

The Embodied Mother of God and the Identities of Orthodox Women in Finland and Setoland

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze two contemporary local Eastern Orthodox contexts, Estonia and Finland, which are related and yet different. We are especially interested in how women negotiate with their Orthodox faith and, within it, the figure of the Mother of God. We are interested in the intersections of popular Mariology (both beliefs and practises), gender and ethnicity. We explore Marian interpretations among Finnish and Estonian Seto women because the Mother of God occupies a special role and meaning for women in both cultures. This meaning could be described as a simultaneous process of identification with Mary and differentiation from her. In this interplay, both Mary's gendered humanity and her ability for divine intervention are accentuated.

Keywords

Finland; Estonia; Setoland; Virgin Mary; women.

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the figure of the Mother of God. We are interested in the intersections of popular Mariology¹ (both beliefs and practises), gender and ethnicity. We explore Marian interpretations among Finnish and Estonian Seto women because the Mother of God occupies a special role and meaning for women in both cultures. This meaning could be described as a simultaneous process of identification with Mary and differentiation from her. In this interplay, both Mary's gendered humanity and her ability for divine intervention are accentuated.

The latter is theologically problematic in all Christian Churches, which emphasize Mary's humanity and depart from any understanding of Mary as divine. However, this line is difficult to maintain in such a clear-cut way, when other than purely theological dimensions are taken into account. For example, the Orthodox liturgy, prayers, icons, and legends are filled with an understanding of Mary as someone who comes to help through her intervention and miraculous power. In this article, we do not discuss Mary's ambivalent nature between humanity and divinity theologically, but rather concentrate on the ways ordinary Orthodox women reflect on this ambivalence or double-character of Mary as a central element of their faith.

The binaries of popular versus institutional, low versus high religion, have been questioned in the academic study of religion (see, for example Orsi 2002: xiv–xix). The term lived religion has been introduced instead, to reflect the entire reality of religion, in which there is also always an interplay between the institutional or doctrinal and the ordinary believers' interpretations of them.

What our two cases bring forward is a rich tradition of lived Orthodoxy centering on the Mother of God as interpreted by women. The Mother of God is firmly embodied and rooted in women's lives and bodily experiences. Thus, she serves as a mirror and object of Orthodox women's self-identification as religious women.

The two cases illuminate how women in two (Finno-Ugric) contexts, Finland and Setoland, shape Orthodox Mariology in the past and in the present. While there is also a prominent Russian-speaking Orthodox minority in both Finland and Estonia, our focus of interest in our joint research project² are ethnic minorities of Finno-Ugric background (Setos in Estonia, Karelians and Skolt Sami in Finland) and Orthodox Finns. The Skolt Sami as a religious and linguistic minority within the minority Sami people of Northern Scandinavia and as an ethnic and linguistic minority within the minority Orthodox Church make an interesting case of the interplay of ethnicity and religion, but this group will not be dealt with in this article.

Our objective is to introduce Finno-Ugric peoples living in Finland and Estonia as well as their specific interpretations of Orthodoxy in the academic discourse on Orthodoxy. Our cases bring forward examples of a lived religion in the

¹ By popular Mariology we mean local everyday theological interpretations about the Mother of God. We examine the local beliefs and heritage about the Mother of God, which have been formed in certain historical circumstances and contexts. Popular Mariology or popular theology is not as systemic and 'logical' as the corresponding academic disciplines and institutional teachings, but ordinary believers' theological thinking represents local knowledge and reflection of church dogma and practices.

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Orthodox context, often less studied than Western Christianity, especially with ethnographic methods. The perspective of lived religion is useful, when ordinary believers are studied, while keeping in mind that their views are in constant negotiation with official teachings and practises. Our cases confirm this in the specific context of women's relationship to the Mother of God. Further, our case studies discuss little known and understudied contexts – geographical, cultural, ethnic and religious – even within the lived religion approach.

Vuola conducted 62 interviews in 2013 and 2014 in different parts of Finland with Finnish Orthodox women on their relationship with the Mother of God. Their ages varied between those born in 1917 and in 1986. Of these, 26 were born and raised Orthodox, 17 were converts, mostly from the majority Lutheran Church. Indigenous Skolt Sami counted among 19 participants, all from the north-eastern part of Finland, and all cradle Orthodox.³ All the interviews were done in Finnish by Vuola.

In order to observe the dynamics of continuity and change, Kalkun analysed both religious folklore recorded mainly during 1920–1930 (held in the Estonian Folklore Archives) and material collected during fieldwork in 2014 and 2016, when thirty Seto women (born between 1921 and 1966) were interviewed in Seto by Kalkun. The majority of the informants lived in the northern Seto region on the Estonian side, some in the Seto areas that are presently Russian territory, and some in Estonian cities where they had emigrated during their youth. Among the informants there were some women whom Kalkun had previously interviewed on Seto secular and Church choirs, menstruation taboos, and subjects concerning Seto folklore and women's lives. The conversations were semi-structured interviews, sometimes requiring more than one visit.⁴

The Mother of God in Eastern Orthodox Tradition and Theology

The Mother of God (the Theotokos) occupies an important place in the Orthodox tradition. The written and oral but also visual and musical heritage related to the Mother of God constitutes a rich and multi-layered tradition with slightly varying focal points in different countries at different times. Studies on the Mother of God in Orthodox theology have been discursively framed as devotional rather than systematic. For Orthodox believers, the Mother of God is a powerful symbol of incarnation because she gave birth miraculously to God. Still, the Orthodox theology and piety emphasise the humanness of the Mother of God. The Mother of God is considered the intercessor on behalf of all Christians, she is seen as the mother of all people, who helps, protects and mediates prayers to God. The Orthodox Church emphasises her human qualities which render Mary easily accessible for her believers and are associated with popular views of Mary as mother and intercessor (Cunningham 2015).

