

**Zeitschrift:** Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie  
**Band:** 104 (2014)  
**Heft:** 3  
  
**Artikel:** Reclaiming theosis : orthodox women theologians on the mystery of the union with God  
**Autor:** Zorgdrager, Heleen  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-405136>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.04.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

## Reclaiming *theosis*: Orthodox Women Theologians on the Mystery of the Union with God

Heleen Zorgdrager

### Introduction

‘The female face of Orthodox Christianity is largely unknown and is still to be explored.’<sup>1</sup> This critical observation made in 1998 by French Orthodox theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel seems to have lost none of its validity. A decade later, when Orthodox women were taking stock of the history of their participation in the ecumenical movement, in Volos, Greece, they deemed it appropriate to choose this quote from Behr-Sigel as the motto of their later publication.<sup>2</sup> The essays in the volume they published also evaluate what the ecumenical movement has meant for Orthodox women in their struggle for full acknowledgement of their role in the life of the church. Furthermore, the authors consider the achievements of this struggle. The conclusion is not very optimistic. The various authors agree that, in spite of the fact that an increasing number of Orthodox women have earned a degree in theology and of the fact that several significant inner-Orthodox women’s consultations were facilitated by the World Council of Churches (Agapia 1976, Rhodes 1988, Crete 1990, Damascus 1995, Istanbul 1997), there are still many obstacles preventing women from effectively contributing to the renewal of Orthodox church life and Orthodox theology.

One way to reveal the value of the female face of Orthodox Christianity is to explore the theological endeavours of Orthodox women from the past, and to highlight their contributions in the wider field of Orthodox and ecumenical theology. That is precisely the purpose of this essay. It focuses on the fascinating theme of *theosis* (or deification) as a central

---

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Women in the Orthodox Church”, in: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware (eds.), *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva: WCC, 2000). The original French version of this article was published in: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *L’ordination des femmes dans l’Église orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, Fulata Mbanjo Moyo, Aikaterini Pekridou, *Many Women Were Also There ... The Participation of Orthodox Women in the Ecumenical Movement*. Proceedings of the WCC Consultation at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Greece, 2008 (Geneva: WCC, 2010). See for the motto, p. 7.

notion of Eastern soteriology and anthropology. As Paul Gavriluk describes, from the early and mid-twentieth century, it became more common for Eastern Orthodox theologians to insist that the doctrine of deification represents a characteristically ‘Eastern’ approach to the mystery of salvation.<sup>3</sup> This was partly in reaction to modern Protestant condemnations of deification as a concept that would distort the message of the gospel (Adolf von Harnack, Karl Barth). Russian émigré theologians in France, those who were inspired by the sophiology of Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900) with its idea of divine humanity (Sophia), as well as those who found new inspiration in the rediscovery of patristic sources, like Georges Florovsky (1873–1979), came to regard deification as a sort of meta-doctrine, underlying and unifying all *loci* of theology, including the doctrine of God, creation, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. It is hardly being noticed, also not in the survey of Gavriluk,<sup>4</sup> that in this modern rediscovery and re-interpretation of deification as a theme of ‘structural significance’ for Orthodox theology<sup>5</sup> some women theologians played a remarkable and original role.

The first scholar who introduced the doctrine of *theosis* to the Western academic world was Myrrha Lot-Borodine. In her ground-breaking essays on the doctrine of deification in the early Greek Church, published in 1932–33,<sup>6</sup> she not only revealed the rich potential of the patristic concept but also presented her own theological view of deification as a mystical ideal and a contemplative practice. Other Orthodox female theologians of the twentieth century, like Maria Skobtsova and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, followed in constructively and creatively reclaiming the notion of *theosis*. They did so by highlighting sometimes significantly different aspects of

<sup>3</sup> Paul L. Gavriluk, “The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum”, in: *Modern Theology* 25 (2009), pp. 647–659, here 648.

<sup>4</sup> For example, he gives the credits to Jules Gross for a ‘ground-breaking study’ on deification (p. 649). See on the work of Gross, note 9.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology”, in: Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Witting (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2007), pp. 32–46, here 43.

<sup>6</sup> Myrrha Lot-Borodine, “La doctrine de la ‘déification’ dans l’Église grecque jusqu’au XI<sup>e</sup> s.” in: *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, 1932–1933. After her death reprinted in: Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *La déification de l’homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*. Préface par le Cardinal Jean Daniélou (Paris: Cerf, 1970); repr. 2011.

the meaning of *theosis* in contrast to the approaches of their male fellow theologians, and their reflections include always some critical discussion of gender ideology in relation to conceiving deification as the goal and fulfillment of human life.

In this article, I will reconstruct the thoughts of these women theologians on *theosis* and try to discern what these women's voices in their own distinctive ways have contributed to the retrieval and reshaping of the notion of deification in the modern age. How have they challenged contemporary Orthodox and ecumenical theological discourse with their interpretations and what could theological gender studies today learn from their hermeneutical method of engaging with Tradition/traditions?

### *Why disclosing the female face of Orthodoxy?*

Briefly put, in Eastern Christianity *theosis* (literally: 'becoming god') intends to describe the transformation of the human being through salvation by Christ. As Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373) phrases it: 'he [the Logos] became human that we might become divine.'<sup>7</sup> The human being is called to grow into the likeness of God and to participate as a creature in the fullness of life that God is, through the Holy Spirit. In other words, the idea of *theosis* refers to the fully realized humanity that has regained the likeness of God. From its early reception into Christianity, *theosis* has stood for both a theological doctrine and a mystical, ascetical and/or ethical practice.<sup>8</sup> Myrrha Lot-Borodine, an esteemed medievalist belonging to the community of Russian émigrés in Paris, published her series of seminal articles on deification in the *Revue de l'histoire des religions* in 1932–33. A few years later, in 1938, Jules Gross would publish his monography on deification.<sup>9</sup> Several contemporary authors recognize the role

---

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, inc. 54. For the history of the so-called 'exchange formula,' see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 106, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Excellent accounts of the development of the doctrine of deification are presented by Russell, *Doctrine of Deification* (see note 7); Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ. Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 1987); Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999); Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères grecs. Contribution historique à la doctrine de grâce* (Paris: Gabalda, 1938); transl. Paul A. Onica, *The*



of Lot-Borodine as trailblazer for the modern Western engagement with the notion of deification;<sup>10</sup> however, the unique content of her theology has not received much scholarly attention.<sup>11</sup> This article seeks to reclaim and honour Lot-Borodine's contribution to the modern revitalization of deification, as well as that of Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945) and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005).

Living all in France and working in distinct, yet overlapping, historic timeframes, Lot-Borodine, Skobtsova and Behr-Sigel courageously set out to describe and shape Christian thinking about what it means to be human, to act as a human and to become fully human. The latter two knew each other personally through the Francophone Orthodox parish in Paris and the Russian Christian Students Association (ACER);<sup>12</sup> Behr-Sigel wrote about the life and work of Maria Skobtsova in a moving essay in memory of her.<sup>13</sup> It is less clear whether or to what extent there were relationships between them and Lot-Borodine. It is possible that Behr-Sigel and Lot-Borodine attended the same classes of Etienne Gilson on Thomism at the Sorbonne in the years 1928–29.<sup>14</sup> They both maintained a life-long friendship with Vladimir and Madeleine Lossky, and perhaps shared

---

*Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim CA: A & C Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> See Kerry S. Robichaux and Paul A. Onica, "Introduction to the English edition", in: Gross, *Divinisation* (see note 9), p. xiv; Russell, *Doctrine of Deification* (see note 7), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Louth may be mentioned as one of the few patristic scholars who took up a serious conversation with her work. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 187–190. I have started filling the gap: Heleen Zorgdrager, "A Practice of Love: Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882–1954) and the Modern Revival of the Doctrine of Deification", in: *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 64 (2012), pp. 285–305.

