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## Women Teachers of Religion in Russia Gendered Authority in the Orthodox Church

There is a large spectrum of social-scientific debates about women in patriarchal religions, with the two poles pointing to, on the one end, classical liberal feminism and, on the other end, views of alternative female agency performed through docility, obedience, and patience<sup>1</sup>. Exploring the position of women teachers of religion in the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) we find a specific model of authority which cannot be fully accounted for within either of these analytical stances. A female didactic religious authority founded in professionalism has been widely acknowledged both among clergy and those learning Orthodoxy. The practice of didactic authority is contingent on women's relationship to priestly authority expressed in blessing, on their secular social status and local variations. The educational and organisational role of women in the post-Soviet ROC derives from the promotion of Orthodoxy in a period when women had already an established place within the secular, public school system. Transferability between the secular and the religious characterises the establishment of didactic authority. The Church understood as a collectivity of believers has undergone a deregulation, characterised by thriving localism, small-group loyalties, and individualised beliefs and practices (A. Agadjanian & K. Rousselet, 2010). The variety of religious knowledge, practice, and belief is enormous. Private and relatively independent from Church control ways of practicing Orthodoxy are prominent, such as participation in pilgrimages (J. Kormina, 2010; T. Köllner, 2010; I. Naletova, 2010). Faced with such diversity, the ROC is attempting to set the criteria for conversion, sometimes called "en-churchment" (or "churchliness", *votserkovlennost'*), and correct practice.

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The Church hierarchs felt a need for their institution to deliver knowledge about theology and the history of the Church. As post-Soviet youngsters and adults started familiarising themselves with “their” religion (K. Rousselet’s introduction to this issue), this new religious participation raised practical issues too, such as dress codes, behaviour in church, ritual practice, correct ways of praying and fasting.

Hence, religious education has become a burning issue. Parish Sunday schools have been established all over the country. Whereas right after 1991 the ROC suffered from a pervasive lack of clergy<sup>2</sup> and specialists in catechisation, in the 2000s the Spiritual Academies and different organisations became actively involved in their training. The hierarchs have reached a consensus that it is desirable for the teachers of the Sunday schools to be Orthodox believers with a degree in pedagogy. Teaching was already a highly feminised profession during the Soviet period. Nowadays most teachers of Orthodoxy who have trained as pedagogues are women. They appear as a prominent authority on how to be proper Orthodox Church members, not least because they are officially appointed or designated by priests as the educational experts. They have acquired didactic authority as professionals in the eyes of priests and the laity<sup>3</sup>. This authority differs from both ecclesiastical authority and other historical models of female authority in Orthodoxy: it presents a new pattern.

## **Women’s post-Soviet didactic religious authority**

Recent studies of women in patriarchal religions revolve around two analytical poles: one that espouses more closely classical feminist views of emancipation and one that stresses women’s alternative agency through patience, docility and obedience. The first approach has been linked to Protestantism, notably branches where women are close to visible leadership positions or hold ecclesiastical authority. The culmination of such affirmation is the exercise of ministry through priesthood (J.-P. Willaime, 1996). Overt feminist claims to liturgical and structural authority may take the form of organised struggles and women’s militancy. Gilkes (2004) emphasises that in the nineteenth and twentieth century in the United States, black women in the Protestant Sanctified Church gained authority and recognition once they were able to get established as teachers of the Gospel. They were differently successful in gaining access to the pulpit, even if “the tasks of the teaching role differed very little from the task of the preaching role

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2. Among the parish clergy many had no official religious education. Today the priests are required to graduate at least from the seminary.

3. This resembles what P. Wilson (1983) terms “cognitive authority”, meaning an influential authority, consciously recognised as proper and reliable. Credibility, competence, trustworthiness play a role in individuals’ judgments about the authority of others, including in the sphere of education (P. McKenzie, 2003).

reserved for men” (C. T. Gilkes, 2004: 51). It was precisely women, Gilkes claims, who allowed the Church to exist through their engagement and “community work”. Where black women had no access to ordination, they built “alternative structures of authority, career pathways, and spheres of influence” (*Ibid.*: 52) which were organically related to the life of the congregations. These women engaged in different degrees of militancy for better recognition. In variance with such militant “womanist” (to borrow Gilkes’ term) involvement in religion, recent anthropological studies have stressed that obedience and docility, while at odds with classical feminism, are conceived of by female faithful as ways of creating change. Thus, what the classical Western liberal view treats as attitudes symptomatic of the devaluation of women in oppressive religions, faithful women may define as an active deployment of virtues. Alternative forms of subjective agency are theorised by scholars studying Islamic movements (S. Mahmood, 2001, 2005), Catholicism and more generally women’s faith-based silence, patience, docility (P. Klassen, 2001; A. Kościańska, 2009a, 2009b; K. Sekerdej, 2010).