³ The Skolt Sami have been Orthodox since the 16th century, unlike the rest of the Sami indigenous people in Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish Lapland, who were converted to Lutheranism. In this article, the Skolt Sami are not dealt with.

⁴ In this article, all the names of those interviewed are changed into pseudonyms, and all translations from Finnish (Vuola) and Seto (Kalkun) into English are ours.

The Orthodox tradition related to the Mother of God is in general more associated with oral Church heritage and practises, which have varied in different regions at different times, than with Scripture. Marian texts and Mariology consist to a very small extent of the Scriptures and considerably more of piety literature, writings of the holy fathers, the poetics of church singing, and iconographic theology.

According to Orthodox tradition, the Mother of God had a fully human nature and thus experienced human life and death. While the Mother of God is considered the chosen one and without sin, she was not radically different from ordinary humans. In order to highlight the full humanity of the Mother of God, Orthodox theologians emphasise Mary's actual death before she was assumed into heaven (the Dormition). The Orthodox Church venerates Mary as a human being who has attained true purity and sanctification in the course of her life. She is thus a model of *theosis*, deification.

The Mother of God is generally viewed in the Orthodox tradition as a model for all humans to follow, both women and men (Behr-Sigel 1991: 208–209; Evdokimov 1994). Some Orthodox theologians have highlighted the *feminine* nature of the Mother of God and femininity as the basic structure of humanity (Behr-Sigel 1991: 212). Other Orthodox theologians have approached the femininity of the Mother of God in very narrow terms (femininity as acceptance, sensitivity and certain desire to nurture) and have contrasted it to secular feminism (for example, Evdokimov 1994).

Feminist Critique of Mariology

Because of Mary's central place in Christianity and her being the most important female figure in it, she has been an object of interest for gender theorists, both secular and religious. Most of the religious-theological feminist critique of traditional Mariology is written by Catholics, due to the central place of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church and, possibly, because of a more intimate link between Mary and other women upheld in Catholicism.

In common sense but also in the feminist critique, Mary is an impossible model of identification and ideal for all women who cannot simultaneously be physically virgins and mothers: she is exceptional exactly in those areas where women most concretely differ from men, women's ability to become pregnant and give birth. The perfection assigned to Mary is thus presented in opposition to female embodiment and bodiliness.

This is why the feminist theological critique of Mary has concentrated on her as an impossible ideal for women – Mary as the great exception of womanhood. According to the feminist critique, this combined with Mary being presented as the model of submission and the juxtaposition of her with the sinful Eve, makes the traditional image of Mary highly problematic for ordinary women.⁵

⁵ We are well aware of feminist (theological) constructive work on the figure of Mary, including Vuola herself, but we do not discuss that work here for two broad reasons. First, none of them deals with the Orthodox tradition, in which the role of Mary and the theology concerning her is different from Western Christianity. Second, none of those works is ethnographic. We emphasize the importance of looking at local, gendered

We argue, however, that in the popular piety of ordinary faithful women, Mary's exemplary nature gains more nuance, body-affirming characteristics and culture-specific elements. In spite of the sexism of the tradition, women in different contexts have Marian interpretations of their own, which stem from their embodied experiences as women, which they see reflected in and affirmed by the Mother of God.

It is difficult to find feminist interpretations of Mary in the Orthodox tradition. Thus, there is a gap between women's interpretations of their tradition and academic theology. The meagerness or outright lack of feminist theology in Orthodox theology is significant. It is mostly representatives of male clergy who write on topics related to women, gender, sexuality, and family (for example, Farley 2012; Seppälä 2013), confirming the teachings of the tradition and with little critical distance to sexist elements in it. There are some Orthodox women who write explicitly from women's perspectives, even when they do not necessarily call their work feminist, such as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Valerie A. Karras (see Behr-Sigel 1991; Behr-Sigel and Ware 2000; Karras 2002, 2006).⁶

Behr-Sigel writes that Mary is beyond her gender. Mary's gender is significant in that she enhances the value of her own gender and grants it a deep theological significance. Mary, a woman, and her gender are set as the model and measure for humanity. Mary's motherhood and status have thus more weight in the Orthodox tradition, in comparison to Protestant Churches (Behr-Sigel 1991: 181–216).

We are interested in how religious women interpret church traditions, dogmas and theology in their daily life and in relationship to their concrete and bodily experiences as women. For that purpose we adopt the concept *lived religion* (see, for example Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2002; Primiano 1995), according to which there are similarities in the religious life of educated and uneducated people, of those who work at religious institutions and ordinary believers, and there is no reason to label one as popular and the other as institutional. Research into lived religion focuses on the daily practises of religious people and is not about making a sharp distinction between magical and religious phenomena or theologically reasoned and less known local interpretations. For our informants, the Mother of God represents a real and daily presence (see Orsi 2002, 2016), and therefore their religion is living and dialogical, while also including ritual and habitual religious practises (see Kupari 2016).

Because of the meagerness of feminist reflection in the Orthodox tradition, it is possible to gain more insight into Orthodox women's self-understanding and theological reflection through ethnography. In a country like Finland, ordinary believers, including women, are well educated and informed of their Church's teachings. Some of the Finnish informants had even studied theology. Even when they cannot be ordained or they do not have positions in academic theology,

interpretations as they are expressed by Orthodox women, and from there, discuss theology, not the other way around.

⁶ *The St. Nina Quarterly* is a journal 'for and by Eastern Orthodox Women and other interested people, published by the Women's Orthodox Ministries & Education Network (WOMEN), an international organization dedicated to exploring, celebrating, and cultivating the rich and diverse gifts of women and men in the Orthodox Church.' See <http://www.stnina.org>.

their reflections on Orthodox Mariology are theologically well informed. In that sense, they can and should be taken as representatives of not only 'ordinary, lay women' but also as theological thinkers. The Seto women, for their part, represent a less theologically informed lived religion, which however is not inseparable from the ways the Orthodox tradition has been presented, preserved and interpreted among believers.