<sup>12</sup> See Olga Lossky, *Toward the Endless Day. The Life of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 21ff; about Behr-Sigel's introduction to the social outreach work of Mother Maria Skobtsova, *ibid.*, pp. 59–60. Original in French: *Vers le jour sans déclin* (Paris: Cerf, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891–1945", in: Michael Plekon and Sarah E. Hinlicky (eds.), *Discerning the Signs of the Times. The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 2001), pp. 41–53, here 44. First published in 1989 as "Mère Marie Skobtsov", in: *Le Messager orthodoxe*, no. 111, 1989, pp. 56–70. For their encounter in Paris mediated by their mutual friend Fr. Lev Gillet, cf. Lossky, *Endless Day* (see note 12), pp. 59–60.

<sup>14</sup> Lossky, *Endless Day* (see note 12), p. 23. Elisabeth Sigel took these classes together with Vladimir Lossky.

other friendships in the circle of the émigré community. As to whether there has been a more substantial cross-fertilization between the two women is hard to determine. Behr-Sigel does mention Lot-Borodine's book *La déification de l'homme* in some of her bibliographies<sup>15</sup> but she neither explicitly refers to it nor discusses its viewpoints. Lot-Borodine has not referred to Behr-Sigel in her writings.<sup>16</sup> I have found no traces of a personal or scholarly relationship between Maria Skobtsova and Lot-Borodine.

In this essay, I will not homogenize the thoughts of these theologians. I will present their views on deification and look for convergences and divergences. I will analyse the strategies they apply with regard to the discourses of tradition and with regard to gender. It will be a subject of investigation: in what sense can we speak of a 'women's regaining' of the tradition of *theosis*?

It is my expectation that disclosing the female face of Orthodox Christianity as it relates to the issue of deification will have significance for the wider field of theology. The tradition of deification has become an increasingly important resource for ecumenical research, dialogue and debate over the last decades.<sup>17</sup> It has inspired Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist and Evangelical theologians to recover traces of the early Christian heritage of *theosis* in their own confessional traditions, and to reconsider earlier, at times very harsh, condemnations of the Eastern approach. New, anti-hegemonic readings of patristic sources on mystical theology and *theosis* have stimulated postmodernist and feminist philosophers and theologians to envision an open-ended, apophatic an-

---

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Alexandre Boukharev. Un théologien de l'Église orthodoxe russe en dialogue avec le monde moderne*. Préface par Olivier Clément (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) and in: *Le lieu du Cœur. Initiation à la spiritualité orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> The Bibliography in *La déification de l'homme* that mentions Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Prière et sainteté en Russie* (Paris: Cerf, 1950; nouvelle édition revue et augmentée: Begrolles-en Mauge, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1982), was posthumously composed by the editor Jean Daniélou.

<sup>17</sup> See inter alia Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2004); Stephen Finland and Vladimir Kharlamov (eds.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2006); Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2007), pp. 186–200.

thropology.<sup>18</sup> All of these aspirations, I would argue, make it urgent and alluring to turn to subaltern, largely neglected women's voices in Orthodox tradition to see to what extent they might help to build bridges between the multi-layered patristic heritage and today's ecumenical, post-modern and feminist concerns.

### **Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882–1957): the journey of an individual mystic**

#### *Life*

Myrrha Borodine was born in 1882 in St Petersburg and died in 1957 in Fontenay-aux-Roses in France.<sup>19</sup> She received her education at the Prince Obolensky University for Women in St Petersburg, and moved to Paris in 1906. She obtained her doctorate in 1909 with a thesis on *La femme dans l'œuvre de Chrétien de Troyes* and in the same year she married the already famous professor in medieval history, Ferdinand Lot. Myrrha Lot-Borodine became a leading scholar in the French and Anglo-Saxon courtly literature of the Middle Ages. She became part of the Russian émigré community in Paris and attended the Colloque Berdyaev (Sunday afternoon meetings at the house of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev). It was these circles that inspired her interest in theology, along with the lectures at the Sorbonne of Étienne

<sup>18</sup> See Linda Woodhead, "Apophatic Anthropology", in: R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (eds.), *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 233–246; Sarah Coakly and Charles M. Stang, *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (eds.), *Apophatic Bodies. Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away. A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville KY: WJKP, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> For the biography, see Marianne Mahn-Lot, "Ma mère, Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1954). Esquisse d'itinéraire spirituel", in: *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 88 (2004), pp. 745–754; Olivier Rousseau, "In memoriam: Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1957)", in: *Irénikon* 30 (1957), pp. 340–345. They mention different years of death, an uncertainty that remains throughout several shorter obituaries. I believe we should follow Rousseau who wrote his obituary immediately after Lot-Borodine had passed away on 'le 18 juillet dernier.' The error in the title of her daughter's biography might be explained by wrong transcription. I herewith correct my previous presentation in: Zörgdrager, "A Practice of Love" (see note 11), p. 291.

Gilson<sup>20</sup> on the mystical theology of St Bernard of Clairvaux, which were also attended by her good friend Vladimir Lossky. The theme of deification came to her attention during a conversation with Fr Georges Florovsky at Berdyaev's home. The idea of *theosis* immediately grasped her. It resonated productively against the background of her passion for Romanesque literature and medieval mystical theology.

### *View of deification*

From her interest in medieval literature, embracing the idea of deification was only a small step for Lot-Borodine. In courtly poetry she had explored how human nature, fuelled by erotic love, shows its innate tendency towards the supernatural, the 'divine touch.'<sup>21</sup> Giving the example of Lancelot of the Lake, Lot-Borodine comments that the cult of love for the unattainable lady cannot be upheld with such an extreme psychic intensity. The end of Lancelot is very symbolic: he dies as a hermit. All the carnal residues of his love for the lady must burn, in ascetic purification. The worldly love transforms itself into the vision of the intelligible world, to dissolve finally in the mystic beatitude of the divine love.<sup>22</sup>

Lot-Borodine began to unfold her thoughts on deification in the essays of 1932/33. Later she would ironically comment that these essays earned her the reputation of a '*théologienne*.'<sup>23</sup> In the essays, she approaches *theosis* as a living phenomenon. The theological doctrine reflects a practice of asceticism and mystical experience. Her approach is organic and experiential, and her description is cast in a poetic, rhapsodic style. Her arguments are well informed by a wide range of Eastern sources, many of

---

<sup>20</sup> Etienne Gilson (1884–1978) revitalized Thomistic philosophy, regarding it as a reaction against scholasticism, and was at the same time a great admirer of St Bernard of Clairvaux. He also inspired Vladimir Lossky.

<sup>21</sup> Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *De l'amour profane à l'amour sacré. Études de psychologie sentimentale au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Nizet, 1979) (written in 1948, published posthumously in 1961).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 29. Lot-Borodine adds that this marks the beginning of the cult of Our Lady (Notre Dame, Virgin Mary) as well. The unattainable lady made the knight suffer by her unjust or sometimes cruel behaviour. The only way out was to detach his view from the earthly queen and turn to the heavenly queen.

