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Byzantine Women: Religion and Gender Construction

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Judith Herrin has proposed that Byzantine women were more prone to icon veneration because 'of their housebound situation, their restricted access to churches and their frustrated religious passion.'¹ To assess this statement the role of women in the hierarchy of the Church from the first century AD to the end of the controversy over religious images that we call Iconoclasm in AD 843 will be examined. Did women have a regularised position? Did secular legislation and ecclesiastical canons have an impact on how women were able to worship? This leads to the second part of this article. Would women resort to other forms of worship, such as icon veneration, if they had little direct recourse to the clergy and, therefore, spiritual guidance, as suggested by Herrin?² Did icons have a place in the daily lives of women because it could be done in the private sphere of life which Byzantine women have been commonly held to occupy? Did icon veneration also form a part of the religious life in monastic communities? To resolve this, re-evaluation of the evidence for icon veneration immediately before Iconoclasm will be examined.

The assumption is that women were intimately involved in the early Church. During this period church services were held in private houses and so women were directly involved because of this. The house church was the focus for the many activities that Christianity promoted; it was not just a place of worship. Their services included 'patronage, education, communication, social services, evangelisation and worship.'³ The church leaders during this period relied on women, many of whom were widows, to provide these services. These activities were to form the pattern for the role of deaconess⁴ which was to become well-established in the Eastern Church during the period under

¹ Herrin 1983: 69.

² Herrin 1992: 100.

³ Osiek 2006: 9.

⁴ Osiek 2006: 13.

discussion in this article. A position in the hierarchy was therefore established, as the letters of St. Paul show. He asked the congregation in Rome to accept

Phoebe, our sister, who is a deacon of the church of Cenchreae. Give her a welcome in the Lord worthy of the saints and help her in anything she may need. She has looked after many people including me.⁵

Paul also, in a letter this time to the congregation in Corinth, included women in the ministry of the church when he asked

have we not the right to take a woman around with us as a sister, like all the other apostles?⁶

There are also other examples of women in the ministry of the Church included in the Bible, such as Paula, Priscilla,⁷ Nympha,⁸ Eudoia and Syntyche,⁹ forming the pattern for the role of deaconess¹⁰ which was to become well-established in the Eastern Church. There is also independent evidence in the letter of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan about female deacons whom he had tortured during the second century.¹¹ The early church fathers St. Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215) and Origen (AD 185-255) both commented on the inclusion of deaconesses in the Bible. They were aware of the role of deaconess and why they were needed. Clement chose to interpret that the women the apostles took on their missionary work were

not...wives, but ...sisters, that they might be their co-ministers in dealing with women in their homes. It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without scandal being aroused. (1 Timothy 3:11)¹²

Women were therefore necessary so that no immoral accusations could be levelled at the apostles. The commentary of Origen on Corinthians showed that he too believed women were active in the ministry of the church.

⁵ Romans 16:1-2.

⁶ 1 Corinthians, 9: 5.

⁷ Romans 16:3-5.

⁸ Colossians 4:15.

⁹ Philippians 4:2-3.

¹⁰ Osiek 2006: 13.

¹¹ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96-7. Wijngaards 2002: 159; Kee 1973: 51-2.

¹² Wijngaards 2002: 160. Translation of St. Clement of Alexandria, *Commentary on Corinthians* 9:5. From *Stromate* 3, 6, 53: 3-4.

