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Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture

Edited by
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in these institutions. Interestingly, however, Liubov’s path was one she shared with her contemporary, the Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna, sister of the last tsarina Alexandra, who founded the Saints Mary and Martha women’s monastery in Moscow after her husband’s assassination in 1905. Class was not as important as we might think in dictating women’s options and practices. More interdisciplinary work needs to be done on peasant women’s evolving cultural aspirations and the influences that were at work in their lives during the dramatic decades of economic and social change after emancipation. Only then will we have a better sense of the everyday experiences and the choices that these women enjoyed.

4. Mary and Women in Late Imperial Russian Orthodoxy

Vera Shevzov

In a recent collection of essays on people’s sacred worlds and the academic study of them, historian Robert Orsi has suggested that we think about religion in terms of relationships that believers form with holy figures. ‘These relationships have all the complexities’, he maintains, ‘of relationships between humans’. If we apply this approach to modern Russia, it quickly becomes evident that the study of women in Orthodox Christianity inevitably leads to, if not begins with, a study of women’s relationship with Mary, the Birth-giver of God (Bogoroditza). Ubiquitously present through her countless images that were located in homes, churches, roadside chapels, marketplaces and sometimes even taverns, Mary was a steadfast reference point in the lives of Orthodox women in the late Imperial period. Supported by an Orthodox belief that her intercessional powers alone could be more effective than the prayers of the entire faith community, Orthodox women turned readily to Mary in moments of need.

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distress and thanksgiving. Though often confined to oral culture, women’s experiences with Mary and her icons were also recorded in petitions to Church authorities regarding the special veneration of Marian images, and in logs kept in churches that housed her miracle-working icons. In this sense, Russia’s Orthodox women from all social and economic backgrounds contributed to sustaining Mary’s life in modern Russia no less than her image contributed to sustaining theirs.

Relationships between women and Mary in modern Russia, however, were highly complex and remain difficult to characterize, in part because of their personal nature. To a large extent, they were formed by associations visually prompted by Marian icons and by the stories associated with them. They also depended in large part on each woman’s individual disposition, hopes, fears, and desires. At the same time, Orthodox women’s conceptions of the woman whom they so revered and the devotional relationship they developed with her were also informed by a broader array of sources. Women’s notions about Mary were animated by a rich, though eclectic, narrative culture that included scripture, liturgical celebrations honouring specific events in Mary’s life, prayers and hymns in her honour, sermons, and, by the mid-nineteenth century, a growing body of devotional literature. In order to gain a sense of the narrative pool from which Russian Orthodox believers in general, and women in particular, might have drawn in forging their relationships with Mary, this essay focuses on a body of hagiographical Marian literature widely circulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, commonly entitled The Earthly Life of the Most-Holy Birth-Giver of God (Zemnaja zhizn’ presvatoi Bogoroditsy).

This genre of literature warrants attention for several reasons. First, numerous accounts of Mary’s life were published in Russia in the nineteenth century, and the number of editions and versions significantly increased during the second half of that century. Sold in villages by itinerant peddlers, the work was commonly found in peasant homes and rural libraries, along with the expected saints’ lives, Psalters and prayer books. In addition, Mary’s life was a customary topic in preaching and perliturgical discussions (vnebogosluzhenskie besedy). Indeed, a review of one version of such a Life, that appeared in 1891 in the Theological Bibliographical Bulletin (Bogoslovskii bibliograficheskii listok), maintained that clergy would find it a rich source for their sermons.

These texts are also notable in that they compel us to reconsider the notion of Mariology in late Imperial Russia and the relationship between images of Mary and the expected roles of women in family, church and society. Most Orthodox Christians at that time probably would have agreed with the view of the dean of the Moscow Theological Academy, Archimandrite Aleksei Zhvanitsyn, who maintained that the essence of the Orthodox teaching on Mary, the Bogoroditsa, was best expressed in the words of a familiar prayer, ‘More honourable than the cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim, who without defilement gave birth to God the Word, true Birth-giver of God, we magnify you’. Yet in contemplating the meaning of these words, not all believers would necessarily have followed the classical, doctrinal direction he took in an 1848 essay, in which he analysed the titles, Birth-giver of God (Bogoroditsa) and Ever-Virgin (Prisynoveda), only in light of her son and the Incarnation. While probably no one would have argued against that approach, we can well imagine that many nineteenth-century women would have been inspired to expound upon Mary’s sanctity in a different way, namely by considering her life as she may have lived it. Published accounts of Mary’s life offered believers narratives that helped to cultivate such inspiration.

2. Pokrova Presvatoi Deve Bogoroditsy. Izbrannye duhovno-prazdnichnye proizvedenia, sluhnotvorenia, povesti i primery iz zhizni i tvoenii svyatych otech, comp. by Igumen Sergii (Novgorod: Tip. M. O. Selivanova, 1905). For descriptions of Mary in local folk customs, see Linda Ivanits, Russian Folk Belief (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 20-24. Joanna Hubbs has pointed out that women’s readings of the Christian story were often expressed in ‘spiritual verses’ that often circulated among, and were composed by, women from various social classes, especially the peasantry; Joanna Hubbs, Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 95. George Fedotov briefly analysed the image of Mary in such spiritual verses: G. Fedotov, Stiki dukhovnye (Paris: YMCA Press, 1935), pp. 47-58.


4. For examples, see Rossiiiskii etnograficheskii musei, f. 7 (Tenishiev), d. 1252, I.4 (diocese of Orel, rural public library); d. 801, I.14; I.20 (Novgorod, private peasant holdings); d. 821, I.72 (Novgorod, local school library); d. 452, I.35 (Viatka, this topic was the subject of public readings at the local zemstvo school); d. 61, I.9 (diocese of Vladimir, private peasant home). Also see Chto chitat’ narodu? Krifteskiiskii ukazuvel’ skri dlia narodgo i detskogo ohotenia, sostavleno uchitel’mitami Kharkovskix chastnoi zhenskoi veckorialnoi shkoly (St Petersburg: Tip. V.S. Balashova, 1888), pp. iii-6.


6. Part of a well-known Byzantine hymn in honour of the Mother of God; usually attributed to St Cosmas the Hymnographer (d. 737). The entire hymn ‘It Is Truly Meet (Dostoi Est)’ is a standard daily prayer in the Orthodox tradition.
and the imagination that it fuelled. Moreover, the fact that the Lives were welcomed by clergy and laity suggests that they exerted pressure neither from above, nor from below, on Marian beliefs and piety, but reflected a tacitly accepted, and in many ways ‘standard’ impression of her in late Imperial Russia.

