

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## The Mother of God in Finnish Orthodox Women's Piety : Converted and Skolt Sámi Voices

Vuola, Elina Inkeri Tellervo

Oxford University Press

2019-08-01

---

Vuola , E I T 2019 , The Mother of God in Finnish Orthodox Women's Piety : Converted and Skolt Sámi Voices . in C Maunder (ed.) , The Oxford Handbook of Mary . Oxford University Press , Oxford , pp. 195-212 . <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198792550.013.48>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/332717>

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198792550.013.48>

---

acceptedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# **The Mother of God in Finnish Orthodox Women's Lived Piety: Converted and Skolt Sámi**

**Voices - Elina Vuola**

## **Biography**

Elina Vuola, ThD, is Professor of Global Christianity and Dialogue of Religions at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research interests include religion and gender, Latin America, and theoretically, the relationship between gender studies and the study of religion as well as theology and lived religion. She has been a visiting scholar at the *Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones*, San José, Costa Rica (1991-93, 1999-2000), at the Women's Studies in Religion Program of Harvard Divinity School (2002-03) and Department of Religious Studies of Northwestern University, USA (2014-15).

## **Abstract**

The chapter analyses two groups of Eastern Orthodox women in Finland and their relationship to the Mother of God. The analysis is based on sixty-two ethnographic interviews and nineteen written narratives. The focus is on two groups in two marginal contexts within Orthodoxy: women converted from the Lutheran Church and the indigenous Skolt Sámi women in northeastern Lapland (all cradle Orthodox). Both contexts reflect a broader ethno-cultural process of identity formation. The converted women tend to reflect on their image of the Mother of God in relation to their previous Lutheran identity, in which the Virgin Mary plays a marginal role. In Skolt Sámi Orthodoxy, the figure of the Mother of God is less accentuated than St. Tryphon, their patron saint. The Orthodox faith and tradition in general have been central for the Skolts in the course of their traumatic history.

## **Keywords**

Finland, women, conversion, Skolt Sámi, indigenous people, lived religion, Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church

Finland is one of the most Lutheran countries of the world: over seventy percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, even though the membership rate has been declining especially among urban youth. At the same time, the Orthodox tradition has a long presence in Finland, which is geographically and historically between the East and the West.

In this chapter, I analyse two groups of Orthodox women in Finland and their relationship to the Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> The analysis is based on sixty-two ethnographic interviews and nineteen written narratives. The research was realized in 2013-14 in different parts of Finland. Within the larger data, the two groups I analyse in this chapter are first, women converted from the Lutheran Church, and second, the indigenous Skolt Sámi women in northeastern Lapland, all cradle Orthodox. My interest is guided by the perspective of lived religion, which enables a close understanding of the faith of ordinary adherents. The focus on gender (all my informants are women) is based on the fact that in the Orthodox tradition women are always, by definition, lay people. It is thus through ethnographic methods, especially interviewing, that their voices and theological thoughts can be made known. Further, my analysis of these two groups is informed by my interest in women's devotion to the Mother of God in two marginal contexts within Orthodoxy. Both contexts reflect a broader ethno-cultural process of identity formation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The research was realized within the project *Embodied Religion. Changing Meanings of Body and Gender in Contemporary Forms of Religious Identity in Finland*, funded by the Academy of Finland (2013-17). I thank Helena Kupari, PhD, for valuable comments to my chapter. I also thank all my informants who shared their time and thoughts with me.

### *Orthodox Tradition in Finland*

Like 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 managing to maintain its distinct culture and language. The area which is now Finland belonged to Sweden until 1809. After that, Finland was formally an autonomous part of the Russian Empire until 1917, when it gained its independence in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

The Orthodox tradition has been present in the southeastern parts of today's Finland ever since it was first Christianized. A few years after Finland's independence, the Finnish Orthodox Church decided to change its jurisdictional position and became autonomous under the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1923. The Orthodox Church acquired the status of a national church alongside the Lutheran Church. Today, the Orthodox Church has about 62, 000 members, accounting for 1.1 percent of the population of Finland (Kupari 2016; Trostyanskiy 2011). The Orthodox Church of Finland enjoys the legal status of a national church alongside the Lutheran Church.

Before the Second World War, a great majority of the Orthodox citizens of Finland were living in Ladoga Karelia, Border Karelia, and North Karelia. During the period when the Grand Duchy of Finland was part of the Russian Empire, the religion of Orthodox Karelians was a fusion of Russian Orthodox and older ethnic traditions, with many pre-Christian features surviving up to the twentieth century (Kupari 2016).

After the war, Finland lost significant parts of its easternmost territories, including most of Karelia, where most Orthodox lived, to the Soviet Union. Over 400, 000 Finnish Karelians became internally displaced people who were evacuated and resettled in other parts of Finland. Among them were about 55, 000 Orthodox Christians, two-thirds of the then Finnish Orthodox population. The Orthodox Church lost about 90 percent of its property (Laitila 2006; Kupari 2016). Its monasteries were evacuated and some of them refounded in Finland. The best-known is the monastery of Valaam (Valamo in Finnish), which today functions both in its old locations on the Russian side of the border and in Heinävesi, Finland, as the monastery of New Valaam. At least half of the members of the Finnish Orthodox Church continue to have some Karelian ancestry.

