dramatic moment of the liturgy, the so-called Great Entrance. At this point the officiating cleric carries the communion cup and the deacon the tray with unconsecrated bread from the Prothesis chapel to the high altar. Accordingly, the hymn announces: “We, who in a mystery represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, let us now lay aside all earthly cares, for we are about to receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Allelouia, allelouia, allelouia.”⁴ To prepare for the mysteries of the Eucharist, the officiating priest has already dismissed the unbaptized or catechumens, but he must be sure that the congregation is full of only worthy Christians. The Cherubikon is thus accompanied by the priest’s inaudible exhortation against the unworthiness of “those who are bound by carnal desires and pleasures.”⁵ It is at this point that the fits of *klikushi* or shriekers in the 19th century began as the celebration of Christ’s Resurrection and of the triumph of good over evil was believed to provoke the fear of the demons inhabiting their bodies. The demoniacs hissed, meowed, howled, cawed, and made other animal noises. They swore, blasphemed, convulsed uncontrollably, and tore at their hair and clothing. With the encouragement of witnesses who became players in the ritual drama of possession, they sometimes shrieked out the name of the individual they thought had bewitched them and had planted the demons inside their bodies. Only the intercession of a saint or the Mother of God or, less frequently, an

³ *Smolenskii vestnik*, 12 October 1890, 3.

⁴ Modification of translation in Perry et al., *Blackwell Dictionary*, 117.

⁵ Translated in Maughan, *Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, 53; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 286–289; and Worobec, *Possessed*, 74. The dismissal of the unbaptized is a holdover from the liturgy of the ancient church.

exorcism (usually involving the intoning of prayers) could expunge the demons and restore the women's bodies and spirit to God. The same hymn obviously could invoke other sentiments as well: Mother Taisiia's ecstatic experience came in anticipation of the mysterious consecration of the bread and wine and a vision of Christ himself.

These two late 19th-century scenes in the midst of the holy liturgy reveal aspects of Orthodox women's spirituality at a time when Orthodoxy found itself infused with new vitality and women were at the forefront of the religious awakening. In response to Catherine II's 1764 secularization of monastic lands and closure of significant numbers of monasteries, the remaining monastic institutions turned inward and reexamined their spiritual functions. One consequence of that reappraisal was the revival of hesychasm, a "mystical tradition based on monological prayer," such as the Jesus Prayer, and its fundamental component of spiritual eldership.⁶ The revival culminated in the second half of the 19th century with the rise of hermitages and monasteries as centers of spiritual advice to the laity as well as clergy, scholarship, and asceticism. While the Optina Hermitage, the most famous of these sacred establishments, attracted people of all estates from commoners to the wealthy and the great intellectuals of Russia's golden age of literature, including Fedor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, scores of official and unofficial non-hesychast religious institutions were being established throughout European Russia. Over seventy-five percent of the official institutions were women's religious communities. Furthermore, pilgrimages to saints' shrines, monasteries, and sites of miracle-working icons increased dramatically in response, in part, to the newer transportation systems of the railroad and steamship and, in part, to the Orthodox Church's embrace of mass communications that announced to a growing literate public the attractions of holy sites. Among the ever-growing number of pilgrims, women once again predominated.

⁶ In the Eastern Orthodox Church the Athonite monk Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) was a leading exponent of the hesychast movement. It enjoyed a Slavic revival beginning in the late 18th century with the dissemination of Paisii Velichkovskii's version of the *Philokalia*, a "collection of mystical and ascetic texts" (Perry et al., *Blackwell Dictionary*, 230–231). While spiritual elders traditionally limited their guidance to monks, the modern variant of spiritual eldership broadened its audience to include the laity (Kenworthy, *Heart of Russia*, ch. 6; and Paert, *Spiritual Elders*).

The high visibility of women in 19th-century Russian Orthodox institutions, both formal and informal, was part of a broader pattern of increased women's roles in Western European and American Catholicism and Protestantism. Indeed, with regard to women's growing presence in religion in the West, historians refer to a "feminization of religion." By that phrase they mean the "growing preponderance of women in congregations; the power that this preponderance gave women over religious life; and a 'softening' of theology and religious symbolism that followed as a consequence."⁷ This definition is problematic for the Russian case. The second characteristic in the "feminization of religion" may in fact be unique to Protestantism since neither the hierarchical Catholic nor Russian Orthodox churches permitted women to gain authority over religious life. Indeed, both Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches found women's preaching to be anathema. In the case of the third characteristic of feminization of religion—"a 'softening' of theology and religious symbolism"—the softening had already occurred within Russian Orthodoxy in the Muscovite period. At this point, the scholarship on Russian women's roles in Orthodoxy and congregational life is not well enough developed to argue for a feminization of religion in late Imperial Russia. Until all aspects of women's spirituality and men's piety in pre-revolutionary Russia are systematically studied, we have to limit our claims to assert that women's spirituality was a significant element within the Orthodox awakening and that a feminization of monasticism did take place.⁸

Getting at the heart of women's spirituality at all levels of Russian society in the 19th century is extremely difficult, given the paucity of sources that privilege women. What the average woman of individual estates thought about God, Mary 'the Birthgiver of God' (*Bogoroditsa*) or Mother of God, Christ, the saints, salvation,

⁷ Pope, "Immaculate and Powerful," 193.

⁸ For discussions of the feminization of Russian Orthodox monasticism see Miller, "Under the Protection"; and Wagner, "Paradoxes of Piety," 212. Nadieszda Kizenko in her superb discussion of two popular cults of holy persons—Ksenia Peterburgskaia and Father Ioann Kronshtadtskii—in Imperial Russia, both of whom were associated with women, suggests that feminization of religion in general was occurring in Imperial Russia. More micro-studies of this type as well as broader comparative studies of women's and men's piety will be necessary to test this claim. See Kizenko, "Protectors of Women," 105–124.

and the role that the church played in her life is difficult to ascertain. The historian has to tease information out of a limited number of autobiographies and biographies, obituaries, sensational stories in the press, and numerous formulaic miracle tales. The two stories presented at the outset of the chapter, the one from the autobiography of the Abbess Taisiia and the other from a newspaper report on the bizarre story of a peasant woman who believed herself to be possessed by demons, provide a lens onto the issue of women's spirituality. On the surface these two stories seem to be diametrically opposed. A closer look, however, reveals a number of overlaps and similarities that suggest some rudimentary characteristics of women's religiosity. The two narratives also provide a framework for exploring other women's religious experiences.

Before we return to those stories, however, we need to examine in a general fashion the attractions that Russian Orthodoxy held for women. On the one hand, the church's male hierarchical structure and didactic literature denouncing women as prone to a variety of sins such as fornicating, gossiping, upholding superstitious beliefs, and committing evil in general could not have been appealing to women in the pre-modern and modern eras.⁹ The prohibition against women entering the sanctuary behind the iconostasis or icon wall reflects patriarchal notions of woman's sexuality, her connection to Eve as well as her bodily pollution or impurity. Exception to this rule was made only in the case of nuns, who out of necessity had to be in the sanctuary to assist a visiting priest in serving the liturgy at women's monasteries or to clean the holy space. A menstruating woman, according to Orthodox practice, could not enter a church or other sacred space or partake of communion. Furthermore, canon law considered a brand new mother to be among the excommunicants: she had to abstain from participation in ecclesiastical rites for 40 days and undergo ritual purification before she was allowed to attend religious services and take communion.¹⁰

Those same taboos with regard to women's sexuality and the concern about men as weaklings when confronted with sexual temptation were expressed in the medieval Orthodox monastic prohibitions against women. Women were not allowed in monks'

⁹ For examples of negative pre-Petrine church writings about women, see Levin, *Sex and Society*, 52–53, 54–55, 56.