Women’s didactic authority in post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy is far from both the notion of “womanist” claims and that of agency through submission, patience or docility. In Russian Orthodoxy women are denied access to the pulpit and to the exercise of sacraments, the prerogatives of priesthood, in accordance with classical Eastern Orthodox theology (K. Karidoyanes Fitz Gerald, 1983). The ecclesiastical and the didactic areas of authority are neither statutorily equal nor theologically comparable. However, they may overlap in how the laity use them, which parallels Gilkes’ (2004) observations about male preaching and female teaching in black American Protestantism. We found that the blessing of a priest, usually accepted as a spiritual permission to do something, may have the same effect on parishioners as the informed advice of a female teacher. The teachers themselves usually see obedience to priestly blessing as a religious virtue crucial for the assertion of their own area of authority. Without challenging the masculine monopoly over priesthood, but also without deploying agency exclusively through the religious virtues of obedience and silence, women teachers have established a new pattern of authority supported by a consensual recognition of didactic professionalism and organisational expertise. This situation recalls what Béraud (2007) writes about French Catholic parishes where the participation of the laity conflicts little with the “limits imposed by canonical rule” (C. Béraud, 2007: 17). She argues that in a context of theological and canonical immobility no less than a “silent revolution” is under way in French Catholicism. The Catholic Church faces declining numbers of priests supplemented by “statistically invisible” laity, mainly married women. The latter teach catechism, assist bishops, act as chaplains in prisons and schools, prepare the people for baptisms and marriages, accompany mourning families, and some officiate at funerals (*Ibid.*: 126). Thereby they gain authority in relation to other faithful and the clergy, without claiming access to priesthood proper. Their employment status is low and unstable, and the economic rewards are meagre.

The ambiguity of their authority finds a striking parallel in the ROC where lay women's didactic authority strengthens despite their limited statutory and material recognition. How should we make sense of this authority that exists alongside the clerical one, acknowledged on the ground but barely reflected in official Church structures? If these women are reluctant to claim feminist emancipation and are usually obedient and subordinate to priests, how do they get established as a *de facto* and relatively autonomous female authority in formal Orthodox education? What does it mean to women to hold didactic authority in a patriarchal religion? In the following, we examine the dynamics of religious education in our field sites. Then, we explore how historical legacies, structural weaknesses and strengths intermingle with the particularities of individual trajectories to foster the emergence of a new concept and practice of religious authority. Much of what is happening depends on creativity and local arrangements in the field of religious education where standards are blurred. The size of the town and the types of social status encountered are important variables. Secular social status influences the transferability of authority and agency between the secular and the religious spheres. Finally we examine three biographies that allow closer insights into these aspects.

## The dynamics of schooling

This article draws on a twelve-month fieldwork in Rostov-on-Don, populated over 1,000,000, and in a town that we call with the pseudonym Ozerovo, located in the region of Saint-Petersburg, of approximately 88,000 inhabitants<sup>4</sup>. We discovered women's role in education while conducting field research on Russian Orthodoxy, initially without a special interest in gender. Rather than testing a hypothesis, we paid attention to similarities that emerged from participant observation and interviews in our sites. Female didactic authority has developed in an urban context where there has been an actual connection between secular and Orthodox schooling. Formal pedagogical training has been considered of utmost importance. Female teachers have revealed as competent advisors on matters religious, more accessible and available than priests. While the question whether the state schools should transmit knowledge about religion, and how and by whom it has to be taught has been left open in the legislation, in

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4. The research was conducted by A. Ladykowska in Rostov-on-Don and by D. Tocheva in Ozerovo, in 2006-2007. To protect the anonymity of the informants, we use the pseudonym Ozerovo for the town in the Saint-Petersburg region. We openly refer to Rostov-on-Don, as its specificities make it easy to recognise. All personal names are pseudonyms. The Rostov-on-Don Eparchy of the ROC consists of 253 parishes structured in 16 deaneries, 3 monasteries and 8 institutions providing religious educational services. Rostov had over 150 Sunday schools in 2007. Ozerovo has three parishes and two Sunday schools. The methodology used was participant observation and open and semi-structured interviews.

practice, in our case studies, there is an overlap between the secular and Sunday schools. Locally, the same persons teach in the two types of institutions. Most Sunday schools in Rostov are run by professional teachers having a parallel job in secular schools. The largest parish of Ozerovo has a chapel located in the most prestigious local secular state school. Since 2000, three classes of pupils enrolled in the latter school study permanently in the parish school where they follow the standard state curriculum taught by teachers from the state school, plus additional Orthodox teachings, with the agreement of the parents and local authorities. The interconnection between religious and secular schools has been accentuated by the introduction of a quasi-religious subject into public secular schools, one of the popular names of which is “Foundations of Orthodox culture”<sup>5</sup>.