This essay examines the images of Mary, particularly in terms of her motherhood, as presented in the published Lives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to appreciate the variety of associations regarding her powerful image that were available to Orthodox women during this period. Because these Lives were composed and published at the same time that currents from the feminist movement in the West were impressing Russian society, this essay also considers the image of Mary as presented in Orthodox – mainly clerical – responses to that movement. Read in the light of these clerical responses, the published Lives of Mary take on added meaning in terms of defining the traditional Orthodox depiction of Mary and explaining Mary’s unabated appeal among Russia’s women of faith.

The published Lives of Mary: Sources and Inspiration

Published accounts of Mary’s life in nineteenth-century Russia were not original in the usual understanding of that term. As early as the mid-second century, curiosity concerning the woman who bore and raised Jesus, as well as disputes about that woman’s identity, led to the formulation of early Christian accounts of Mary’s early life. By the late fourth and fifth centuries Christians also told stories about her death. Throughout the Byzantine period, select stories and episodes from her life shaped the Christian understandings of Mary by their influence on preaching, iconography, and hymnody. The homilies of such well-known patristic authors as Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Andrew of Crete (d. 720 or 740), Germanus, archbishop of Constantinople (d. 733 or 740) and John of Damascus (d. 749), all reflected the influence of such apocryphal accounts. Given their widespread influence in Byzantium, it is not surprising that stories concerning Mary’s life, including the Protevangelium of James and narratives concerning her death, were part of the ‘international collection’ of apocryphal texts that ancient Russia inherited from Byzantium following the Christianization of Rus’ in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Apocryphal texts in general, including those concerning Mary, were ambiguously positioned in Orthodox Christianity in nineteenth-century Russia. On the one hand, the Church recognized the distinction between canonical and non-canonical texts and maintained that the latter often contained fabricated embellishments to biblical narratives. Some churchmen went even further and attempted to demythologize certain Marian-related apocryphal accounts since they only ‘supported fabrications which were intolerable in the Christian Church’. In his history of Mount Athos, for instance, the archaeologist and bishop Porfiri (Uspeiskii) challenged a story about a reported visit of Mary to Mount Athos following the death and resurrection of Jesus, a story often included in nineteenth-century Lives of Mary. By demonstrating that the story was a popular local Athonite legend on which Georgian monks from the Iveron monastery on Athos had capitalized in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Uspeiskii hoped to curtail any damage that ‘pious falsehoods’ might inflict on the ‘holy truth’.


9. Protorei I. Smirnov, ‘Apokrificheskie skazaniia o Bozhiei Materi i deianiakh apostolov’, Pravoslavnoe obozrenie (April, 1873), 569–614; N. E. Smirnov, Ocherki istorii i︠u︡zhno-razlichnikh apokrificheskikh skazanii v posen (Kiev: Tip. A. Divdenko, 1898), pp. 3–4; V. V. Mil’kov, Dremerusskie apokrify (St Petersburg: Izd. Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1999), p. 18. Francis Thomson, however, has noted although apocryphal gospels such as the Protevangelium of James were among the earliest translated into Slavonic, the earliest existing manuscripts in Russia date only to the fourteenth-century: Francis Thomson, ‘The Nature of the Reception of Christian Byzantine Culture in Russia in the 10th–13th centuries’, Slavie Gelandens, 5 (1978), 107–38 (108).


On the other hand, such caution could only go so far. Various apocryphal stories dating from the second to the tenth centuries, as well as patristic writings concerning the life and character of Mary, were woven into the analytically elusive yet palpable fabric of Orthodoxy known as tradition. In ancient Russia, such apocryphal stories were embedded in collections with canonical texts, including biblical texts, suggesting that the boundary between the two often had been vague at best. In the first part of the sixteenth century, the future metropolitan of Moscow, Makarri, oversaw the gathering of such sacred writings along with hundreds of texts concerning saints and feasts into a monumental collection of daily readings — the 

menologion (Chet’i-Minrei). Subsequently, in the early eighteenth century, the bishop of Rostov, Dimitrii, completed his own version of the 

menologion that also contained material drawn from Western sources, such as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. By including apocryphal stories associated with Mary in their collections, Metropolitan Makarri (Bulgakov) of Moscow (d. 1563) and Metropolitan Dimitrii (Tuptalo) of Rostov (d. 1709) sanctioned and reaffirmed their place in Orthodox devotional knowledge.

While stories concerning Mary’s early life and death developed independently early in the history of Christianity, as a literary genre, the hagiographical Life of Mary appeared later. Marian hagiographies that combined descriptions of her early years, as depicted in the 

Protevangelium of James, with those of her later years, as depicted in stories about her death, appeared in Byzantine monastic circles as early as the sixth or seventh century and subsequently found their way to the medieval West. In Russia, the genre of Mary’s Life was known by at least the fourteenth century, with some scholars indicating its importance in the composition of lives of medieval and early modern Russian saints.

In the modern period, inspiration to pen these lives in Russia came primarily from the Ukraine, through the work of the seventeenth-century preacher and archimandrite of the Chernigov monastery, Ioanniki

Galiatovskii (d. 1688). His well-known collection of Marian miracles, The New Heaven (Nebo novoe), incorporated not only ancient Byzantine and Russian narratives about Mary, but also details of her life that had come to be known primarily in the Roman catholic West. It is noteworthy that Russia’s nineteenth-century interest in Mary’s life also found a parallel in Europe, where during the first half of that century a well-received Life of Mary composed in France by Abbot Orsini was published and subsequently translated into English, Italian, Spanish, and German. It is difficult to establish for certain, however, the extent to which this work or others like it were known or read in Russia.

By the nineteenth century, then, stories about Mary’s life had already enjoyed quasi-canonical status in Russia for centuries insofar as they had informed liturgical hymnody and iconography. Consequently, Russia’s believers would have attributed a semblance of authority to them. To question the authenticity of even select strands of such narratives could potentially call into question the authority ascribed to tradition more broadly speaking. Not surprisingly, therefore, in describing his source base, one author of a Life of Mary, composed in 1845, maintained that the Orthodox church ‘preserves’ and ‘respects’ such stories about Mary ‘because they carry the imprint of apostolic times and are entirely compatible with the Word of God’, thereby attributing to them a sense of authenticity, if not historical accuracy.

