Elina Vuola

Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary

Questions related to gender and religion have suffered from a double blindness in scholarship: blindness to religion in gender studies, on the one hand, and blindness to gender in religious studies, including theology, on the other. The situation is changing, but it is still very much on the level of acknowledging the importance of gender in religious studies and theology, and of religion in gender studies, respectively. Scholars of religion and gender, including feminist theologians, share the concern for this double blindness. However, from the perspective of theology, I wish to add yet another possible blindness at the core of the study of religion and gender, namely some kind of blindness to theology – or avoidance of it, to put it more mildly. I will also argue that another blind spot is that of lived religion in theology, including feminist theology: ordinary women’s theological thinking and interpretation have not occupied a central place in feminist theology, which has centred on academic theological critique of religious traditions.

Continuity and change

The history of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity testifies how pressures for change do not necessarily come from the “secular”. It is thus important that we understand how changes happen through new interpretations of sacred texts and theological doctrines. This is a two-way dynamic: different cultural contexts and changes in society influence religious communities such as churches; new interpretations and self-understanding of religious communities, including their relationship to society, influence not only the communities themselves but also the surrounding society. Different liberation theologies, including feminist theology, are examples of this dynamic of continuity and change, which stem from both (internal) theological developments and (external) changes in society.

Feminist theology – and other liberation theologies – are examples of how theological reinterpretations, “from within” and not from outside a given religious community, can become sources of change, not just in the religious
sphere but also a more general context. Latin American liberation theology, for example, played such an important role in repressive political situations. Because of its location at the intersection of theology and gender studies, feminist theology has relevance beyond the academy that no other form of gender theorizing has.

The role of theology

Methodologically, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which ethnographic and textual methods may enrich each other in theology, religious studies, and anthropology of religion. On the one hand, it is rare to see a theologian, even a feminist or liberation theologian, using ethnographic methods. On the other hand, questions related to doctrine and scriptures are too easily bypassed in much of religious studies, especially in the study of vernacular religion, and even when such questions would be crucial in understanding a specific religious phenomenon.

Feminist theologians have not made extensive use of ethnographic methods. Neither have they drawn on insights gained by anthropologists of religion in developing a feminist theology, that would also be attentive to women’s lived religious practices and ways of understanding their religious identity. The emphasis has been on the interpretation of texts, doctrines and traditions. The more practical dimension of feminist theological work is most often related to issues of ethics, particularly sexual and reproductive ethics. There is, thus, a vacuum at the heart of feminist theology: it does not stem from ordinary women’s ways of being and acting as religious persons, does not include their own interpretations of their religious traditions, even when the mainstream self-understanding of feminist theology has been rooted in orthopraxis. By and large, this is a methodological issue: how do we know what this orthopraxis consists of if we do not use non-textual methods? As important as it is to critically analyse and interpret sacred texts and the history of theology, feminist theologians in different contexts should pay more attention to the variety of women’s lived experiences. In other words, if there is some sort of blindness to theology in religious studies and anthropology, there is also a blindness towards different forms of lived religion and popular religiosity in feminist theology.

For its own part, ethnographic study of religion is of course valid without theological knowledge and analysis. If textual analyses do not suffice for understanding the interplay between gender and religion, much the same can be said of mere ethnographic analysis. The relevance of different methods obviously depends on the object of research. For example, it is a different
thing to analyse and deeply understand new religious movements or spiritualities that lack – often even reject – systematic theology or dogma, than it is to study Muslim, Jewish or Christian women, whose struggles and self-understanding are more directly tied to sacred texts, their interpretations, authoritative teachings, the development of dogma, and so on. At least in the three monotheistic religions, women’s ways of thinking theologically, and of interpreting the teachings at the core of their tradition, form a central part of their religious identity and should not be ignored by scholars.

How do the adherents of these communities – especially women – negotiate between the obvious patriarchal elements of their tradition and the ideals of equality both within that tradition and in the secular society? What is the relationship between the core religious elements (the sacred, spirituality, transcendence, God) and people’s everyday lives (community, family, ritual, meaning of life, values)? What is the relationship between one’s sense of belonging and the institutionalised structures of the given tradition? And what does all this mean in relation to the secular society?