Our Two Contexts: Finland and Setoland of Estonia

While Setos and Finns are geographically rather closely related Finno-Ugric speaking peoples, the two cultures reflect substantial differences for historical reasons. Today, the linguistically closely related Finns and Setos live in different countries surrounding the Baltic Sea (Figure 1). In addition to the ancient linguistic roots, the Finnish people and Setos, who live in Estonia, also share a common history as subjects of Imperial Russia, from which both countries achieved



Figure 1: Aivo Pölluäär.

independence at the beginning of the 20th century. Both cultures demonstrate that religious people engage in dialogue with 'official' theology and actively contemplate on the tradition related to the Mother of God and its adaptations. In both contexts, Orthodox liturgy was long practised in a foreign language (Church Slavonic), not the vernacular, which means that people have had to actively translate and interpret what they have heard in church.

Historically, both Orthodox populations have suffered from the changing national borders with Russia (the former Soviet Union), resulting in evacuation, loss of land and villages, and the renegotiations of identity in new circumstances. The contemporary border between Estonia and Russia, as well as between Finland and Russia, is still today a painful border of loss, memory and trauma, with the Orthodox faith giving it a specific aspect.

The Finnish Orthodox Church is an autonomous Orthodox archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. With its roots in the medieval Novgorodian missionary work in Karelia, the Finnish Orthodox Church was a part of the Russian Orthodox Church until 1923. Finland belonged to Russia between 1809 and 1917.

Parts of the South-Eastern region of Karelia, the traditional cradle of the Orthodox faith, were lost to the Soviet Union in the Second World War. A minor part still today belongs to Finland. Two-thirds of the Orthodox population in the area was evacuated into other parts of Finland. Also the indigenous Skolt Sami, a small population under 1000 people today, Orthodox by religion, were evacuated and relocated in North-Eastern Finland after the region were they had lived for centuries was ceded to Soviet Union after the war. Like in many other areas between competing superpowers, the borders of Finland have been constantly changing over the centuries and the region has formally belonged both to the West (Sweden) and the East (Russia), while at the same time having been able to maintain its distinct culture and language.

Today the Finnish Orthodox Church has about 60,000 members that account for 1.1 percent of the population of Finland. Until at least the 1960s, the public image of the Orthodox Church in the predominantly Lutheran Finland was stereotypical and even openly negative: 'the Church of the Russians' points to both Russophobia and a view of Orthodox Christians as 'image worshippers'. Today, the tide has been almost reversed: there are more and more Lutheran converts to the Orthodox Church, often considered as more sensual and embodied than the word-centered Lutheranism. In a short time, the Orthodox Church has thus changed from the despised Other to the favorite Other in the Finnish cultural and religious landscape.

The Setos are a people speaking a Finno-Ugric language,⁷ and their area of settlement has been part of the Republic of Estonia since 1919. Today, Setos form a well-integrated minority known for their rich cultural heritage and unique Orthodox traditions. For example, the singing tradition (*leelo*) is included in the

⁷ In 2002, the Seto Council of Elders declared Setos as a separate people. In Estonia, there is a tendency to interpret the Setos as a segment of Estonians. Russia recognises Setos as an ethnic minority and, for example, unlike Estonian censuses, Russian censuses give Setos an option to identify themselves as Seto by ethnicity. Similarly, the Seto language has been generally viewed as a special variety of the South-Estonian dialect. Today, however, even Estonian linguists agree that Seto is a language, not a dialect. The Setos themselves regard it as a separate language.



Figure 2: An important part of Setos' daily Orthodox practices was venerating ancestors and various rituals connected with commemorating the dead. Seto women in traditional clothing have laid out a commemoration meal on a grave in the Petseri graveyard. Photograph by Vilhelmine Säägi, 1940. Estonian Folklore Archives (ERA, Foto 1702).

UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. While it is commonly believed that there was some contact with the Orthodox mission before the Estonian territory was Christianised by Catholic religious orders in the 13th century, the rest of Estonia was then under the influence of the Western Church – first Catholic, later Lutheran. At the present moment, only one-fifth of the Estonian population are Orthodox Christians. Estonians make up only 12% of this. The Seto are included in this figure (see Eek 2015: 9).⁸

With their long Orthodox traditions, Setos occupy a rare and unique place in the context of Estonian Orthodoxy – and even within Eastern Orthodoxy more broadly. The current Seto settlement area, the Setoland (*Setomaa*), on both sides of the border of Estonia and Russia, has been under the influence of the Orthodox Church since Russia was Christianised in 988. In 1473, a monastery was founded in Petseri (Pechory), the so-called Seto capital (see Piho 2011; Plaata 2011a, b). The monastery has influenced the Setos' religious life since then. Orthodox services in Seto churches were held in Church Slavonic until the 1920s, and Setos' Russian-language skills were considered highly inadequate. This is why the Seto religion has acquired several unique features. Religion has set Setos apart from linguistically close Lutheran South-Estonians, and language has set them apart from religiously close Russians. Nowadays, the Setos who live in the Russian Federation belong under the Moscow Patriarchate and the Setos who live in Estonia under the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

⁸ As of the 2011 Estonian census, there are about 12,800 people who understand the Seto language. About 4,000 of them live in the Estonian part of Setomaa, about 8,500 elsewhere in Estonia, and about 300 in Russia (Setomaa 2014).

In a patriarchal Seto family, the secularisation and modernisation processes of the early 20th century reached women later than men, as women were living in the confines of their homes for long periods of time, including limitations of communication and movement imposed on married women and post-labour taboos. Women thus remained the safe keepers and developers of the Seto singing tradition and continued to wear traditional clothes (Figure 2). The same applied to religious practises throughout the entire 20th century: Seto women have been more active church-goers and have observed religious traditions more strictly than men. Although Orthodox Christianity has been far more confining towards women than it has been towards men, including restrictions of women's access to the sacred space because of their supposed impurity during menstruation and after childbirth, Seto women have accepted those religious practises, while seeming to disregard their misogynist implications (Kalkun 2007, 2015).

