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# CULTURAL FEATURES OF ORTHODOX FEMALE MONASTICISM

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## Abstract

Orthodox monasticism is an integral part of the culture of the Russian people. Monasteries have always had a significant impact on people's life and traditions, being the source of the Orthodox worldview, spiritual, moral and ethical values. The authors examine the history of the formation of Orthodox female monasticism, analyse the features of the culture of Orthodox female monasticism, including its material and social components, as well as the culture of religious practices.

*Keywords:* philosophy, nonresistance, Christian ethics, Jainism, nonviolence principle

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## 1. Introduction

The Orthodox monastic culture today is one of the phenomena attracting the attention of an increasingly wider range of researchers. We believe there are several reasons behind the need to study the features of the culture of monastic cloisters. First, the relevance of this topic is associated with the revival of religion and the increase in the number of monasteries, primarily in the area of the spread of Eastern Christianity, with the need for interaction between monasteries that live according to Orthodox principles and modern society. Thus, on the eve of Perestroika, there were 16 active monasteries in the USSR: two in the RSFSR, nine in Ukraine, one each in Belarus, Moldavia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Over 1985-1988 four more monasteries were opened [1]. In 2008, there were already 459 active monasteries (219 for men and 240 for women), 196 metochions and 56 sketes in the Russian Federation [2]. By 2021, there are 537 monasteries and hermitages in Russia, including 31 stauropagic monasteries and two lavras [*Monastyrskii vestnik RPTs (Monastic herald of the Russian Orthodox Church)*, 2021, online at <https://monasterium.ru/monastyri/>].

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Moreover, the study of monastic communities and their place in the local society will provide an opportunity to deeper understand certain aspects of social life in Russia.

At the same time, the phenomenon of monastic culture is today one of the poorly, or, more precisely, one-sidedly studied phenomena. Most of the researchers consider the monastic culture in the context of artistic and aesthetic or theological and ideological problems [3-5]. At the same time, much less attention is paid to the specifically culturological aspect of the monastic culture. Moreover, one uses 'monastery' and 'monastic culture' mostly to refer to male monasticism [3, 4] and the features of female monasteries are less explored. After all, despite the growth in the number of works on Church history in recent years [5-8], the problem of female monasticism is rather poorly explored in theological studies.

At the same time, the phenomenon of female monasticism is inherent not only in Christianity. For example, in Buddhism, female monastic communities exist along with male ones. However, female monasticism is much less developed than male, which is associated with the socio-cultural traditions of Buddhism; according to legend, the Buddha himself agreed to the establishment of a women's community only after long doubts and persuasions. The established practice placed much more stringent requirements on nuns than on monks and placed them in an oppressed position. Thus, the code of conduct for Buddhist monks provides 250 restrictions for monks and 500 for nuns [9]. Representatives of one of the two main sects of Jainism - Shvetambara or Shwetambara - also allow women to be accepted into nuns and recognize them as capable of attaining moksha (liberation from the circle of rebirth) [10].

The researchers of female monasticism are interested in, for example, manifestations of female religiosity in general [11]. Researchers note the high religiosity of women, an extraordinary intensity of religious experiences which is associated with women's psychoemotional and physiological state; the belief of women in the magical power of rituals, and the general mythological nature of female attitudes towards religion [6, 12].

As for the research into monasticism itself, the historical aspect of the emergence and existence of women's monasteries (along with men's ones) was considered in the works by I.K. Smolich [13], S.M. Kenworthy [14], B.M. Kloss [15]. Women's monasticism through the prism of the life of its representatives was explored in the works by L. Neville [16], N. Melvani [17]. L.V. Kurishova, studying the originality of the cultural traditions of women's monasteries in Russia, using the example of the monasteries of the Volgograd region, makes a conclusion about the decisive role of social and charitable activities in women's monasteries in the region [1]. O.V. Kirichenko examines the history of women's monasteries in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup>–mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the prism of the concept of 'asceticism' [18]. According to the researcher, "asceticism is a religious (Orthodox) and sociocultural phenomenon that arose in Russia due to mass conversion of Orthodox women to the early Christian ideals of holiness and austere spiritual life, which resulted in the creation of numerous

communities and monasteries and existed from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” [18, p. 21]. Recognizing the fact of the rapid development of women’s monasteries at that time in the Russian Empire, one should also note that asceticism as a phenomenon can be attributed to all monasteries of all times. Asceticism is a feature of monastic life in general, is expressed in different ways, and cannot be attributed only to convents of a certain region and period.