Especially in the context of the three so called Abrahamic religions, theological ideas and doctrinal interpretations make up an essential part of people’s religious identity and agency. Attention to how people create their theological worldview as part of their religious identity is important when scholars aim to understand how people negotiate with their religious inheritance. This negotiation is often a complicated, layered, and conflicted process, especially with regard to gender, women’s position, and sexuality. “Religious agency” thus always includes theology and theological agency. In order to understand it, scholars need to understand the core theological doctrines and their development over time.

Anne M. Blackburn makes a similar point when analysing the relationship between textual and empirical analysis of religion:

There is a danger, however, that the turn to studies of ritual and everyday life, especially in the context of an apologetic retreat from the study of texts, leaves scholars of religion in an intellectually untenable position. We may fail to recognise the often profoundly influential connections between texts and devotional practice, for example, and to neglect the very high value accorded to textual composition, transmission, and interpretation within the communities we seek to understand.¹

Blackburn does not speak of theology as such, since her case study is Thai Buddhism, but in my view, her point is just as accurate in the case of Christianity and the other monotheistic religions – perhaps even more so since the authority of ancient texts is considered sacred and normative: they are textual religions, their theology drawn and interpreted on the basis of these texts. Blackburn thus pays attention not only to the importance of texts but also to their interpretation as an essential part of religious renewal.

An ethnographic study of the Virgin Mary – an interesting and common subject for scholars of religion and gender – can be substantially enriched by a theological analysis of Mary’s central place in Christian theology. I would even argue that such an analysis is necessary in order to understand how Catholic or Orthodox women, for example, interpret the Mariological tradition of their church.

Case study: The Orthodox Church in Finland

The Orthodox Church of Finland features as a case study in a larger research project, “Embodying Religion. Changing Meanings of Body and Gender in Contemporary Forms of Religious Identity in Finland.” The project focuses on the study of certain religious minorities in Finland, especially from the perspective of gender and minority status. Part of the following is based on interviews conducted with over sixty Orthodox women in my home country in 2013-14.

The project questions approaches to religion and religious women that are either culturally obtuse (see secularisation as inevitable and natural) or openly negative (see people, particularly women, as victims). Such constructions of women’s absence or victimhood are discursive forms of otherness, in which the issue of religious difference has remained relatively unexplored. Taking religious people’s – especially women’s – agency as a starting point, the project aims to highlight the dynamics between the above mentioned continuity and change within the tradition.

Because of its geographical location, Finland has been an area of encounter and conflict between two great religious currents. The south-eastern part of the country, Karelia, is still today the main home base of the Eastern Orthodox faith, whereas the western part has been Protestant since the sixteenth century. The Catholic Church prevailed approximately 400 years before the Reformation.

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Until 1808, current day Finland belonged to Sweden. It was then formally a part of Russia until 1917, when it gained its independence in the aftermath of the Russian revolution.

![Map of Finland](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Finland, 24 February 2016)

Parts of Karelia were lost to the Soviet Union in World War II [WWII], and a minor part belongs to Finland to this day. As in many other areas in which competing superpowers have interests, the borders of Finland have constantly shifted over the centuries. While the region has formally belonged both to the West (Sweden) and to the East (Russia) along the years, it has been able to maintain its distinct culture and language, which is neither Indo-European nor Slavic. The Orthodoxy under discussion is thus a culture-specific Orthodoxy, influenced by both East and West, as well as by pre-Christian traditions.

Just before WWII, poetry, incantations, and ritual laments were still being recorded by folklorists in the area. The Karelians belonged to the Orthodox

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Church, although in many ways their Orthodoxy was intertwined with elements of pre-Christian religion.\(^5\) The culture of this area, including its religion, has been shaped by influences from both East and West, and its diverse origins have resulted in a rich and hybrid heritage.\(^6\) As a consequence of WWII, Finland ceded to the Soviet Union large parts of Karelia in the south-east, and Petsamo (Pechenga) in the north-east. From both regions, a large number of evacuees was relocated to different parts of Finland; many of the evacuees, including the entire population of the Skolt Sámi indigenous people in the north-east, were Orthodox by religion.