What might explain the resurgence and popularity of this genre in nineteenth-century Russia? In part, these Lives exemplified the broader upsurge in the production of devotional literature in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century and, in particular, of Marian devotional literature. Such an interest in her life might also be viewed as part of broader devotional

15. The complete title of Galiatovskii’s work, initially published in Polish, was Nebo novoe, s novymi zvezdami sotvorenoi, t. e. Prebłagolovieniia Deva Mariia s chudami Swiemi, och. Ioannikia Galiatovskogo (L’vov, 1665). The work was translated into Russian in 1677; Sumtsov, Ocherki istorii, p. 57; N. F. Sumtsov, Ioannikii Galiatovskii (Kiev: Tip. G. V. Gorochak-Novitskogo, 1884); I. I. Ogienko, Legendarno-Apokrificheskii element v ‘Nebe Novom’ Ioannikia Galiatovskogo, izhino-russkogo propovednika XVII-go veka (Kiev: Tip. T. G. Meinander, 1913).
trends sweeping through Europe, in which Mary figured prominently. With the reports of appearances of Mary in La Salette (France, 1856), Lourdes (1858), Marpingen (Germany, 1876) and Knock (Ireland, 1879), the nineteenth century has been referred to as the start of the ‘age of Mary’. Believers’ experience of Mary in nineteenth-century Russia, especially through her countless icons, was no less evident. Her Life provided a background and character to the woman who was portrayed on these revered images and helped to facilitate a relationship with her.18 Evgenii Poselianin, a compiler of such a Life, reminded his readers that they ‘did not have to sail from Antioch to Jerusalem in order to enter into a relationship with the Mother of God’. Such a relationship was possible through meditation and prayer, imaginative recollection and an ‘exalted gaze’ upward from ‘worldly strife’.19

Imagination played a key role in these devotional texts. They documented centuries of imaginative Christians thinking from such diverse places as Constantinople, Syria, Jerusalem, Crete and Rome, as well as encouraged creative thought on the part of their readers. The genre’s very raison d’estre – filling in the conspicuous lacunae left by canonical scriptures – motivated devotional elaboration. By ‘piously exerting their imaginations’, wrote Evgenii Poselianin, readers could surmise what might have taken place in Mary’s life.20 Moreover, the fact that many of these Lives often told similar, yet not identical, stories, tacitly encouraged and sanctioned such creative reflection. Not only was such meditation not harmful or frivolous; it was, in fact, a matter of devotional etiquette. Compilers of Mary’s life insisted that given the extent to which believers turned to her for guidance and inspiration, believers were ‘obligated to know the circumstances of her [own] life’.21 Such knowledge would be both ‘comforting and edifying’.22

The popularity of the genre might also be explained by a spirituality that encouraged an imitation of Mary. Such imitation was a common theme in Orthodoxy in pre-revolutionary Russia. Clergy especially addressed this topic on the occasions of her feast days, when they encouraged such imitation in their sermons. Only by imitating the ‘inner image’ of Mary, Bishop Justin (Polianskii) of Riazan’ stated in 1900, could believers ‘maturely’ fulfill Christ’s directives.23 In 1894 the widely-distributed journal, The Russian Pilgrim (Russkii palomnik), even republished a modified and highly-edited translation of an eighteenth-century work by the French Jesuit Alexander-Joseph de Rouville called The Imitation of Mary (O podrazhaniu Presvatiui Deve Marii), a sequel of sorts to Thomas à Kempis’ famous Life of Christ. To some extent, the longing to know more about Mary’s life was related to a desire to imitate her.24

Furthermore, the proliferation of versions of Mary’s Life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took place at a time when the quest for the historical Jesus among Western biblical scholars was well underway. In Russia, these influences were felt on the more popular level by means of the circulation of such books as Ernest Renan’s famous The Life of Jesus in 1863 (Russian translation abroad, 1864) and Lev Tolstoi’s various essays regarding Christianity that followed his Confession (Ispoved’) in 1879. While the authors of the versions of the Life of Mary did not refer to the modern Lives of Jesus, their compositions, nevertheless, reflect sensitivity towards history and a desire to present their accounts as ‘factual’, despite their Mythological character. For instance, in order to give his account added authority, one anonymous compiler made sure to identify the authors of relevant ancient sources as historians.25 In addition, such Lives frequently described the environment of the Holy Land, often including illustrations to ground their narratives geographically. Some compilers also attempted to provide broader historical contexts for their stories. In relating the story of the wedding at Cana, for example, one compiler described what he considered to be a typical Jewish wedding of the time. Another presented evidence for consecrated virgins living in the temple during this period as a context for the story of Mary’s presentation into

23. Episkop Justin, Poselenie v chest’ i slava Presvatiui Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Afonskii russkii Pantaleimonov monastyr, 1900), p. 90; Besedy o presvatiui Bogoroditse (St Petersburg [n.p.], 1901), pp. 3, 19. Occasionally, a compiler of a life of Mary would mention the importance of imitating Mary as a guide to salvation. For example, S. D. Stulchev, Zhizn’ presvatiui Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Manukhin, 1873), Zemniiia zhizn’ Presvatiui Bogoroditsy, comp. by Ioann Kuzmichev (Moscow: Izd. Monzov, 1894), p. 4.


the temple. 26

Finally, the late nineteenth century offered greater opportunity for authorship of such texts. No longer was the compilation of such publications a predominantly monastic occupation. Among more than two dozen accounts of Mary’s life, only four can be directly identified with a monastic context: two were penned by monastics and two others were published by monastic presses. 27 Several texts remain anonymous. The identifiable compilers include an interesting mix of urban and rural priests, deacons, a professor at a theological academy, laymen and even two lay women who were known for their careers in the literary world: the translator and devotional writer Avedot’ia Pavlovna Glinka (1795–1863) and Sof’ia Ivanovna Snesoreva (1816–1904). 28 The experience of marriage and family in many of these cases introduced a new working context for the narration of Mary’s life.

We can see some of the motivations that led to the compilation of these Lives in the foreword that Avedot’ia Glinka, wife of the poet and essayist Fedor Glinka, provided to her book, The Life of the Most Holy Virgin Mother of God According to the Books of the Menologion (Zhit’ 29

presviatoi Devy Borogorditsy po knizsam Chet’i-Mineiam), first published in 1840. 30 Having compiled her work from the references to Mary in the Menologion (Chet’i-Minei) by Dimitrii, Metropolitan of Rostov, Glinka stated that she had been inspired to take on this project for two reasons. 31 First, she believed such a text would provide people with a relatively complete Life of the Mother of God, which could serve as spiritual inspiration and edification. She noted that she had enjoyed spiritual benefit while working on this project. As she wrote, the scenes frequently brought tears of compunction to her eyes: “I acknowledge – no one secular book [...] has had such a touching effect on me.” 32

Second, Glinka was sensitive to the dilemmas of Christianity in a modernizing world, a sentiment shared by Abbot Orsini with regard to his compilation of a Life of Mary in France. 33 Glinka wished to make Mary’s life more accessible to the common, secular ear; hence, she translated the relevant passages from the Slavonic menologion into modern Russian, an effort Orthodox clergy found commendable. 34 Glinka’s progressive efforts proved fruitful. Her version of the Earthly Life was an immediate success; by 1915 it had gone through sixteen editions.