¹⁰ Levin, *Sex and Society*, 169–72; and Levin, "Childbirth," 47–49.

cells and from the 1420s onward could not confess their sins to abbots and monks, although they could receive counseling from these men in specially designated visitors' rooms, where presumably more than one cleric was in attendance.¹¹ Women who visited saints' shrines at monasteries were also denied liturgical assistance. Thus, women who experienced miracle cures after having prostrated their bodies on saints' tombs did not receive the mediation that monks provided to men in the same circumstances. In fact, the monks were conspicuously absent from these holy places when women were present. While such strictures may not have always been enforced and most were lifted in the modern period, the designation of certain areas within monastic institutions as being off limits to women continued to reflect the church's wariness of women's sexuality. Paradoxically, the absence of monks from holy tombs in the medieval period empowered women to enjoy a more intimate and personal relationship with saints because women were able to access these holy persons through their prayers and nocturnal visions without the mediation of monks. The saints' tactile responses in medieval miracle stories to their supplicants' entreaties for help against disease, infertility, or abusive relationships—by touching them on their heads and faces, wiping their faces with their mantles, or taking them by the hand—suggest that medieval women had already created for themselves a kinder, gentler Orthodoxy.¹²

While women in the 19th century continued to have personal visitations of saints and the Mother of God at night or on the road to holy shrines, women's ability to participate in liturgies and memorial services at saints' graves located within monastery walls assured the greater dependence of women worshipers on monks' intercession with God, Christ, Mary, and saints. Any encounters women had with the divine on their own lost their subversive character because of the modern standardization of ritual for all worshipers regardless of gender. Each recipient of a vision, whether female or male, was obliged to make and fulfil a vow to travel to the particular saint's grave to thank the saint and participate in the ecclesial community by having prayers and a memorial service said by an officiating cleric.¹³

¹¹ Levin, *Sex and Society*, 281; and Spock, "Solovki Monastery," 149.

¹² Thyrêt, "Muscovite Miracle Stories," 124–125; and Thyrêt, "Women and the Orthodox Faith," 169. See also Spock, "Solovki Monastery," 406, 394.

¹³ The notion of the subversive nature of visions comes from Christian, *Visionaries*, 8.

At the same time that the Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchy held a condescending attitude towards women, however, it was also "concerned with the salvation of all its members" and "could not afford to treat women as innately weak vessels."¹⁴ Consequently, it championed examples of good women who were either divine themselves or capable of interceding with the divine. Chief among these models was that of Mary.

The cult of the Mother of God was and continues to be central to Russian Orthodoxy. Icons dedicated to Mary, many of which are believed to be miracle-working, were ubiquitous throughout Orthodox Russia in the medieval and modern periods and the range of her iconographic images, with or without the Christ child, immense. In fact, there are "well over two hundred different types" of icons of the Birth-giver of God or Theotokos,¹⁵ although these depictions are not representations of "separate Marys." Venerated above the saints in Russian Orthodoxy, the Mother of God intercedes with God on behalf of mankind because of "her having shared those life experiences . . . familiar to common believers." That stress on Mary's "common humanity," according to Vera Shevzov, separates 19th-century Orthodoxy from Roman Catholicism and its 1865 adoption of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁶ In Orthodoxy, Mary's infinite mercy promises mere mortals the possibility of achieving God's grace through miracles and redemption.

Mary's intercessory role beckoned women in Orthodox Russia to identify with her in both the medieval and imperial periods and quite possibly provided "an inspiration for female action within the patriarchies of faith and society."¹⁷ According to Liudmila Semenova Gerasimova's petition to the 1917–1918 National Church Council, "Woman is cast by human fate as the Holy Virgin severing the head of the serpent, the intermediary between God and people, and as a moral force."¹⁸ Like the Mother of God,

¹⁴ Thyrêt, *Between God and Tsar*, 15.

¹⁵ Coomler, *Icon Handbook*, 203.

¹⁶ Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 225, 219. Russian Orthodox theologians referred to Mary as the Virgin, but, unlike their Western counterparts, emphasized the spiritual nature of her virginity.

¹⁷ Marker, "God of Our Mothers," 205; and Thyrêt, "Women and the Orthodox Faith," 173.

¹⁸ See Gerasimova's "To the All-Russian Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church," translated by William G. Wagner, in Bisha, *Russian Women*, 284.

women of the upper classes could intercede with the divine on behalf of those less fortunate. At the same time, women of all estates could identify with Mary in her various earthly roles as orphan, virgin, mother, widow, needleworker, and exile.¹⁹ Prayers to the Mother of God could touch upon one or more of these roles as women sought relief from labor pains, poverty, and the tribulations of widowhood. They also sought Mary's aid in healing their own, their children's, their husbands' and other relatives' physical and spiritual ailments. For example, the Korsun icon of the Mother of God was particularly revered by barren women and those with ailing children, the Tikhvin Marian icon by those with sick children, and the icon of the Mother of God of the Never-Draining Cup (from 1878 onward) by those with alcoholic relatives.²⁰ Finally, women whose visions or miraculous cures resulted in the special veneration of a Marian icon not only shared their experiences with the larger community of believers, but also enjoyed special recognition by ecclesiastical authorities.²¹

Like the Mother of God, officially and unofficially recognized Byzantine and Russian women saints, although smaller in number than male saints, provided women in both medieval and modern Russia with role models.²² Here were independent women who defended the faith, acted as domestic caretakers of their families

¹⁹ Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 221–222.

²⁰ Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 234, 324n105; and Weichert, “De-Toxing the Nation,” 24–25.

²¹ For an example, see Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 238.

²² Due to the fact that a regular canonization procedure did not exist in Muscovite Russia, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of Russian women saints in the period before Peter the Great (1682–1725). Church publications of the 19th century, including Archimandrite Ignatii's (Malyshév) two-volume 1875 compendium of Russian saints (*Zhitiia sviatykh*), list only 16 women among more than 387 saints (less than 4.1 percent). Such a low number led subsequent church historians “such as E. Golubinskii and George Fedotov” to conclude that “Muscovite Russia did not encourage the concept of holy women.” (Thyrét, “Women and the Orthodox Faith,” 162.) Yet, according to Eve Levin, the Russian calendar of the 14th and 15th centuries mentioned a total of 239 women saints. Clearly not all of these women were Russian but the larger number of women as well as Isolde Thyrét's investigations into the definition of the sanctity of medieval Russian women suggest a far richer representation of women among the divine that must have influenced women at the time and continued to influence them in the modern period. See Levin, *Sex and Society*, 60n71; and Thyrét, “Women and the Orthodox Faith,” 162–167.

and servants, dispensed charity to the needy, and achieved holiness through God's grace. Among these holy women were also those who had traumatic experiences within a patriarchal society because they had been raped, threatened with rape, or physically abused by their husbands. Some even sought to escape the strictures of patriarchalism by taking on masculine traits and in extreme cases disguising themselves as men.²³ In addition to providing role models, these female saints were gatekeepers to the miraculous. The Russian holy women who were recognized as saints in the medieval period, when sanctity rested upon "popular commemoration of their pious acts" rather than a regularized canonization process conducted by the church hierarchy, came from various social groups.²⁴ Since neither wealth nor social status were prerequisites for God's divine grace, the message was clear that "holiness" was available to any woman, rich or poor. The popular veneration of female "holy fools for Christ" in the 18th and 19th centuries, some of whom possessed humble peasant backgrounds, attests to a continuing tradition of a democracy of holiness, at least in the popular mind, even when the Holy Synod, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church from 1721 until 1918, in regularizing the procedures for canonization and severely limiting its frequency preferred to sanctify prominent bishops within its own ranks.²⁵ The canonization of a popular poor merchant's son and spiritual elder, Serafim Sarovskii, in 1903 and the reaffirmation of the sanctity of Anna Kashinskaia in 1909 (after having prohibited her veneration since the end of the 17th century) proved the exceptions to the rule.²⁶

²³ Talbot, *Holy Women*; and Levin, *Sex and Society*, 214–215, 280.