The women we met were trained initially as pedagogues, academics, or had followed one or several specialised trainings in Orthodox pedagogy after having engaged with religion. Teachers’ legitimacy, attested by a diploma of formal pedagogical training, came to have equal importance in the secular and Orthodox schooling systems, thus founding a new model of transferability of authority between the religious and the secular world, as we discuss below. We do not claim that our cases are representative; statistics are simply nonexistent. Yet, the analysis of two places allows some general insights into the dynamics of secular and religious education. The holders of diplomas granted by the Theological Universities form the educational elite among Rostov’s teachers<sup>6</sup>. The Orthodox intelligentsia includes also women engaged in scientific life, often holding a junior (*kandidat nauk*) or senior (*doktor nauk*) academic title. Those of them who converted to Orthodoxy usually studied pedagogy as a second discipline at later stages of their career. Almost all female teachers are engaged in writing a textbook on Orthodox catechisation, which indicates both the urge for providing knowledge in the field and the diversity of the content. The largest parish school in Ozerovo is run entirely by women, though the official head above the director is the parish rector. The teachers see their school in competition for funding with the church, the domain of the priest. Among themselves they often discuss

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5. It is a highly debated issue since Russia is officially a multiconfessional country and the Constitution proclaims the separation between State and Church. However, political authorities promote Orthodoxy as a source of morality. In this context, the “Foundations of Orthodox culture” became eligible for adoption in secular schools on a voluntary basis. The subject raised diverse responses from society (see the 2009 survey of The Levada Center *Obschestvennoe...*, 2009: 72). In 2010 the Ministry of Education replaced the previous subject by “Foundations of religious cultures and secular ethics”. Disputes resumed, especially around the ill-defined concepts of “religious culture” and “secular ethics” (<http://iph.ras.ru/page50562154.htm>).

6. It is hard to estimate the percentage of teachers of Orthodoxy with theological education in Rostov because there are no statistics. Usually their number in big cities is high. Among numerous institutions of Orthodox higher education in Russia only three grant diplomas with state accreditation. A branch of one such institution is located in Rostov (A. Ladykowska, 2012).

that the priest keeps “his sponsors for himself”. When the school needed money, the teachers reported with irony that the priest would simply “give [them] his blessing to write letters [to prospective sponsors] to ask for money”. The teachers’ sense of animosity is combined with their gratitude to the rector. Thanks to his support some of these women had received formal religious training and a job in the parish school. All in all, thirteen women work there. Five of them have graduated from a three-year course in Orthodox pedagogy in Saint-Petersburg; four were initially trained as pedagogues. Most of the teachers and other staff members have more than one job. About a half are divorced. The profile of the teachers in Rostov is similar: women between their thirties and late fifties, all of them have two jobs, one of two at a state school or university. Most of them are divorced with grown up children, a trend well documented for this age group (B. A. Engel, 2004: 260). Thus, this characteristic does not single out the women teaching religion as a sociological minority within Russian society. The teachers’ team is for them a group where to socialise and receive support. Official pedagogical education sanctioned by a diploma and affiliation with a Church structure are female teachers’ formal sources of legitimacy, on the basis of which they gain authority in the eyes of the priests and other educators (A. Ladykowska, 2012). Yet, in the eyes of adults and children learning Orthodoxy, closeness and availability are the sources of their authority. Indeed, teachers tend to be more accessible and available than priests. Adults who know the teachers tend to address them for advice in ordinary, casual interactions in the school or in the church, or even on the street, interactions from which the priests are absent. The teachers transmit knowledge through remarks, friendly advice, or criticism in response to requests or spontaneously. These are often, but not exclusively, women-to-women interactions; these are mainly the pupils’ mothers and grandmothers who keep a relationship with the secular and Sunday school, though some fathers do it too. Moreover, women make up the majority of the constituency for Orthodox classes for adults. Usually, the teachers act as competent and self-confident advisors on issues on which priests have historically been the authority, such as correct ritual practice and even soteriology. They assert their didactic authority without necessarily discussing this process with priests, though with the silent agreement, if not request, of the latter. How does this recognition of didactic authority articulate with the teachers’ low material reward and the absence of official ecclesiastical recognition? Ambivalence appears to be an inherent feature.

## **Constitutive ambivalence**

Before discussing in detail the multiple aspects of this ambivalence, it is important to note that in the post-Soviet ROC the issue of authority in general has become crucial, related to the current controversy which Agadjanian and Rousselet describe as “the competition for authenticity’ within tradition”