<sup>23</sup> In an autobiographical text, quoted by Mahn-Lot, "Ma mère" (see note 19), p. 748.

which were not yet available in Western languages.<sup>24</sup> She shows a preference for early theologians with an apparently more Gnostic or Neoplatonic mind, like Clement of Alexandria, the Desert Fathers, the Cappadocians (in particular Gregory of Nyssa), Evagrius Ponticus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian. She seldom refers to Church Fathers like Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria. Surprisingly, she sometimes places her favorite Church Fathers side by side with medieval mystics like St Bernard, Tauler, and Hildegard of Bingen. As for the main features of her view on deification, I distinguish the following aspects:

First, Lot-Borodine insists on the importance of the apophatic nature of our knowledge of God. She follows fourteenth-century Gregory of Palamas who argued that deification entails partaking in the Energies, not in the Essence of God. The Essence of God by its very nature evades our human forms and speech.

Second, she demonstrates a very robust sense of the goodness of creation which makes her consonant with, for instance, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. In her view, divine grace is already active in creation in the form of the power of *eros* with which God pulls the creatures towards himself. She emphasizes that the *nous* is not purely intellectual; it is the faculty of charismatic knowledge, and is more properly understood as 'intuition'. In the ultimate mystic vision of God, knowledge and love are intimately joined. The *nous* as the depositary of the image of God in the human being hints to a point where soul and body are found in union in the very centre of human being. Deification is mediated through the purification of the image of God in the *nous* and concerns the whole psychosomatic unity of the human.<sup>25</sup>

A third striking feature, which is related to the sense of the goodness of creation, is Lot-Borodine's view of synergism in salvation.<sup>26</sup> In Eastern soteriology, she argues, human beings maintain certain autonomy. The integrity of the free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is the divine mark in human beings. She states that in the process of deification the first initiative is to the human will, which is guided and nourished, but not activated, by the

<sup>24</sup> Only in 1943, in Lyon the first volume appeared of the famous bilingual collection of patristic texts, *Sources Chrétiennes*, edited by Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac and Claude Mondésert.

<sup>25</sup> Lot-Borodine, *La déification* (see note 6), pp. 44ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

divine power.<sup>27</sup> She shares with Sergei Bulgakov the view that Christ, the God-Human (*bogochelovek*), came to restore human nature but that the Mother of God played a significant role as well by carrying the Son in his integral human nature in her womb. Thus, the event of Incarnation was already salvific.<sup>28</sup> From this base, Lot-Borodine fully acknowledges human/divine synergism in the process of deification. The healing is within the reach of human beings who are being driven by the desire (*eros*) for union with God. To achieve complete union with the divine, however, we need the sanctifying grace that is beyond human resources.

Fourth, in conceiving the practice of asceticism as part of the deification process, she favours a vital, embodied practice of love.<sup>29</sup> She criticizes the ‘rather angelic than apostolic’ virtues of monks. The love that flows from the union with God should join the passion of erotic energy with the self-giving aspects of divine love (*agape*). She calls the resulting combination *eros ekstatikos*, as the queen of virtues. In the highest state of contemplation all human activities will be suspended and the mystic person experiences a rapture of the *nous*. For Lot-Borodine, this mystical surrender is the highest experience of divinization. She praises contemplative asceticism as the ‘royal way’ of deification, but admits that for many believers this may be too difficult. Therefore the Church dispenses in the sacraments the deifying grace to all. She regards the strictly personal and the ritualistic way of deification as two forms of mysticism, which are, however, united in their roots and harmoniously complementary.<sup>30</sup> In these essays, she clearly prioritizes the personal over the ecclesiastically mediated journey towards God. It might be, as Andrew Louth has indicated,<sup>31</sup> that she later corrected this position in her – equally pioneering – articles on the fourteenth-century Byzantine mystic Nicholas Cabasilas, from 1935 onwards.<sup>32</sup> She explored the Divine Love in his work, and fo-

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 91. She draws on the disciplinary practices of Eastern monks, and on Clement and Origen who defended the inviolable freedom of the human being.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 90, note 23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 180–183.

<sup>31</sup> In his lecture on Myrrha Lot-Borodine and Vladimir Lossky in the series of Amsterdam Lectures on ‘The Ways of Modern Orthodox Theology’ (2012–2013) – Amsterdam Centre of Eastern Orthodox Theology, VU University Amsterdam, May 14, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> The articles are collected in the posthumously published book: Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *Un maître de la spiritualité byzantine au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle: Nicolas Cabasi-*



cused on the symbolism of the Divine Liturgy and the nature of Eucharist and Baptism. It looks like she found a connecting bridge between the two forms of mysticism, without giving in to ecclesial institutionalism.

The woman, who started her scholarly writing with a thesis on *The woman in the work of Chrétien de Troyes*, addresses the gender issue also in theological anthropology by asking: Will there be a duality of sexes in the deified state?<sup>33</sup> Her answer is a firm denial; the destiny of human life is a full, androgynous humanity which transcends male/female as well as all other ‘temporary differences.’ The matter of the body is not left behind; the material body will be permeated by the Spirit, as Maximus Confessor states: ‘becoming wholly God by grace, in soul and body.’ Human life will be fulfilled in the spiritualization of the whole creation, when God will be all in all and the cosmos will be glorified.

### **Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945): going all the kenotic way**

#### *Life*

Maria Skobtsova is more well-known for the unusual course of her life, her radical social involvement, and her death as a martyr in Ravensbrück concentration camp than for her work as an academically trained theologian who was actively involved in the development of modern Orthodox theology. I would like to draw attention to the latter. However, to understand the richness and innovative power of her theology we should first consider her dramatic life story which is its fertile soil.

Maria Skobtsova (her religious name) was born as Elizaveta Pilenko in 1891 in Riga.<sup>34</sup> In her childhood she moved to Anapa on the Black Sea coast and after the death of her father in 1906 the family moved to St Pe-

las (Paris: Orante, 1958).

<sup>33</sup> Lot-Borodine, *La déification* (see note 6), 46.

<sup>34</sup> See the memories of Igor Krivoshein, *K 25-letnju so dnja končiny Materi Marii (Kobcovej)* [Mother Maria (Skobtsova): for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death], 1970, on the website [www.mere-marie.com](http://www.mere-marie.com) (accessed on August 7, 2013). Another important biography is Sergei Hackel, *One, of Great Price* (London: DLT, 1965); published in a revised version as: *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891–1945* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 1981). A congenial biographical essay was written by Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891–1945”, in: Plekon and Hinlicky (eds.), *Discerning the Signs* (see note 13), pp. 41–53, here 44. See also the chapter on Mother Maria in: Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).



tersburg. The loss of her father plunged 15-year old Lisa into a crisis of faith. How could an all-loving God be so unfair? While still a teenager, Elisabeth met the poet Aleksandr Blok and became interested in Marxism. She joined the artistic and social revolutionary circles of St Petersburg. She studied theology at the St Petersburg Spiritual Academy, as the first female student, blessed by the metropolitan of St Petersburg, and passed the necessary exams. Elisabeth married twice (in 1910 with D. V. Kuzmin-Karavaev and in 1919 with Daniel Skobtsov); both marriages ended in a divorce. With her first husband she had a daughter Gaiana, with the second the children Yuri and Anastasia. In the tumultuous years after the Russian Revolution, in 1920, Elisabeth left Russia and, after many wanderings, arrived in Paris in 1924.