![Figure 2: Areas ceded in 1944](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Finland, 24 February 2016)

Most of the ancient Finnish Karelian folk poetry, including materials built into the Finnish national epic “Kalevala”, has been collected in Karelia and


\(^7\) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Finland, 24 February 2016
Ingria, largely in the 19th century. This oral material, only partly published and translated, is housed in the Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives in Helsinki, one of the largest folklore archives in the world. Parts of this poetry are pre-Christian and reflect the ancient Finnish religion, while other parts show Christian (primarily Orthodox) influence, though often in syncretised form. Karelia preserved elements of an indigenous non-Christian belief-system for much longer than neighbouring regions in Finland. Interestingly the figure of the Virgin Mary plays a central role in this material – in poetry, incantations, laments, and songs. Some of the contemporary informants in Northern Karelia (on the Finnish side of the border) interviewed for this study were knowledgeable of the ancient oral poetic tradition, including the role of the Virgin Mary in it. One of them, a living embodiment and dictionary of Karelian culture, performs regularly in public events – song and public lamentation, and teaches both to other women. This Karelian tradition of female ritual singers is alive in Finland to this day.

**Contemporary Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary**

The Finnish Orthodox Church is today an autonomous Orthodox archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. With its roots in the medieval Novgorodian missionary work in Karelia, the Finnish Orthodox Church was part of the Russian Orthodox Church until 1923. Today, the Church has about 60,000 members, accounting for 1.1 percent of the population of Finland. At least until the 1960s, the public image of the Orthodox Church in predominantly Lutheran Finland was stereotypically and openly negative: “the Church of the Russians” (ryssänkirkko) points to both Russophobia and the view of Orthodox Christians as “icon worshippers”. This is why many Orthodox Karelian evacuees in fact converted to the Lutheran Church. Nowadays, the tide has been almost reversed: there are more and more Lutheran converts to the Orthodox Church, often considered more sensual and embodied than the word-centred Lutheranism. Thus, in a short span of time, the Orthodox Church


has changed from the despised Other to the favorite Other in the Finnish cultural and religious landscape.

In 2013 and 2014, I conducted 62 interviews in different parts of Finland. The ages of the women interviewed varied from just under 30 to almost a hundred years old. Of these, 26 were born and raised Orthodox, 17 were converts to the Orthodox Church, and 19 were Skolt Sami, all cradle Orthodox. My main question was “What does the Mother of God mean to you?” Based on my earlier research among Costa Rican Catholic women,11 I assumed that instead of asking women how they see their role and position in the Orthodox Church, asking about Mary would be an easier, less tendentious task, that would provide a richer window or lens into women’s lives. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Almost without exception, at some point in the interview, the women started talking about issues of gender hierarchy, sexism, and women’s position in the church, exhibiting a variety of opinions and positions towards these issues. However, talking about Mary rather than about women’s roles, opens up the entire spectrum of issues in women’s lives – relationships, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and spirituality – often by reflection through the meaning of Mary for women and the broader theological framework in which Orthodox Mariology is presented. Thus, the Mother of God – or the God-Bearer or Birth-Giver of God (Theotokos), the more common terms used in the Orthodox tradition – is not only an icon (understood as the divine presence in material, visual form) to be venerated and used as a window to transcendence, but also a window to immanence: talking about Mary with believing Orthodox women was to open a window to the entirety of their lives.

Responses from converts were greater than expected. In the process of doing the interviews, I started asking converted women somewhat different questions from those I asked women who were born and raised Orthodox. For some of the former, the presence of Mary in the Orthodox tradition, unlike in the Lutheran Church, had been a pulling factor. For others, the rich Marian devotion in liturgy, prayer, iconography, and Orthodox theology, had come as a “surprise” which they slowly embraced. A few of them recounted how the

centrality of Mary in the Orthodox Church had been a source of suspicion even as they felt drawn to convert for other reasons; this was accentuated in the stories of women who had been active participants and believers in the Lutheran Church, in which the absence of Mary is notorious.