The Mother of God in Setoland

In Seto tradition, especially in women's tradition, the Mother of God plays a highly significant role. Mary – Pühä Maarja, as Setos call her – is associated with important Seto legends, for example the origin of the most important monastery in the area, Petseri, and the boundaries of the Seto region. The tradition localised to the Petseri monastery has clearly served the function of strengthening Setos' ethnic identity, which emphasises the Seto people as being the chosen one by the Mother of God. Seto women have also known narratives about the relations between the female body and the Mother of God that are not known elsewhere.

The Mother of God appears already in Seto lyroepic songs⁹ which are regarded as highly archaic. According to the interviews with contemporary religious Seto women, many women are still knowledgeable of the old narratives related to the Mother of God. Contemporary Seto women still send their most secret prayers to the Mother of God and kiss the Theotokos icons found in homes, churches and monasteries. Sometimes conventional Orthodox traditions are followed, sometimes local, and sometimes the practises are also given new and individual meanings.

In a way, the emphasis on the atheist education and non-religious upbringing during the Soviet period has helped to preserve the early 20th-century situation when Setos could neither understand the language spoken at church nor were able to read the Bible. The women interviewed were in general not particularly informed about the official views of the Orthodox Church, nor did they read religious literature. Many informants were aware of their different faith and 'lack of knowledge' and suggested talking to a priest or checking the Bible for the 'right' answer.

⁹ The earlier Seto singing tradition shares similarities (in metrics, poetics, etc.) with that of Estonians, Finnish, Karelians and Ingrians. It has been argued that the plots of the earlier Seto singing tradition with Christian personifications are older than Christianity in the region – i.e. the persons present in the songs have been Christianised. The same can be observed in Finnish-Karelian singing and poetry tradition, in which the Virgin Mary is not only a central character, but she also represents elements from both Christianity and pre-Christian beliefs. See, e.g. Timonen 1994 and Vuola 2011.

The early 20th-century narratives about the Mother of God have undergone certain transformation, but recognisable motives from the old tradition were still present in the interviews. Wearing traditional Seto clothes daily was widely common in the early 20th century, and the narratives claimed that the Mother of God wore the same kind of headdress and clothes as Seto women did, not like the 'whores' skirts' of Estonians and Russians (Hurt 1903; Raasakõisi 2013). In the 1920s, when the younger generation wore traditional clothing only on festive occasions, the narratives cautioned that when Setos stop wearing the clothes, the world would end. In the present day, Seto clothes are worn mainly by folklore groups (Figure 5). However, contemporary informants said that a woman has to cover her head in church in order to follow the example of the Mother of God, represented in the icons with her head covered. The narrative about the link between the end of the world and wearing Seto clothes has also changed in time. When people had no clothes for their children during the destitute post-war period, the mother of one of the informants had had a dream that the world will end when there are plenty of clothes available but nobody needs them. She was certain that this time has arrived (Alli, b. 1928, 7 August 2014).

With the changes of state borders and means of transportation in the 20th century, the religious geography of the Setos has transformed. The Theotokos icons of some churches, chapels and monasteries are not as accessible as they used to be. Today, the time needed for travelling is much shorter and people can visit different churches with less effort. The Petseri monastery with its various miracle-working Mother of God icons, though located on the Russian side



Figure 3: Participants in the cross procession held on the Feast of the Assumption are returning to the Petseri Monastery. A Seto woman is preparing to walk through under miracle-working icons of the Mother of God. In the forefront is the Hodegetria icon (She Who Knows the Way), behind it the Eleousa (Tenderness), and the last one is the Dormition of the Mother of God icon, which is the most valuable treasure of the Petseri Monastery. Photograph by Vilhelmine Säägi, 1939. Estonian Folklore Archives (ERA, foto 1742).

of the Estonian-Russian border, has remained the most important sacred site in terms of Seto Marian piety (Figure 3). The narratives about the Mother of God connected with Petseri have remained in use also on the Estonian side of the border.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Dormition of the Mother of God icon in Petseri was called the Old St. Mary, whereas the icons of other churches were called her daughters or sisters. Still today, the Mother of God is highly localised for Seto women. For each religious woman, icons of the Mother of God in different churches and homes form a kind of a social circle – with some icons the relationship is closer and more personal, with others it is more formal.

One of the characteristic features of the Seto Marian tradition is bringing the Mother of God closer in time and space. The legends tell that the Mother of God was living and acting in the Seto region, as she used to hold services in the caves of which the Petseri monastery was later formed and sit on local stones. Because of her being located specifically in the monastery, the Mother of God has also assumed guardianship over the Seto region surrounding the monastery. In several legends, Mary appears dressed in the traditional clothes of Seto women and speaks the Seto language variety. Both of these elements emphasise the bond between her and the Seto people: she, in a way, is a Seto. In early 20th-century folklore, Mary, wearing traditional Seto clothes, appears in battle and advises (usually) Russian troops on how to escape the enemy's attacks.

For the contemporary women interviewed, the Mother of God was both sacred and very homely and friend-like. One of the reasons given for this personal closeness is her speaking the Seto language or wearing 'our' clothes. Liidi's (b. 1933) mother had dreamed about the Mother of God who, clad in Seto clothes, spoke 'in a high voice' in Seto language, on more than one occasion. When Liidi's mother had once forgotten a St. Mary's feast day and slept in, she heard through her sleep a woman with a high voice asking in Seto language in a very casual manner: 'Aren't you coming to see me today?' At once, the mother realised that this was St. Mary, upon which she got up from the bed, tended the animals and rushed to the church. Seto women believe that the Mother of God is kind, she is always there, waiting for even those who are late.