²⁴ Thyret, "Women and the Orthodox Faith," 163, 162.

²⁵ Holy fools for Christ were believed to be imbued with God's grace. Through unconventional behavior and renunciation of worldly pleasures, the medieval holy fools criticized the political and social status quo, while the imperial Russian holy fools dispensed spiritual and worldly advice. Popularly venerated female holy fools in the 18th and 19th centuries included Ksenia Peterburgskaia, Pelageia Diveevskaia, Paraskeva Diveevskaia, Mariia Ivanovna Diveevskaia, Masha Mukhanovskaia Riazanskaia, and Annushka Riazanskaia (*Blazhennaia Pelageia*; Kizenko, "Protectors of Women," 111; and Rudinskii, "Znakharstvo," 193, 195).

²⁶ The Russian Orthodox Church's denial of Anna Kashinskaia's (d. 1338) sanctity in 1677, after having canonized her in 1649, came in the midst of the church schism. Prelates were concerned that Kashinskaia's positioning of her fingers to make the sign of the cross signified that she was a

No less important for Russian Orthodox women of all ranks were the scores of male saints and uncanonized deceased holy men who through their intercession with God healed a variety of illnesses regardless of gender or age.²⁷ Some even specialized in childhood and women's ailments. Through its thaumaturgical arsenal the church had a far more benevolent attitude toward illnesses that plagued women than 19th-century medical practitioners who hystericized the female body. The fact that ordinary women had access to spiritual help from 19th-century elders and monks as well as the miraculous gave them hope in the face of life's uncertainties. Perhaps even more importantly, the church depended upon those women who experienced miracles to authenticate the miraculous by reporting their and their relatives' cures at holy sites.

"The immediacy of the sacred" to all believers, both women and men, worked "to level . . . the gendered hierarchy" of the church itself.²⁸ As a result, a minority of Russian women were inspired by the religious models before them to become independent women religious, while the majority actively participated in ecclesial communities that gave them spiritual and physical comfort, helped them celebrate important passages of life and holy feast days, released them temporarily from daily burdens to go on pilgrimage, and in some cases empowered them. The stories of Abbess Taisiia and the Smolensk *klikusha*, presented at the outset of the chapter, illuminate the ways in which the divine was accessible to women of different stations and occupations in life.

Although Abbess Taisiia's position as head of a woman's monastery was not the norm among women religious, her autobiography is reflective of larger 19th-century trends. The abbess had

heretic: "Anna Kashinskaia," in Averintsev, Meshkov, and Popov, *Khristianstvo*, 1: 85; and Isakov, *Zhitie Anny Kashinskoi*.

²⁷ In the miracle tales attributed to three holy men canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in the early 20th century—Serafim Sarovskii in 1903, Ioasaf Belgorodskii and Oboianskii in 1911, and Pitirim Tambovskii in 1914—women, adolescent girls, and female children accounted for just over 50 percent of the recipients of miracles (53.6 percent in the case of St. Serafim, 57 percent in the case of St. Ioasaf, and 57 percent in the case of St. Pitirim), a figure that is similar to the percentage (53.5) of female recipients of miracles in the tales attributed to Dmitrii Rostovskii, who was canonized in 1757. As I argue elsewhere, these miracles "cut across lines of class, sex, age, and status" (Worobec, "Miraculous Healings," 30. The quotation is from Goodich, *Violence and Miracle*, 151).

²⁸ Kivelson and Greene, "Introduction," in their edited *Orthodox Russia*, 10.

abandoned the normal life-course of an upper-class woman. Eschewing marriage, children, wealth, and estate management, she chose the contemplative and public life of a woman religious who at one and the same time emulated the asceticism of the early desert mothers and fathers and reached out to the larger community by offering social services and educational opportunities for orphans, young girls, the elderly, and the sick. Charitable work as part of a religious vocation for women was new to the 19th century.²⁹ Impressionable young women from among the nobility may also have been attracted to the cloistered life by an idealized notion of that life. Varvara Mikhailovna Sokovnina (1779–18??), abbess of the Vveden Monastery in the city of Orel from 1821 until 1844, recalled that as a teenager seeking to escape her difficult mother, she was influenced by one of her acquaintance's description of the Sevsk Troitse (women's) Monastery as "a heavenly dwelling place, inhabited by peaceful and meek souls and administered by three angels, who in their unanimity resemble the Holy Trinity."³⁰ Other noble women chose the contemplative life only after they had fulfilled their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

Overall, however, the representation of the nobility within the women's monastic estate declined dramatically in the late 18th and 19th centuries due to the social democratization of women's monasteries. As Westernization and rising literacy gave noble women other options for independence, they lost, according to Marilyn Miller, "their hold on the power structure" of monastic institutions. The Catherinian reforms had not only significantly reduced the number of monasteries but also designated a limited number of spaces for nuns in each surviving institution. Subsequent openings were to be allocated to "clerical and military women."³¹

Thousands of women from the other social estates in Russian society, particularly from the peasantry, sought independence by entering or founding religious communities. Between 1764 and 1917, 217 unofficial Orthodox women's religious communities were founded in Imperial Russia, while the number of Orthodox women's monasteries grew exponentially in the same period, from 68 to 475 (with the number of nuns and novices increasing

²⁹ Lindenmeyr, *Poverty is Not a Vice*, 16.

³⁰ "Serafima," translated by William G. Wagner in Bisha, *Russian Women*, 276.

³¹ Miller, "Social Revolution," 172.

from 5,105 to 73,299).³² These figures do not include the thousands of unofficial women religious and the countless number of *chernichki* (referring to the black clothing they wore) or *keleinitsy* (a word that emphasized their separate dwellings or cells). *Chernichki* and *keleinitsy* were lay sisters who did not enter a religious institution but followed the ascetic rigors of monastic life. They lived either alone or in a small group at the edge of villages or in their parents' yards. Some *keleinitsy* chose to eschew community living and in imitation of the ancient desert mothers built cells or dug caves in the wilderness.³³ Although these lower class women who entered religious communities were increasingly single (i.e., never married) due in part to the growing popularity of communally organized religious communities, some of them waited to assume religious functions until they had fulfilled their marital and childbearing responsibilities.³⁴ Seeking "an alternative to domesticity," they took on the mantle of women religious in both officially and unofficially recognized religious communities.³⁵ Inspired by the Mother of God, they sought a life of serving God, one that celebrated compassion, humility, intercession on behalf of the poor, and social engagement, all in the company of women. A

³² Meehan, "From Contemplative Practice," 142; and Smolich, *Russkoe monashestvo*, 563, Tables X and XI.

³³ For a discussion of *chernichki* and *keleinitsy*, see Tul'tseva, "Chernichki," 80–81; and Gromyko and Buganov, *O vozzreniiakh russkogo naroda*, 201, 218, 220, 226–227, 228. The *keleinitsa* Mariia Sherstiugova, who chose to live as a hermit in a cave that she carved out of a mountain in the Don Cossack area, not only attracted pilgrims, but also received the imprimatur of Alexander I (Paert, *Spiritual Elders*, 72).