The Finnish evacuees included five hundred Skolt Sámi (*sä'mmlaž* in Skolt, *kolttasaamelaiset* in Finnish) from Pechenga (Petsamo). The Sámi are an indigenous people that have historically inhabited northern Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula. They are divided into several tribes of which the Skolt Sámi is one. The traditional home area of the Skolt Sámi, which includes Pechenga, is situated in northwestern Kola Peninsula. The Skolts are traditionally Orthodox by religion, Christianised in the sixteenth century by Russian monks. This, besides language, customs, and history, sets the Skolts apart from the rest of the Sámi. The Skolts are a small minority both within the Orthodox Church (linguistically and ethnically) and among the other Sámi (linguistically and religiously). They are thus a minority within two minorities in contemporary Finland. It is estimated that there are about one thousand Skolts, of whom about 600 are in Finland and the rest in Russia and Norway. Of the Finnish Skolts, today only a little more than half speak Skolt Sámi as their mother tongue (*Kolttasaamelaiset*).

The postwar period was difficult for both Orthodox evacuees and the Church as a whole. Their religion was often regarded with suspicion. At least until the 1960s, the public image of the Orthodox Church in predominantly Lutheran Finland was stereotypically and openly negative: 'The

Russkies' church' (*ryssäinkirkko*) points to both postwar Russophobia and the view of Orthodox Christians as 'image worshippers'. Besides marriages to Lutherans, this is one reason why many Orthodox Karelian evacuees converted to the Lutheran Church (Kupari 2016). Since the 1960s and 1970s, the tide has been almost reversed: there are more and more (mostly Lutheran) converts to the Orthodox Church. In a short span of time, the Orthodox Church has changed from the despised Other to the favorite Other in the Finnish cultural and religious landscape.

*Ethnographic research on women's devotion to the Virgin Mary*

This chapter is based on semi-structured interviews, which I conducted in 2013 and 2014 with sixty-two Orthodox women in different parts of Finland, including North Karelia -close to the Russian border, the stronghold of the Orthodox faith in Finland- and northeastern Lapland among the Skolt Sámi. The women were born between 1917 and 1986. Twenty-six of them were born and raised Orthodox, seventeen were converts, mostly from the Lutheran Church. Nineteen of my informants belong to the Skolt Sámi people, all cradle Orthodox. I published a call for interviews in all major Orthodox media, both printed and on the Internet. I also expressed the possibility of writing instead of being interviewed. I ended up receiving nineteen written narratives, some short, some longer – all from converted women, born between the years 1939 and 1986. Further informants came to me through my contacts with local parishes and some key informants, especially among the Skolts. Most of my informants were married and mothers, but there were also single and divorced women and those who did not have children.

All the interviews were conducted in Finnish, and all translations from Finnish to English are mine (of both the recorded interviews and the written narratives). All the names of the informants have been changed into pseudonyms and no other information that would reveal their identity is

presented. In the case of the Skolt Sámi, I do not even mention the exact age, because the community is so small, and many knew whom I had been interviewing. By the youngest generation, I refer to those born in late 1970s and 1980s; by the middle-aged, to those born in the 1950s and 1960s and early 1970s; and by the oldest generation, to those born before the 1950s.

In the call for interviews, I stated that I am interested in how Finnish Orthodox women experience their relationship with the Mother of God. I found about half of my informants through this call: the women contacted me directly expressing their willingness to be interviewed.

My main question was: What does the Mother of God mean to you? Other questions included: Is the Virgin Mary somehow linked to the position of women in the Church? Do you think Mary is more important for women than for men? Have there been situations or times in your life in which Mary was of special importance or when your relationship with her has changed? Particularly the first two issues came up often in one way or the other without me directly asking. The third question proved to be crucial, because it elicited the most personal and emotional answers – often related to difficult pregnancies and deliveries, infertility, abortion, divorce, social hardships, issues of health, and stress about income.

Geographically, I interviewed women in Southern Finland, both in cities and rural areas, several of them in the larger Helsinki region. I spent time in North Karelia on two occasions when I made several interviews in different locations. I spent several weeks in northeastern Lapland among the Skolt Sámi in 2013. I also participated in the pilgrimage of St. Tryphon of Pechenga, the patron saint of the Skolts, twice (2013 and 2017). The traditional center of Skolt culture is Sevetijärvi (*Če'vetjäu'rr* in Skolt), where the Orthodox Church is dedicated to St. Tryphon. There are other

smaller Skolt villages on the other side of the vast Lake Inari. The pilgrimage visits them all every mid-August.

In this chapter, I concentrate on two groups among my informants. First, I will look at the role the Virgin Mary plays in the lived piety of my converted informants, especially as related to the conversion process. Second, I will discuss the Skolt Sámi women in relation to the Virgin Mary. I have published on my research in other contexts (Vuola 2016, 2018; Kalkun & Vuola 2017) but in those I have left the converted and the Skolt Sámi informants out of my analysis. Of the Skolt Sámi, I have written in the context of pilgrimage (see Kalkun, Kupari & Vuola 2018).