(A. Agadjanian & K. Rousselet, 2006). Rivalry characterises post-Soviet religious authority: “behind the negotiation of meaning by individuals lie conflicts of authority: how much authority is vested in the church ‘as a whole’, in its hierarchy, in a particular priest, a spiritual father, a *starets* (elder), a nonpriestly popular ‘tradition-keeper’, a group of pilgrims, a family, or a particular individual?” (A. Agadjanian & K. Rousselet, 2010: 312). One aspect of authority in Russian Orthodoxy has long been related to gender. Historically, women have been granted authority exclusively for their association with various expressions of sacredness. Women with a special status, such as royal women (I. Thyret, 2001) and those whose asceticism fostered admiration among male clergy (B. Meehan, 1993) were authoritative religious figures. Weaver (2011) analyses how women’s claims that some icons are miraculous are accepted by the Church on the grounds that evidence has been brought to the believers “from above”: “Direct participation by ‘persons’ who are neither subordinate to nor controllable by the formal authorities of the Church devolves authority back to the laity as much as they enhance the power and prestige of the Church” (D. Weaver, 2011: 407). Another occurrence of a lay women achievement is the 1988 canonisation of Saint-Petersburg’s most popular Saint Xenia, the “patron of female social suffering” whom women kept worshiping over centuries (J. Kormina & S. Shtyrkov, 2011). These cases demonstrate that female religious authority has long drawn on claims to sacredness and that practical religious authority within Orthodoxy is flexible. The establishment of a female didactic authority can partly be seen as the most recent evidence of this flexibility. But from another perspective, it is a sheer innovation, being rooted not in sacredness but in professionalism. Post-Soviet formal Orthodox education has emerged as an area of female authority by replicating women’s ambivalent position characteristic of both religion and secular education. On the one hand, one may speak of women’s empowerment. It has been argued that in post-Soviet countries conversion to evangelical forms of Christianity offers women facing hardship empowerment and integration in a social community (W. Clark, 2009: 136-137; M. Pelkmans, 2009: 149; C. Wanner, 2009: 68-72). Our study shows that acquiring didactic authority opens avenues for women’s empowerment in Russian Orthodoxy too. Its growth is an unprecedented phenomenon with no equivalent among traditional religions on the former Soviet territory. In comparison, “women of authority” in Central Asian Islam, though important as religious specialists, act outside of the official religious structures (H. Fathi, 2004). Within these structures, they participate as wives of devout men or teach Islam only to women and girls (Hilgers, 2009; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008), while the Orthodox teachers teach and advise men too.

On the other hand, Orthodox theology, the ecclesiastical structures, and the legacies of women’s position in Soviet and post-Soviet education, contribute to nuance the idea of empowerment. Lay women entering Orthodox schooling face

rigid ecclesiastical structures and only sparse signs of liberal interpretation amidst the traditionally conservative theology. Debates about women's place in the Orthodox Church, as encapsulated in theology, history and tradition, oscillate between Orthodox anthropology (in the philosophical and theological sense) stressing the equality of the God's creation and the importance of the Theotokos (Mother of God) as an ideal image of womanhood, and the word of the Holy Scriptures, the literal reading of which refuses women any significance in the Church (M. Miklicz, 2006). As "the weak sex" they are supposed to cover their heads and to "keep silent" (I Cor 11, 3-15, 14, 34). Though literal interpretations are not rare, recent history has complicated these conservative positions. Women's religious role under Soviet rule is sometimes coloured by celebratory overtones within the postsocialist Church. In Soviet times, women formed the majority of believers, as they do today. A popular phrase "The white scarves saved the Church" ("*Belye platochki Tserkov spasli*"), used also by priests, means that the Church survived atheist policies thanks to women. This idea was taken further in a theological discussion by Andrei Kuraev, an influential deacon representing a relatively liberal intellectual current. In his public lecture "Women in the Church: reply to the feminists" ("*Zhenshchina v Tserkvi: otvet feministam*", 2004), recorded on DVDs and widely sold in Orthodox shops, he discusses the Holy Fathers' positions on the marginal place of women within Orthodox Christianity and their questionable relevancy to contemporary developments. Taking Protestant feminist debates on the ordination of women as his starting point, he opens up a debate about women in post-Soviet Orthodoxy. He does not claim that women should have access to priesthood, but his critical comments challenge more conservative positions. He supports his plea to hold women in higher esteem with the argument that "the white scarves" were saviours of the Church throughout communism. This background is now combining with the ambivalent legacies of female participation in Soviet education. On the one hand, Russians share the understanding that women are good educators. This strongly feminised profession still holds a high symbolic status in the eyes of many Russians. The female teacher had been an iconic figure of authority for generations of Russians, enshrined by popular literature and cinema. A teacher – an engineer of the "New Soviet Man" – was one of the key professions in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, however, the Soviet field of education became occupied by the less socially recognised sex. Despite the fact that official Soviet discourses emphasised women's emancipation, state policies were far from emancipatory, which was visible already from the postwar period (G. W. Lapidus, 1978; B. A. Engel, 2004; P. McMahan, 1994). In practice not only did women grapple with the double burden of reproductive matters, childrearing and house-keeping, and of participating in salaried labour, but also occupied the most poorly paid jobs. The strong promotion of technical and scientific training among women created a high female concentration in such fields. Nonetheless stereotyped concepts of gender roles persisted. Among all those clusters of