³⁴ Traditional, idiorhythmically organized women's monastic institutions favored widows of the upper and middling ranks who used their own property to support themselves. Independence of means gave these women relative autonomy within the monastic walls. The shift to communally organized communities occurred with the support of Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov), who held that position from 1826 to 1867. See Wagner, "Paradoxes of Piety," 222n30; and Meehan, "Metropolitan Filaret," 310–323.

According to the 1721 Spiritual Regulation, women could not be tonsured until they had reached the age of 50; in the 19th century the age of tonsuring was lowered to 40 (Meehan, "Authority of Holiness," 51n35). Although "technically. . . a novice," a *riasofo* nun had "take[n] an intermediate vow" ("Mavrikiia in Schema Maria," translated by William G. Wagner, in Bisha, *Russian Women*, 288n62).

³⁵ Marker, "Enlightenment of Anna Labzina," 369.

surfeit of single and widowed women in late 19th-century Russian villages that resulted from the economic and social dislocations of increasing male out-migration to the cities, where mortality rates were higher than in the countryside, also contributed to the phenomenal growth of sisterhoods and women's religious communities.³⁶ Those who did not wish in the end to take up the rigors of cloistered life could, nonetheless, find employment and shelter in these institutions.

The empowerment of women religious came from taking up a celibate life among a community of women in a culture where marriage was almost universal, engaging the sacred, performing "liturgical roles normally preserved for men," and extending their natural talents as nurturers to the larger community.³⁷ Those who attained leadership positions within their communities enjoyed far greater authority than women did in patriarchal households. In addition to dedicating themselves to a life of prayer, asceticism, and mysticism, women religious provided a variety of social services. They taught other women and children rudimentary literacy skills, ministered to homeless and widowed women as well as the poor and sick, read the psalter over the dead, and baked communion bread.

Given the prominent visibility of women religious in turn-of-the-20th-century Russian society and their engagement with worldly affairs, some churchmen and abbesses (including Grand Princess Elizabeth Fedorovna) proposed reinstating the ancient position of deaconess, a lower ministry that had served women, instructed them in the particulars of the faith, and supervised the comportment of women and children in church during services. Initially, such requests came from missionaries in the mid- and late 19th century who needed the help of a female deaconate in their conversion efforts by teaching and ministering to the poor. Given the fact that some 19th-century Protestant churches in Western Europe had already restored the ancient position, conservatives within the Russian Orthodox Church pointed to the inappropriateness of a female deaconate in Russia not only as a violation of canon law, but also as an unwelcome foreign innovation. The unacceptability of women preachers in Russian Orthodoxy and the visibility of women preachers among "heretical" Old Believers

³⁶ Meehan, "Popular Piety," 99; and Wagner, "Paradoxes of Piety," 222.

³⁷ Wagner, "Paradoxes of Piety," 223.

and sectarians no doubt also fueled this distrust of a separate women's ministry. By 1906, concrete proposals nevertheless were drafted to expand the ancient roles of deaconesses to include cleaning of the church premises, if not the area around the high altar and communion vessels. These clerics may have not only been bowing to necessity in face of the fact that parishes were reporting a shortage of male caretakers. They may also have recognized the interrelationship between the sacred space in the parish church and the private dwelling because women had traditionally served as caretakers of the icon corners in their own homes.³⁸ Like nuns, ordained deaconesses were to be widows and single women over 39 years of age, although younger women could serve as assistants. Another model for the position of the deaconess proposed integrating them within women's monasteries. Such women who did not wish to undergo tonsure could still be involved in the social services dispensed by the monastery, while nuns could return to the rigors of a contemplative life that privileged spiritual over social functions. Such proposals for the restoration of a female deaconate came to naught, however. While the creation of the position was raised again at the 1917–1918 National Church Council on the strength of need as well as women's petitions to become deaconesses, those discussions became moot as the Russian Orthodox Church found itself in a battle for survival with the Bolshevik regime. Ironically, women during the Soviet period did serve as caretakers of parish churches and were in essence deaconesses without formal ordination and recognition.³⁹

Women who wished to intercede on behalf of the poor and the suffering in Christ's name did not have to take the paths of Mother Taisiia and scores of other women religious, whether

³⁸ The notion of the interconnection between sacred and domestic spaces comes from Hart, *Time*, 24, 147. That interconnection in Orthodoxy goes further, Hart argues, when women bring candles and holy water from the church to the icon corners in their homes.

³⁹ Beliakova and Beliakova, "Obsuzhdenie voprosa o diakonissakh," 141–142, 143, 144, 145–146; 149–150, 154. For a favorable early 20th-century view of a female deaconate within the Russian Orthodox Church, see Troitskii, *Diakonissy*. Troitskii argued that women were more devoted to the church than were men. For an English translation of a woman's petition in favor of the female deaconate, see Gerasimova, "To the All-Russian Local Council," in Bisha, *Russian Women*, 284–286.

official or unofficial. They could do so within secular society. Continuing in the tradition of tsars' wives and aristocratic Muscovite women who performed acts of pious charity, 18th- and 19th-century noblewomen also performed the role of intercessor in both prayer and deed. For example, the provincial noblewoman, Anna Labzina (1758–1828), evoked the intercessory roles of the Mother of God and her own mother as she ministered to the needs of serfs on her mother's estates, exiles in Nerchinsk (near the Chinese border), and prisoners in Irkutsk, Siberia. Such social engagement was part of Labzina's Christian duty to a gentle and merciful God and a deep love for humanity. Other noblewomen in the 19th century followed Labzina's lead out of religious convictions that empowered them in a patriarchal society that, like its European counterparts, limited the work of women outside the home.⁴⁰ Among the great benefactors of monastic institutions in the 1840s figured the religiously devout Countess Anna A. Orlova-Chesmenskaia who lavished huge sums of money and gifts of precious metals and gems upon Novgorod's Iur'ev Monastery and regularly donated substantial funds to the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery in Sergiev Posad (just outside Moscow) to feed poor pilgrims and care for the poverty-stricken. In her will she also endowed every monastery in Russia with a donation of 5,000 rubles. Countess Orlova-Chesmenskaia hoped that her generosity and strict Christian regimen would expiate the sins of her father, not least of which was his participation in the assassination of Peter III.⁴¹ Similarly, in the late 19th century Countess Maria Vladimirovna Orlova-Davydova contributed a total of 1,300 desiatins of land and close to a quarter million rubles to establish a community of 25 women religious to minister to poor peasants in Dobrynin, Moscow diocese.⁴² Besides making gifts to monasteries, upper class Orthodox women actively participated in other acts of charity, visiting the poor, attending to prisoners, and volunteering at hospitals and orphanages.⁴³

⁴⁰ Marker, "God of Our Mothers," 193–210; and Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice*, chs. 1 and 6.

⁴¹ Zyrianov, *Russkie monastyri*, 77–78; and Kenworthy, *Heart of Russia*, 48, 58.

⁴² "Countess Orlova-Davydova," translated by William G. Wagner, in Bisha, *Russian Women*, 280–281. Other 19th-century benefactresses included Baroness Bode, D. A. Derzhavina, and the landowner Belokopytova, who donated or bequeathed land to monastic institutions. (Zyrianov, *Russkie monastyri*, 84.)

⁴³ See Lindenmeyr, "Public Life," 562–591.