Both groups are marginal within the larger tradition of Orthodoxy. First, Orthodoxy in Finland is culture- and history-specific in itself, and within it, the growing amount of converts from the majority Lutheran church forms another interesting case. My converted informants articulated the Orthodox understanding of the Virgin Mary in terms of their Lutheran past and the Lutheran tradition in general. Second, the Skolt Sámi women described the presence and role of the Mother of God in terms of their minority ethno-cultural identity, one which pertains to the minority position of a small indigenous group within the Finnish society, an ethnic minority within the Orthodox church, and a linguistic and religious minority within the larger indigenous Sámi minority. Finally, women form an important group of their own in both contexts. In the Orthodox tradition, women are always laypeople and there are gendered practices, which affect especially women. My interest, guided by the approach of lived religion, is to present their thoughts and experiences as a normative part of the contemporary Orthodox tradition.

In both 'background cultures' of these two groups of Orthodox women, the Lutheran Church and culture for the converts, and the Skolt Sámi culture in the case of the Skolt women, the figure of the



Mother of God herself is marginal. The lived, liturgical, and theological meaning of the Virgin Mary is meagre – if not non-existent – in the (Finnish) Lutheran church in spite of much shared Marian theology with the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is against and in relation to this Lutheran marginality of Mary that my converted informants reflected their thoughts. In the Skolt Sámi culture, the patron saint of the Skolts, St. Tryphon of Pechenga, is the most valued and loved figure, and not so much the Mother of God.

Theoretically, my approach is that of lived religion, especially as it is employed in the analysis of the lived piety and experiences of women. However, the field of lived religion has tended to focus on certain geographical, cultural contexts and religious traditions (Ammerman 2016). There is very little original research on lived religion in the Orthodox tradition from any perspective, and gender research on Mary in religious studies tends to concentrate on the Catholic tradition (e.g., Gemzöe 2000; several articles in Hermkens, Jansen & Notermans, eds. 2009).

The understanding of religion as everyday practices and lived (e.g., Hall, ed. 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2002, 2005) covers different aspects of religious experience, questioning the dichotomy between formal and informal, institutional and ‘popular’, textual and ‘experienced’. My interest in my research was to be attentive to the theological thinking of my informants, understanding also theology as something that is lived and produced in the relation between religious institutions and the ordinary faithful. In this chapter, I will not focus on this part, but I have written about it elsewhere (Vuola 2018).

*Conversion, Gender, and the Mother of God*

There were more responses from converts than I had expected. As stated earlier, conversions from the Lutheran Church to the Orthodox Church have grown steadily in Finland. In the process of doing the interviews, I started asking the converted women somewhat different questions from those I asked women who were born and raised Orthodox. For some converted informants the presence of Mary in the Orthodox tradition had been a pulling factor. For others, the rich Marian devotion in liturgy, prayer, iconography, and Orthodox theology had come as a surprise, which they slowly embraced. A few of them recounted how the centrality of Mary in the Orthodox Church had been a source of suspicion even as they felt drawn to convert for other reasons. This was accentuated in the narratives of those women who had been active participants and believers in the Lutheran church, in which the absence of Mary is notorious.

Some of my informants had returned to the faith of their grandparents or one parent. Without exception, they were descendants of Karelian Orthodox evacuees who had converted to Lutheranism after the war or who had raised their children Lutheran. Conversion is not a correct word to describe these interviewees, but rather return. In the case of these women, embracing Orthodoxy at some point in their lives was a process of very concrete return to family history, extended family, and religious customs they were familiar with, at least to some extent. I will mention this when quoting these informants.

Some informants contrasted their Orthodox faith with their previous Lutheran identity rather strongly. This contrasting was sometimes expressed in terms of seeing the Lutheran Church as anti-feminine and the Orthodox Church as more 'feminine' in spite of the former ordaining women. This view was expressed also by some cradle Orthodox, but mostly by converts, which is natural because they have lived experience of both churches. In a country like Finland, the surrounding society and the majority Lutheran Church are the mirrors in issues of gender equality for the Eastern Orthodox

Church. Most of my informants were educated, working women, who also sometimes perceived me as the mirror representing the ‘outsiders’ who, according to them, often stereotypically think of the Orthodox tradition as especially patriarchal. The centrality of the Mother of God, the importance of a variety of female saints, and the overall more sensuous, embodied liturgy of the Orthodox Church were contrasted with the wordiness, the meagreness of emotion, warmth, and the senses and the lack of Mary in Lutheran liturgy and spirituality.

For example, Anna (b. 1943, Orthodox for over thirty years) said: ‘I had a negative relationship to the Lutheran Church. (...) I was tired of it always looking for something new, something refreshing. (...) My conversion was probably also a protest against Protestantism.’ For her, the figure of the Mother of God did not play any role in her conversion. Also Beth (b. 1948, Orthodox for about twenty years) expressed very critical views of the Lutheran Church: ‘It is too superficial, often. For example, you accept same sex unions. Rock concerts in the church. The church is not at all a holy place for Lutherans. I have experienced it so many times.’ Also Tina (b. 1958, Orthodox for about thirty years) expressed her frustration with the Lutheran Church: ‘I didn’t have any experience of the Lutheran church touching me. It touched my intellect, my outside, but I was not an atheist.’ She brought up the issue of women’s position in the two churches: ‘There are women pastors in the Lutheran Church, but do women really have a position in the Lutheran Church? (...) I would argue that in the Orthodox Church we do. (...) Women and femininity are present through the Mother of God. (...) I have experienced this wisdom, feminine wisdom, more in the Orthodox Church. (...) It is easier to be a woman there, because we have Mary and all the female saints.’