And thus this text teaches us at the same time two things: that there are...women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate.¹³

The third-century handbook, *The Didascalia* of the Apostles, gave advice to bishops about how to conduct pastoral care for women. A deaconess was necessary as a chaperone and to avoid the necessity of a man placing his hands on a woman during the anointment of oil before baptism occurred.¹⁴ The fourth-century monk and bishop Epiphanius of Salamis also commented on the necessity for women deacons. Their role is not to perform the functions of the priest but to 'preserve decency for the female sex.'¹⁵ In the late fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* a new attitude about women's place in the Church appeared. A deaconess was to be *formally* ordained and had to be either a *virgin* or a *widow* who had been married only once.¹⁶ During this period many women are mentioned as being ordained as deaconesses. Olympias was a wealthy close confidant of the bishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (AD 398-404). Of the extant letters of Chrysostom seventeen are addressed to Olympias, in one of which he refers to her as 'the most revered and divinely favoured deaconess...'¹⁷ Many other women are named as deaconesses of the great church of Constantinople. Palladia, Elisanthia, Martyria, Prokla and Pentadia¹⁸ were all ordained by Chrysostom himself. So the necessity for deaconesses was recognised by the Church.

Other sources also point to the role that women had in the Church. The Anonymous *Attemii Passio* tells us the deaconess of Antioch, Ariste, performed funerary services for the martyred Artemios. She

made a coffin and smeared with myrrh [Artemios']
holy and blessed body, and anointed it with

¹³ Wijngaards 2002, 161. Translation of Origen, Commentary on Romans 10:17; taken from Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 14, col. 1278 A-C.

¹⁴ Wijngaards 2002: 163. Gryson 1980: 42; 138, n. 61.

¹⁵ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 75, 1-4; Wijngaards 2002: 167.

¹⁶ Wijngaards 2002: 174. Elm 1996: 170.

¹⁷ A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 289.

¹⁸ Mayer 1999: 268-70.

valuable scents and ointments, and laid it in the coffin.¹⁹

In the *Life of St. Macrina* by Gregory of Nyssa the same service is provided by deaconess Lampadia for his sister Macrina. Palladios of Helenopolis' *Historia Lausiana* praised the qualities that made a good deaconess. However by the end of the fifth century Pope Gelasios (AD 492-6) strongly opposed women officiating in church. In a letter dated 11 March 494 he stated

we have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the sacred altars, and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex, to which they do not belong.²⁰

In the seventh century John Moschos, author of the *Spiritual Meadow*, also showed an awareness and limitation of the role of women in the Church. When a priest refused to baptise a woman on the grounds that he would feel embarrassed to lay hands upon a female body, his archbishop, Peter (AD 524-52), suggested that a woman deacon be appointed to perform the rite but did not do so because he thought that this was 'contrary to custom'²¹ as the role of the deaconess in the church did not extend to the performance of rites. Peter, and by extension Moschos, was not denying the existence of deaconesses within the church but showing the limitation of their role. Inscriptions also exist to stand testament to the role of deaconess. No fewer than thirty-two inscriptions about deaconesses from the Byzantine Empire between the third and eighth centuries have been discovered. These can be found amongst tombstones of other male members of the clergy.²²

Legislation, both secular and ecclesiastical, also forms part of the evidence for the role women in the Church. The secular law recognised the position of women in the Church hierarchy. However, here it is concerned with the

¹⁹ The *Artemii Passio*, 67.

²⁰ Gelasius I Epistle 14.26, in Lee 2000: 263.

²¹ Moschos, 3.

²² Wijngaards 2002: 109. A fourth-century inscription in Macedonia describes Theoprepia as a 'deacon of Christ who has completed a self-disciplined, zealous and exemplary life ...' Likewise the sixth-century Cappadocian inscription described the role the deaconess Maria had, who '... cared for children, welcomed strangers, washed the feet of the saints and shared her bread with the needy...' (Wijngaards 2002: 107). Wijngaards also includes a map of the areas of the empire in which these inscriptions can be found. (Wijngaards 2002: 108).