In Paris, Elisabeth took courses at the St Serge Theological Institute with outstanding philosophers and theologians, including Georgy Fedotov, Sergei Bulgakov, Lev Zander, and Nikolai Berdyaev, who later became her close friends. As secretary of the Russian emigrants' youth movement ACER (Action Chrétienne d'Étudiants Russes), she taught religious lectures herself. Later, after entering the nunnery in 1932, she was blessed by Metropolitan Evlogy to preach in churches after prayer services. Besides her profound engagement in philosophy and theology, she was dedicated to the art of icon painting, embroidery, and writing poems and plays.

A life turning event for Elisabeth was the death of her 3-year-old daughter Anastasia who died of meningitis in 1923. Elisabeth wrote in her memories that the existential catastrophe had made her a different person. Before that her soul was 'wandering blind.' But

while I walked in the cemetery behind the coffin, it all suddenly opened to me. I became a part of the universal all-encompassing motherhood [...] I saw another way and a new meaning of life, which was *being the mother of all who needed protection*.<sup>35</sup>

Anastasia's death (the name means 'resurrection') was to the mother as an 'abyss of divine visitation.' In the crisis, God revealed himself and the true nature of things.

The death of a loved one is the door that opens suddenly upon eternity. In visiting us, the Lord reveals the true nature of things: on the one hand a dead

---

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from the memories of Igor Krivoshein (see note 34), without page numbers. Italics by the author of this article.

skeleton of a human being and of all creation that is mortal as he is, and on the other hand, simultaneously, the Spirit of fire, giver of life, consoler who consumes and fills all.<sup>36</sup>

The pain and co-suffering of the mother had become the birth place of the Spirit of fire in her life. That was when she decided to take the veil. In 1932 she was professed in a liturgy led by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky), the bishop of the Russian émigrés in Paris. He gave her the monastic name Mary, after the desert mother St Mary of Egypt, and expressed the hope that she would speak and act in the desert of human hearts. The world became her monastery. Maria Skobtsova established a hostel in Rue de Lourmel in Paris for homeless immigrants, prostitutes, and ex-prisoners, and made it a hospitable residence for artists, intellectuals, and priests as well. While she was a nun, people kept calling her just ‘mother’ (French: *mère*; Russian: *mat'*). Even in Skobtsova’s theology there is a profound continuity between her physical ‘natural’ and spiritual motherhood.

After the death of her daughter Gaiana in 1936 in the USSR,<sup>37</sup> she even more determinately continued ‘being the mother of all who needed protection.’ During the Second World War the hostel at Rue de Lourmel became a refuge and escape route for Jews. Mother Maria and her helpers were betrayed and sent to concentration camps. Maria Skobtsova died on March 31, 1945 in the gas chamber of Ravensbrück. Her last words scratched on a piece of paper were, ‘I fully accept suffering [...] and I want to welcome death, if it comes, as a grace from on high.’<sup>38</sup>

In 2004, Maria Skobtsova was canonized a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, along with her son Yuri and her helpers Fr. Dimitri Klépinine and Ilya Fondaminsky.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Hackel, *One, of Great Price* (see note 34), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> As a friend of Mother Maria later disclosed, she died from a botched abortion. Dominique Desanti, *La Sainte et l’incroyante. Ma rencontre avec Mère Marie* (Paris: Bayard, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Behr-Sigel, “Mother Maria Skobtsova” (see note 13), p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> On the process of canonization see Michael Plekon, “Maria Skobtsova: Making a Saint in the Eastern Church Today” – Lecture at the Strasbourg Ecumenical Institute Conference, July 2013, ‘Saints without borders’ (not yet published).

*Love of the neighbour as the mystery of the union with God*

Skobtsova's theological imagination found its expression in multifarious forms, including essays, poems, plays, icons, drawings, and embroidery.<sup>40</sup> All of these should be included in a thorough reconstruction of her view of *theosis* as the mystery of the union with the living God. Here I will concentrate on some major essays in which Skobtsova reflects on the central questions of Christian life. In these essays we encounter the principles of her theology: love of the neighbor as the reality of the love of God; *sobornost'* (community, catholicity); divine humanity; personhood; and the correspondence of the paths of Christ and the Mother of God.

In 'Types of Religious Lives' (1937), she offers a profound and practice-oriented analysis of five types of piety that can be found in Eastern Orthodoxy. To every spiritual type she addresses the normative question: Can we find genuine love here, and does it creatively respond to the challenges of Church life and society in these despairing times? Skobtsova sees no future for the *synodal type* of piety that subsumes the Church to the needs and values of the State, neither for the *strict ritualism* of the Old Believers or 'monastic citadels' like Athos and Valaam that has replaced spirit with form, love with ritual. She calls both types of religious life 'idolatry.'<sup>41</sup> This judgement applies to the *aesthetic type* of religious life as well, for it is difficult to find love in the aesthetic piety. The aesthetic elite is 'incapable of self-sacrifice in love.'<sup>42</sup> Their eyes are not able to see how

---

<sup>40</sup> See for new French editions of her texts: Mère Marie Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère*. Nouvelle édition revue et complétée par Hélène Arjakovsky-Klépinine (Paris: Cerf, 2001); Mère Marie Skobtsov, *Le Jour du Saint-Esprit*. Préface de S. E. Monseigneur Gabriel de Comanes, Introduction par Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Ouvrage dirigé par Paul Ladouceur (Paris: Cerf, 2011). An English edition of texts: Mother Maria Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*. With an introduction by Jim Forest (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2003). In Russian, many texts by and about Mother Maria Skobtsova as well as images of her artistic works are available on the website [www.mere-marie.com](http://www.mere-marie.com) (accessed on August 7, 2013). A detailed bibliography (last updated in 2002) of works by and about Maria Skobtsova in various languages is presented on the website of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship <http://www.incommunion.org/2004/10/18/mother-maria-skobtsova-bibliography/> (accessed on August 7, 2013). A recent study of her fine arts is offered by Xenia Krivochéine, *La Beauté salvatrice: Mère Marie (Skobtsov): Peintures – dessins – broderies* (Paris: Cerf, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Skobtsova, *Essential Writings* (see note 40), p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Christ himself comes out from the sanctuary that is protected by a splendid iconostasis.