Possessed women, unlike women religious and noblewomen, sought spiritual redemption by way of a different path—one of extreme torment that could only be relieved by spiritual healing at the hands of monks and nuns who treated them with the thaumaturgical arsenal of Orthodoxy, including: prayer and exorcism; confession and communion; holy oil and holy water, and blessed herbs. Like women religious, they were relieved of family responsibilities, if only temporarily, until their demons were exorcized. They sought spiritual help through pilgrimage to holy shrines and monasteries renowned for their ministrations to the sick and possessed. Until the mid-19th century they, like women religious, came from all social groupings. However, by the end of the 19th century as the proportion of peasant membership in women's monasteries increased appreciably, shriekers stemmed almost entirely from the peasantry and recent migrants to the city. That change resulted from the success of the medical profession in convincing upper and middle class women that they were suffering from hysteria rather than possession. The medicalization of possession and hysterization of women's bodies transferred what had been culturally understood as a spiritual ailment to the realm of a diseased mind, best taken care of by psychiatrists rather than clerics. Unaffected by medical science, peasant culture continued to produce *klikushi*. Unlike women religious, who were either single or widowed, most shriekers were of child-bearing age. They were unable to cope with all the demands that their society placed upon them as wives, mothers, obedient daughters-in-law, and during an increasing out-pouring of men from the villages to seek work in towns and cities, primary managers of their domestic economies. Besides gaining relief from family burdens, they received solicitude from family members, neighbors, and clergy and some alteration in personal circumstances upon having been healed. They, like women religious and pious lay women, could be empowered by their experiences. Those who were the beneficiaries of miraculous cures became the subject of community memory and pride, while others achieved greater respect and social status as a result of rooting out evil from their communities. Still others remained demoniacs for several years. Having played out their emotional anxieties through possession, they found their new elevated role as sufferer preferable to returning to their everyday positions as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. By allowing these women's suffering to be publicly expressed, Russian peasant society and clergy participated in their social healing.

Besides providing evidence about the ways by which women religious and *klikushi* could be empowered by their spiritual experiences, the stories of Abbess Taisiia and demoniacs also reveal women's concrete experiences with the divine in terms of religious ecstasy and the gift of tears. Abbess Taisiia described her "ecstatic rapture" as being accompanied by "tears ... streaming down my face." The Old Church Slavonic word *umilenie* comes to mind here. "Untranslatable because of the richness of sense inherent in it," the word refers to emotions invoked by God's grace as a result of intense devotion through prayer.⁴⁴ It is associated with the famous Novgorod icon of the *Umilenie* Mother of God, which reportedly shed tears when the icon had fallen from the iconostasis in July 1337.⁴⁵ The image of a weeping icon of the Mother of God, in turn, evokes the popular apocryphal tale "The Descent of the Virgin into Hell," in which the Virgin wept and even sobbed when she witnessed the torments of Christian sinners in the various sectors of Hell. Her compassion led her to intercede personally and summon all saints and guardian angels to intercede with God on behalf of all those sinners.⁴⁶ According to Thyrêt: "One of the most highly prized spiritual qualities in Muscovite Russia," the gift of tears in medieval miracle tales "tended [to be] attributed to women, rather than men," even though the experience of *umilenie* was believed to be gender neutral.⁴⁷ Abbess Taisiia depicted in her autobiography another example of *umilenie*, this time with regard to an elderly nun of peasant origin whom she witnessed by accident in her cell at the Tikhvin Vveden (women's) Monastery in Novgorod province, where Taisiia had been a novice. She described Mother Feoktista as kneeling "in a corner of her room, with her arms uplifted. Her lips were moving and her face wet with tears, which were also streaming down her clothes." "Involuntarily," she wrote, "I had become a witness of the inner secret of an aged nun's soul." Mother Feoktista subsequently became a model for Taisiia to emulate.⁴⁸ The peasant hermit Anastasia Semenovna

⁴⁴ Fedotov, *Russian Religious Mind*, 393. The phrase "gift of tears" stems from the writings of the fourth-century Evgarius of Pontus (Hart, *Time*, 202).

⁴⁵ Coomler, *Icon Handbook*, 238.

⁴⁶ The tale is reprinted in English translation in Zenkovsky, *Medieval Russia's Epics*, 152–160.

⁴⁷ Thyrêt, *Between God and Tsar*, 136; and Thyrêt, "Women and the Orthodox Faith," 169.

⁴⁸ Meehan, *Holy Women*, 111–112.

Logacheva (1809–1875), who became a spiritual elder at the Nikolaev Ulala Monastery in Tomsk province, “was [also] known to have the gift of tears.”⁴⁹ These and other descriptions of ecstasy and accomplishment underscored for women the rewards of pursuing a higher calling in life achieved by following the rigors of the monastic order.

The stories of *klikushi* also contain references to the gift of tears. Fedor Dostoevsky aptly used the term *umilenie* in his *Brothers Karamazov* to describe women who witnessed a miraculous cure of a *klikusha* as a result of the elder Father Zosima’s intercession. Through their suffering and genuine possession, Dostoevsky believed, demoniacs reached a higher state of spiritual ecstasy that he associated with the holiest of people. His narrator explains shriekers’ cures before the communion cup as being directly related to their belief in the power of Christ’s Body over the demons possessing them.⁵⁰ Dostoevsky’s reference to the communion cup being given to *klikushi* bespoke of the Orthodox belief that the victims of demon possession were not responsible for their situation. In distinguishing the possessed who were worthy of communion from those individuals whose actions made them unworthy of the host, the church Father, John Chrysostom advised, “Let no one inhuman, no one rough and unmerciful, least of all any one unclean approach here. This I say not only to you, who seek to receive the Communion, but also to you, whose ministry it is to give it.... *They that be possess in that they are tormented of the devil are blameless and will never be punished with torment for that: but they who approach unworthily the holy Mysteries shall be given over to everlasting torments.*”⁵¹ The tears that *klikushi* shed after successful exorcisms were also signs of great piety. According to the 1911 exorcist account of Father Skubachevskii, he directed the woman from whom he had driven demons with the help of St. Ioasaf Belgorodskii to pray with him to the saint in thanksgiving. As he did so the woman “began quietly to repeat the words of the prayer after me and began to cry.” When she kissed the holy relics, the priest ordered her to lift her head up so that he could bless her with the life-giving cross and then asked her to give thanks to “God’s holy saint.” The woman prostrated herself before the holy relics, and “all those present could not keep back the tears” as they witnessed God’s grace

⁴⁹ Meehan, “Authority of Holiness,” 39–40.

⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, *Brat’ia Karamazovy*, 49.

⁵¹ Quoted in Blackmore, *Doctrine of the Russian Church*, 223–224n1.

upon the shrieker and the radiance of ecstasy on her face.⁵² Just as the nuns' gift of tears influenced the women around them, the ecstatic experience that women enjoyed as a result of the expulsion of their demons had a profound effect upon the congregants who witnessed the spiritual healing and had their own faith reaffirmed. The fact that women outside of the religious establishment could attain the highest form of religious ecstasy through the gift of tears demonstrated the democratizing nature of religious belief.