You can be late to church. It is good to get there while they are reading the Gospel. Saint Mary says that you may even come on the final hour¹⁰, I will still be waiting for you. When the bell is rung, Saint Mary invites everyone to come to church. (Liidi, b. 1933, 2 July 2013)

An important part of the Dormition of the Mother of God feast day at the end of August for the Setos was, and still is, to visit the Petseri monastery and take part in the procession around the monastery (Figure 4). Nowadays there is also a folklore festival held on the day following the feast. Thus, Setos have several reasons to visit Petseri each year. When the women interviewed spoke about going to the Dormition feast day, they said that one should 'go see St. Mary'.

¹⁰ This is clearly a paraphrase of the Bible, although the words of wisdom are here attributed to the Mother of God. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20: 1–16), in which the master gives the workers who arrive last the same amount of pay as those who come first.



Figure 4: It is women's task and responsibility to lay down a flower carpet along which the miracle-working Dormition of the Mother of God is taken on a cross procession around the monastery on the eve of the Dormition of the Mother of God. August 2012, Petseri. Photo: Elina Vuola.

The major religious festival was spoken about as if it was an intimate visit to a friend.

The Mother of God who appears in the dreams of Seto women resembles an ordinary Seto woman. In addition to the similarities in language and appearance, the Mother of God also possesses other, very mundane physical qualities. For example, the Mother of God may feel cold or appear in dirty clothes (because those who clean their floors on St. Mary's feast day taint her clothes with their floor washing water). A bed-ridden informant Mari (b. 1921, 17 July

2014) had been thinking about taking some icon scarves, which she had woven, to church; but she had not come round to doing it. When the Mother of God appeared to her in a dream telling that she was feeling cold, Mari understood that this was a sign that she must quickly fulfil her promise.

In earlier Seto folklore, the traces of which can be found in the narratives of contemporary women, women's bodily identification with the Mother of God was taken even further. Women believed that the Mother of God was the first woman to have menstruation and that she also helps women in childbirth because she herself suffered a very painful labour.¹¹ The following quotations are from archival material, collected in 1938.

St. Mary was the first to have a period, even when no other woman had had it. St. Mary went to the sauna and told women not to look at her. But the women could not resist and looked at her. Then St. Mary said – doesn't matter, let you have it too then! (ERA II 194, 64475 (20) Odo Ilusaar, b. 1849 (1938))

Giving birth is more difficult to some women than it is to others. There are three types of women: those like St. Mary have the most difficult childbirth, those like a horse have an easier one. Women who are like bitches have the easiest childbirth. (ERA II 194, 444 (18) Oga Ambo, b. 1869 (1938))

That menstruation was associated with the Mother of God is probably related to the fact that contemporary interviewees were aware of the Orthodox tradition according to which a woman during her period is not allowed to participate in sacred rituals, take communion, commemorate the dead, kiss the icon, light a candle in front of it, or, in more radical cases, was even banned from going to church. Thus, an old church custom has been given a local interpretation, and an ancient Orthodox taboo has merged with a local Marian representation in accordance with women's own experience of their bodies and bodily realities.

Not accepting Church laws without question, some Seto women have actively proposed alternative explanations to them. When the women were asked why they believed the Orthodox tradition has prohibited women from attending liturgy during their period, one informant, Klara (b. 1941, 04 July 2016), speculated that perhaps the reason is that at Eucharist the wine transforms into the blood of Christ and it would be inappropriate if there was also women's menstrual blood together with the blood of Christ in the church.

A theme that appears already in the earlier singing tradition, is the Mother of God appearing during childbirth to help women in labour. These songs were sung when the village women came to see the young mother and her new-born child. In the songs the woman in labour sends her husband, or goes herself, to summon the Mother of God (and Jesus). The Mother of God appears with her tools or sends her servants or daughters, and the childbirth is safe and successful. Similar motifs of calling the Mother of God to help can be found in

¹¹ Orthodox theology emphasises the humanness of the Mother of God, but her childbirth is nevertheless considered painless. In the teachings of Church Fathers (for example, Gregory of Nyssa 1999: 158), the Mother of God is presented in opposition to Eve with her painless virgin birth from no prior sexual engagement. The Theotokos thus triumphs over Eve's punishment of giving birth with pain (Genesis 3:16). The opposition between Mary and Eve has been one of the central elements in the feminist theological critique of classical Mariology of both East and West.

spells used during childbirth. In Karelia, the region between Finland and Russia (Keinänen 2003: 122–127).

St. Mary is the icon of women, St. Nicholas is the icon of boys. St. Nicholas has a grey beard, but St. Mary has a child in her arms and a scarf on her head. When a woman is in labour and the child is not coming, they pray: 'St. Mary, come with your woollen whisk, yarn broom and warm water, come help me with your grace!' (ERA II 301, 297/8 (168), Ann Tuulik (1942))

Saint Mary is everyone's, not just women's. But she helps during childbirth. Childbirth is difficult and Saint Mary helps. My mother gave birth to her children at home, only the last two in Petseri. An old woman from the next house helped her to deliver. (Liidi, b. 1933, 15 July 2015)

In Liidi's comment, the standard Orthodox understanding of Mary being a model to follow for both men and women, and a specifically gendered, lived interpretation of Mary as another woman, come together.