protection of women in society. Legislation was introduced in the Theodosian Code to protect the wealth of a woman who became a deaconess to prevent it passing into the control of the Church (XVI, 2, 27), away from the State.²³ Justinian I (AD 527-65) also legislated on the role of a deaconess when he gave them equal rights with a male deacon, in Novella 6, 6,1.²⁴ The eighth-century Byzantine law code, the *Ekloga*, however makes no reference to women in relation to their role in the Church. This may be because it was concerned with legislating on secular activities. Not all the ecumenical councils and synods legislated on the position of women either. The councils Neocaesarea (c. AD 315); Gangra (AD 325- 81); Antioch in Encaeniis (AD 341); Constantinople I (AD 381); Ephesus (AD 431); Constantinople II (AD 553); and Constantinople III (AD 680/1) were primarily concerned with doctrinal disputes and heresies. The ones that did make specific references to women are Ancyra (AD 314); Laodicea (AD 343-81); Nicaea I (AD 325); and Chalcedon (AD 451). Women were regarded as a financial drain on the resources of the Church and possible corrupters of the male clergy. Women were not allowed to participate in the liturgy. A woman under the age of forty was forbidden to become a deacon; and even then she was only allowed if she had an impeccable character. The objective was to curtail activities by women in the Church. Circumspection in the activities that women were allowed to perform in the Church culminated in Canon 70 of the Quinisext Council in Trullo held in AD 691/2. Women were to remain silent in church.²⁵ The canons increasingly diminished the role women had in the Church, so that by the twelfth century canonists Theodore Balsalom and John Zonarist²⁶ were aware that women *had* held a position in the hierarchy but were now reduced to the chaperoning of younger women.

²³ Wijngaards 2002: 176.

²⁴ Wijngaards 2002: 184.

²⁵ Corinthians I, 14:34-35. 'Women are to remain quiet in the assemblies, since they have no permission to speak: theirs is a subordinate part, as the Law itself says. If there is anything they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home: it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly.'

²⁶ Afanasiev. 1983: 62. 'Elderly women... [who] watched over the women who came to church, and like teachers instructed them where and when they ought to stand.'

Proscription against religious images, which resulted in the eighth-century controversy that we call Iconoclasm, was not a new thought process by the Byzantines. There had been concerns about images as early as the second century. These were raised by Tertullian (c. AD 160-225) in his treatise *On Modesty*.²⁷ In the fourth century a possibly legendary letter by Constantia, sister of Constantine the Great (AD 306-37), requested an image of Christ. She was censured for this by Eusebios.²⁸ During the sixth century Hypatios, bishop of Ephesos (AD 531-8), wrote about the types of images allowed in sacred buildings. These, Hypatios allowed, formed a difficult issue but certain images were permissible so long as no pleasure was derived from them.²⁹ For Hypatios the main purpose of images was to educate the illiterate, as can be seen in his *Miscellaneous Inquiries*: 'we permit simpler people...to learn by way of initiation...'³⁰ Women are not specifically referred to when he points to the 'simpler people.' Hypatios makes no distinction based on gender but is simply referring to all people who could not read.

The sources depict icons as becoming increasingly important. They are carried in battles as symbolic protection, a role that they were to have in Byzantium until the end of the empire. In the seventh century an icon of Christ was used in this way during the reign of Maurice (AD 582- 602).³¹ In addition, the famous icon of Christ on the Chalke Gate (bronze gate of the imperial palace in Constantinople) is first mentioned during the reign of Maurice by Theophanes the Confessor.³² In AD 622 when Emperor Heraclius (AD 610-3-41) left Constantinople to fight the Persian army he took an icon of Christ with him.³³ The icon of the Theotokos (the Virgin Mary) was paraded around the walls of Constantinople during the combined Persian and Avar siege of AD

²⁷ Tertullian *On Modesty*, X.

²⁸ Mango 1972: 17-18.

²⁹ Alexander 1952: 179.

³⁰ Alexander 1952: 179. Alexander gives a translation of the passage, *Miscellaneous Enquiries*, on pp. 178-81.

³¹ Cameron 1979: 23.

³² Theophanes 410; Whitby 1988: 20. This was reportedly destroyed in the first offensive of the iconoclast controversy. Whitby considers that it possible but not provable that Maurice set up the icon there.