Sof’ia Snesoreva, whose Life of Mary (Zemnaiia zhit’i presviatoi Bogoroditsy i opisanie sviatykh chudotvornykh ee ikon) was published some fifty years later (1891), seems to have been motivated by similar sensibilities. A translator, Snesoreva had worked for such well-known publications as Library for Reading (Biblioteka dla chtenia), Collection of Foreign Novels (Sobranie inostrannykh romanov), and Notes of the Fatherland (Otechestvennye zapiski). 35 Her life path eventually led her to become a


27. Zhit’i preblagoslavennykh vladychnych nasheia Bogoroditsy Prisvoedny Marii, comp. by Ieromonakh Stefan, 3rd edn (Moscow: Tip. I.D. Sytina, 1898); Zemnaiia zhit’i Presviatoi Devy Marii Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Izd. Afonskogo sv. Proroka Ilii skita, 1899); Arkhimandrit Ioann Verizhukski, Beseda s ruskimi bogomol’tamia o zemni zhit’i Bozhi Materi i eia blagodatnom ispol’zovani (St. Petersburg: Pravoslavnoe Palestinskoe obshchestvo, 1908); Vasili, episkop Mozhaiskii, Zhit’i presviatoi i preblagoslavennyh Bogoroditsy i Prisvoedny Marii: Dushespol’stvennaiia beseda (Sergiev Posad: Tip. Pr. Sergievoi Lavry, 1914).

28. Although it is impossible to identify the compilers of all of the versions of the published Lives in late imperial Russia, in addition to Avedot’ia Glinka and Sof’ia Snesoreva, some of the compilers include: Petr Simonovich Kaznasinski, (d. 1878), a layman, historian, and graduate from the Moscow Theological Academy; I. V. Krasnitski, a layman, devotional writer, and bibliographer (d. 1900); P. Losev, a layman, devotional writer and author of a catechetical textbook; E. N. Posel’ianin (Pogozhev), a layman, devotional writer from a noble family; executed 1931; Ivan Evgen’evich Rozanov, a deacon; Mikhail Il’ich Sokolov (d. 1885), a priest and devotional writer who published in Rakovost’i dla sel’skih pastyrei i Tserkovnii vesnosti; Arkhimandrit Ioann Verizhukski (d. 1907), superior of the Kirillo-Novodevsky monastery: ‘Nekrolog’, Vologodskie eparkhiin’iye vedomosti, no. 2 (1907), 40–41. It is noteworthy that Avedot’ia Glinka was also a composer of akathist hymns, a genre of devotional hymnody that became extraordinarily popular in nineteenth-century Russia. For akathist hymns to the Mother of God, see Vera Sheshev, ‘Between Popular and Official: Akafists Hymns and Marian Icons in Late Imperial Russia’, in Letters from Heaven: Popular Religion in Russia and Ukraine, ed. by John-Paul Himka and Andriy Zayarnyuk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 251–77.


30. Zhit’i presviatoi devy Bogoroditsy po knizsam Chet’i-Mineiam, comp. by Avedot’ia Glinka, 14th edn (Moscow: Tip. Stupina, 1904), pp. 5–7. The Chet’i-Minei is a twelve-volume collection of the lives of saints and readings for feasts for every day of the liturgical year.


32. In the preface to his work, Abbot Orsini had indicated that one of the reasons for compiling the life of Mary concerned the need to modernize the appeal of the Christian faith: Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, pp. v–ix.


spiritual daughter of the well-known monastic writer and later bishop, Ignatii Brianchaninov. He, in turn, drew upon her connections to the literary world and became indebted to her for the publication of many of his works.\(^{35}\) Though she clearly loved her work as a translator of secular European literature, under the encouragement and influence of Brianchaninov, Snesoreva began writing spiritual works, culminating with the publication of a *Life of Mary* when she was 83. Like Glinka, she too, was moved by Mary. As one reviewer of her book wrote, her work ‘is permeated with and warmed by the religious sensibilities of its author’.\(^{36}\) Yet unlike Glinka, whose work drew almost exclusively on Metropolitan Dimitrii of Rostov’s *menologion*, Snesoreva culled from a wide variety of sources, including the fourteenth-century Byzantine historian Nicephorus Callistus Zanathopoulos (d. 1335). Comparable to the work of hagiographers in late antiquity, Glinka’s and Snesoreva’s work with Mary’s life became a means of not only expressing their own devotion but, as Derek Kruger has observed, ‘a technology for its cultivation’.\(^{37}\)

The Byzantine predecessors of Russia’s nineteenth-century *Lives* of Mary exhibited two tendencies with respect to her portrayal. According to the historian of Christianity, Stephen Shoemaker, the first tendency appeared in a *Life of the Virgin*, dating back as early as the seventh century; it emphasized Mary’s active presence during Jesus’ ministry and in the early Christian community after his death. According to this seventh-century *Life*, Mary was active during her son’s ministry as a leader and guardian of the women who followed him. This early text also depicted her as the sole witness to the resurrection. She announced the glad tidings to the disciples and to the myrrh-bearing women. Finally, this *Life* placed the Mother of God at the centre of the Christian community following Jesus’ ascension: ‘She was a leader and a teacher to the holy apostles’, the text states.\(^{38}\)

Another *Life* of Mary that appeared later in monastic circles (in the ninth and tenth centuries) exhibits a second tendency. The extent to which it minimises Mary’s role, both during Jesus’ ministry and in the early years of the Christian community, is striking. This *Life* of Mary, composed by Epiphanius the Monk in Constantinople in the ninth century, did not even mention her presence at the wedding at Cana. Similarly, Mary neither bore witness to the resurrection, nor was among the women who found the empty tomb. Instead, this *Life* portrayed her as having stayed at home because her grief was too great.\(^{39}\)

The numerous *Lives* of Mary published in nineteenth-century Russia generally fall between these two types. Some versions of her *Life* stray little from the Gospel texts.\(^{40}\) The majority of *Lives*, however, follow the chronology of the biblical narrative, but draw to one degree or another on the apocryphal narratives that describe Mary’s birth, childhood and death, as well as writings attributed (sometimes falsely) to such well-known Christian authors as Ignatius of Antioch, Andrew of Crete, John Chrysostom and Ambrose of Milan, among others. The *Lives* also sometimes make extensive use of liturgical texts, hymnody and whatever else their compilers assumed as belonging under the canopy of ‘tradition’, and therefore worthy of communication. In the end, the *Lives* are distinguished from one another not only by the stories the compilers chose to include, but also by the compiler’s own intermittent interpretation and commentary.