The singing will continue to resound; clouds of incense will still rise, the faithful will be overcome by the ecstatic beauty of the services. But Christ will go out on to the church steps and mingle with the crowd: the poor, the lepers, the desperate, the embittered, the holy fools. Christ will go out into the streets, the prisons, the hospitals, the low haunts and dives. Again and again Christ lays down his soul for his friends.<sup>43</sup>

In his *kenosis*, his self-emptying and descent to the poor, Christ is searching for the divine image, a reflection of eternal Beauty in our ugliness, in our miserable lives. And having awakened it,

[h]e will return to the temples and bring with him all those whom he has summoned to the wedding feast, has gathered from the highways, the poor and the maimed, prostitutes and sinners.<sup>44</sup>

This is Skobtsova's account of *theosis*, depicted in gospel imagery (Mt 22:1–13) as the social act of love that reaches down into the endless depths of the human spirit. Genuine asceticism is an act of emptying oneself completely. The *evangelical type* of religious life – simply: the way of the Gospel – is characterized by this true asceticism. Meanwhile, she criticizes the more explicit type of *ascetical piety* for its actual motive of renunciation of the world turns out to be 'a perfection of egoism.'<sup>45</sup> Those who pretend to be ascetics are usually only concerned about the salvation of their own soul. True asceticism, she claims, does not wall off the person from the universe. On the contrary, it requires that the person go out into the world as this is the place where God's love wants to incarnate.<sup>46</sup> Skobtsova complains that the *Philokalia*, the influential anthology of spiritual texts from Eastern tradition,<sup>47</sup> scarcely counts love of the neighbour among the ascetical works.<sup>48</sup> There are just a few texts, e.g. from Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373) and Isaac of Nineveh (7<sup>th</sup> century), that

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> 'The Philokalia of the Fathers' was compiled in the eighteenth century by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, published in Venice in 1783, and contains mystical and ascetical texts from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>48</sup> In "Le second commandement de l'Évangile" (1939), in: Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère* (see note 40), pp. 130f.

consider concrete love of the neighbour as a way of achieving *theosis*.<sup>49</sup> This demonstrates how Orthodox tradition has one-sidedly valued the solitary ascetical practice. Yet, as she writes, the few exceptions provide ‘a patristic foundation to our research.’<sup>50</sup> She finds similar support within the works of the nineteenth-century religious authors Khomiakhov, Solovyov and Dostoyevsky, in which the mystery of human communion becomes essential in the journey toward God.<sup>51</sup>

The evangelical path is led by the double commandment of love. One cannot love God without loving the neighbour who is destined for deification, and we cannot truly love the human without loving God, which leads us to discern the image of God in the neighbour. If we do not love humanity, we condemn ourselves to a kind of deaf-mute blindness with respect to the divine as well.<sup>52</sup> In this 1937 essay, Skobtsova models Christian love after Christ and his way of Godmanhood (*bo-gochelovechestvo*) or divine humanity,<sup>53</sup> but she employs the metaphor of maternal love to depict the essence of Christian love. ‘Only that maternal love is truly Christian which sees in the child an authentic image of God, which is inherent not only in him but in all people.’<sup>54</sup> Only this kind of maternal love is truly self-sacrificing, and it is completely different from the maternal love that is ‘taking’, that sees in the child merely the reflection or extension of one’s self. In a sense, Christ manifested a genuine maternal love when he went the way of the Cross in his self-denying love for the world. Skobtsova takes the words of Christ literally: ‘Greater love has no man than the one who lays down his *soul* for his friends’ (Jn 15:13). For her, Christ spoke here precisely about the soul, one’s inner life, one’s spiritual treasures.<sup>55</sup> A radical non-possession characterizes

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 133–135.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>52</sup> Skobtsova, *Essential Writings* (see note 40), p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> Skobtsova borrows the term from the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900); Boris Jakim introduced the translation ‘divine humanity.’ See Valerie Nollan, review of Boris P. Vysheslavtsev, *The Eternal in Russian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002), in: *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002), online journal <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000049/article.pdf> (accessed on August 7, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Skobtsova, *Essential Writings* (see note 40), p. 178.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

the Christian life.<sup>56</sup> Such a person, who will squander her soul in love, will meet Christ face to face in the other person, and in that communion she unites with Christ himself. Skobtsova summarizes, ‘Thus the mystery of union with the human becomes the mystery of union with God.’<sup>57</sup>

Here we are speaking about a genuine emptying, in partial imitation of Christ’s self-emptying when he became incarnate in humankind. In the same way we must empty ourselves completely, becoming incarnate, so to speak, in another human soul.<sup>58</sup>

The Eucharist is the symbol of this deep mystery. Skobtsova writes that ‘through it earthly flesh is deified and having been deified enters into communion again with earthly flesh. In this sense the Eucharist is true communion with the divine.’<sup>59</sup> Thus she speaks of the whole of Christianity as ‘an eternal offering of the divine liturgy beyond church walls,’ and subsequently the sacrament of the altar must be celebrated on the altar that is the heart of the sister or brother in need. To summarize, for Skobtsova *theosis* entails that we are transformed or transfigured into persons after the likeness of Christ, into ‘christs,’ and that we incarnate God again and again in kenotic acts of self-sacrificing love, giving our hearts as food for the world.<sup>60</sup>

### *Cross and sword*

We now turn to the most revolutionary aspect of Skobtsova’s theology in terms of gender. She arrives at the understanding that two images *equally* symbolize the love of the neighbour: the path of the Mother and the path of the Son.<sup>61</sup> She had struggled to determine the relation between the two.<sup>62</sup> In 1927, in her essay ‘The Holy Land,’ she regarded them as two

<sup>56</sup> For the virtue of non-possession in Skobtsova’s theology, see *ibid.*, pp. 181ff. (“Types of Religious Live”); pp. 104–106 (“The Poor in Spirit”); pp. 100–103 (“Toward a New Monasticism II”).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>61</sup> I am grateful to Marina Shishova (Russian Christian Academy of Humanities, St Petersburg) who generously shared her thoughts on this aspect of Maria Skobtsova’s theology with me.

<sup>62</sup> See Grigory Benevich, *Tema Sofii i kak ona svjazyvaet m. Mariju, A. Bloka i Vl. Colob’ëva* [The theme of Sophia and how it connects Mother Maria, A. Blok and Vl. Solovyov]. Undated, available on [www.mere-marie.com](http://www.mere-marie.com) (accessed on August 7, 2013).



different and distinct paths for the religious soul. In the 1937 essay, she sought greater integration and proposed that maternal love is a vivid metaphor for the love of Christ. Two years later, she revised and specified her view in the article 'On Imitating the Mother of God' (1939).<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, she states, there are two ways of Christian love: that of sacrificial service to the world, like the Son; and that of compassion, co-suffering, co-bearing with the other's pain, like the Mother. In symbolic language she refers to this as the cross and the sword.<sup>64</sup> The cross symbolizes willingly accepted suffering, while the sword stands for passively suffered pain. In her last poem, 'The Day of the Spirit' (1942), Skobtsova wrote, 'The sword and cross are the beginning of the world.'<sup>65</sup> Cross and sword are inseparable. The cross of Christ was, at the same time, the sword that pierced the soul of the Mother of God. It is a 'double-edged' sword. The Mother must be in pain when her Son is in pain. And her pain is intensified because the Mother cannot take over the Son's suffering. Any soul that feels the pain of others becomes like the Mother of God standing by the Cross. According to Skobtsova, at the very moment a soul truly feels the pain of another, Christ is born within it.<sup>66</sup> In her reasoning, she goes even further: if a soul gives birth to Christ, it also adopts the whole Body of Christ, which is the whole divine humanity and each human individually. This is the mystical basis of our relation to the neighbour; we are called to maternity.<sup>67</sup> It is not just that the cross becomes the sword. At the next moment, the sword that has pierced the soul with pain becomes the cross. It becomes the cross that the soul takes upon itself willingly, carrying the burden of those it feels deeply sympathetic with. This, most likely, was what Elisabeth Pilenko felt when she walked behind her daughter's coffin, an event she called the 'inner catastrophe.' The soul that in its pain gives birth to Christ – for 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:19–20) – and takes part in the saving of the world. This soul walks *both* the path of the Mother and the path of the Son.