professional workers with higher education where the proportion of women was particularly high, the teachers constituted the largest group in the Soviet Union (G. W. Lapidus, 1978: 143-147, 172, 185-187). Wages in education gradually decreased in comparison to the national average (*Ibid.*: 190-191). The Gorbachev period and the later economic changes brought hardship and the feminisation of poverty (H. Pilkington, 1996). Women largely withdrew from the salaried workforce; the majority of those who have remained employed continued to dominate in professions low in status and in salary (B. A. Engel, 2004: 250-268). The ambivalences of the structural and symbolic position of women have been transposed into the Church. Religious education has replicated the structural disadvantages of the secular world by paying women teachers low wages and refusing to inscribe their practical authority into the official ecclesiastical hierarchy, but at the same time has benefited from their contributions.

The following three biographies illustrate how teachers come to terms with the fundamental ambivalence of their position. They show that didactic authority emerges in a complex relationship to obedience (*poslushanie*) to priestly authority as encoded in blessing and assignment of tasks (K. Rousselet, in this issue). Women's social status does make a difference for how the religious virtue of female obedience articulates with their assertiveness as professionals, thus shaping an internally diverse model of female didactic authority. The teachers cultivate secular marks of legitimacy in several ways: through a subjective narration of their Soviet-time activism as in the first case; through formal professional training as in the three cases; through active participation in prestigious areas of secular education as in the third case. All cases highlight different aspects of what we call the transferability of authority between the secular and the religious. Religious submission does not entirely supplant secular values (in variance to P. E. Klassen, 2001; A. Kościńska, 2009a, 2009b; S. Mahmood, 2001, 2005; K. Sekerdej, 2010). Instead, these biographies attest to the importance of convertibility between the secular and the religious, with the third case showing a mutual reinforcement of authority and agency in the two fields.

### **“One has to know how to work with children”**

Whereas black American Protestant women have sought support for their womanist claims in the Scriptures (P. Côté & J. Zylberberg, 1996; C. T. Gilkes, 2004), post-Soviet Orthodox women have drawn on their past in Soviet communist activism and on the consensual in Russia esteem for professional educational competence to establish their religious didactic authority. Alena Petrovna (44) was perhaps the most beloved teacher of religion in Ozerovo. For her the high spiritual value of priestly blessing did not devalue her past Soviet engagement but the two together helped her establish her own area of authority within a parish. She was married with two grown up children and employed in a heating



Both women teachers and priests are involved in evaluating the results of the Orthodox education. The last day before the summer break : diplomas for the winners of the *Foundations of Orthodox culture* contest in Rostov, 2007, © Agata Ladykowska



Orthodox women teachers and academics actively participate in the Orthodox conference alongside with priests, 2007, © Agata Ladykowska

company. In Soviet times, she worked in the police. Her husband was a military in a unit located in Kazakhstan where the family lived. She lost her job in the very beginning of the 1990s. At that time, her children went to an Orthodox Sunday school in Almaty. The family moved from Kazakhstan to northwestern Russia in 1995. Once settled down in Ozerovo, A. Petrovna put her children to the Sunday school, a step that led her to take a job in the church. She started her narrative in a way typical for Orthodox women teachers: “I grew up in a non-believing family, but I have always been attracted to God.” A. Petrovna’s grandmother had put her on the path to God, although this grandmother’s knowledge was not properly canonical, as A. Petrovna noted. Listing further the people who led her to her religious educational commitment, she attributed the most prominent roles to men:

“I worked already in the department of internal affairs [of the police] when my boss said: ‘Alena Petrovna, a lecture on atheism will be delivered today in the House of Culture. You, as a Komsomol member, you should go.’ Before that I was the secretary of the Komsomol at school, I have always been such an activist, such a Komsomol member. So I went there to hear the lecture. [...] The lecturer was a man obviously so much in love with his work that he spoke so well of Jesus Christ that as a result he didn’t turn me away, but on the contrary, I became interested.”

The smooth transition between work within Soviet structures and within Orthodoxy in A. Petrovna’s narrative is far from being an exception. Continuity is the most widespread pattern of reinterpretation of one’s own life trajectory