### The Life of Mary: Vocation and Motherhood

The *Lives* of Mary, though often similar in terms of chapter composition, varied in style and emphasis. Some compilers, for instance, wove their narrative voices freely into the text; others chose a more reserved approach and focused more strictly on the New Testament and traditional liturgical texts.\(^{41}\) Some compilations read as weighty panegyrics that meditated on Mary as an ‘imprint of perfection’, upon whom God continually gazed ‘with eyes of favour’.\(^{42}\) Such *Lives* often opened with a review of the classical biblical prefigurations and prophecies that ancient Christians believed

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35. For correspondence between Ignatii Brianchaninov and Sof’ia Snesoreva, see ‘Pis’ma svyatitel’ya Ignatii Brianchaninova k S. I. Snesorevoi, Svaytitele’ Ignatii Brianchaninov. Pismo sobranie tovornoi, V, 487–554.
36. Bogodonski bibliograficheski listok, 463.
40. Zem’naia zhiz’’ Tsaritsy Nesbsoi (Moscow: Sinojala tipografia, 1913).
41. As examples, see P. S. Kazanskii, *Zem’naia zhiz’’ Prevalitoi Bogoroditsy* (St Petersburg: Izd. Elagina, 1870); M. I. Sokolov, *Zhit’’ Bozhiei Materi* (St Petersburg: Tip. Tovarnichestva ‘Obshchestvennaia pol’za’, 1873); Zem’naia zhiz’’ Tsaritsy Nesbsoi (Moscow: Sinojala tipografia, 1913).
Joseph, Mary continued to live according to her perceived calling and did not unequivocally conform to the life of Joseph's busy household. She seems to have lived in Joseph's home but did not, at least at first, forego her aspirations in order to cultivate family bonds. Her vocation took precedence.

At the same time, in contrast to the Gospel texts in which family was redefined largely in terms of discipleship, many of the Lives are significantly more sensitive to traditional family bonds. The deacon, I. E. Rozanov, for example, emphasized the spiritual benefits and joys of family life and considered the nature of human bonding unique to the parent-child relationship. This is also evident with respect to the portrayal of Mary's alleged parents. Some versions of Mary's life depict Joachim and Anna hesitating to fulfill their vow of dedicating Mary to the temple. Instead, a determined three-year-old Mary convinces them to let her go. Similarly, in some versions, Anna not only regularly visits Mary, but, along with Joachim, eventually moves to Jerusalem in order to be closer to her daughter and to participate in her upbringing. When Joachim dies, some Lives note that Anna moves in with Mary and spends the last two years of her life with her. In her compilation, Glinka included a discussion of the feast of the Annunciation by the Archbishop of Tver, Grigorii (Postnikov), in which he linked the power of Mary's prayer to the lack of parental love. She engaged in prayer, he maintained, ‘when the emptiness of her heart desired fullness’.

The Gospel texts offer scant insights into Mary's life and disposition during the years of Jesus’ youth and ministry. Only two, the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Luke, relate any details about Mary and her infant son. After their brief mention of Jesus’ birth and, in Matthew, the family’s flight to Egypt and eventual return to Nazareth, these texts offer readers only four brief glimpses of Mary for the duration of Jesus’ short life. The nineteenth-century Lives of Mary often recognize

43. Radouina Blagodatnaiia, Gospod' s Toboiia (Moscow: Universitetskaia tip, 1899); Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy: Blagoveshchenskaiia razmopleniia kristianina (Moscow: Tip. A. Semena, 1863), p. 12; Sokolov, Zhiz' Bezhi dil Materi.
44. For examples where compilers emphasized Mary's intellectual acumen and enlightened mind, see Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy i Prisno-DerevMarii (Moscow: Tip. Orlova, 1876), p. 25; Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Tip. Sytina, 1903), p. 9; Posebini, Bogomer' s zemle, p. 26. For compilers who mentioned her work ethic, see Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Izd. Gubanova, 1886), p. 25; Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Odessa: E. I. Fesenko, 1896), p. 94; Posebini, Bogomer' s zemle, pp. 58, 61. For Mary's courage, see Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Moscow, 1863), p. 30; Glinka, Zhizn' Presviatlyia derev Bogoroditsy, p. 57. For Mary's political awareness, see Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Moscow: Tip. Sytina, 1903), pp. 88-89.
46. For examples, see Glinka, Zhizn' Presviatlyia derev Bogoroditsy, p. 45; Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy i Prisno-DerevMarii (Moscow: Tip. Orlova, 1876), p. 14.
47. As examples, see Glinka, Zhizn' Presviatlyia derev Bogoroditsy, p. 48. O zemnii zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy: Naroduicnietzienia (St Petersburg: Tip. Straua, 1890); Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy (Odessa: E. I. Fesenko, 1896), pp. 23, 29; Pokrovskii, Zemnaia zhizn' Presviatlyia Bogoroditsy, p. 15.
50. Glinka, Zhizn' Presviatlyia derev Bogoroditsy, p. 236.
51. The four scores include: 1) Mark 3:31-35 with parallels in Matthew 12:46-50 and Luke
this conspicuous lacuna in Scripture and address it. Several compilers reflected upon the anonymity of motherhood and its consequences. As an 'invisible' period in a mother’s life, the years of child-rearing generally escape historical attention. Mary, in this sense, was no different from other mothers. In an attempt to rehabilitate this anonymity, one version of Mary’s life reminded its readers that often it was not the most conspicuous actions in history, but the ‘inner’, not immediately evident, ones that ultimately proved historically most significant.

Other authors attempted to dispel the ‘deep anonymity’ and ‘impenetrable veil’ of silence surrounding Mary’s motherhood by encouraging readers to imagine her hypothetical conversations with Jesus, when they ‘inclined their heads together’. It was at these moments that he may have disclosed mysteries known to her alone. While some versions of Mary’s Life predictably maintain that Jesus, as the Word of God incarnate, needed no instruction, others emphasize that he followed the development laws of all children. Hence, Mary’s and Joseph’s roles were not superfluous in his upbringing. Evgenii Posel’ianin emphasized that the holy family was a working family and that Mary, too, worked. As a single mother following Joseph’s death, her work only increased so as to be able to support her son. Another compiler, who composed a Life for public reading groups among ‘the people’, specifically noted that Mary took on the education of her son and served as an example to parents in child-rearing.

Texts are more divided with respect to Mary’s role during Jesus’ ministry. Some versions of Mary’s Life maintain that, despite scriptural silence on

the matter, Mary was undoubtedly among the women who followed Jesus throughout his ministry. The version of Mary’s Life that originated in the Skete of the prophet Elijah on Mount Athos, for instance, agrees that while Mary was present in Jesus’ company throughout his ministry and served as an inspiration for the other women in the group, she at no time manifested her ‘maternal rights’ over him. In other words, the compiler of this text made a point to emphasize that Mary’s sphere of influence did not extend to the content of Jesus’ ministry. Other versions of Mary’s life, such as Snossoreva’s, left Mary outside the purview of Jesus’ ministry altogether, maintaining that Mary spent very little time with him during those years. While authors often attempted to decipher the meaning of scriptural silence regarding this period in Mary’s life, few actually interpreted it as an overt virtue, as did the rural priest M. Sokolov from the Smolensk diocese. In his version of Mary’s Life, he maintained that ‘nothing better demonstrated the Holy Virgin’s humility and meekness than her silence during Jesus’ ministry’.