Contemporary Seto women were aware of this tradition of the Mother of God helping women specifically in issues related to women's everyday lives. Women often had a very special relationship with Mary concerning some prayer or wish that she granted or some very personal issue that the Mother of God had helped to solve. One informant, who believed that praying to the Mother of God had once helped her to abstain from alcohol, explained in a highly typical manner why it is easier to address the Mother of God than her son. Again, in the contemporary view, motifs from ancient legends have merged with personal experience – thus, an example of what we call lived religion:

I pray every morning and evening to the best of my understanding. I also ask Saint Mary: 'Mother of Christ, help us, protect us and save us and ask your son, Christ the God, that he would forgive my sins and give me eyesight.' I do tell my problems to Saint Mary. Saint Mary is the first you should pray to. I read from somewhere that there was a war and Christ's mother waved with her shawl and the war ended. You must pray to Christ's mother so she would pray to her son. We are too sinful to use Christ's name all the time. Then we pray through Christ's mother. I can't bow to the ground because my knees are weak. I pray every morning for my children, house, home, and health. After I was saved from drinking I swore to God that I would be going to church as long as I can walk. Even if I'm no longer good to sing, I shall attend. (Anni, b. 1931, 19 July 2014)

The God-Bearer in Contemporary Finland

In consequence of her earlier research among Catholic women (Vuola 2006, 2009, 2011), Vuola was interested in learning about contemporary Finnish Orthodox women's relationship to the Mother of God, as it is related to their self-understanding as women and their theological interpretations, especially on gender-related issues in the Church. Because of the importance of the Mother of God in the Orthodox tradition in general, and, more particularly, in the understanding of the human being, it is not without relevance that she is a woman. Asking women about her meaning accentuates her gender in a different way than does the Mariological tradition of the Orthodox Church, by and large created by male clergy. The embodied God-Bearer, familiar and important to women in both the Catholic and Orthodox Church, makes visible a neglected



Figure 5: Seto women no longer wear traditional clothes on a daily basis, but they wear these during festivities. A choir of resettled Setos, active in Tallinn, visiting a festival organised on the Dormition of the Mother of God in the village of Radaja, near Petseri, in 2012. Photo: Elina Vuola.

aspect of women's gendered faith and religious practises as it is attached to and interpreted through the figure of Mary.

It is important to take into account the theological reflection of informants who come from a tradition such as Orthodoxy, in which theology plays a crucial role in the understanding of the Church (ecclesiology), the human being (theological anthropology), and the Mother of God (Mariology). This theology is thoroughly gendered. As was said earlier, those active in the church are usually very knowledgeable of its official teachings. Thus, when interpreting their views, it is important to keep in mind that lay people, including women, always negotiate with those teachings and reflect their lived experiences in relation to the tradition and the authoritative practises of the Church. In this sense, ordinary people are theological agents and subjects whose interpretations, even non-normative ones, are based on intellectual, spiritual and embodied reflection which should not be considered in a binary opposition to the institution and its teachings. Their voices can be best reached through ethnography.

In Finland, motherhood and sexuality are the two themes which came up most often in the interviews. In these cases, Mary *de facto* functions as a reflecting mirror of women's experiences. They are related to how women perceive the Church and its teachings on women. This mirroring is both about identification and differentiation – in the first case, the women interviewed identified themselves with the Virgin Mary as another woman and mother. In the latter case, they saw Mary as different from ordinary women – and this being the

reason, not the obstacle, for and the source of her empowering and protective meaning.

Almost without exception, at some point during the interview, the women started to talk about issues of gender hierarchy, sexism and women's position in the Church – with a variety of opinions and positions on these issues. Asking and talking about Mary, rather than about women's roles, opened up the entire spectrum of issues in women's lives – relationships, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and spirituality – not always, but often, reflected through the meaning of Mary for women and the broader theological framework in which Orthodox Mariology is presented.

Mary as Women's Shield

One of the informants summarized well a view of Mary which came up in many interviews and which is also in line with the long tradition of the protective role of Mary. According to Helen,

But Mary protects women, she is good to women. She is a compassionate mother. She is like a shield between me and the patriarchal world, the church too. That's how I experience her. She is women's shield. (Helen, b. 1960, 21 July 2013)

The understanding of Mary as protectress of humankind is central in both Eastern and Western Mariology. There are many visual traditions depicting this, for example the Mary of the Protecting Mantle (in Western art) and the icon of the Protection of the Theotokos and the concomitant feast of Pokrova (in the Eastern tradition). Helen joins this old tradition but gives it a specific gendered meaning: the Mother of God protects women especially or in special ways (Figure 6). Interestingly, Helen also offers an explicitly feminist interpretation of Mary's protection: she protects women from being downplayed in the society and the Church.

Tina – the only converted person quoted here – expressed Mary's protection in a more quotidian way:

I have icons of the Mother of God, she has pretty much taken over my home in that sense [...] When I enter my house, there is an icon of the Mother of God on the opposite wall. I cross myself when I enter, and when I leave home, my last prayer there is always crossing myself, bowing to the Mother of God, and asking her to take care of my home while I am gone. So, yes, she lives there. The relationship is sort of practical. (Tina, b. 1958, 14 October 2013)

Tina also expressed something that is related to icons and their meaning, which Shevzov (2007) calls iconic piety. In front of an icon, there is no need for words. Rather, it is a material, bodily, spiritual relationship that matters.

I was thinking about bodiliness, it is something that makes everything easy in Orthodoxy. In the state of tiredness, I just stand in front of an icon of the Mother of God. I may cross myself or bow, likely both, but I don't have to have any words. [...] I just rest there. (Tina, b. 1958, 14 October 2013)

Amy (born 1976) came to our appointment at my office at the University of Helsinki. After greeting me, she took a copy of the icon of the Mother of God of Valaam (Valamo in Finnish) from her bag and placed it on the small table between



Figure 6: Orthodox women during a procession in Hoilola, South-Eastern Finland, which included rowing by boat to an old forest cemetery. August 2015. Photo: Elina Vuola.

us. It was there during the entire interview. She told me how she and her husband had been suffering from infertility. They had gone to the New Monastery of Valaam in Heinävesi, where the icon is located, and prayed together in front of it, having heard of miracles especially in cases of infertility. They now have two children. When the first one was born, Amy's brother-in-law had brought this copy of the icon to the hospital, and ever since it has been on their bedroom wall.