among teachers of religion (M. Benovska-Sabkova *et al.*, 2010; A. Ladykowska, 2011). In 1987, while still employed by the police, A. Petrovna and her young son got baptised secretly, persuaded by an aunt. By then, A. Petrovna discovered Orthodox literature. She emphasised that at home, her husband and their children used to listen to her reading and telling religious stories: “My husband would ask: ‘Mother, you should tell us some story.’ And so, in practice, he learns the Holy Scriptures from my stories. When I start speaking, this sounds understandable to him, and interesting, and familiar.” This spiritual discovery of Orthodoxy and of the ability to “tell stories” was followed by a professional turn: “And this is how God brought me to Him: my children studied in the Sunday school and I had always dreamt to work with children.” Unemployed during the harsh 1990s crisis and relying on the tiny salary of her husband, A. Petrovna felt the need to provide for her family. An encounter in the church led her to start a new career: “I started going to this church [...] and the people noticed me, because my children, it was obvious, were educated (*gramotnye*), because they knew how to cross themselves and all the rest.” The woman director of the parish school asked A. Petrovna whether her children would like to join the Orthodox classes. A. Petrovna agreed. During the next few months she helped the staff of the school. The parish rector noticed her efforts and offered her a salaried job in the church shop, which she felt was a sign that her prayers were heard. After a while, the shop posted an announcement about courses in pedagogy and theology: “At that time I was already an educated person, I had read a lot, I knew a lot. I thought: ‘I want to go to these courses.’ I went to the rector: ‘Father, give me your blessing’.” But the rector refused, afraid of losing her as a church worker. She kept insisting until she received his blessing and three years later graduated as an Orthodox pedagogue. In 2000, her family moved to a new neighbourhood. She decided to join the parish closer to her new home. She told the priest:

“‘Father, I know that you wish to open a Sunday school.’ He answered: ‘I do want to, but I have no one to help me. I started working with children, but it doesn’t work well.’ One has to know how to work with children of course. Our Father is very talented, he has marvellous education from the Academy, he knows how to deliver a speech, he gives great sermons, he is smart, overall, he is a wonderful man. I told him: ‘Father, I will be your helper if you accept me.’ He said: ‘Then join me’.”

Within the new parish she initiated a new Sunday school led by herself and the priest. At the moment of our conversations, in 2007, she was well known as the Sunday school leader. A. Petrovna presents her involvement with religious education as the long process of her own upbringing and progressive construction of her self-confidence as a teacher of religion starting at her own home. She was able to understand the parents: “I know the spiritual hunger they experience.” She was also able to provide the necessary support to a “wonderful” priest who was, nevertheless, not gifted for work with children. She listed two

priests who gave an impulse to her career by hiring her and blessing her desire to go further, in addition to encouragement from the communist lecturer and her husband. But the moving motivation was hers. Alena Petrovna overtly claims her area of professional competence. For her, priests have their own domains of competence; she has hers. A. Petrovna positively evaluates her past as a Komsomol activist. Such view is not a personal peculiarity; it reflects a structural continuity that matters for the understanding of the transferability between the secular and the religious in post-Soviet Russia. Soviet legacies have been instrumental to the establishment of female didactic authority in Orthodoxy. Professional didactic authority and organisational skills in the Komsomol, structurally recognised in Soviet times, have extended to the religious sphere. S. Luehrmann (2011) discusses the enduring effects of Soviet didacticism whose practitioners often found new home in religious organisations. She stresses the “happy conjunctures” between Soviet era didactic skills and habits, and the demands of, among others, establishing Protestant churches. However she doubts that such skills and habits may efficiently incite the Orthodox zeal. Our research demonstrates that not merely didactic and organisational skills but also the collective representation of female didactic authority rooted in Soviet activism has found its way into Orthodox education, bridging secular and religious contexts and reshaping the ROC’s map of gendered authority.

## The Orthodox educational elite

Women of higher social status also emphasise their youth when they revealed as skilful Komsomol organisers and top students (*otlichnitsy*). But while the above narrative is typical of Orthodox women without previous career as pedagogues and no high education, in the case of women trained as teachers and/or pursuing an academic career one notices more self-assertive positions. Such teachers are fully aware of the advantage their academic competences and organisational ability give them in parish life and Orthodox education. If disobedience to priestly assignment, illustrated below, is exceptional, again it brings to the fore the secular-religious nexus characteristic of female didactic authority, the secular being conveyed not by a feminist claim, but by an emphasis on professionalism and secular social status.

Larisa Ivanovna, in her late forties, is a teacher in Rostov with a long professional career considered “excellent” by her colleagues, holding high position at the school, where she also teaches the “Foundations of Orthodox culture”. She had accomplished additional education in theology. While she was still a novice in Orthodoxy, she went on a pilgrimage to a famous distant monastery, where she made acquaintances with a young man, who turned out to be a priest, and his mother, who turned out to be school director. The pilgrimage had a tragic conclusion: on the way back the bus had an accident in which the priest died.