For her part, Martha (b. 1952, Orthodox for five years) who defined herself as a feminist, said: ‘I pondered whether I can join the Orthodox Church as a feminist. There are no female priests. Then I thought that, well, it is much more important for me that the Mother of God is there, all the feasts

and texts and songs for her. She is so respected. (...) It is, like, a woman has a central place in the religion, at its heart.'

Thus, both those women who consider the Lutheran Church too liberal and those who are feminist and support women's ordination in the Lutheran Church, convert. The former seek stability and what they perceive as an unchanging tradition, which they did not experience in the Lutheran Church. The latter are conscious of the tension between their feminism and their conversion to a more patriarchal church – at least if women's ordination is the yardstick, which it was not for most of my informants. They also struggled socially: women like Martha described how they had to justify their conversion not so much spiritually but because of the perceived sexism and conservatism of the Orthodox Church.

The Mother of God seemed to bridge this tension for some of these women. Because of her – and other female saints – the Orthodox Church was experienced as 'more feminine' in spite of the lack of women priests. This may not have been a pulling factor, as it was not for most of my converted informants, but possibly something they learned later – both as a reality and an argument for those who questioned their conversion.

Furthermore, the sensuousness and beauty of the Orthodox Church and liturgy were considered by some interviewees as reflecting the 'more feminine' character of Orthodoxy. For example, Hanna (b. 1957, Orthodox for seven years), who also considered herself a feminist, said: 'My daughter questioned my choice: "how can you as a feminist join a church where women cannot be priests?" (...) I see the Orthodox Church as much more feminine [than the Lutheran Church]. (...) The Orthodox churches are like a mother's uterus, round; the cupolas like a woman's breasts. (...) Orthodoxy is a religion of beauty, it nourishes your senses.' Later she said: 'The presence of

womanhood comes through the God-Bearer. There is something quite masculine and militarist in the Lutheran Church.’ She was not against same-sex marriages or women’s ordination in the Orthodox Church and was well aware of patriarchal elements in it, but besides the beauty and sensuousness, it was the Mother of God, more than anything, that offered her a feminine aspect in the divine.

For some of my converted informants, the Mother of God had been a clear pulling factor to the Orthodox Church. Dora (b. 1972, conversion as an adult – no exact date given) is one of those who wrote to me but whom I did not interview. She writes: ‘The Virgin Mary is extremely important for me. I love and respect her. (...) She is a strong protector, leader in the battle, who dares and can approach God directly. (...) When I was young, I had no contact with the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. However, something in Mary was attractive already then.’ She, too, commented on the lack of feminine presence in the Lutheran Church from which she converted: ‘Orthodoxy is very equal and even idealizes women. Mary is actively present in the liturgical year and prayers. (...) In Protestantism, nothing is said about women, and ordination does not change it, if at the heart and values of faith the most important woman, mother of Jesus, is absent.’

Ella (b. 1950, Orthodox for thirteen years) wrote: ‘I was led to the Orthodox Church by the Virgin Mary. She guided me to a good path, and I think it is due to her that I have remained in the Church. (...) She led me to the Church and was my only and most important contact to it for a long time. It took me years to dare and be able to approach Christ. (...). By being led to the right path I mean the words of the Virgin Mary, “let it be according to your will” – an incomprehensible surrender for and acceptance of something one does not understand.’ Miriam (b. 1978, Orthodox for about a year), whose maternal family is Orthodox from Karelia and who has ‘always felt Orthodox’, wrote about a difficult event in her life: ‘I was afraid, but the face and hands of the Virgin Mary appeared

in front of me, and she said, “be not afraid of anything”. I understood that she protects me, and my mind became calm and strong. No human being can break that protection and come between me and her. (...) It was a pivotal moment in my life. The Virgin Mary invited me to where my heart had known to belong (...).’

For some, the Virgin Mary played no role in their conversion and she even formed an obstacle, since most of them converted from the Lutheran Church and may have been raised with the idea that devotion to Mary is something heretical or at least non-Lutheran. Pia (b. 1972, Orthodox for nine years) wrote: ‘At first, the Virgin Mary felt foreign. She was not important for me when I was a child. (...) After becoming Orthodox, I took up the habit of lighting a candle in front of the icon of the Mother of God and praying there. (...) The fact that she was mentioned continuously in the liturgy made me think about her and approach her in a totally new way. (...) Through the prayers, the Virgin Mary has become a second mother for me. (...) She is the kind of mother we all should have. (...) Through her, I experience that also we ordinary women are respected in the Church.’

Kati (b. 1984, joined the Orthodox Church as an adult – no exact date given) wrote in her narrative that ‘I experience the Mother of God both very close to me and very holy. (...) When I was for the first time in an Orthodox vigil, I was startled and found it odd when it was said “the Most Holy God-bearer, save us through your intercession”. Slowly my relationship to her changed. (...) First it was the songs and prayers and texts, but finally I dared to approach her myself, cautiously at first. But I started to experience her love and care.’