Finally, the stories of 19th-century women religious and *kliku-shi* overlap in terms of the experience of pilgrimage, one that also enveloped a larger population of ordinary but devout women. Pilgrimage held out tangible hope to the disabled and diseased, their relatives, and all believers who could not take their good health for granted. Through their prayers for the intercession of the Mother of God, Christ, saints, and other holy persons, and their vows to visit saints' graves, the ill, handicapped, and sick at heart could hope to attain God's mercy and grace. Even if their physical illnesses were not cured, they came away renewed from having entered holy space and having shared in the miraculous—that is, the presence of a saint and the Mother of God.⁵³

Although men also went on pilgrimages, in the course of the 19th century it appears largely from impressionistic accounts that female pilgrims outnumbered their male counterparts. For example, observers of pilgrims at the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra in Sergiev Posad in the 1870s and 1880s commented on the predominance of women.⁵⁴ A Smolensk newspaper reporter, describing the scores of pilgrims who descended upon the village Rybki in Dorogobuzh district for the celebration of the Day of the Ascension by paying their respects to a miracle-working icon of the Mother of God, similarly noted the overwhelming number of women among

⁵² Skubachevskii, "Belgorodskiiia torzhestva," 126–127.

⁵³ See Wunderli's description of pilgrimage shrines in his *Peasant Fires*, 60–61.

⁵⁴ See Rostislavov, *Opyt issledovaniia*, 110; and Filimonov, *Sergiev Posad*, 91–92. Unfortunately, reliable statistics on the identity of pilgrims have not yet been uncovered. Using archival documents, Scott Kenworthy estimates that in the 1880s, 400,000 pilgrims visited the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery annually, while by 1900 that figure had grown to over 600,000 (Kenworthy, *Heart of Russia*, 186). The Russian historian M. M. Gromyko, who has combed the archives on the subject of pilgrimages, notes the greater number of women than men among pilgrims. (Gromyko and Buganov, *O vozzreniakh*, 153.)

the worshipers: "A lot of women, in particular, come on pilgrimage; many of them hail from a hundred or more versts away...." Another Smolensk reporter, writing about the annual pilgrimage of peasants to the city of Smolensk to pray before the miracle-working Smolensk Hodigitriia icon on the Day of Ascension, spoke of "several thousands of peasants, mainly women."⁵⁵ Early 20th-century descriptions of pilgrims at holy sites also privileged women. An anonymous correspondent for *Pravitel'stvennyi vestnik* painted the following scene of ill pilgrims at the Sarov Uspenie Hermitage in Tambov province, who were hoping to receive a cure with the intercession of Serafim Sarovskii:

Along the road to the spring one can see a multitude of ill [persons]. Here on a stretcher—of two sticks with a cloth stretched over them—they are carrying an ill girl; in a cart they are leading a sick man whose legs are paralyzed; a pale, weak, sick woman, having put her arms around the shoulders of two women, hardly moves her legs, every minute using up her breath from exhaustion; a hunchbacked old woman goes on two crutches; holding the stick of a boy-leader, a blind man walks with his head high; behind him a boy hops on a crutch with a bent leg; a woman moved on her legs and arms, like a 4-legged [animal], contorted in the waist...⁵⁶

Lastly, according to a report on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 1880s, which was considerably more arduous and costly than pilgrimages within European Russia, between 58 and 70 percent of the pilgrims were women whose average age fell between 35 and 50.⁵⁷ In seeking salvation these predominantly older women were fulfilling a lifetime desire and in some cases vows to visit the holy sites of Christ's life before they died.

Released from the cares of everyday life, pilgrims sought spiritual solace, renewal, and even redemption or were fulfilling vows they had made to God and the saints for cures of illness or delivery from unfortunate circumstances. These trips were conscious choices that the faithful made as they sought to experience the mystery, "enchanted time and space," and "unfamiliar light" of

⁵⁵ *Smolenskii vestnik*, 12 June 1891; and Grachev, "Prazdnik vozneseniia Gospodnia."

⁵⁶ Reprinted in "Izvestiia i zametki," 441.

⁵⁷ Solov'ev, *Sviataia zemlia*, 131; and Vorob'eva, *Russkie missii*, 112. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem and neighboring sites were most popular around Easter, Christmas, and just before Lent.

a holy place. Women who chose the pilgrimage route were abandoning, if only temporarily, all their obligations and deference to the power structures of household, village, or community. Indeed, pilgrimages represented liberating acts that created new social relationships.⁵⁸ As important social occasions during which participants forged friendships, exchanged gossip, shared provisions, and uttered prayers individually or in unison, pilgrimages served as cathartic experiences for the sick and well.⁵⁹ Pilgrims returning to the sites of their healing to give thanks for their recovery provided hope to those who were making the trip for the first time.

The biographies of women religious are replete with references to pilgrimages as having shaped their lives. Pelageia Efimova Ovsianikova (1813–1877), who later became Abbess Pavlina of the Belevsk Krestovozdvizhensk Monastery in Tula province and whose extreme humility impressed the elder Makarii of the Optina Hermitage, had been exposed to the regimen of a women's monastery when she was a child. She had learned to read in a religious community that was close to her parents' home in the *sloboda* (suburb) of the town of Mtsensk, Orel province. However, her life changed forever when, at age 16, she went with her mother on pilgrimage to the Belevsk Monastery. Witnessing the devotion of the women religious there, she decided to enter the cloister as a novice. The life of Abbess Evgeniia (1800–1885), the founder of the Tikhvin Monastery in the town of Buzuluk, Orenburg province, was similarly transformed by a pilgrimage she took as a 12-year-old girl with her parents to the Sarov Hermitage in Tambov province, where the elder Serafim not only blessed her, but also pointed out that she was among the elect. Not yet ready to sever all ties with her family and to give up her responsibilities to them, she spent the next 20 years as a member of the Kirsanov religious community in Tambov near her parents' home and then several years in a separate cell in Buzuluk, when her parents moved to a village near that town. Similar stories abound in the biographies of women religious who went on pilgrimages later in life for spiritual renewal.⁶⁰ Abbess Taisiia specifically went on pilgrimage to the 11th-century Caves Monastery in Kiev to pray at the founding monk's, St. Anthony's, grave for inspiration in her quest to build a stone church in honor of the Mother of God at Leushino.

⁵⁸ Wunderli, *Peasant Fires*, 61.

⁵⁹ Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*, 2.

⁶⁰ Gromyko and Buganov, *O vozzreniakh*, 216ff.

St. Anthony had dedicated the monastery's main church to the Mother of God.⁶¹ Pilgrimages for young girls could thus be formative experiences in convincing them to devote their lives to God, or in the case of women religious, could reaffirm their faith and inspire them to follow the paths of sainted Russian monks.

Other women religious became professional pilgrims. In 1897 an elderly and illiterate noblewoman described herself to an observer as a pilgrim by profession. As a teenager she dreamed about the contemplative life, spending most of her time praying. Once the "Bogoliubskaia Queen of Heaven herself came to me with all the saints." Unable to resist outright her mother's insistence that she marry, the anonymous woman identified only as "Ts." agreed to go through with a wedding ceremony, but fled from the estate immediately after the nuptials, dedicating her life to wandering from religious site to religious site. For the next 33 years she supported her wanderings to such faraway places as Solovki (in the White Sea region) and Jerusalem by selling lace that she had made herself.⁶² In the middle of the 19th century the *keleinitsa* (self-proclaimed religious person) Anis'ia Romanova of the *sloboda* Dedilova, Tula province, went on numerous pilgrimages. She traveled several times to holy sites in Kiev, Moscow, and Voronezh. She also ventured out to monasteries in Zadonsk, the Solovki Archipelago, and in 1852 and again in 1858 to Jerusalem. In all of these places she studied the contemplative way of life and purchased icons as well as books recounting the lives of the saints and containing prayer cycles. Upon her return to Russia from a year in Jerusalem, Romanova attracted people of all ranks to her with her tales of the Holy Land and the mementoes—candles that she had burned in Christ's tomb at Easter, crosses, and other religious paraphernalia from the Holy Land—that she was prepared to sell.⁶³ Scores of other professional women pilgrims traversed the Russian landscape, bringing communion bread, candles, holy water and oil, and other material items from monasteries to the rural and urban faithful and carrying the donations, ribbons, cloth, and requests of these same faithful, who themselves could not go on pilgrimage, to monastic shrines.