This tragic experience brought Larisa Ivanovna and the young priest's mother together. Soon after the accident L. Ivanovna moved to the school administered by the priest's mother, and this has been her work place since then. L. Ivanovna, as a graduate of the Theological University and author of numerous publications on Orthodox upbringing, enjoys great authority from the director and this is an additional fact that nourishes her self-assertion and relative independence. L. Ivanovna's self-confidence led her to a conflict unusual for an Orthodox believer. She was a person of great energy and power of persuasion – by becoming a believer she became a very active parishioner. She taught religion to children and established a parish “club of pedagogues”, attracting parishioners interested in religious upbringing. As an intellectual, she was responsible for the parish's “public image.” She wrote books and articles reporting on the parish activities and became a precious parishioner to the priest. Yet, they came into conflict when she refused to fulfil a minor service for the priest – making a copy of two pages. Behind the small conflict there was one of a higher stake: L. Ivanovna considered the insignificance of the request and its irrelevance to her competences as an infringement on her intellectual authority. The priest interpreted it as a refusal to accomplish his assignment of a task, that is, a blatant act of disobedience. As a result he “banished [her] from the parish”. She then moved to another one, and started to build her position from the beginning. At the time of fieldwork she was already very influential in this second parish community and was engaged in the Sunday school teaching both children and adults. However, she continued to meet with friends from the “club of pedagogues” of her previous parish. It is very unusual to come into an open conflict with the rector; an Orthodox parishioner has the obligation to obey the priest, regardless of his/her status in the parish and in the outside world. L. Ivanovna expected higher esteem from the priest and did not hesitate to refuse obedience when the priest's demand meant disregard for her intellectual status. This case attests to the distinctive impact of female teachers' high social status upon their relationship with priests. Disobedience was the teacher's protest against a priestly assignment that she felt was an insult to her secular authority. If the priest did exercise his ecclesiastical power by expelling the teacher, the latter retained authority in the eyes of the club members, evidence that her area of authority had become relatively autonomous from priestly control.

Finally, our third case illustrates what many of our informants emphasised: the contribution of their secular status to the building of their religious didactic authority. It also speaks of a relation between authority and agency. The promotion of Orthodox education in highly secular Russia requires from women to master the religious and secular grammars. Women transfer secular authority and skills to their religious commitment; they also struggle to convert their Orthodox fervour into secular agency. Assuring this double transferability was crucial for a woman with a high academic status who trained herself in Orthodox

obedience, distancing herself from secular morality. But learning religious obedience revealed insufficient for this woman who wanted to work for the expansion of Orthodox education. Religious obedience, while deeply lived as a virtue, may take on a particular importance in relation to teachers' authority and agency in the secular world.

Elena Antonovna from Rostov, born in 1953, is a senior academic in natural sciences with a successful career. She converted as a grown up person, in the early 1990s. Her devotion was so compelling that she abandoned her academic life and committed herself to reading the Scriptures. She devoted much energy to training herself in obedience, which helped her to "reconstruct", in her words, her relationships with her husband and her former and current boss, both men, earlier fraught with tensions. Now being obedient to "superiors" was not a problem to her anymore. When she met problems while upbringing her son she started exploring the methods of Orthodox upbringing. When she was going through the "period of neophytism" she became seriously ill and stopped working. However, the disability pension she received was meagre; she needed to find a job. She asked a priest to pray for her that she could know and follow God's will. When she was offered a position as a director of a Sunday school and was asked to lead the lectures for adults in another parish, she understood it as God's will. Because of her engagement in these jobs, E. Antonovna was deprived of her pension and faced the necessity to return to academic work. As in C. Béraud's (2007) case, the low-paid parish jobs usually occupied by lay women mean a precarious living. This was a challenging situation, since for the last ten years she had been reading only the Holy Scriptures and had given away half of her academic book collection, convinced that science was behind her. An unsettling event definitely persuaded E. Antonovna to return to active university life and combine it with her Orthodox devotion. As a Sunday school teacher she had collected materials for teaching children, which she had done in cooperation with a student, also a Sunday school teacher. E. Antonovna felt regret that "such good material can vanish" and decided to send what was already a manuscript to a contest for the best school textbook for teaching religion. Their manuscript won the first prize. This motivated her to publish the book, suitable also for state schools. Soon there was an academic conference on pedagogy where her student co-author presented the book. The presentation stimulated a lively discussion among the academic guests. One of the pedagogical experts was very critical about the religious bias obvious in this textbook designed for secular schools. The expert was, as E. Antonovna recounts, "an academic woman, a pedagogue and a great professor, but not baptised and an atheist. She's great and wise but very remote from this topic. And she started to attack my girl." E. Antonovna recalls that moment as decisive: she understood that she was the only person able to competently defend such material from possible attacks in secular academia. She understood the power she would have had as an academic authority in the secular world to defend her Orthodox position:

“I was sitting and thinking – well, if I was sitting in her [the secular pedagogical academic’s] place, I could have defended my girl. But, it was all my fault, it was me who distanced myself from academic life, I could blame only myself for not being active in science. And then I went to the priest [...] whom I consult on serious matters. – ‘Father, what will you say, should I return into active life or not?’, I said. – ‘Is it vanity? Perhaps it is pride that has awoken in me, or maybe even something else?’ He thought, and thought, and thought and then said: – ‘Someone has to do it after all.’ So he gave me his blessing. And this year I even published another book.”