Finally, Helena (b. 1939, Orthodox for about 35 years) wrote that the Virgin Mary did not mean much to her when she was still Lutheran. Helena, too, has Orthodox roots in her family and used the term ‘return’ instead of conversion. She wrote about her doubts about Orthodoxy in general and

about the Virgin Mary in particular. It was strange for her that the Mother of God held such importance in the Orthodox Church. She was advised by an Orthodox bishop to pray, take part in the Eucharist, and read Orthodox literature – that is how she would mature and also understand the love of the Mother of God. ‘That is more or less what happened, to some extent at least’, she wrote. ‘It is very fulfilling to sing with others, to praise the Holy Mother who loves us all (also me).’

In sum, for my converted informants, the Mother of God was both a pulling factor to the Orthodox Church and something they learned to love and trust even when Mary was not important for them at the moment of conversion. Sometimes they first had to overcome feelings of strangeness. The process was mostly described either as a sudden experience of protection and presence (in some cases) or as something gained through the practice of prayer, singing, attending liturgy, and the icons (on iconic piety, see Shevzov 2000, 2007). Even when the (main) reason for conversion was not the Virgin Mary, for all my converted informants she was an important, even central, and intimate part of their faith at the moment of my research. The formation of their Orthodox identity was largely contrasted with the majority Lutheran tradition and the perceived lack of Mary - and other female figures - in it.

### *Skolt Sámi Women and the Virgin Mary*

The Skolt Sámi are a small linguistic and religious group within the indigenous Sámi of northern Scandinavia. At the same time, they are also a linguistic and ethnic minority among the Orthodox minority in Finland. They thus form a minority within a minority in two different contexts.

After Finland ceded Pechenga to the Soviet Union, the Finnish Skolt Sámi were resettled in three villages situated on different sides of Lake Inari. The Skolts lost access to their ancestral fishing and

hunting grounds, which resulted in the disintegration of their traditional way of life. The Skolt Sámi culture has suffered severely from Finnish national assimilation policies. For instance, Skolt children were placed in boarding schools, far away from Skolt villages, in which speaking the Skolt Sámi language was prohibited. The second-generation displaced Skolts, born in the 1950s and 1960s, experienced these measures most harshly. They lost the ability to speak Skolt Sámi fluently and in the process learned to feel ashamed of their Skolt identity. Starting in the 1970s, the assimilation policies were gradually lifted. Over the course of the past few decades, intensive measures have been taken to revive the Skolt Sámi language, which is still severely endangered. Third-generation displaced Skolts, who are by and large more educated than their parents and grandparents, have been most active in the preservation and revitalization of Skolt culture.

Skolt Sámi culture is intimately connected with the Orthodox faith. Eastern Christian influences set Skolts apart from other Scandinavian Sámi groups, a difference that has historically been a source of discrimination within the wider Sámi community. However, it has also facilitated the maintenance of a distinctive Skolt identity. The Orthodox Church and tradition are important for the Skolt Sámi. For many older interviewees, it was difficult to separate religion and culture, for 'to be Skolt Sámi is to be Orthodox'. Among the younger generations, there is more variation. The more general trends of secularization and detachment from religious institutions are noticeable also in the Skolt community. However, even those Skolts who are not religiously active and are critical towards or feel distanced from the Church do not usually leave it altogether. As one younger informant stated, 'Orthodoxy is the glue that holds the Skolt culture together'.

St. Tryphon of Pechenga (*Pââ'ss Treeffan* in Skolt, 1495–1583) preached the Orthodox religion to the Skolt Sámi in the sixteenth century and founded the Pechenga Monastery. He is considered the patron saint of the Skolts. The Skolts' deep reverence for St. Tryphon is evident, for example, in the



presence of his icons in Skolt homes, churches, and chapels. Several of the latter have also been dedicated to him (more in Kalkun, Kupari & Vuola 2018).

Since my broad interest was in women's lived devotion of the Virgin Mary, it is something I asked the Skolt Sámi informants as well. However, I noticed quite soon that I did not get many responses beyond statements of the general importance of the Mother of God in Orthodoxy. Given that the contemporary religious identity of the Skolts has been little researched (for an exception, see Rantakeisu 2015), the interviews took a form in which my informants either talked about the history and present-day Skolt culture or, as part of that, of the meaning of the Orthodox faith for them more generally. Thus, one of my results among the Skolt Sámi is that the Virgin Mary seems to have less (gendered) meaning for the Skolts than for my interviewees in other parts of Finland, with Karelian roots or not. Whereas I heard personal, even passionate, narratives about the importance of the Mother of God especially for women among the latter, both converted and cradle Orthodox (see Vuola 2018), the Skolt Sámi women reflected more on their Orthodox faith in general and on St. Tryphon, specifically.

An important aspect to be taken into account is that the Skolts as indigenous people have been studied and interviewed by researchers of a variety of disciplines. Especially the older ones are tired of researchers – something that I heard several times. Related to that, there may be aspects of their culture which they are not willing to share with outsiders. I have to respect that and be limited in my conclusions to what I received. Some of my informants said, however, that they were pleased that someone is interested in their contemporary religious identity, and not only language, ethno-cultural habits and customs, history, or music.