³³ Cameron 1979: 23.

626 by the patriarch Sergios and then placed upon the Golden Gate.³⁴ It was believed by the Byzantines that this intercession enabled their victory.³⁵ These instances show icons forming part of public displays and consciousness. Women are not often recorded in public roles and so for this reason it is men, not women, who are shown to be involved with icons. No doubt at times during processions and ceremonies there were women present but they are not the leading figures. This can be seen as related to the fact that men occupied the public position and women the subordinate role. Aside from this protective purpose icons are also mentioned as intercessors. Theodore of Sykeon blessed an icon of himself made during a visit to the *Romaion* monastery.³⁶ John Moschos' *Spiritual Meadow* contains four stories involving icons: three concern men and one a woman. Another seventh-century source, the *Miracles of St. Artemios*, also included icons. Of the forty-five stories only five refer to icons; two include women.³⁷ The evidence from these seventh-century sources, although both heavily interpolated, nevertheless suggests that men, rather than women, were more likely to be portrayed as venerating icons.

Yet it is a woman who is first portrayed as the most zealous defender of icons. In the late source, the *Vita* of St. Theodosia of Constantinople, she was allegedly martyred when leading a group of 'other pious women'³⁸ during the riot against the removal of the Chalke Icon during the first period of Iconoclasm (c. AD 750-87). However Theophanes the Confessor, our most important source for the period, does not refer to women during the riot, only 'the populace of the Imperial city',³⁹ although another source, Stephen the Deacon, describes these crowds as 'honourable women.'⁴⁰ This period of Iconoclasm ended with the ecumenical council of Nicaea II. The Acts contains

³⁴ Kaegi 2003: 136.

³⁵ Bissera Pentcheva 2002: 2-41 has shown however that this tradition of the icon of the Virgin Mary on the walls of the city during this siege belongs to the period after Iconoclasm. Instead what were associated with this siege were the relics of the Virgin.

³⁶ *Three Byzantine Saints*, 138-9.

³⁷ *Miracles of St. Artemios*, Miracle 34 and Miracle 43.

³⁸ *Life of Theodosia*, 6. See N. Constans' assessment for the historicity of Theodosia in the introduction to his translation of the *Life of St. Theodosia of Constantinople*.

³⁹ Theophanes the Confessor, 559.

⁴⁰ *Life of Theodosia*, 2.

several examples of icon veneration. A woman, Theotekna, set up an icon in her home after being cured;⁴¹ a man set up an icon over the door to his workshop;⁴² an icon was set up in a church in Alexandria;⁴³ a soldier carried an icon of Saints Kosmas and Damian with him for protection which was also venerated by his wife when he came home;⁴⁴ a woman had icons upon the walls of her home.⁴⁵ These examples show that both men and women were portrayed by the council that ended the first period of Iconoclasm as venerating icons, although as it was the Church speaking they associated icons and women within the private sphere of Byzantine life, their homes.

Three imperial women were credited with venerating icons during the second period of Iconoclasm (AD 815-43): Euphrosyne the step-mother, Theoktiste the mother-in-law and Theodora the wife of the Iconoclast Emperor Theophilos. The story involves Empress Theodora taking her five daughters to see their grandmother, who then taught them to venerate icons.⁴⁶ There is also another story, this time of direct involvement of the empress in icon veneration. The court jester Denderis saw Theodora kissing icons in her private apartments.⁴⁷ However the author of Theodora's *Vita* nowhere suggests that she had icons in her possession or encouraged her daughters to venerate them. Both these stories are literary topoi by Theophanes Continuator and Pseudo-Symeon which belong to the period after Theodora became synonymous with the overturning of Iconoclasm. Therefore the role of these women can be seen as reflecting the attitude of the post-iconoclast period when women were increasingly portrayed as more vehemently pro-icon.