Me and my husband wanted to have a child, but when nothing happened, we visited Valaam monastery and prayed in front of this icon [Mother of God of Valaam] [...] we experienced a kind of response to our prayers. We just recently visited Valaam with our family and we told our children about this. My brother-in-law brought this icon to the hospital when our daughter was born, and now it is on our bedroom wall. (Amy, b. 1976, 8 July 2013)

Amy's story is one personal account of the age-old and cross-cultural vision of Mary as someone who helps especially in situations of infertility, pregnancy and childbirth. The miraculous icons of Mary are well-known among the Orthodox in Finland, but they are not often talked about with such intimacy as Amy did.

Mary's and Women's Body

As we saw in the Seto case and above, women tend to identify with the Mother of God in concrete bodily ways through which they can seek out Mary's help and



Figure 7: An elderly woman decorating the icon of the Mother of God of Valaam in her local *tsasouna*, village chapel, in Kovero, 2014. Photo: Elina Vuola.

understanding, which are based on her own female bodiliness. It is especially at the time of giving birth, when Mary's protection is sought out: she herself gave birth (identification) but she also has power to protect in a life-threatening and difficult situation (differentiation). Both are based on women's trust in Mary's understanding, in being a woman and mother herself. This aspect of women's Marian piety came up in several interviews.

However, as in Setoland, also Finnish women discussed the purity regulations of the Church as well as Mary's virginity and its meaning – both theologically and more practically, in relation to their own experiences as sexual beings. For example, on the virginity of Mary, Ann commented,

In the Orthodox liturgy we have a completely male priesthood who then sing about the Virgin Mary, the eternal virgin [...] I start to think about the inner life of those monks and church fathers. They have, like some thousand years ago in their cells, been thinking about it, denied women and female company in their lives, and it all came together in this, the virginity [...] Like, I have given birth to three children – well, if she was virgin throughout the process, where did Jesus come from? Through her stomach? Or, what is meant by virginity? It is [searches for the word] the ambiguity, the contradiction – controversiality is maybe what I mean. (Ann, b. 1976, 23 January 2014)

Ann and Helen, quoted above, 16 years apart in age, also both interpreted the circumstances of the birth of Jesus and Mary's pregnancy from a point of view which emphasized Mary's closeness to women and not something against them. According to Ann,

She [the Virgin Mary] is maybe like a model for me – when I have thought about my own womanhood and my own choices [...] at some point, I got really pissed off with the image of the Virgin Mary, oh yeah well, is that then how we women should be? Always kind, patient, eternal virgin, no physical desires and like that [...] like the holy mother that she has been amputated to. But, then really, historically [...] what she did and what were her choices [...]. She must have taken a lot of shit, in the society of her time. Young girl, teenage mother. Unwed mother. [...] Doesn't it make the whole story somehow even greater if Jesus was conceived in like really wretched circumstances? (Ann, b. 1976, 23 January 2014)

And, Helen:

I think she [Mary] was made pregnant and the pregnancy was hidden, it was an illegitimate pregnancy. So I don't believe in the virgin birth, that much scientific is my world view.

EV: Does it mean something in your relationship to the Mother of God?

No, it does not mean anything to me. She is not less holy or more holy because of that, quite the contrary – it makes it even easier to identify with her. [...] It is a very radical thought that an unmarried woman without a man/husband gives birth to a new king. I think the whole story would collapse if Mary had been married. It must be like this. (Helen, b. 1960, 21 July 2013)

The Orthodox Church maintains certain gendered practises of purity, most importantly the idea of the uncleanness of a woman after childbirth and while menstruating, as has been mentioned earlier. The ways women negotiate with these practises came up in both our contexts. By and large, when the issue came up in the Finnish context, it was not taken up by the oldest generation but mostly the middle generation who probably grew up with these teachings, but who also broke with them in their own lives. The issue did not surface at all among the youngest generation.

According to Cathy, when asked if she is familiar with the purity regulations, replied:

Well, they are in a way in your sub-consciousness, because they live in those prayers. Like when I had my last child, in 1992, I remember going to the church a week after the baby was born, and thinking that maybe I can go. I did, but it crossed my mind.

EV: Where did you learn it?

I guess from those prayers. [...] I think it is the prayers, not people – everybody knows if you are still bleeding. It is like from the times before good sanitary towels. (Cathy, b. 1955, 12 May 2014)

Lena, when asked if she had learned any of these regulations, answered:

Well, I did church [*kirkottaa*] my baby, but then I did not think about it. Someone else brought the baby to the church because the mother was still bleeding. I know the regulations, but I never [...] I go to the church when I want to. Is it then better not to go...?

EV: Did I understand you right – you followed the custom but you thought that you could go if you wanted to?

Yes, if I want to go to church, I am not staying at home because of that. [...] Like when we think that it is a woman's task to give birth, why would it then become something evil when you do it and life goes on? (Lena, b. 1959, 14 May 2014)

In the last sentence, Lena uses the traditional view (of all Christian Churches) of motherhood as a woman's main and most important role against another long-held view of a woman's body as polluted and impure and thus unsuitable for occupying sacred spaces. Her way of thinking is a good example of how women use the tradition for 'their own ends', but also of how women's lived experience can reveal inherent contradictions in the tradition: a woman's ability to become a mother is biologically tied to her bodily functions such as menstruation – you can't celebrate only one part and demonize the other.