Reading the transcriptions of my Skolt interviews now, I notice that I have sometimes ‘pressed’ my informants about the Mother of God, especially in the first interviews, in order to have comparable material with the rest of the interviews. At some point, I decided that I will ask about Mary – as I did in all my interviews – but let my Skolt informants take a stronger lead in the interview.

By and large, the Orthodox faith is very important for the Skolt Sámi, even to the extent of it being the cultural glue that holds them together, and that ‘to be Skolt is to be Orthodox’. There was some variation in the younger generation, but even among them, the relationship to the Orthodox tradition was strong and mainly positive. I learned about specific Skolt habits and beliefs, which most probably stem from their lifestyle before the war and their relationship with nature. For the sake of this chapter, I will next present excerpts from my interviews in which the Virgin Mary (*Nijdd Mä’rjj* in Skolt) plays a role – remembering what I said above about her meagreness in the data.

I did most of the interviews at my informants’ homes. There was an icon corner in practically all of them. Most often there were icons of St. Tryphon and the Mother of God. Women are by and large more active than men in the Church and revitalization processes of the Skolt culture.

Several women told me that they have received an icon of the Mother of God at birth or at some other important life event. Icons of the Mother of God were considered women’s icons and those of St. Tryphon more as men’s icons, even when he is important to women as well. For the Skolt Sámi women, the Mother of God is above all someone for whose intercession one prays, which is a standard Orthodox way of thought. My informants prayed in front of their Virgin Mary icons. Only a handful of them responded in the affirmative when I asked if there are any specifically Skolt beliefs or practices related to the Mother of God. The Orthodox faith has been internalized at a young age, through example, and for many interviewees it was difficult to verbalize their faith. ‘I don’t know why one does this’ was something I heard often when I asked my ‘why’ questions. One

middle-aged interviewee said she had asked her parents the same, but the response had been ‘that is how it is, that is what you are supposed to do’.

Tyynne (oldest generation) told me of a habit she learned from her mother and other older women: when baking bread one should not scrape the dough from the table by knife, because ‘it is like scraping a mother’s breast’. She herself linked this also to Mother Mary’s breast.

Other Skolt informants said, for example that ‘how I have thought about it is that Mary is the one who gave birth. What about the father? How come God became the father when Mary gave birth? Who did it to Mary? (...) If she had not been with men, how did she then get the child in her? (...) So it is Mary that one could worship [the informant used the word to worship, not to venerate] because she made God (...) who came to the world through her. Otherwise we would not have God.’ (Anastasia, the oldest generation)

The oldest informants still remembered the times and the traditional way of life before the war, especially of those who lived far away from the Pechenga monastery, which meant a meagre presence of the formal Church and priests. The customs and beliefs were learned at home, often with very little formal religious education. The Skolts in the Pechenga area lived in closer relation to the monastery and the institutional church.

Anni, middle-aged, interpreted her icon of the Mother of God as depicting motherly love and tenderness. The Mother of God is a source of comfort. She was an exception among my Skolt informants when she explicitly said that the Mother of God is more important for her than St. Tryphon, although acknowledging his importance for her tribe. Most of my informants valued St. Tryphon more, either saying it explicitly or just talking more about him and not having so much to say about the Mother of God beyond the custom of having an icon of her or acknowledging her

general importance. However, when I asked more, most of them said that the Virgin Mary is the one they pray to and feel closer to, especially at times of crisis. Whether there is tension between ethnic and gender identity is difficult to say. Possibly the combination of St. Tryphon and the Mother of God – the two whose icons I saw at most informants' homes – is what supports both ethnic and gender identity.

Anni started to talk about the position of women in the Orthodox Church and Skolt Sámi culture. She even asked why the Church has only male priests. According to her, women are respected as volunteers. Nevertheless, the Church for her is 'the mother and the father', and you can go to them as you are, man or woman. The traditional Skolt way of Orthodoxy, which consisted of big festivals such as weddings, is not reality anymore.

Anni told me that, in the Skolt Sámi culture, men are traditionally more valued than women, but that it is women who have been more persistent: working hard, which includes fishing and reindeer herding. Still in her mother's generation, young women were married away without asking their permission. She did not link this to the Orthodox tradition, but rather to old habits of the Skolt Sámi culture.

As for the Virgin Mary, she said that her icon of the Mother of God is important for her: 'It is a window to prayer. If you are really sad or even bitter, by looking at the icon you get strength, and the bitterness fades away. Lighting a candle [in front of an icon], when I am too tired to pray, I feel that the smoke gives you strength and faith. When my mother was about to die, I opened the window and had a candle lit all the day, because I knew she was about to leave. The candle was lit all the time. (...) For me, the candle is important.'<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Anni probably refers here to something I heard in several interviews with the Skolt Sámi. Their burial practices include all sorts of openings or loosening: leaving the shoe laces of the deceased untied, cutting the tip of the

A younger woman, Iida, stated how her only icon is that of St. Tryphon, since ‘he is the one who baptised us’. She continued: ‘We don’t get any religious education from men. It is mothers who raise their daughters. The man is often absent anyway. I don’t think young men put icons on their walls. I doubt they would.’ She also described how her older female relative had said that ‘women have the Mother of God and men have Tryphon’ and that is why there are men’s and women’s icons.