Therefore, the most popular in the available literature are the historical and hagiographic aspects of studying women’s monasteries. However, as a cultural phenomenon, women’s monasticism has hardly been considered. In view of this, the purpose of this study is to analyse the cultural characteristics of Orthodox female monasticism.

## **2. History of the formation of Orthodox female monasticism**

The emergence of female monasticism can be seen as the embodiment of the thesis of the equal dignity of men and women in Christianity. Women’s asceticism and women’s monasteries arise simultaneously with men’s. Thus, even the first Egyptian hermits include Saint Syncletica and Saint Thaïs, who distinguished themselves in a special way for their selfless acts [19]. Saint Paphnutius is considered the creator of coenobitic monasticism. In the monastery founded by the saint, located on the banks of the Nile, his sister Maria was also a nun who later became the abbess of the nunnery Saint Paphnutius founded. The monastic charter created by Saint Paphnutius was used in both male and female communities. Monasticism was also chosen by Saint Emilia of Cappadocia (d. 372/373) and Saint Macrina the Younger (d. 379/380) [19], mother and sister of Saint Basil the Great, the author of another monastery charter.

The development of female monasticism in the Christian East, in particular in Palestine and Asia Minor, in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, was associated with the names of such saints as Saint Melania the Elder (d. 410), founder of the monastery on Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and her granddaughter Saint Melania the Younger (d. 439), Saint Paula of Rome (d. 404), the founder of the convent in Bethlehem, as well as Saint Pelagia of Palestine (d. 457) and Saint Olympias (d. 408) [19]. Over the next centuries, numerous women’s monasteries operated within the Byzantine Empire, where women from different strata of society became ascetics.

There were many of women’s monasteries in the first half of the second millennium in Constantinople. Quite often they were founded by representatives of the ruling dynasty or famous Byzantine aristocratic families. Therefore, it is no coincidence that these monasteries were the real centres of the intellectual life of the capital of Byzantium [20]. One of the most famous women’s monasteries in Constantinople during the reign of the Komnenos dynasty is the Theotokos Kecharitomene Monastery, founded in the late 11<sup>th</sup> - early 12<sup>th</sup> century by Empress Irene Doukaina (cca. 1066-1123/1133) with the assistance of her husband, Basileus Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118). Her daughter, Anna

Komnene (d. 1153), also became a nun of this monastery. Here Anna wrote her account 'The Alexiad' [16].

Eastern models of monastic life spread from Byzantium to the Russian lands. The first monasteries in Kievan Rus appeared soon after the adoption of Christianity (988), but monasticism took deeper roots under the Grand Prince of Kiev Yaroslav the Wise (1019-1054) [7]. At the same time, women's monasteries were established. Monastic centres arise primarily in capital cities. Most often, their founders were representatives of the Rurik dynasty, less often - Church hierarchs and nobility [7]. Kiev was one of the main centres of monastic life in Russia. According to sources, in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, besides the male monasteries, there were also at least four female ones. Among the most ancient of them is the monastery of Saint Irene founded by Prince Yaroslav the Wise probably even before 1037 [14].

Female monasticism was also widespread in North-Western Russia. One of the most famous monasteries on modern Belarusian lands in the Middle Ages was the Convent of Saint Euphrosyne in Polotsk, organized approx. 1127/1128 by the daughter of the Vitebsk prince Svyatoslav Vseslavovich - Saint Euphrosyne of Polotsk (born Predslava). Numerous monasteries also functioned in the north-eastern lands of Russia. Novgorod was an important centre of female monasticism. Women's monasteries operated in Suzdal in Vladimir-on-Klyazma, in Murom [14].

### **3. Features of the material culture of female Orthodox monasticism**

A monastery is primarily a community of monks or nuns living according to established rules (charter) [8, 21]. However, this concept is not limited to this meaning. A monastery is also a territory, as well as buildings located on it, which are owned by the monastic community. It is quite obvious that for the monastic community to be able to properly fulfil its vocation, the community required a certain "developed space" [7]. This space was not only sacred (as a place for prayer and ascetic practices) but also practical (as a place for everyday life). Thus, the monastery for the nun was not only the location of her spiritual endeavour but also her home. Here the nun prayed and performed ascetic deeds, worked, rested and ate.