---

<sup>63</sup> "De l'imitation de la Mère de Dieu" (1939), in: Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère* (see note 40), pp. 175–190.

<sup>64</sup> Both symbols – the cross and the sword – are also found in the poem 'Snow Maiden' of the hero of her youth Aleksandr Blok, dated 17 October 1907.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted by Benevich, *Tema* (see note 62), without page number.

<sup>66</sup> Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère* (see note 40), 185.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186f.



How shall we evaluate the gender imagery? How are the feminine and masculine aspects constructed in relation to each other? It could lead to a traditional separation of masculine and feminine services. Many Silver Age philosophers, such as Solovyov and Berdyaev – Mother Maria's teachers – propagated this view. In their philosophy, the woman is supplementary to her husband who sees himself as Christ's warrior. While her husband fights against dark forces, she, sharing passively his burden, must comfort and inspire him with the gift of light and tenderness. Gradually, Maria Skobtsova succeeded in overcoming this traditional paradigm of complementarity. She transformed the imagery of her teachers. The religious soul, whatever the sex, must walk both paths, that of the Son and that of the Mother.<sup>68</sup> Only this makes one a whole person. The deifying way of love embraces both.

There is a further aspect of the Mother imagery that requires our attention. Kateřine Bauer calls it, in the terminology of Julia Kristeva, 'the aspect of the semiotic maternal.'<sup>69</sup> The suffering Mother under the Cross, the mother of all living creature, becomes in Skobtsova's poetic view the Mother-Damp-Earth (Russian: *Mat'-syra-zemlya*), motherhood symbolized and universalized by Mother Earth.<sup>70</sup> The life and suffering of the Earth is united with the mystery of the Mother of God. The cross of Golgotha has pierced not only Mary's soul but the soul of the Earth-Mother as well. Skobtsova draws here on pre-Christian Slavic tradition which also inspired her spiritual father Sergei Bulgakov. For Bauer, this aspect of the semiotic maternal associated with something 'Damp' is innovative, as an attempt to bring the excluded feminine and the unstable reality of the body back into theological discourse in order to change the symbolic order. I concur with Bauer that Skobtsova's multilayered imagery of the maternal and her use of poetic language help to destabilize the symbolic order and to create openings for renewal of the theological tradition.

<sup>68</sup> 'L'âme chrétienne doit être filiale et porteuse de croix, mais aussi maternelle et réceptrice de l'épée.' Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>69</sup> Kateřine Bauer, *The Play of the Semiotic and the Symbolic: The Authenticity of the Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova*, unpublished manuscript, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Skobtsov, *Le sacrement du frère* (see note 40), p. 183. See for comments also Hackel, *One, of Great Price* (see note 34), p. 54, and Benevich, *Tema* (see note 62), without page number.

**Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005): *theosis* as a critical concept for gender analysis**

Elisabeth Charlotte Sigel was born in 1907 in Strasbourg.<sup>71</sup> She died at the age of 98 in her apartment in Paris in 2005. As the daughter of a French Lutheran father and a Jewish Austrian mother, she was baptized in the Lutheran church. While studying at the Protestant faculty in Strasbourg, she befriended Russian émigrés who introduced her to Eastern tradition. After she was deeply touched by an Easter liturgy led by Fr Sergei Bulgakov, she chose to enter the Orthodox Church. Her affiliation would intensify after her marriage to the Russian emigrant André Behr. She became a prominent mediator of Orthodox theology in the West, specializing in Russian spirituality, hagiography, and modern Orthodox theology. In the last quarter of her life, she gained fame among a wider audience for her outstanding contributions, largely within ecumenical circles such as the World Council of Churches, to the question of women's ordination in the Orthodox Church.<sup>72</sup>

Behr-Sigel can be called a 'theologian of the incarnation.'<sup>73</sup> Her entire vision is characterized by the permeability of the human being to Christ, which allows one to present him to others.<sup>74</sup> As it was for Maria Skobtsova (whom she had personally known and greatly admired), the theme of *kenosis* became a leading motif in her theology. She found it particularly prominent in Russian spirituality.<sup>75</sup> Behr-Sigel was fascinated by men and women who were shaping 'a different type of monasticism,' who opened the doors of the monastery and plunged into the depths of the city where God seemed absent, to shed a transfiguring light on the secular world. To

---

<sup>71</sup> For an excellent biography, see Lossky, *Toward the Endless Day* (see note 12).

<sup>72</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Le Ministère de la femme dans l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1987); English translation: *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (Redondo Beach CA: Oakwood, 1991); Behr-Sigel and Ware, *The Ordination of Women* (see note 1).

<sup>73</sup> Lossky, *Toward the Endless Day* (see note 12), p. 279.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Plekon, "To Become Permeable to Christ: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's Theological Vision", in: *Ecumenical Review* 61 (2009), pp. 165–176; here 167, 171.

<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "Le Christ kénotique dans la spiritualité russe", in: *Cahiers Saint-Dominique*, no. 170, 1977; reprinted in Behr-Sigel, *Prière et sainteté*, 1982 (see note 16), pp. 219–236. English translation: "The Kenotic, the Humble Christ", in: Plekon and Hinlicky, *Discerning the Signs* (see note 13), pp. 29–40. The theme of kenosis as essential for Russian spirituality was first comprehensively analyzed by Behr-Sigel's good friend Nadejda Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1938).

characterize her view of deification, the expression a ‘monk in the city’ comes to my mind. This is how Behr-Sigel referred to the first modern Russian theologian Alexander Bukharev (1822–1871) on whom she conducted her doctoral thesis.<sup>76</sup> Bukharev – his monastic name was archimandrite Theodore (Feodor) – was a brilliant biblical scholar who sought to open Orthodox tradition to the modern world. A bitter conflict with ecclesial authorities brought him to the decision to make a request to be laicized. He accepted the deprivation of clerical and academic status as his kenotic path, his ‘descent into the world,’ following Christ. He held that the faithful must suffer with Christ and the Spirit in the process of the birth of a new humanity. For Behr-Sigel, the image of ‘a monk in the city’ integrates the *kenotic* as well as the *deifying* aspects of a Christ-like way of living in modern times.

Hence, the first characteristic of her view of deification is that it is based on a radical kenotic Christology. Behr-Sigel wholeheartedly embraced Bukharev’s worldly interpretation of asceticism. ‘Without abandoning anything of Christ, keep faithful to the earth.’<sup>77</sup> Far from the monastic practices of ‘fearful mortification’ or ‘scorn for the body’, ascetic life is meant to bring about the integration of human beings. Ascetic life involves the engagement of a kenotic Church and stretches out towards all social responsibilities and dimensions. Therefore, she asserts, ‘an effort must be made to *Christify*, that is truly to humanize this culture, not from outside, by constraint, but from within, by the energies of the Spirit.’<sup>78</sup> Likewise, the spiritual example of Maria Skobtsova taught her that deification is in the deepest sense Christomorphic, and that kenotic suffering is an essential part of it.<sup>79</sup> She completely agrees with Skobtsova that *theosis* is the call to deepen solidarity in communion.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Behr-Sigel, Alexandre Boukharev (see note 15). See also Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Le moine dans la ville: Alexandre Boukharev (1822-1871)”, in: *Revue de l’histoire et de la spiritualité* 52 (1974), pp 49–88; translated in: Plekon and Hinlicky, *Discerning the Signs* (see note 13), pp. 55–88.