Despite their views on Mary’s whereabouts during the three years of Jesus’ active ministry, all versions of Mary’s Life have her joining him in Jerusalem for his final days. From this point, as Snossoreva reported, Mary remained as close to her son as possible and if she did not visually witness the events that unfolded, then at least she heard what transpired. Accordingly, compilers often retained the ancient tradition that considered Mary a unique witness to the last days of Jesus’ life.

Mary’s motherhood comes into particular relief in descriptions of her experiences during the final hours of her son’s life. All of the texts dwell on her maternal agony in the face of the excruciating torture of her only child. Some Lives depict her as making a desperate appeal to Pilate in person. The depth of this agony explains why, according to many compilers, Jesus did not address Mary as ‘mother’ in his last words to her on the Cross; instead he

58. Sokolov, Zhizni’ Bozhii Materi, p. 22.
chose the more formal ‘woman’, trying to spare her grief. Several versions even attempt to penetrate the character of that suffering. The well-known devotional writer, Evgenii Poselianin, described in most compelling terms the inner turmoil and anguish of a woman torn between a deep faith in, and understanding of, the cause for which her son chose to die and her profound, unique and unrepeatable bond with an only child. Even at this final stand, according to Poselianin, ‘a secret, silent conversation, never recognized by the world’, took place between mother and son.

Because of the power and privilege of motherhood, the majority of the Lives did not accept at face value Scripture’s silence regarding Mary’s witness of the resurrection. After all, claimed one anonymous compiler, ‘she undoubtedly had more right to see the Saviour’ than anyone else. Accordingly, the Lives of Mary often follow the ancient tradition that places Mary as the first witness to the resurrection. Some versions also included the ancient explanation of why such an important ‘fact’ was not included in the Gospel accounts. Compilers maintained that this detail was omitted so as not to give anyone pause to doubt the resurrection, since mothers can be biased. For this reason Mary herself forbade the disciples to speak about her or her testimonies directly.

Finally, the nineteenth-century Lives of Mary included those scenes from ancient narratives that depicted her as an influential teacher and administrator in the life of the early Church. One version refers to her as the ‘focal point’ of the young Christian community. Fearlessly, claimed Snossoreva, ‘she directed the first steps of the infant church’ and guided the apostles on their missionary itineraries. According to the nineteenth-century Lives, Mary also reportedly participated in missionary work, which, in one account, earned her the title of ‘holy preacher’ (svetiata propovednitsa).

The apostles routinely turned to her for guidance and support, seeing in her the ‘face of their Lord’. Moreover, because she was the first to comprehend the significance of the events surrounding the life and death of her son, she was the ‘Apostle to the apostles’, speaking words as if from the lips of the Lord himself. New members of the young community would travel from afar to hear her speak. As the primary source of information concerning the life and teachings of Jesus that were known only to her as his mother, she was not only a source of inspiration but, as Glinka’s compilation suggests, one of the primary sources for the Gospel narrative.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the published Lives of Mary typically end with her death or dormition. Occasionally, authors added a chapter on Mary’s appearances after her death, and one version added a chapter on posthumous miracles attributed to her. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, however, accounts of Mary’s life increasingly began to include a compendium of images of Russia’s most specially-revered Marian icons and the miracle stories associated with them. Prior to this time, Mary’s life and the compendia of her miracle-working images were for the most part published separately. Combining the two genres offered an added dimension, both to Mary’s life, and to her miracle-working images. On the one hand, the combined genre expanded the scope and meaning of Mary’s life and motherhood. With Mary’s life now encompassing the chronicles associated with her icons, her authority, identity and meaning were no longer simply a part of the past, but were confirmed as relating to the

other examples see, Zemnye zhitii Bogoroditsy Drev – upovaniya khristianom (Moscow: Tip. Fugodina, 1871), p. 32; Rozanov, Zemnya zhit’ Presvati Bogoroditsy, p. 46; Krasinitski, Zemnya zhit’ Presvati Bogoroditsy, p. 30. Many of the descriptions of Mary as a missionary are based on a narrative describing Mary’s visit to Mt. Athos and her interaction with its non-Christian inhabitants. In the late nineteenth-century, in a desire to purify Christianity of ‘lies to which it is intolerable’, the archeologist and Bishop Porfiri (Uspsenski) maintained that the story was a popular local Athonite myth on which Georgian monks from the Iveron monastery on Mount Athos had capitalised in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century in order to give added weight to their own community. See Episkop Porfiri (Uspsenski), Istoria Afon v dvuh tomakh, 2 vols (1892; reprint, Moscow: DAR, 2007), I, 212.

70. Glinka, Zemnya zhit’ Bogoroditsy, p. 149.


73. Zemnya zhit’ presvatiy Bogoroditsy i ece chudesa (Moscow: E. A. Gubanov, 1886).
The Appeal of Mary's Life in late Imperial Russia

The popular appeal of Mary's life for Russia's Orthodox women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is difficult to gauge. The direct testimonies of Glinka's and Sensoreva's work and the indirect evidence that these Lives were sold by traveling peddlers, found in peasant homes and in rural and urban libraries suggests that Orthodox women in Russia were familiar with these accounts. Moreover, since clergy turned to Mary's life as a source for preaching and public discussion, many women would have been comfortable with the process of imagining the character of her life. One way to consider the potential impact of these accounts is to read them in light of Orthodox responses to the women's movement in the late Imperial period. In what way did the image of Mary, as presented in the Lives, correspond to the ideals and images of women, in particular Mary, described in these responses to the women's movement?

In essays and sermons that directly addressed issues the women's movement raised, churchmen generally agreed on the essential equality by nature of men and women, basing their views either on the creation story in Genesis (1:26–31; 2:4–25) or on Paul's assertion in his letter to the Galatians (3:29), that there is neither male nor female 'in Christ'. In the essential matters of redemption, salvation and the Kingdom of God, they thus maintained no differences between men and women. Such essential equality, they often argued, was a unique trait of Christianity that set it apart from other religions in the world of late antiquity.

At the same time, however, churchmen differed in their evaluations of the distinction between the sexes in this life. On the one hand, some churchmen did not share the Orthodox establishment's view that the image of God shone directly only through men—women reflecting that image only indirectly, by means of their husbands. Some clergy dismissed feminist demands for equal rights in the workforce by insisting on women's inferior intellectual and physical strength. As the priest N. Steletskii wrote in 1909, 'we are convinced that to no female is it given to develop genuinely creative activity, to pave the way for new paths in the sciences or the arts, or to produce something that would have true significance in the history of culture and that would facilitate progress'.