That is why buildings of various types formed the monastery complex of the nunnery: sacral (temple, chapel, bell tower), residential (monastic cells) and household (refectory, kitchen, pantry, barn) [8]. The most important building of the monastery complex, without a doubt, was the temple, around which the prayer life of the community was concentrated. However, not all women's convents had their own churches. Some monastic communities used the temples of the nearby male monasteries [1, p. 15]. Monastic churches were predominantly consecrated to the Trinity or Virgin Mary. Temples named in honour of saints were less common, and consecration to reverends was even rarer. At the same time, not every monastery had its own church. Some

communities of nuns prayed in shrines located near monasteries, and some settled near already existing parish churches [8].

For each nun, the monastery was the place where the woman, having taken the vows, had to live until her last days [22]. Therefore, in addition to the temple, residential buildings were an obligatory element of the monastery complex.

#### **4. Features of the social culture of female Orthodox monasticism**

The legal basis for the life of women's monastic communities was the monastic charters and decisions of councils. The sisters based their daily lives on certain precepts of monastic life. These could be both the charters of men's monasteries, adapted to the needs of women's communities, and the ascetic works of Saint Basil the Great, which partly replaced the monastic charters. The ascetic works of the saint formed the basis of monastic life in the Christian East and a model for creating the consuetudinaries of individual monasteries. At the same time, some monastic communities did not use written charters at all, relying only on traditional norms. The decrees of diocesan councils were of certain importance for the organization of the inner life of monasteries [22, p. 48].

A secular person who wanted to take the vows did not immediately receive the status of a full member of the monastic community. After receiving the abbess's consent to join, the person became a candidate (novice). For a certain time, the first probationary period lasted which was necessary to find out whether the novice could bear the burden of monasticism and whether she was pregnant. This period also served to check whether the parents of the candidate agreed with her in the choice of life path.

The choice of monastic life was quite often determined by the spiritual needs of a person who 'renounced the world'. Her religious upbringing at home or the example of relatives who were already in the monastery had a significant influence on this decision. In some places, women were urged to take the vows by church courts, offering them to live unmarried after a divorce or serve God in a monastery. At times, purely mercantile motives were at work: for some candidates the monastery was the place that guaranteed relative stability in life. To a certain extent, this choice was influenced by the factor of the prestige of the clergy in society at the time [22, p. 85]. After the probationary period, the novice was clothed in the first degree of monasticism, becoming a rasophore. The main elements of the rite were the first tonsure as well as the presentation of individual elements of monastic clothing to her: a cassock and a headdress (kamilavka). The texts necessary for the first degree, as well as for the Little Schema, were contained in the printed Small Euchologies, as well as in numerous handwritten "monastic small euchologies" and "tonsurers" [22, p. 114].

The tonsure began the next stage of spiritual formation - the rasophorate. As a rule, one of the nuns, called the 'eldress', who was responsible for the rasophore's improvement, carried out the guardianship of the rasophore. Usually, this was an abbess or an older nun with extensive experience in monastic life. The duration of the rasophorate was not delineated, and depended on various factors, primarily the spiritual development of the rasophore. Although, this stage of her formation as a future nun did not always end with eternal vows. Sometimes the rasophore 'returned to the world' - voluntarily or because the parents refused to pay the dowry. Sometimes the rasophore could be removed from the monastery for violation of discipline.

The final acceptance of the rasophore into the monastic community took place during the rite of the Little Schema. Eternal vows were taken mainly at the Divine Liturgy in the presence of a priest acting on behalf of the local bishop. The ceremony was often held on major church holidays or Sundays. According to the tradition of Eastern monasticism, it was during the Little Schema that the nun received a new name. However, sources indicate that in some monasteries there was a practice of providing a monastic name already at the first stage. The new names were very diverse. The heavenly patrons of the sisters were, first of all, saint women, monastic martyrs and martyrs [11].