Women in the Church

Helen took up the issue of gender discrimination several times during the interview. For example:

I don't understand the exclusion of women and gays from the priesthood, for me it is [...] a human rights violation and discrimination, forbidden by the Finnish law. I simply don't understand it. [...] Right now I am in a calmer situation concerning the church. At some point I felt that I will go and shut the door loudly behind me, and leave the church. That I come out 'from the closet' and tell everyone that there are feminists in the Orthodox Church who can't stand it. [...] I will probably always belong to the Church – and then Mary is someone I will always explore, in literature and so on. She is such an interesting figure. I am interested in her as an archetype. Of all the churchly figures she is the closest to me. (Helen, b. 1960, 21 July 2013)

Generally, on the relationship between Mary, women and the Church, Cathy expressed well the central place that Mary has in the Orthodox Church and how that is related to women's self-esteem and identity:

The Mother of God is important for women's position in the Church. It is difficult to say how, but it is something empowering, also for us as women. If you want like a comment on why women can't be priests because we have Mary [...] it is a quite distant thought for me, like we could get some compensation. But the Virgin Mary is the holiest of all [*Panagia*], she is a woman and she is the most holy person. (Cathy, b. 1955, 12 May 2014)

Similarly, Emily said,

In all situations of life, be they happy or sad, we always find the mirror in the Virgin Mary. [...] For example, when you are singing about Mary's pain when she sees her son on the cross, the church offers you the possibility to cry over all your own sorrows. The icon *Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow* – all you need is just cast your thoughts to it [...] Because you can cast all the sorrows of the world, of women and families, onto her, so that you don't have to carry them in yourself. (Emily, b. 1950, 14 February 2014)

Here, too, it is possible to detect the interplay of both-and: Mary both as myself, a human woman, and as a divine powerful figure. By and large, the women interviewed stressed the importance of Mary for Orthodox women also *qua*

women in the Church. Some of them pointed out the contradiction between the centrality of Mary and the marginalization of women. Most – but not all – of them did not link women's position and roles in the Church only to the priesthood. It was not the yardstick of equality for most of the women interviewed. Women who saw themselves reflected in the Mother of God, as gendered and bodily beings, also felt supported and valued by her – and through that, also in the Church. And if not, Mary served as a reminder of the value of women that should be taken seriously.

In the lived experience of Orthodox women, Mary thus gives worth to women in the Church in spite of the exclusive male leadership and priesthood. Because of the Mother of God and other female saints, these informants considered the Orthodox Church 'more feminine' than the Lutheran church. There is a strong female presence at the heart of the liturgy and spirituality. However, this does not exclude a critique of male dominance in the Church, even though this is not necessarily or only related to all-male priesthood.

Conclusions

The feminist critique of Mary as the great exception among women, and for that reason, her being an impossible point of identification, can be read and interpreted in a different way in light of our data: it is *because of* her difference from other women that she can be the source of divine protection and help. She is a human being, a human woman, even though an exemplary one, in the teachings of all Christian Churches, but her central role in the Incarnation and the multiple legends about her divine intervention also make her a somewhat liminal character between humanity and divinity.

The Mother of God is extremely important in the Orthodox tradition and theology generally, but it seems that she is especially and differently important for women: Mary is considered easy to approach in issues such as maternity, family, sexuality, and everyday life. This is based on women's strong identification with her as another woman, sister and mother. She understands women because she is a woman and mother herself. However, she is stronger and holier than any other human being. She thus functions both as a mirror of human identification and a source of divine protection. She is the Intercessor for whom one can pray for help and protection. That it is easier to approach Mary than God or Christ is theologically based on her role as an intercessor. She is close to humans, since she is human herself, but she is also closer to God and Christ, bringing the petitions of her believers to them. She prays for humans before God.

Finnish Orthodox women negotiate with the gendered teachings and practises of their church in multiple ways. Some of them expressed their critique on the basis of their lived experience as women. This critique was aimed at the church as an institution, which holds and exercises all kinds of power. In all this, the Mother of God serves as a divine mirror in which women can see themselves reflected.

The oral tradition related to the Mother of God, emphasising the Setos and their land being the chosen ones by her, are clearly related to identity construction. Legends of being the chosen people with a glorious past have helped this small ethnic minority, settled between Estonians and Russians, to survive.

Russians used to call Setos half-believers, but Setos themselves have believed that Christian saints, and specifically the Mother of God, have treaded their land. This means that Setos themselves have been convinced of the adequacy of their religious heritage and way of life. The Mother of God thus serves to strengthen the ethnic identity of the entire Seto people and, as shown above, also to glorify specifically women's experience and to sympathise with women.

Our cases show how in lived Orthodoxy the dogmatic Mariological 'problems' have been 'solved' through ordinary believers' active faith and interpretation, and how Orthodoxy has been adapted to different local and bodily circumstances. Local interpretations, lived theology, have transformed the Mother of God to meet the realities and expectations of a religious woman. Both Finnish and Seto women depicted Mary as having similar experiences to ordinary women (menstruation, painful childbirth) as well as worries and care (concern about the wellbeing of children and family, motherhood, and so on). Active interpretation and experiencing of the traditions related to the Mother of God and their dialogue with church teachings have taken place in the beginning of the 20th century (illiterate Seto women) and continues to this day (contemporary Seto women and more educated Finnish women). According to our informants' views, new local and gendered interpretations of traditions related to the Mother of God support religious women in different ways and, at the same time, give insight on how women interpret inherited traditions related to the female body and women's place in the Orthodox Church.

It is especially the intersections of gender, religion and ethnicity – and their relation to historical circumstances – which illuminate the more intimate experiences of Orthodox women in our two contexts. It seems that beyond obvious differences between them, there is a shared gendered tradition of interpreting and experiencing the Mother of God as a both-and figure: Mary as someone who is easy to identify with, even against formal teaching and its feminist interpretation, and someone who is able to protect, empower and intervene in various situations, which are of central importance especially for women.

There are obvious differences between our two cases, and the comparison may seem arbitrary. We could have stressed differences instead of similarities, but for the sake of our argument we wanted to highlight the way ordinary believers create their own identity and interpretations in relation to and in tension with the official church structures and tradition.

The interplay of Mary as both like another human woman and a powerful protective figure happens in relation to traditional Orthodox Mariology and the gendered practises of the Orthodox Church. Ordinary believers who, in the case of women, are always lay people, bring forward a lived experience of Orthodoxy, which both affirms and departs from the more formal theology and the institutional Church. The local interpretations of Orthodoxy and 'mariologies' of Finno-Ugric Orthodox minorities enrich our understanding of the Orthodox religion in the world today and complement the general view with additional ethnic and gendered voices of religious people associated with Scandinavia or Eastern Europe.

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