Some informants were critical of what they perceived as male dominance in the Orthodox Church. Kaisa, of the youngest generation, said when I asked her about icons: ‘I prefer an icon of the Virgin Mary. It has always been confusing for me that most persons in Orthodox icons are tall blond men. How come, didn’t they look a bit different in the Middle East? (...) I prefer an icon of the Virgin Mary. (...) In the Orthodox Church, there are Jesus and these others; it is very male dominated. There are very few visible women. Maybe that is why it [Mary] calls my attention and gets my sympathies.’

According to middle-aged Siina, Mary is more important for women than for men. ‘I think it is because she is the mother of baby Jesus. (...) That you sort of see your own mother in her ... their relationship or something like that. She kind of brings that forward.’ For her, the Virgin Mary is someone to resort to, even though she is in the back, compared with Jesus and God. ‘She is in the behind, around us. She is like a wall.’

Another younger informant, Katrina, was very critical of the Orthodox Church even though she also acknowledged its positive meanings for the Skolts. She paralleled her critique with the role of the

---

traditional pointed reindeer-skin shoes, untying all ribbons, knots and buttons, and in Anni’s case, opening the window: ‘so that you can move, that your spirit does not get tied down’.

Lutheran Church among the other Sámi groups: religion has been a major source for the loss of traditional beliefs, habits, and music (banning the traditional *yoik*, for example, now revitalised) of the Northern Sámi, the biggest Sámi group. The Orthodox Church was not as strict on the traditional culture of the Skolts, but that history is not without problems either.

She said that those Orthodox priests who serve in the Skolt areas should learn the language. She considered herself typical of her generation of Skolts in that she is rather secularized and even critical of religion, but at the same time belongs to the Church and would not leave. As for the Virgin Mary, she paid attention to the fact that, in Skolt Sámi language, her name means ‘Maiden Mary’ (*Nijdd Mä’rjj*), which emphasizes her age and not her sexual inexperience. In spite of all her criticism of the Church, she said that she does have an icon on her wall. When I asked which one, she laughed and said: ‘Well, in fact the Virgin Mary! (...) Those old dudes with their beards don’t exactly attract me, if I say it straight. Maybe that is why Mary.’

There are thus generational differences in relation to the Orthodox Church among the Skolt Sámi, but this should not be exaggerated. The young Skolts tend not to leave the church, like so many of their generation in Finland do, and they also acknowledge positive elements in the meaning of Orthodoxy for the Skolt Sámi culture and identity. Centuries of Orthodox faith, practices, and habits have set the Skolts apart from the other Sámi groups, which is probably why it remains a part of the distinct cultural identity of the Skolts, not only in relation to the majority Finnish culture but also to the other Sámi groups.

For the oldest generation, the source of their knowledge of Orthodoxy in general and the Virgin Mary specifically is by and large oral tradition. The Orthodoxy of the Skolts before the war and the relocation was formed in relation to their traditional way of life, the culture, and its beliefs and

practices.<sup>3</sup> The younger generation, more educated and less tied to the Skolt tradition – also through living outside the Skolt autonomous area – than their older relatives, is affected by the same trends of secularization and critique of religious institutions as their generation in general. The middle generation is the one most affected by the loss of language and culture. Thus, for them, the Orthodox tradition is not so much related to its pre-war meanings but to its importance as a source of continuation and identity in a context which threatened the very existence of the distinctive Skolt culture. These generational differences are clear in my data, but as I said, they should not be exaggerated: in the interviews, representatives of all generations recognized the overall meaning of Orthodoxy for the Skolt culture and ethnic identity, and even the youngest wanted to remain members of the church.

My broad conclusion of my data among the Skolt Sámi is that, of the Orthodox saints, St. Tryphon as an ethno-cultural symbol seems to be more important than the Mother of God for Skolt Sámi women, underscoring his importance for their ethnic identity. This does not mean that there were no gendered aspects in the interviews. By and large, these were usually not related to the figure of the Mother of God but to women's roles in both Skolt culture and the Orthodox Church.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter, I have analysed my ethnographic data among contemporary Finnish Orthodox women, and within this minority religion, two specific groups, which could be understood as minorities within the minority. In spite of the trend of conversion from the Lutheran Church to the Orthodox Church, the phenomenon has not been much researched. The converted women in my

---

<sup>3</sup> In the analysis of my larger body of data (Vuola 2018), I pay attention to the general high level of education of Finnish women, which includes substantial knowledge of the theology and teachings of the Orthodox Church. This was less accentuated among the Skolts, especially the oldest generation, which is understandable taken the thin presence of the institutional Church in their lives before the war and the lower level of formal education of that generation of Skolts.

data tended to reflect on their image of the Mother of God in relation to their previous Lutheran identity, in which the Virgin Mary plays a marginal role or in relation to the majority Lutheran tradition in general. My informants were well aware of the image of the Orthodox Church as a more patriarchal tradition than the Lutheran church. They ‘used’ Mary – and other female saints – as one form of negotiation of this tension.

Also among my Skolt Sámi informants, the Virgin Mary is meagrely present, although for totally different reasons than in the case of my former Lutheran informants. The identity formation of my Skolt informants, both as Orthodox and Skolt, tended to value the Orthodox faith in general and St. Tryphon, specifically. The figure of the Mother of God is thus less accentuated in Skolt Orthodoxy than St. Tryphon as their patron saint. When it comes to the meaning of Orthodoxy for the Skolts in general, there are generational differences. However, the Orthodox faith and tradition have been so central for the Skolts in the course of their traumatic history, that even the youngest informants recognized it and, in spite of their criticism, tended not to leave the Church formally.