Each monastic community had its own structure. The monastery was headed by the abbess, who was helped or, under certain circumstances, replaced by the assistant. The abbess was elected by the entire monastic community, whose will was later confirmed by the local bishop. The nuns' right to elect the leader did not rule out the possibility of her appointment by the bishop. There were various reasons for the termination of the powers of the abbess. One of them was re-election. However, the available sources indicate that the periodic elections of the abbess were rather rare [22, p. 234]. Most commonly, the new abbess was chosen after the death of her predecessor. Sometimes the term of the abbess could be terminated due to voluntary renunciation due to old age or poor health. There were also instances of the elimination of the abbess by the bishop because she violated discipline. The abbess, as a rule, came from noble or priestly families. This situation, after all, partly reflects the social structure of monastic communities. The abbess's duties, in addition to the spiritual care of the sisters, included various administrative functions, in particular, the management of the monastery property and financial management. The abbess also represented the monastery before the secular and spiritual authorities.

An essential role in the life of the monastic community was played by its confessor [22, p. 368]. The main duty of each confessor, undoubtedly, was the exercise of spiritual custody of the nuns entrusted to him, as well as the provision of liturgical needs. A great responsibility in observing the order of services in the monastery lay with the permanent confessors. However, the parish priests, who did not live permanently at the monastery, also could not neglect the liturgical life there [11]. The confessor's work was not limited to the liturgical functions and the function of the confessor. The confessor participated

in the acceptance of the candidate into the community and saw off the sisters on their last journey.

## **5. Features of the culture of religious practices in female Orthodox monasticism**

Prayer was one of the foundations of the daily practices of female monastic communities. Prayer, communicative and personal, should be central to the life of every nun, no doubt, but this did not mean that work could be neglected. According to the instructions of Saint Basil the Great, for a monk or nun to become more virtuous, both types of activity had to be mutually complementary and balanced [11].

The liturgical prayer of the monastic communities took place daily and fit into three cycles of divine services: daily, weekly and annual. The main cycle that defined the rhythm of monastic life, was the daily cycle, while its most important services – evening and morning, of course, took place regularly [11]. The main point of the daily and weekly cycles was the Holy Liturgy, which, most likely, was performed in the monasteries on Saturday, Sunday and holidays. The biggest holidays of the liturgical year are the Resurrection of Christ, Christmas and Pentecost solemnly celebrated in all monastic communities [11]. The temple (patronal) holiday was also an integral part of the annual liturgical cycle. All the nuns of the monastery, priests from neighbouring parishes and the surrounding people participated in the Divine Liturgy, which was performed that day in the monastery church. The holiday ended with a festive meal, to which the sisters invited the clergy and the most respectable people in society.

Fasts played a significant role in the spiritual life of the community, and the Great Lent was naturally the most important. During the Lent, all the services prescribed by the charter were observed in the monasteries, in particular, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts was performed [11]. The apparent manifestation of Lent was abstinence from the consumption of meat and dairy dishes, as well as eggs. In preparation for this 'period of abstinence', the sisters, on the last day, which preceded each of the four great fasts and was called the 'pre-lent', arranged a festive meal in the monastery.

A significant part of religious practices consisted of prayer for the deceased sisters, whose names were always read during funeral services, primarily the Liturgy, and memorial service, which was performed on days dedicated to the memory of all the deceased [11]. According to a long-standing tradition, the sisters also prayed for the dead the day after the temple holiday.

## **6. Conclusions**

According to the purpose of the study, we analyzed the cultural characteristics of Orthodox female monasticism, including its material and social

components, as well as the culture of religious practices in Orthodox female monasticism.

From the perspective of Orthodoxy, a woman is not a being secondary to a man. At the same time, following the Orthodox teaching, not only man is the image of God but also human society in its essence embodies the same idea that underlies the Trinity: different personalities-hypostases are united by their spirituality-essence. A man and a woman are understood as beings who are not the same but who have equal dignity.

Women's monasteries, despite the lack of the opportunity for a woman to be a priest in Orthodoxy, participate in the pastoral function of the Church. This activity can be traced in the following: women's monastic way of life is an example for the laity; the nuns support the laity with their prayers; nuns who have suffered themselves, have learned a lot and can understand others; the way of life of monasteries (in particular, for women) is capable of influencing the value orientation of the laity, awakening their spiritual life.

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