On the other hand, in attempting to embrace modern ideals and aspirations, other churchmen were significantly more moderate in their consideration of distinctions between men and women. Describing women as 'equal participants' in life and equal collaborators on the home front, they also recognized the intellectual acumen of women and argued strongly for their professional education.

In his support for women's education, a lay

74. As examples, see Sokolov, Zhizn' Bezhiey Materi (St Petersburg: Tip. Tovarisches'tva 'Obeskhodvennai a pol'za', 1873), p. 28.
76. As an example, see I. Galakhov, Zhenshchiny vosproj prichiny i otsenki s khristianskoi tochki zreniia', Khristianskoe chinenie (July, 1903), pp. 102-05; Zhenshchiny-krashtaniki (Moscow: Sinodal'naia tipografia, 1905), p. 23; Zhenshchiny-krashtaniki (Kaluga: Tip. Gubernskogo pravleniia, 1912).
77. Velikoe vespitatel'noe znenie Khristianskoi zhenshchiny: rech' vespitatel'noi, okonchitelnoi kursov v 319 tsentsii godu (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia, 1893); A. V. Nikitin, 'Khristianski vikladii na zneni i prava zhenshchiny', Vena i berkov, 1:5 (1899), 718-56; Episkop Vissarion, 'Polozhenie lits zhenskago pola v zhizni khristianskoi, someinoi i obeskhodvennoi', Dushepleznoe chinenie (November, 1902), 344-45; Zhenshchiny-krashtaniki (Moscow, 1905).
physician writing in the devotional journal, *Beneficial Reading for the Soul* (*Dushpaleznnoe chitienie*), argued that Christ himself had chosen to discuss complex theological issues with women. In a similar vein, the Bishop of Tomsk, Makarii (Nevskii), maintained that women would not only benefit from theological education but from philosophical, mathematical and scientific education as well: ‘From among the main fields of human knowledge, there is not one which would not be beneficial to women.’

Despite their diverse evaluations of the differences between men and women, most churchmen in late Imperial Russia agreed that by divine design the two were responsible for different social spheres. Writing in 1873, the priest Aleksei Klucharev described these spheres as two ‘worlds’ – a ‘macrocosm’ (*mir velikii*) and a ‘microcosm’ (*mir malyi*). The macrocosm entailed the public social and political spheres of life, while the microcosm referred to the private and familial spheres. Few churchmen would have disagreed that a woman’s world – her ‘innate kingdom’ and the ‘cornerstone of state and society’ – was the family. Churchmen differed only as to the degree of the permeability of the two worlds and the extent to which women were free to move between them.

In their efforts to define women’s roles, clergy drew primarily on the images of women as mothers and helpmates as the main antidote to the growing women’s movement in their midst. Despite Orthodoxy’s traditional estimation of monasticism as the higher form of lifestyle, churchmen paid remarkably little attention to its ideals and virtues when it came to modern women. Instead, they insisted that motherhood and the family belonged to the essence of womanhood. Attempting to empower women in their traditional roles, clergy countered associations of family life and marriage with confinement, by arguing for the immense potential influence (social and political) of mothers and wives. For instance, given the potential that women held to ‘shape the character of the human race’, one priest wondered why a woman would instead desire to participate in government life. Another priest maintained that because of women’s associations with life, and the creation of life, as mothers, they were meant to direct culture and history.

In 1864, an anonymous, Orthodox woman voiced similar sentiments in an unusual essay published in the devotional journal, *Beneficial Reading for the Soul*. Voicing her concerns about the potential complications the women’s movement might have for children and family life, she advocated a higher social, political and civic evaluation of motherhood. Alluding to her own experiences as a mother, she spoke of the unique position she held, and of the freedom and independence that role gave her, with respect to social influence. As mothers and overseers of the ‘microcosmic’ or ‘inner’ sphere of human life, she maintained, women were positioned at the very core of society, the very functioning of which depended on them.

Remarkably, in their response to the women’s movement and their deliberations on the role of women in contemporary society, Orthodox churchmen did not routinely draw on the image of Mary in support of their views or as a model to imitate. When they did introduce her, they spoke of her most often theoretically and meta-historically in light of the Incarnation. Her role as God-bearer in salvation history, they argued, placed her at the forefront of any discussion of women and liberation for several reasons. Because God had chosen to clothe himself in the humanity of a woman, reasoned Aleksandr Nadezhdin in 1872, there could be no doubt about women’s dignity and glory. Given Mary’s role in salvation history, he argued, any contempt and disrespect for women was ‘abnormal.’ In maintaining that Mary’s role in salvation history ensured the high esteem of women at large, Orthodox churchmen also sometimes considered the classical Christian view of the relationship between Mary and Eve. Through her love and humility, Mary, in this view, willfully accepted God into herself and thereby restored
to all of creation what Eve had lost—namely, a life in communion with God. In so doing, Mary was the first genuinely emancipated woman who not only enjoyed such communion herself, but enabled it for all of creation. Writing in 1873, the priest A. Khoinatskii even suggested that in the person of Mary, women might be imagined as occupying a higher place than men in the Kingdom of God, since Mary had proven herself more honourable than even the angelic hosts.

While churchmen readily hailed Mary theologically as the first genuinely emancipated woman, they found more difficulty in convincingly translating that role into their depiction of Mary as a mother in first-century Palestine and as a member of the earliest Christian community. Especially striking was churchmen's minimization of any potential public leadership roles that Mary might have held among the earliest followers of Jesus. Given the Orthodox understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Logos of God, it is not surprising that neither the Lives of Mary nor churchmen's responses to the women's movement offered her a prominent role in Jesus' ministry. Yet clerical responses to the women's movement also rarely considered such a role for her in the Christian community even following Jesus' death and resurrection. Despite their general lauding of what they deemed characteristically female traits—multi-tasking and effective managerial skills—Mary, in their estimation, had 'no independent significance' in the management of the earliest Christian community.

In part, churchmen's minimization of Mary's role in the post-resurrectional Christian community may have stemmed from their concerns regarding a growing discussion about the ordination of women. In an 1873 essay devoted to this topic, the priest A. Khoinatskii insisted that even though Mary lived in the temple during her childhood and had access to the Holy of Holies, she never had a priestly function, nor presided over the Eucharistic meal. In 1882, the Bishop of Ufa, Nikanor (Brovkovich), reminded his readers that Mary never performed any liturgical functions in church. Furthermore, she did not preach. 'Finding herself in the company of the first Christians', wrote one anonymous author, she never came forward with a public sermon or public teaching, 'leaving this right to men'.