<sup>77</sup> Quotation from Boukharev by Olivier Clément in his ‘Préface’ to Behr-Sigel, *Alexandre Boukharev* (see note 15), p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>79</sup> Behr-Sigel, “Mother Maria Skobtsova” (see note 13), pp. 41–53.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Could not the task of Christian theology be “to deepen solidarity in communion”, the certainty that there exists “one single human, one unique Adam who is constantly broken by our sins and constantly restored in Christ, in whom we are all consubstantial”, a certainty that must be incarnated in love and in the humble service

The second characteristic of Behr-Sigel's view of deification is that *theosis* is 'real' but not 'natural.' She passionately affirms the reality and effectiveness of redemption. She contrasts her view of redemption sharply with Karl Barth's dialectical theology: if the divine life cannot be smelled, touched, seen, or tasted, but solely heard in the proclamation of the Word, wouldn't the Resurrection of Christ be in vane?<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, she criticizes the speculative theology of Bulgakov. His vision of 'progressive deification' as a kind of natural evolution of humanity does not take into account the 'catastrophic eschatology' of the New Testament.<sup>82</sup> The former Lutheran theologian Behr-Sigel emphasizes that the incarnation of Christ is not 'a quasi-normal step of the deification of human nature and creation in its entirety.' The cross is a permanent disturbance of any natural moral progress of humanity.

A third feature, which figures more prominently in her work than with the theologians discussed above, is that *theosis* is conceived of as a critical concept that transgresses and destabilizes gender binaries. *Theosis* encompasses human wholeness. It is rooted in apophatic theology (the 'unsaying' of God implies the 'unsaying' or eschatological openness of human destination) as well as in our baptismal identity in Christ (Gal 3:28). Behr-Sigel deconstructs the idea of different and complementary 'male' and 'female' paths to holiness, as well as the dichotomy contrasting men, who are linked to Christ and meant to represent him, and women, who are supposedly linked to the Holy Spirit. This ideology, based on a distinction of 'male' and 'female' principles or archetypes and attributing different charismas to men and women, was advocated by her friend Paul Evdokimov in his *La femme et le salut du monde* (1958).<sup>83</sup> Behr-Sigel was sym-

---

of our neighbor?' Cf. Behr-Sigel, "Orthodox Theological Formation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Tasks Involved", in: Plekon and Hinlicky, *Discerning the Signs* (see note 13), pp. 11–20, here 18.

<sup>81</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "Review of Karl Barth, *La proclamation de l'Évangile*" (ed. by his student A. Roulin on the occasion of Barth's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 1961), in: *Contacts* 14 (1962), pp. 284–285. See for comments on this Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Elisabeth Behr-Sigel: Feminist, Protestant, Orthodox?" Part I, in: *Sobornost* 32 (2010), pp. 53–75, here 67.

<sup>82</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, «La Sophiologie du père Serge Boulgakov», in: *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 19 (1939), pp. 130–158.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *La femme et le salut du monde: Étude d'anthropologie chrétienne sur les charismes de la femme* (Paris: Casterman, 1958). Published in English as *Woman and the Salvation of the World* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 1994). See for a thorough analysis of Behr-Sigel's critique of Evdokimov's gender ideology, Sarah

pathetic with Evdokimov's intention to value sexuality in spiritual life and to strengthen the place of laypeople in the church, but she fiercely resisted this theology of closed gender concepts. In her opinion, Paul Evdokimov, Thomas Hopko and others rejected the baptismal truth that both women and men are called to represent, icon-like, the Anointed One.<sup>84</sup> They passed from a theology of the image as an inexhaustible source of inspiration and meaning, to a theology of closed concepts that became instruments of oppression.<sup>85</sup> Behr-Sigel contends, drawing on Gregory of Nyssa, that the human being is marked by a mysterious freedom to grow as a person into God's likeness. This freedom transcends, transforms, and multiplies all given gender and sexual identities, without denying or obscuring the possible spiritual richness of sexual difference.

## Conclusion

Where do the views of these women scholars converge and where do they diverge? What kind of strategies do they apply with regard to Orthodox tradition and to gender?

Though different in approach and elaboration, Lot-Borodine, Skobtsova and Behr-Sigel share a commitment to an inclusive and eschatological understanding of human nature, in which gendered patterns of the desti-

---

Hinlicky Wilson, *Woman, Women, and the Priesthood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), pp. 11–28.

<sup>84</sup> See Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women. Also a Question for the Orthodox Churches", in: Behr-Sigel and Ware, *The Ordination of Women* (see note 1), pp. 11–48. She refers to the groundbreaking research of patristic scholar Nonna Verna Harrison, who presents her theological anthropology in: *God's Many-Splendored Image. Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2010). Cf. also Martien Parmentier, "Griechische patristische Elemente zu einer theologischen Anthropologie der Frau als Mensch und als Frau in ihrer Differenz zum Mann", in: Urs von Arx and Anastasios Kallis (eds.), *Bild Christi und Geschlecht. 'Gemeinsame Überlegungen' und Referate der Orthodox-Alt-katholischen Konsultation zur Stellung der Frau in der Kirche und zur Frauenordination als ökumenischem Problem*. Levia (Griechenland) und Konstancin (Polen) 1996, in: *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 88 (1998), pp. 132–174. English translation by Duncan Reid: "Greek Patristic Foundations for a Theological Anthropology of Women in their Distinctiveness as Human Beings", in: *Gender and the Image of Christ*, in: *Anglican Theological Review* 84 (2002), pp. 555–583.

<sup>85</sup> Thus she argues in a review of Louis Bouyer, *Mystère et Ministères de la femme* (Paris: Aubier, 1976), in: *Contacts* 30 (1978), pp. 181–184. See Hinlicky Wilson, *Women, Woman, and the Priesthood* (see note 83), pp. 50–51.



nation of human life are actively challenged and transcended. They passionately advocate the need for the integration of the following: the embodied and spiritual aspects of human life; *eros* and *agape*; God and creation; male and female; Church and world. Methodologically, they all underline that deification, above all, points towards a practice of love and that any doctrine of *theosis* should reflect this experiential basis. As for their soteriology, synergism is not a bad word. Lot-Borodine is most provocative in assigning the first initiative for deification to the unimpaired core of the human will, as reflecting God's image. For Skobtsova and Behr-Sigel, the human-divine cooperation involves imitating the way of Christ (and the Mother of God) as an ongoing work of salvation. Behr-Sigel is most cautious here and brings in the cross of Christ as a permanent disturbance.

The paths of the theologians diverge when it comes to the relations between individual and community. For Skobtsova and Behr-Sigel, the path and destination of human life are deeply embedded in community life, whereas the mystic mind of Lot-Borodine prefers the individual way of approaching union with God. However, as I have indicated, she came to integrate sacramental-communal dimensions of deification in her later work on Cabasilas. The three women are of one accord in their dislike of fossilized ritualistic religion and of asceticism when practised as 'scorn for the body.' In their works, organic, maternal, erotic, non-clerical, and even cosmic pictures prevail when drafting the ideal of community.