The Orthodox tradition and gender

The Orthodox tradition is less studied from a gender perspective than other Christian traditions. This includes both ethnographic and theological research. There is a considerable and recognised meagreness, or even lack of, feminist theology in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Mary and Marian theology in the Orthodox tradition is both different from and similar to the Catholic tradition. From the perspective of gender, a major difference (possibly a variation) is the emphasis on Mary as the model for humanity, independently of gender: the most divine and holy (panagia) person, a model of theosis, deification, for both men and women to follow. The Church does not present Mary as the ideal model for women only. Also, especially in liturgy and stories of miracles attached to certain icons, the role of Mary is that of the leader in battle, a powerful woman who protects. And finally, there is an emphasis on incarnation, which also makes human deification possible: incarnation is not possible without Mary, thus she is and should be at the centre of the Church, liturgy, prayer and spirituality.

All these notions were reflected in the interviews. In what follows, I focus on two themes that came up practically in all interviews, in one way or another: a) motherhood and womanhood, and b) women in the Church. Let me start by introducing the meaning of icons in the Orthodox tradition.

Iconic piety

One of the interviewed women, aged 28, from Helsinki, began the interview by producing an icon of the Mother of God of Valaam from her bag and placing it on the small table, where it stayed for the entire interview. She told how she and her husband had been suffering from infertility. They had gone to the New Monastery of Valaam in Heinävesi, where the original icon is placed, and prayed together in front of it, having heard of miracles especially in cases of infertility. They now have two children. When the first one was born, the woman’s brother-in-law had brought the small icon to the hospital, and ever since it has been on their bedroom wall.

Me and my husband wanted to have a child, but when nothing happened, we visited Valaam monastery and prayed in front of this icon […] we experienced a kind of
response to our prayers. We just recently visited Valaam with our family and we
told our children about this. My brother-in-law brought this icon to the hospital
when our daughter Maria was born, and now it is on our bedroom wall.¹²

This icon is considered as one of the greatest treasures of the Finnish Ortho-
dox Church, said to work miracles. It was originally placed in the Old Valaam
Monastery’s Church of the Dormition, in the region ceded to the Soviet Union
after WWII, and later transported to safety in Finland. It now occupies a prom-
inent position in the main Church of the New Valaam Monastery.

A.’s way of speaking of the icon and her story related to it was not uncom-
mon among the women interviewed. Most of them had an icon of the Mother

of God, which was particularly dear to them, even though not all had experienced a miracle related to the icon. It is important to note that Eastern Orthodox spirituality is impossible to understand without understanding the central role of the icons and their veneration. This may be called visual piety, or, more specifically, iconic piety. This piety is not merely visual, since the relationship with the icons includes prayer, body movements like bowing, touching, kissing, lighting of candles, smelling (the wax, the incense), decorating the icon, and so on.

Iconic piety is about a true relationship with a holy person. It is a face-to-face interaction in the context of prayer and silence. The gaze goes both ways. In the words of David Morgan, “...a face receives one’s attention and returns it. Like a face, an icon is both a surface and a depth, which combine to create a sense of presence.” At the same time, the icons are thought of as bringing the divine into presence, as being the locus of divine presence, mediating the divine to the person in front of the icon. Icon veneration is thus about relationship and presence. In front of the icon, a space is created in which worshipers believe that human and divine relate to each other and communicate in a shared presence, which is always both individual and communal.

In the words of Vera Shevzov,

[…] icons are not merely depictions of persons or events in sacred history; they are also thought to convey the presence of that which they depict. In this sense, icons can be considered a means by which the faithful can know God and participate in the sacred reality that the images manifest. The stories surrounding icons are intimately connected to this theology of presence, telling of an individual’s or community’s perceived encounter with “the holy” by means of a particular icon.

Iconic piety implies also the possibility of wordlessness and the inability or unwillingness to put issues in words. This notion came up in several interviews, when women were asked about their devotional practices: that one can

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just go in front of an icon, whether at home or at church, light a candle, kiss the icon, stand there in its presence, and not say or think anything, just be. Many of them called it “to rest”.

Much more can be said about the meaning of icons in Eastern Orthodox tradition. For the purpose of the following discussion on motherhood and womanhood, it suffices to say that in addition to the devotional aspects discussed above, icons play an important role in mediating theological truths. Thus, in the case of Marian icons, the different types – conventional and repetitive – all convey theological ideas.