⁶¹ Meehan, *Holy Women*, 127.

⁶² *Kto pomogaiut gorodskii popechitel'stva?* 47–48. The wanderer interpreted the death of her husband, which occurred only six weeks after the wedding, as God's punishment.

⁶³ Gromyko and Buganov, *O vozzreniakh*, 149–150.

Like women religious, *klikushi* regularly went on pilgrimages. However, they did not seek personal renewal, but rather sought the help of monks and nuns who specialized in exorcisms, which generally involved the intoning of prayers. For example, Elena Afanas'eva Shibakova, a married peasant woman from the village Slobodka in Moscow province, sought help initially at the Lavrentiev Monastery and then the Tikhonova Hermitage, both located in Kaluga province, before heading off to an almshouse church in Suzdal', the Simonov Monastery in Moscow, the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery in Sergiev Posad, and finally, in 1903, to the Sarov Hermitage in the diocese of Tambov. Moscow's Simonov Monastery was particularly renowned for ministering to shriekers. In the late 19th century the demoniac Vasilisa Alekseeva, after making the rounds of several other monasteries, ended up at the Simonov Monastery, which she described as housing between 30 and 40 shriekers at any one time. There, Father Mark affirmed Vasilisa's belief that she was possessed and advised her to stay at the monastery for six weeks. During that interval she was to attend special services from 3 a.m. until 1 p.m. each day and to take his treatment of grasses, oils, and communion bread for six weeks.⁶⁴

While the stories of the women religious and *klikushi* emphasize their individual experiences, pilgrims traveled in groups, with relatives and neighbors. In the early spring, summer, and early fall, European Russia was awash with pilgrims traveling to holy shrines to celebrate saints' days and other religious holidays. The Rostov Rozhdestvensk (women's) Monastery, which housed the miracle-working icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God, for example, saw pilgrims from Rostov and neighboring counties on the following feast days: 17 March (St. Aleksei), 9 May and 6 December (St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker); 26 June (the icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God); 8 August (the icon of the Tolga Mother of God); 8 September (Nativity of the Mother of God); 21 September (St. Dimitrii Rostovskii); and 4 December (St. Barbara the Martyr).⁶⁵ Other monasteries with miracle-working icons had similar calendars that beckoned pilgrims to them regularly.

Seeking cures for themselves and often their family members, pilgrims also sought the help of about-to-be-canonized holy men. Religious newspaper and journal reports as well as letters

⁶⁴ Nikitin, "K voprosu o klikushestve," 662; Krainskii, *Porcha*, 109–110; and Worobec, *Possessed*, 83–84.

⁶⁵ Gromyko and Buganov, *O vozvreniakh*, 145.

from elders at the famous Optina Hermitage encouraged villagers to time pilgrimages to coincide with canonization and relic translation services, occasions when a saint's power was thought to be heightened. The 1896 glorification of St. Feodosii Chernigovskii was followed in rapid succession by the glorification of five other saints and affirmation of the holiness of Anna Kashinskaia, a woman canonized in pre-Petrine Russia, in the decade and a half before the February Revolution. These canonizations drew hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

Women pilgrims asked saints for the amelioration of a whole host of illnesses and problems, most of which were not specifically female in nature. With the exception of demonic possession and scattered references to infertility and other gynecological difficulties, and occasionally a hint of marital discord, miracle tales recorded ailments common to men and women. They ranged from endemic diseases such as typhus, measles, diphtheria, consumption, and dysentery to abscesses, paralysis, tuberculosis of the bones, peritonitis, rheumatism, and life-threatening debilities, to congenital defects. When these illnesses were so debilitating that their victims could not embark on pilgrimages to holy shrines, women and men might instead have dreamed of a particular saint at night in the security of their homes. These visions were followed by either immediate or incremental cures and the obligation on the part of the healed to visit the saint's gravesite to give personal thanks and order services for the saint's memory.⁶⁶ Healings could also take place through contact with material objects connected to a saint. Thus, it was common for a mother to pour water over a saint's icon or an icon of the Mother of God in a vessel, wet the sick child's or adult's head with the "holy" runoff, and have the patient drink some of the water.⁶⁷ The miracle narratives also repeatedly refer to the application of holy water, holy oil from the votives illuminating icons in the saints' crypts, wadding from the saints' coffins, and pieces of saints' clothing to diseased areas of the body. While the use of such objects did not always result in a cure, it appeared to believers that their employment increased the probability of the saint's intercession. So important was materiality that a substantial, if controlled, modern consumer industry of holy objects developed at pilgrimage sites within and around monasteries' walls. Such objects gave hope to women for

⁶⁶ Worobec, "Miraculous Healings," 26.

⁶⁷ *Skazanie o zhizni*, 73; and Shevzov, "Poeticizing Piety," 367.

the alleviation of their ailments as well as those of their children and husbands.⁶⁸

Although many of the ailments in the miracle tales of the early 20th century were not gender specific, less common miracle stories dealing with marital difficulties and defiance of male authority shed some light on the ways in which Orthodoxy could empower women. In one such tale we learn about the husband of a peasant woman who denied his wife, who was suffering from an undefined "woman's ailment," permission to go on pilgrimage to Belgorod for the 1911 translation of Ioasaf's relics. The wife not only defied her husband by going on the pilgrimage, but she also became the beneficiary of a miraculous cure through St. Ioasaf's intercession. In the end, when the husband contracted a liver problem, the wife refused to get him the medical treatment he needed and he died.⁶⁹ The tale suggested that the man's callous treatment of his wife, not his wife's negligence, was responsible for his death. It also highlighted the superiority of a male saint's authority over that of a husband. The wife had used the saint's superiority in defying and seeking independence from her spouse. Similarly, Anna Labzina in the late 18th century turned to the higher authority of God to gain independence from her abusive first husband even while she respected his patriarchal rights over her. "She said to her husband Katamyshev, 'You have the authority to deprive me of my property and peace of mind, but you cannot take away my conscience and good name.... So long as the hand of God protects me I shall not stray from the path of virtue and I shall not accept your advice.'" Neither Labzina nor her peasant counterpart more than a century later were slaves to "obedience" and "silent suffering."⁷⁰ There were also miracle stories in which the Mother of God "went to great efforts to enlighten and spiritually reorient the offending spouse." Finally, a miracle tale involving the intercession of the Mother of God sanctioned a woman's rebuke of a priest for not observing Sundays and feast days properly. In the midst of the singing of the Cherubikon (the same hymn that produced Abbess Taisiia's mystical experience and the Smolensk shrieker's demonic attack), this ailing 28-year-old woman had a vision of Mary who directed her to lecture the officiating priest publicly. When the priest refused to believe Ekaterina's claims of

⁶⁸ Worobec, "Miraculous Healings," 30, 31.

⁶⁹ "Novye chudesa Sviatitelia Ioasafa," 524.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Marker, "God of Our Mothers," 207; also see 209.

having seen the Mother of God, the Virgin cured the woman of her ailment. The subversive nature of this miracle tale clearly bypassed the notice of a church censor when he approved the tale as the subject of an official publication.⁷¹ No doubt some women, who did not leave memoirs or who were not the recipients of miraculous cures, were emboldened by stories such as these and by the tenets of their faith to assert their independence from abusive spouses or obnoxious priests. For those who chose to suffer in silence, such stories of empowerment provided them with hope of heavenly retribution against the offending parties.