As for their gender strategies, Lot-Borodine joins the mystical tradition of androgyny. Skobtsova transforms traditional Mariology by bringing in a subversive imagery of the Mother/Earth, and by presenting the Son and the Mother as two equal models for the religious soul beyond gender binaries. Behr-Sigel most explicitly addresses the issue of gender justice and gets close to what contemporary gender studies would call: religiously inspired freedom in performing gender and sexual identities.

Reclaiming the tradition of *theosis* plays a crucial role in their gender criticism. Their way of relating to tradition can best be explained by the theory of Margaret Kamitsuka, who argues that, since it is impossible to step outside of dominant theological discourses in order to create a new imaginary, women have to negotiate with the disciplinary force of Christian tradition in order to 'construct desires and practices in relation to it that are both pleurably compliant and imaginatively and subversively

resistant.’<sup>86</sup> What is remarkable in the women’s re-appropriation of the tradition is that (Christ’s) *kenosis* is not merely presented as the *condition* for *theosis* (as in the classic formula of Athanasius) but that achieving *theosis* is *realized* primarily through the believer’s practice of kenotic love. The Christian symbols start to move and change their positions with respect to each other.

Finally, how do the women theologians relate to major streams in modern Orthodox theology? Within twentieth century Orthodox theology, scholars usually distinguish between the so-called ‘neopatristic synthesis’ (Florovsky, Lossky, Meyendorff) and the ‘Russian Religious Renaissance’ (Khomiakov, Solovyov, Bulgakov).<sup>87</sup> Each has a different approach towards modernity and the Tradition. The neopatristic school emphasizes the ‘return to the Fathers’, including the Hellenistic conceptual framework. The ‘Russian school’ shared the conviction that, with all due respect for its patristic foundation, Orthodoxy must go ‘beyond’ the Fathers in order to respond to the challenges of modern times, in particular to the social needs. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson coins for the latter the term ‘suprapatristic,’ taking the chief characteristic of this school to be the movement *beyond* the patristic foundation and taking creative risks in theological development.<sup>88</sup>

Where do the women theologians fit in? All three women appear to fit quite well in the picture of the ‘suprapatristic school’ with its freedom of creative renewal from the source of Living Tradition. They either smoothly integrate modern psychological, Freudian terminology into theological discourse (Lot-Borodine) or they ally in responding to societal challenges and the need for the church to engage in social work (Skobtsova, Behr-

<sup>86</sup> Margaret D. Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference* (New York: OUP, 2007), p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> See Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part Two (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987 – originally 1937); Alexander Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey”, in: *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972), p. 4; Paul Vallière, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); Hinlicky Wilson, *Woman, Women, and the Priesthood* (see note 83), pp. 129–142. This division in ‘schools’ is contested by Paul L. Gavralyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); he argues that the standard narrative of twentieth-century Orthodox theology, based on this polarization, must be reconsidered.

<sup>88</sup> Hinlicky Wilson, *Women, Woman, and the Priesthood* (see note 83), p. 136.



Sigel). However, we have also found that they distance themselves clearly from fellow theologians of the ‘suprapatristic school’ when it comes to the latter’s gender ideology. Moreover, in their personal lives, as far as we know, Lot-Borodine and Behr-Sigel kept on friendly terms with Vladimir Lossky, and they both repeatedly refer to neopatristic theologians with affirmation.<sup>89</sup> Though I largely agree with Hinlicky Wilson that ‘the fact that Behr-Sigel made occasional positive remarks about neopatristic theologians should not cast doubt on her ultimate loyalties,’<sup>90</sup> yet I refrain from grouping these women theologians into one camp or the other. Why not allowing them a third way? It rather looks like they present their own distinct way in reclaiming Eastern tradition. They are united in proposing a timely Orthodox theology that includes a critical gender perspective and commits itself, from deep spiritual roots, to everyday embodied practices of compassion. Perhaps we could label it a non-possessive, non-reifying dealing<sup>91</sup> with living Christian Tradition in a women’s voice.

*Heleen E. Zorgdrager (born 1959 in Franeker NL), is since 2010 lecturer and since 2013 professor of Systematic Theology and Gender Studies at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam. She studied theology in Kampen, the Netherlands, and in Wittenberg, GDR. She was ordained in 1991 and served as a students’ chaplain in Leiden and as pastor of the Reformed congregation in Leersum. She defended her PhD in Kampen in 2003 on a gender-critical reading of Schleiermacher’s theology. From 2005 to 2010, she was program manager in service of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands for missional cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe. From 2005 till 2013 she worked part-time in Ukraine as seconded lecturer at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, teaching ecumenical theology. She continues since then in Lviv as a visiting professor.*

*Address: Het Bosje 16, 3921 EJ Elst (Utr.) NL. Email: hezorgdrager@pthu.nl*

---

<sup>89</sup> In particular to the book of Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood NY: SVSP, 1998); cf. *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 1944). Behr-Sigel also occasionally quotes with appreciation Florovsky and Meyendorff, e.g., in “Women in the Orthodox Church”, in: Plekon and Hinlicky (eds.), *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (see note 13), p. 122.

<sup>90</sup> Hinlicky Wilson, *Women, Woman, and the Priesthood* (see note 83), p. 139.

<sup>91</sup> With thanks for this term to Ivana Noble, “History Tied Down by the Normativity of Tradition? Inversion of Perspective in Orthodox Theology”, in: Colby Dickinson et al. (eds.), *The Shaping of Tradition. Context and Normativity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), pp. 283–296.

*Deutsche Zusammenfassung*

Die Studie erkundet den Beitrag dreier orthodoxer Theologinnen des 20. Jahrhunderts – Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882–1957), Mutter Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945) und Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005) – zur Revitalisierung und Reform der Lehre der Theosis («Vergöttlichung») in der Neuzeit. Was weckte ihr Interesse für den Begriff der Vergöttlichung? Die Autorin stellt die Entwicklung ihrer Auffassungen dar und setzt sich zum Ziel, genauer zu bestimmen, in welchem Sinn sie den orthodoxen und ökumenischen theologischen Diskurs mit ihren Interpretationen herausfordern und was theologische Genderforschung heute von ihrem methodischen Umgang mit der Tradition lernen könnte. Obwohl ihre Ansätze und Begrifflichkeiten sich unterscheiden – sie sehen Vergöttlichung in der Spannweite von «Reise eines individuellen Mystikers» bis zu «Weg einer sich entäussernden Liebe in der säkularen Welt» –, so stimmen Lot-Borodine, Skobtsova und Behr-Sigel darin überein, dass sie für ein inklusives und eschatologisches Verständnis der menschlichen Natur plädieren, in der Geschlechtsrollen tatkräftig hinterfragt und transzendiert werden. Zentral in ihrer Sicht ist sodann, dass Vergöttlichung vor allem auf eine den Menschen in seiner ganzen Leiblichkeit einschliessenden Praxis der Liebe hinweist. Was vielleicht am meisten an ihren Soteriologien auffällt, ist der Umstand, dass Entäusserung in der Linie von Christi Kenosis nicht nur als Voraussetzung für die Theosis präsentiert wird (wie in der klassischen Formel des Athanasius von Alexandrien), sondern dass Theosis vornehmlich durch die Praxis einer sich entäussernden Liebe der Gläubigen erreicht wird. Die Autorin sieht davon ab, die drei Theologinnen einer der orthodoxen «Schulen» zuzuordnen, denn es sieht eher so aus, dass jede von ihnen in der Aufarbeitung einer östlichen Tradition ihren eigenen Weg ging.