⁴¹ Mango 1972: 134.

⁴² Mango 1972: 134.

⁴³ Mango 1972: 135. 'An enormous and wonderful image: in the middle it had Our Lord Christ... to the left Mother of God, and to the right John the Baptist.'

⁴⁴ Mango 1972: 138-9.

⁴⁵ Mango 1972: 139.

⁴⁶ For the version that refers to Euphrosyne as the grandmother involved see Pseudo-Symeon, 628-29; for Theoktiste see Theophanes Continuatus, 90.

⁴⁷ Theophanes Continuatus, 90-1.

Several Byzantine monastic foundation documents (pl. *typika*) survive; the earliest of these can be dated to the seventh century.⁴⁸ The ninth-century *typikon* of Theodore of Studios, who was an ardent iconophile, does not mention icons. Icons are not mentioned in the Studios monastery until after the end of Iconoclasm. In the sixty-one translations of Byzantine *typika* published by Dumbarton Oaks, thirty contain references to icons and thirty-one do not. However, only three of these *typika* date to before the end of Iconoclasm in AD 843.⁴⁹ The twelfth-century *typikon* of Empress Eirene Doukaina, founder of the *Kecharitomene* convent, is the earliest to mention icons in female monasteries.⁵⁰ This however may be taking the evidence out of context as there are few surviving *typika* for female monasteries and these all date to after the end of Iconoclasm. More male monasteries than female monasteries refer to icons.⁵¹

In conclusion, looking below the layers of the narratives produces the perception that women did have a regularised position in the early Church. In the beginning they performed a vital role and were admired for their help in spreading Christianity. This role ranged from providing meeting places to facilitating baptisms by acting as chaperones. They were given a specific role as deaconess which was increasingly diminished as the ecumenical councils legislated about who could and could not become a deaconess. Women began to be excluded from active participation in the Church in the fifth century, perhaps because they were no longer necessary as there were fewer adult baptisms, since children were baptised shortly after birth. The advent of monastic communities also meant that women could dedicate themselves directly to God. The ecclesiastical legislation, more than the secular, did have an impact on how women were able to worship. The result of this is that by the twelfth century, canonists such as Zonaras and Balsamon, although acknowledging that elderly widows had a place in church in charge of the younger women assembled there, they were not considered part of the formal

⁴⁸ Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: Apa Abraham, 51.

⁴⁹ Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents.

⁵⁰ Byzantine Monastic Foundations Documents: Kecharitomene 14, 677; 59, 697; 80, 710; Appendix B, 714-6.

⁵¹ See the Dumbarton Oaks Collection of Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents.

hierarchy. Elisabeth Clark has neatly summed up the actions of the Church as 'strategies of containment,'⁵² which took women out of the public into the private sphere of life. Therefore the suggestion by Herrin that icon veneration would now become important for women seems on the surface to have credence.

However, that icon veneration was more likely to be by Byzantine women than men does not seem to be supported by the sources. The extant source material points to a rise in icon veneration during the sixth and seventh centuries but there is no evidence that women were more likely to be pro-icon than men. This evidence can be assessed in several ways. Firstly, the survival of texts may not be representative of how much icons were venerated. Secondly, gender construction in the sources may have presented men as venerating icons more than women, whether this reflected actuality or not. It is difficult to assess this, as neither men nor women are called stronger in their piety in their veneration of icons until after the Iconoclast controversy when it is women who are portrayed as fervent iconophiles. This is connected to the role that the empresses Eirene and Theodora have in ending Iconoclasm, which this article cannot discuss due to word limit constraints. Thirdly, the paucity of sources from the previous centuries may not be representative of when and how icons became more prominent, irrespective of gender construction. There is no evidence that women had restricted access to churches or that their religious passion was frustrated, as they could enter female monasteries. From this perspective the sources would not depict Byzantine women as more fervent icon venerators than Byzantine men.

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⁵² Clark 1994: 163.

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