The tales that enumerate miraculously cured diseases and the visions that individuals of all classes had of the Mother of God and individual saints unfortunately reveal little about the spiritual transformations of the recipients of miracles. We can only surmise from incomplete pieces of information the powerful effect that miraculous cures must have had on the recipients as well as throngs of witnesses. In the early 20th century, for example, Klavdiia Pavlova Malinina, the spouse of a Raneburg school inspector, described her soul upon kneeling at the grave of St. Ioasaf Belgorodskii and beseeching him to help her walk. She said that it felt “light and comforted, exactly [the way it felt] on the Blessed Easter Holiday.”⁷² In Malinina’s case the anticipation of the cure began her spiritual transformation, or at least that is how she chose to remember that transformation. In another case, it was a cured woman’s strong faith that left an indelible impression upon the religious and lay men who heard her testimony. The story of Nadezhda Lagutina, who was cured from life-threatening hemorrhaging as a result of the intercession of St. Pitirim Tambovskii, so moved the investigating committee set up to verify the miracles attributed to Pitirim before his canonization in 1914 that it waived its requirement that there be more witnesses to her miracle than simply the woman’s spouse. The testimonies of Lagutina and her husband, in which Lagutina swore that she was providing “absolute truth before God,” demonstrated such a deep faith in the miraculous power of St. Pitirim that “there is no room for doubt in the existence of miraculous facts in the case of Lagutina’s healing.”⁷³

⁷¹ Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 234–235, 221.

⁷² “Novye sluchai,” 700.

⁷³ RGIA, Fond 796, opis’ 195, number 1449 [Kanonizatsiia Pitirima], ff. 123, 122v.

Lagutina's testimony also indicated that she initially thought herself to be unworthy of a miraculous healing. "Considering myself to be unworthy of such great grace from God, I was silent about my healing a long time, but my conscience does not give me peace, and I decided to report [it] now."⁷⁴ Lagutina's reticence to come before a church commission may say something about her humility as well as her reaction to the negative portrayals of women that clergy sometimes painted. At the same time, her experience could not remain personal but had to be shared with the wider community of faithful in order to validate Pitirim's holiness and honor God's divine grace upon mere mortals. Similarly, Paraskeva Shilina described herself as being sinful for not reporting her miraculous cure of pleurisy after fulfilling her vow to visit the grave of Serafim Sarovskii. Clearly, she felt compelled to do so because of the preparations for Serafim's canonization.⁷⁵ Yet another lower class urban woman came forward with information about the miraculous cure of her son, Paul, in 1908 through the intercession of Ioasaf Belgorodskii only after the saint appeared before her and promised that her son would be completely healthy if she swore to the healing under oath.⁷⁶ While such miracle tales served the didactic purpose of impressing upon the faithful their duty to inform ecclesiastical authorities of miracles, the association between women and a reticence to report healings suggests that numerous women may never have gone public with their stories. They also illuminate the continuing importance of women's accounts in the modern age to the validation of saints' cults.

One last hint of women's religiosity and the effect that it had on other believers comes from pilgrimage narratives. In her discussion of the development of the Marian shrine at Lourdes in the late 19th century, Ruth Harris reminds us that "pilgrims were willing to risk death, and saw their audacity as a test that might hasten the 'resurrections' they sought."⁷⁷ However much in pain, humble pilgrims usually vowed to walk to their holy destinations. Thus, a chronically arthritic, lower-middle class woman (*meshchanka*), Aleksandra Korneeva Den'kova from the city of Riazan', walked 15 or so versts to pay her respects to the miracle-working icon of St. Nicholas at the Nikolo-Radovitsk Monastery. She

⁷⁴ RGIA, Fond 796, op. 195, No. 1449 [Kanonzatsiia Pitirima], f. 122v.

⁷⁵ "Blagodatnye znamenii prepodobnogo Serafima," 645.

⁷⁶ *Skazanie o zhizni*, 91–92.

⁷⁷ Harris, *Lourdes*, 261.

described her ordeal as such: "Going down the road with my painful legs and experiencing unbearable pain ..., you could say that I did not walk, but crawled...."⁷⁸ The sight of Den'kova and her determination would have impressed passersby as well as the monks who received her at the end of the road. A more complete picture emerges from the pen of the priest A. Goncharev. The cleric wrote an eloquent account of a paralyzed young peasant woman who joined a procession of the cross that he had organized from the parish church in Senna, Bogodukhov *uezd*, Khar'kov province, to Belgorod in the spring of 1912, several months after the glorification of St. Ioasaf. Having been paralyzed on the left side for 13 years, the 30-year-old unmarried woman insisted on walking the entire 200 versts to Ioasaf's grave, refusing to ride on a cart. According to her fellow pilgrims, she sought ultimate redemption through death, but only after being able to visit the saint's grave and take communion there. "I do not wish to be healed," she is reported as saying. "I am already old and besides will be a parasite on my parents; I would be so happy if God helped me to get to Belgorod, to prostrate myself before the relics of God's saint, [and] to sob out my grief before him, and having [the opportunity to] take communion, even if I were to die, I would be happy." Ultimately, the pilgrim did reach the relics and died on the journey home.⁷⁹ Goncharev and his fellow pilgrims had been so moved by the woman's humility, faith in God, and quest for redemption that the priest felt compelled to write an article for the religious press about the girl's story.

The stories of Abbess Taisiia and a Smolensk shrieker as well as the experiences of other devout women those narratives have evoked have presented a window unto a larger story of women's spirituality in late 18th- and 19th-century Russia. They demonstrate ways in which Russian Orthodoxy was relevant to women's lives as well as the ways in which Orthodoxy empowered women. By serving God and the larger society with extreme piety and social services, women religious gained authority by following Orthodoxy's privileging of "the monastic or 'angelic' path to salvation."⁸⁰ As widows or young single women they could abandon family cares to found or enter already established communities of like-

⁷⁸ Quoted in Poplavskaia, *Palomnichestvo*, 30.

⁷⁹ Goncharev, "Palomnichestvo," 279, 793–794.

⁸⁰ Meehan, "To Save Oneself," 121.

mindful women, serving as models of extreme piety and exemplars of charitable acts. At the same time, God's grace and mercy and his ultimate gift of *umilenie* were not limited to individuals who had taken up monastic orders or copied the rigors of monastic life. Ordinary peasant women who experienced difficulties in their lives could also have their lives transformed. Women who believed themselves to be possessed were not abandoned by the church to the care of medical doctors but were accorded attention and treatment through public exorcisms often through the mediation of saints' prayers. While exorcisms confirmed the patriarchal order with male priests and monks restoring control to a woman's soul and body, the miraculous cures empowered women within their communities. Being able to leave family responsibilities behind temporarily in order to secure spiritual help at monasteries provided these women with the solace that they needed. Pilgrimages to nearby and far away monasteries beckoned both sick and well women. The much needed respite as well as spiritual renewal they experienced on their travels allowed them to return to their daily burdens and to carry them out in accordance with the dictates of a Christian society that also periodically allowed them to defy patriarchal authority within their own homes. The tenacity with which women clung to Orthodox practices in the early Soviet period when religion came under attack and the feminization that resulted thereafter can only be understood by further exploring avenues of women's spirituality in the 19th century during Orthodoxy's great revival.

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