**Motherhood and womanhood**

The single most frequent point of reference for the interviewed women with relation to the Mother of God or The Birth-Giver of God, was, perhaps obviously, motherhood. Most of the women were mothers themselves, but even those who were not talked about motherhood, about having a mother. The younger ones, still without children, brought up thoughts about future motherhood. As in other contexts, talk of motherhood included talk of not being able to become a mother (infertility and miscarriages), the difficulties of being a mother (including being a single or divorced mother), not wanting to become a mother (including abortion), and the importance of motherhood to one’s identity as a woman.

Like the Catholic women interviewed in Costa Rica,18 the Finnish Orthodox women also stressed the role of the Mother of God as an example and intercessor for them, especially in issues more relevant and urgent in women’s lives, with motherhood being the most important. Women’s closeness to Mary was often expressed in terms such as: “she understands especially us women and mothers”; “she is a woman and a mother herself”; “she is closer to me than God or Jesus”; and “she is the mother of all mothers”. Thus, the idea of being able to talk to the Virgin Mary about everything, without shame or self-control, seems to be central in women’s devotion of her in both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. It is the Protestant tradition which seems to be the great exception here.

Let us turn to two examples of how Mary is experienced, first as another woman (identification), and second, as someone who has the power and willingness to protect women in particular. Both quotations were made by single

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18 Vuola, “Seriously Harmful for Your Health?”; Vuola, “La Morenita on Skis”; and, Vuola, “Patriarchal Ecumenism, Feminism and Women’s Religious Experiences”.
mothers, which is not accidental: it was due to their situation that these two roles of Mary were felt with special intensity, as is also reflected in the fact that both women cried while talking.

The identification with Mary’s earthly lot was expressed with special intensity by S.:

I have this thought [about Mary E.V.], it is maybe awful to say it, but I am a single mother, I gave birth to my son alone, and somehow… when Mary learned that she is pregnant, she too had to suffer the anguish of being a single mother, the shame and things like that… So it is also because of this experience that Mary is so human, so very close to me… that I have experienced all these things in my own life […] I prayed [to Mary E.V.] for strength: “you who have gone through the same.”

S.’s identification with Mary was a source of great comfort for her. This understanding and lived experience of Mary as someone who not only shares the lot of other women, but also understands and protects them, was expressed by another single mother:

If you live as a single mother or have a child outside marriage or that you are a manless woman […] you have to be really strong. You feel rejected even by people you would never believe that they would. [When I was pregnant with x E.V.] the story of Mary comforted me […] But then on the other hand it was difficult for me to approach the church from this position of the sinful woman. X [son E.V.] was baptised in the church, but I could not even think that I would have invited all my family there. Because of the shame […] But Mary protects women, she is good to women. She is a compassionate mother. She is like a shield between me and the patriarchal world, the church too. That’s how I experience her. She is women’s shield.

Women in the Church

Because of the gendered teachings of the Orthodox Church, the women interviewed had different ways of negotiating them as women, and Mary was an important part of this negotiation. Due to of the lack or meagreness of feminist theology in the Orthodox tradition, ordinary women do not have a similar theological basis for their critique of certain practices and teachings as do women in the Catholic Church and in most Protestant churches. This does not mean that no theologians reinterpret the Orthodox tradition from women’s

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19 Unpublished interview with S., born 1949, on 14 May 2014; my translation from Finnish.
perspectives, but a systematic de- and re-construction of the gendered nature of Orthodox theology is still quite lacking.

In a country like Finland, the surrounding society and the majority-serving Lutheran Church serve the Orthodox Church as mirrors in issues of gender equality. Most of the interviewed women were educated, working women, who sometimes saw the interviewer as a representative “outsider” who would often hold a stereotypical view of the Orthodox tradition as especially patriarchal. This added a certain defensive tone to the way some of them spoke about gender issues in their Church. One of the most frequent comments in this respect, was the comparison of the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church in a way that emphasised the more masculine and anti-feminine character of the Lutheran Church, in spite of it having female pastors and even one female bishop. The centrality of the Mother of God, the importance of a variety of female saints, and the over-all more sensuous, embodied liturgy of the Orthodox Church were contrasted with the wordiness, the meagreness of emotion, warmth and the senses, and the lack of Mary in Lutheran liturgy and spirituality. Thus, women’s ordination did not serve as a yardstick for gender equality for these women, who claimed that the all-male priesthood does not pose any problem for them.