These minorities of a minority – in the case of the Skolts, also among the rest of the Sámi, the only indigenous minority people in the European Union recognized by the United Nations as such – are examples of the multiplicity of ways in which the relationship to the Mother of God is construed within the Orthodox tradition – sometimes in contrast with the formal institution. Women have gendered interpretations of the Mother of God, which I analyse in detail elsewhere (Vuola 2018). The Virgin Mary may become a source of negotiation and identity formation, which is especially the case among those converted to Orthodoxy from the Lutheran Church. For the Skolt women, too, Mary has gendered meanings, but the importance of St. Tryphon for the Skolt culture remains central also for the women.



For some (especially younger) Skolt informants, Mary represented femininity, motherhood, and womanhood, just as for my converted informants. The lack of female figures as sources of identification was pointed out in the Lutheran Church. At the same time, the importance of Mary in the Orthodox tradition was contrasted with the dominance of male figures (in the hierarchy of the Church, among the saints, in the icons, and so on). In these cases, the Mother of God served as an important source of identification for women, both Skolt and non-Skolt.

The approach of lived religion enables to bring forward this kind of heterogeneity in any religious tradition. The Orthodox tradition has not been much researched either from a lived religion or from a gender perspective. In this chapter, I have aimed to fill this double vacuum. The voices and identities of 'ordinary faithful' are not homogenous either: there are cultural, linguistic, historical, ethnic, and gender differences among them. My informants' devotion to the Mother of God reflects all these differences, sometimes overlapping, sometimes not. Even when there certainly are gendered meanings in women's devotion to the Virgin Mary, they are construed in a continuum of continuity and change within Orthodoxy. The importance of Mary for Orthodox women is related not only to gender but also to ethnicity, family history, and the norms of the surrounding society.

### **Recommended Reading**

Kalkun, A., Kupari, H. & Vuola, E. 2018. 'Coping with the Loss of Homeland through Orthodox Christian Processions: Contemporary Practices among Setos, Karelians, and Skolt Sámi in Estonia and Finland'. *Practical Matters* 11.

Kupari, H. 2016. *Lifelong Religion and Habitus. Religious Practice among Displaced Karelian Orthodox Women in Finland*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Orsi, R. A. 2002. *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street. Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. Second edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vuola, E. 2016. 'Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary'. *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 24: 63-80.

----2018. *Women's Cross-cultural Devotion of the Virgin Mary. Experiences from Catholic Costa Rica and Orthodox Finland*. London & New York: Routledge.

## **Works Cited**

Ammerman, N. T. 2016. 'Lived Religion and an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers'. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29.2: 83–99.

Gemzöe, L. 2000. *Feminine Matters. Women's Religious Practices in a Portuguese Town*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Hall, D. D., editor. 1997. *Lived Religion in America. Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hermkens, A.-K., Jansen, W. & Notermans, C., editors. 2009. *Moved by Mary. The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*. Farnham: Ashgate.

- Kalkun, A. & Vuola, E. 2017. 'The Embodied Mother of God and the Identities of Orthodox Women in Finland and Setoland'. *Religion and Gender* 7.1: 18-41. DOI: 10.18352/rg.10165
- Kalkun, A., Kupari, H. & Vuola, E. 2018. 'Coping with the Loss of Homeland through Orthodox Christian Processions: Contemporary Practices among Setos, Karelians, and Skolt Sámi in Estonia and Finland'. *Practical Matters* 11.
- Kolttasaamelaiset. *Saa'mi Nue'tt*. <http://www.saaminuett.fi/kolttasaamelaiset.html>, accessed 5 June 2018.
- Kupari, H. 2016. *Lifelong Religion and Habitus. Religious Practice among Displaced Karelian Orthodox Women in Finland*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Laitila, T. 2006. 'History of the Finnish Orthodox Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', in *A Short History of the Orthodox Church in Western Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by Christine Chaillot. Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue.
- McGuire, M. B. 2008. *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Orsi, R. A. 2002. *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street. Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. Second edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- 2005. *Between Heaven and Earth. The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rantakeisu, M. 2015. *Cultivating a Sense of Belonging: The Orthodox Church as a Part of the Collective Memory of Skolt Sámi in Finland*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Helsinki, 2015.
- Shevzov, V. 2000. 'Icons, Miracles, and the Ecclesial Identity of Laity in Late Imperial Russian Orthodoxy'. *Church History* 69.3: 610-31.
- 2007. 'Iconic Piety in Modern Russia' in *Modern Christianity to 1900*, vol. 6 of *People's History of Christianity*, edited by A. Porterfield, A. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Trostyanskiy, S. 2011. 'Finland, Autonomous Orthodox Church of' in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, edited by J.A. McGuckin, J. A. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vuola, E. 2016. 'Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary'. *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 24: 63-80.
- 2018. *Women's Cross-cultural Devotion of the Virgin Mary. Experiences from Catholic Costa Rica and Orthodox Finland*. London & New York: Routledge.