E. Antonovna’s return to active academic life in order to better serve Orthodox education received the priest’s approval. The teacher’s obedience to the advice of the priest was one step toward her further engagement with secular science and religious education. E. Antonovna’s authority in Orthodox education was well established in Rostov. Moreover, E. Antonovna’s decision to return to scientific life from the position of an Orthodox believer and her active involvement in writing about Orthodox pedagogies brought her great recognition among the priests, especially those belonging to the educated elite. Engagement in secular academic life for the sake of E. Antonovna’s higher visibility and secular prestige was supported by the religious virtue of obedience to priestly blessing. In a context where the state has favoured the teaching of Orthodoxy but has left relatively open its practical introduction to secular schools, there are heated local fights which devout women pedagogues enter by continuing to carefully cultivate their academic status in order to reinforce their agency and authority of Orthodox pedagogues. Thus, their concept of agency differs from S. Mahmood’s (2005) “patient” religious agency of women fully embracing religious virtues at the expense of the secular. Instead, teachers’ agency in the secular sphere is religiously sanctioned; priestly blessing opens the way to secular engagements in a world of self-affirmation and competition. Orthodox priests are aware of the importance of this double transferability of women’s authority and agency.

Women reinvest the secular background of their didactic authority in religion, sanctioned by priestly blessing, thus remapping ROC’s gendered authority. This novel situation derives from the protracted influence of the Soviet concept of an intrinsic link between women and education. The Soviet and post-Soviet systems have enshrined this concept as a collective representation. No matter how low the material reward, how insecure the job, and how unthinkable an appointment to an ecclesiastical position, Orthodox education provides women with social and professional integration. Joining it is experienced as a professional and moral fulfilment. The recognition of women’s didactic authority by priests and the laity is neither triumphalist, nor controversial despite occasional conflicts with priests. This unprecedented establishment of didactic authority within Orthodoxy is post-Soviet Orthodox women’s unwitting *tour de force*. Women openly expect that priests and laity recognise their skills and social status not as women, but as professionals. Their didactic authority is largely contingent on priestly blessing. It does not challenge the masculine monopoly over priesthood. Neither does it sidestep traditional Orthodox male authority by claiming

the sacred. It follows a new pattern whereby secularity has come to permeate the Church, a process which, ironically, has revealed critical to ROC's revival. With Céline Béraud (2007) one can claim that "a silent revolution" is under way in Russian Orthodoxy, with education being probably but one area where it is taking place.

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## **Women Teachers of Religion in Russia Gendered Authority in the Orthodox Church**

*Everyday education in post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy relies on women's engagement. The didactic authority of women, which is recognised by clergy and laity learning religion, derives from a consensual acknowledgement of professionalism. This authority does not challenge the masculine monopoly over priesthood, but nonetheless is secularising the Church in a genuinely new way by bridging the fields of secular and religious education, and by drawing on secular arguments based on ideas of professionalism. Priestly authority, encapsulated in blessings and assignment of tasks, sanctions its establishment. Women teachers' secular social status creates diversity within this new model of religious authority.*

*Key words: Russian Orthodoxy, education, women, authority, gender.*

## **Les enseignantes en religion en Russie Une autorité de genre dans l'Église orthodoxe**

*L'éducation au quotidien dans l'orthodoxie russe post-soviétique repose sur l'engagement des femmes. L'autorité éducative des femmes, reconnue par le clergé et les laïcs qui s'initient à la religion, découle d'une reconnaissance consensuelle de leur professionnalisme. Cette autorité ne défie pas le monopole masculin sur la prêtrise mais sécularise néanmoins l'Église d'une manière totalement nouvelle en reliant les champs de l'éducation laïque et religieuse et en puisant dans des arguments laïcs de professionnalisme. L'autorité cléricale contenue dans la bénédiction et l'attribution de tâches conditionne son affirmation. Le statut social laïc des femmes enseignantes engendre de la diversité au sein de ce nouveau modèle d'autorité religieuse.*

*Mots-clés : orthodoxie russe, éducation, femmes, autorité, genre.*

## **Mujeres maestras de religion en Rusia Autoridad generizada en la Iglesia Ortodoxa**

*La educación cotidiana en la ortodoxia rusa postsoviética descansa sobre el compromiso de las mujeres. La autoridad didáctica de las mujeres, reconocida por el clero y los laicos que aprenden religión, surge de un reconocimiento consensual de su profesionalismo. Y si bien esta autoridad no desafía el monopolio masculino del sacerdocio, seculariza a la Iglesia de una manera completamente nueva, ligando los campos de la educación laica y religiosa y retomando los argumentos laicos del profesionalismo. La autoridad clerical contenida en la bendición y la atribución de tareas condiciona su afirmación. El estatuto social laico de las mujeres maestras genera diversidad al interior de este nuevo modelo de autoridad religiosa.*

*Palabras clave: ortodoxia rusa, educación, mujeres, autoridad, género.*