This contrasting and comparing was especially accentuated among converted women, who thus justified their decision to convert from the more gender equal Lutheran Church to the more traditional Orthodox Church. Some said this was among the most frequent questions they were asked by others following their conversion: how could they convert to such a patriarchal church after the Lutheran Church had finally opened up ordination for women.

Those who were born and raised Orthodox did not have a similar point of comparison of traditions, and thus, the issue of women’s roles and gender issues in the Church were framed somewhat differently. Here are two examples. First, about all-male priesthood:

We don’t have female priests… I have been thinking about it sometimes, but on the other hand I think that this is how it must be – that we have men as priests, as fathers in the Church, as we say. The fathers of the Church and then this mother, Mother of God, as the female side. That this is why I think we don’t have female priests. And it is not a problem for me.21

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21 Unpublished interview with Sh., born 1948, on 14 May 2014; my translation from Finnish.
and second, about the practice of gendered division of space in the church:

I think the practice of having men’s side and women’s side in the Church is in fact quite fine. Maybe a long time ago it meant putting women in the corner or aside […] but for me it is also a kind of protection that you are among other women. I don’t have to think if there is some guy behind me when I am bowing, or if my hair is fine.22

The most critical voices questioning sexism and patriarchal practices came from cradle Orthodox. Some of the women interviewed were daughters, sisters or wives of priests, and had thus a very down-to-earth view of priesthood:

Well, we have this institution, this Church, and it has certain rules and norms. I think all members should be equal, as they are in front of God. Men can talk to male priests, we women also have to talk to male priests, and I think we should have the opportunity […] People are just so used to it and do not question […] OK, I will comply, but don’t give those stupidities as reasons to me. I have a right as a person to my opinion.23

and once again H., the single mother quoted above:

They always say this [that Mary gives women worth] and that women have their important role and duties in the Church, which are valuable. But I don’t believe it, because you always see that women do not have the same position as men. There are women who would like to be priests, like a friend of mine, who then became a flight attendant […] Well, at least she got to the heavens [laughs E.V.]. And I think I would make a good priest.24

A different kind of comparison between churches concerning Mary came from a woman who in her youth was active in the ecumenical student movement:

When I went to ecumenical meetings, I did not understand what Protestant women were talking about when they said Mary is a model of submission […] It was an ‘aha experience’ for me – that my image of her in the Orthodox Church as the

24 Unpublished interview with H., born 1960, on 21 July 2013; my translation from Finnish; emphasis in the original.
God-Bearer was something totally different […] I was thinking about her images, the icons. I see a strong and independent woman, not a mellow young girl. I don’t recognise the submissive image of Mary.25

And finally, one example of the answers given to the question, if the devotion to the Virgin Mary is somehow related to women’s position in the Church – and if yes, how:

The Mother of God is important for women’s position in the Church. It is difficult to say how, but it is something empowering, also for us as women. If you want like a comment on why women can’t be priests because we have Mary… it is a quite distant thought for me, like we could get some compensation. But the Virgin Mary is the holiest of all [Panagia E.V.], she is a woman and she is the most holy person.26

Conclusion

The Mother of God is extremely important in the Orthodox tradition and in theology in general, but it seems that she is especially and differently important for women: Mary is easy to approach in issues such as maternity, family, sexuality, and everyday life. This is based on women’s strong identification with her as another woman, sister, and mother. She is believed to understand women by being a woman and mother herself. However, she is also believed to be stronger and holier than any other human being. She thus functions both as a mirror of human identification and a source of divine protection. The experience of it being often easier to approach Mary than God or Christ is theologically based on her role as the intercessor. She is seen as close to humans, being human herself, but also closer to God and Christ, bringing the petitions of her believers to them, praying for humans in front of God.