When read in light of churchmen's reflections on issues stemming from the women's movement, the Life of Mary takes on added meaning and potential significance. Its inherent appeal for Orthodox women, especially mothers, becomes readily evident. Presented as no less traditional and authoritative than contemporary pastoral voices, stories from these Lives often presented alternative images of the life of the woman and intercessor, to whom most Orthodox women turned in their daily lives. Although on occasion some compilers narrated their version of Mary's life in light of conventional, clerical sensibilities of the time—stating, for instance, that Mary did not 'mix' her voice with the voice of the apostles—even these versions usually portrayed Mary as a teacher and missionary following Jesus' death and resurrection. The scattered glimpses of Mary struggling between her will and the divine will, and between her will and established social conventions; bearing the challenges of household and family that seemed at odds with her own vocational calling; facing the anonymity of motherhood; suffering alongside a child and finding herself in an entirely new public role in the later years of her life, offer more existentially gripping images for meditation and imitation, than the somewhat more elusive theological depictions of Mary as a 'vessel' (sosed) or 'seal of perfection'.

Conceivably, certain episodes in the Lives could have also reverberated with progressive Christian thinking on the 'women's question' at that time. One of Russia's earliest feminist theologians, E. Liuleva, hinted at the sensibilities with which at least some Orthodox women in late Imperial Russia might have approached their faith. In her essay 'The Free Woman and Christianity', for instance, Liuleva argued that Christ established the foundation for the liberation of women by giving them full access to the Kingdom of God. In so doing, he consistently regarded women as free, independent persons who enjoyed the same rights and...
capabilities as men in matters of eternal life and the discernment of truth. Liuleva dismissed the conventional argument that women could not be preachers because, according to canonical Scripture, Christ had not chosen women as apostles. Because of historical circumstances, she argued, women preachers would not have been possible in his day. At the same time, Liuleva maintained, the Gospel texts testify that women were heard. Women were ‘apostles to the apostles’ since they were the first witnesses to Christ’s resurrection; ‘There could be no stronger confirmation of women’s full rights and independence’. 105

Similarly, in Liuleva’s estimation, traditional Orthodox views of marriage did not reflect the liberating values expressed by Christ in the gospel texts. Since their first responsibility was to their husbands, married women were denied not so much their right as their responsibility to pursue the gospel mandate to seek the Kingdom of God. 104 In light of such views, Mary’s Life generally offered a counter image of marriage. In virtually all of these accounts, Mary’s personal vows and ‘calling’ remained formative in her relationship with Joseph, though not without causing strain, as the well-known scene of Joseph’s struggles at Mary’s pregnancy illustrates. Indeed, Liuleva singled out Mary as having gained independence on account of her vow of virginity. Generally, those who were familiar with episodes from various versions of Mary’s Life might have easily drawn on them in support of Liuleva’s views.

In his essay on the earliest texts of the Life of the Virgin, historian Stephen Shoomaker, considers the potential audiences of the Lives he examined. He wonders, for instance, why the narratives of Mary’s life, that so strongly emphasized her leadership, arose and were popular in all-male monastic circles. ‘One might not expect to find such traditions favoured’, he states, ‘in an environment as traditionally unwelcoming to women as Mount Athos’. 105 Indicating that a Life of Mary did not circulate widely outside monastic circles in the seventh to the tenth centuries, he wonders about the kind of influence such narratives, with their strong emphasis on Mary’s leadership, might have had in a parish setting, where they could have provided models and precedents for women’s roles in the Church.

The resurgence of the genre of the Life of Mary in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia gives new life to Shoomaker’s hypothetical query and begs questions regarding the transposition of ancient texts into modern times. Although drawing mostly on ancient and medieval narratives – some of which were no less challenging to social and political norms in their own day – Mary’s Life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries takes on new shades of meaning in the context of modernity. 106 Although humility, meekness and purity still graced Mary dutifully and dependably in these narratives, these features often receded before, or yielded to, a search for Mary’s more adaptive human qualities as demanded by the notion of earthly life in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia. Consequently, while not devotionally dismissive of Mary’s unique role in salvation history and of the praise with which she is often lauded, women, and mothers in particular, might, nevertheless, have also identified with, and been emboldened by, her fierce sense of vocation and the fervent way she pursued it, despite the social precepts and political pressures of her times.

At the same time, the potential appeal and influence of many episodes in these Lives for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orthodox women from various social backgrounds may well have stemmed not from any perceived novelty in the features of Mary’s life, but precisely from their foundations in what they knew as tradition. Often grounded in the same stories that inspired Church hymnography, Marian feasts and Marian iconography, these Lives encouraged the stirring of the imagination and thereby fostered women’s ‘living contact’ with Mary on their terms, while still resonating with the faith community of which they were a part. 107 Such freedom within the bounds of tradition not only potentially quickened personal ties between women and Mary, but also showed those bounds to be more yielding than historians often assume.

The widespread circulation of her Life and the inclusion of the stories associated with specially-revered icons of Mary as part of her life narrative prevent historians of Orthodoxy in Russia from unequivocally accepting the tempting view that the image of Mary in Russian Orthodoxy was hopelessly chained to a male, clerical and ascetic culture and

104. Liuleva, Sverbodnnaia zhenschina, pp. 17–22.
106. For an example of ancient writing on Mary that challenged social and political norms in their own day, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ‘On Mary’s Voice: Gendered Words in Syria: Marian Tradition’, in The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism and Historiography, ed. by Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 63–86.
5. Women and the Visual Arts

Rosalind P. Blakesley

In 1800, the French artist Marie Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, then resident in St Petersburg, was elected an honorary free associate of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. The first woman painter to be honoured in this way, the artist responded by painting what she later considered to be the best of her many self-portraits and presented it to the Academy, where it hung in the Council Chamber until 1922 (Fig. 1).

Vigée-Lebrun depicted herself at work on a portrait of Empress Maria Fedorovna, who was not only consort of the Emperor of all the Russias, but also an artist in her own right. Conveniently marking the start of the period under consideration in this book, the painting could be construed as testament to the achievement of women artists in Russia at the time, as Vigée-Lebrun celebrates acceptance into the bastion of the Russian artistic establishment by depicting herself carrying out a prestigious Imperial portrait of another woman artist. The painting’s composition could be seen to enforce this multi-layered reading of female artistic agency. The planar structure, in which the outline of Maria Fedorovna hovers above the shadow which Vigée-Lebrun casts on the canvas, might be read as a metaphor for the established, professional woman artist both standing apart from, and buttressed by, amateur practice. At the same time, the way in which both sitters look directly at the (female) artist who painted them sets up a dialogic encounter between women, which subverts the more familiar objectification of female subjects for a male gaze.

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