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

Finnish Orthodox women negotiate with the gendered teachings and practices of their Church in multiple ways. Many of the women interviewed for this project expressed critical views which could be seen as feminist, but not explicitly theological in nature. They expressed their critique on the basis of their lived experience as women. Their critique was aimed at the Church as an institution, which holds and exercises all kinds of power — not just within itself but in the broader society and culture.

However, the Orthodox Church is a minority church in Finland, which is why the majority-serving Lutheran Church often served as a mirror and point of comparison. The societal influence of the Lutheran Church is obviously much greater. The secular society with its ideals of gender equality was another point of comparison: for example, all-male priesthood was not seen as a problem even though gender equality outside of Church was taken for granted. Those women who were most critical of sexism in the Church, tended to think that the Church should not be an exception in society, and that the broadly shared gender equality should be extended to it as well.

Theology, including feminist theology, is not only academic, but an individual and communal way of reflecting intellectually on one’s faith and beliefs. This always takes place within a continuum of tradition — and continuum includes both continuity and change. Though I have not emphasised the interviewed women’s theological views in this article, this kind of scholarly attentiveness means locating the theology in their speech when it occurs. Mariology is a case in point: even less educated laypeople are usually aware of the theology concerning Mary in different Christian churches. The women interviewed in the course of these research projects, first Catholic and then Orthodox, both maintained a distance from these teachings and at times affirmed them, always reflecting upon them and negotiating with them.

The first part of this paper analyses some methodological issues concerning the use of ethnographic methods in theology. It is important to pay attention to how ethnographic and textual methods may enrich each other in theology, religious studies, and anthropology of religion. Feminist theologians have not widely used ethnographic methods or included the insights of anthropologists of religion in the development of such a feminist theology, that is also attentive to women’s lived religious practices and ways of understanding their religious identity. In the course of research, over 60 Finnish Orthodox women had been interviewed in 2013-14 regarding their perceived relationship with the Virgin Mary. Preliminary results show, that in the lived experience of Orthodox women, Mary gives worth to women in the church in spite of exclusive male leadership and priesthood. However, this
does not exclude a critique of male dominance in the Church, even though this is not necessarily or only related to all-male priesthood. Finnish Orthodox women negotiate with the gendered teachings and practices of their church in multiple ways. Many of the informants expressed critical views which could be seen as feminist, on the basis of their lived experience as women. Their critique was aimed at the Church as an institution which holds and exercises all kinds of power – not just within itself but in the society and culture at large.

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Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary

En la primera parte del presente artículo, son analizadas algunas cuestiones metodológicas sobre la utilización de métodos etnográficos en teología. Es importante tener en cuenta que, en áreas como la teología, estudios sobre la religion o antropología, los métodos etnográficos y textuales se podrían enriquecer mutuamente. Las teólogas feministas no han recurrido mucho al uso de métodos etnográficos, ni han incluido las ideas de los antropólogos de religion para el desarrollo de una teología feminista centradas en las prácticas religiosas vividas por las mujeres y sus formas de entender su identidad religiosa. Durante los años 2013 y 2014, entrevisté más de 60 mujeres ortodoxas finlandesas sobre su relación con la Virgen María. Algunos resultados preliminares de este estudio muestran que, para estas mujeres ortodoxas, la Virgen María valoriza a las mujeres, a pesar de que el liderazgo en la Iglesia y sacerdocio sea ejercido exclusivamente por hombres. Sin embargo, esto no excluye críticas a la dominación masculina en la Iglesia, aunque este aspecto no está ni necesariamente ni únicamente relacionado con el sacerdocio exclusivamente masculino. Las mujeres ortodoxas finlandesas negocián con aquellas enseñanzas y prácticas que se relacionan con cuestiones de género diferentemente. Muchas de las mujeres entrevistadas expresaron ciertas críticas, que pueden ser interpretadas como feministas, a partir de su experiencia vivida como mujeres. Las críticas fueron dirigidas hacia la iglesia como institución, que mantiene y ejerce varias formas de poder – no únicamente dentro de la iglesia sino también, de una forma más amplia, en la sociedad y cultura.

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