

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Orthodox Christians are the largest confessional minority in Poland. The Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church comprises over half million believers (Wyznania... 2013), the majority of whom inhabit eastern regions of Podlaskie Voivodeship. The aim of this project is to demonstrate the image of the woman current among Poland's Orthodox Christians and to see if women who are engaged in (Orthodox Christian) religion can at the same be emancipated. Another goal is to create a scholarly language in which to speak about religiously engaged emancipated Orthodox women and their agency.. Specifically, the research subject is the reality of women in Polish Orthodox Christian Church as mediated in texts read and written by its regular members and hierarchs as well as – perhaps most of all – in reflections on this reality expressed in narratives by women. Statements by my female interlocutors will be juxtaposed with Orthodox Christian literature, both official, theological works and ones that are less official, and at times downright inconsistent with the Church's position, yet published under its auspices. The discourse which I aim to study underscores the conviction of the individual (in this case: the Orthodox woman) about her social role and the tasks she thinks are set forth before her by the Church (and by God Himself). In the meaning I adopt, discourse is a way of speaking about a problem, a way of communicating ideas, beliefs and emotions. The language of a text, the way it is phrased will be analysed with a view to reveal that which is hidden behind the words used, that which is not evident at first glance – to discover the image emerging indirectly from the analysed texts.

The situation of Orthodox Christian women in Poland has changed considerably over the recent decades. The Church's life is increasingly shaped by women brought up in a reality different from the one their mothers and grandmothers knew. These women are better educated and more aware of the diverse socio-economic, ideological and moral factors affecting the Church and its members. Often, they are more familiar with Orthodox Christian literature, especially with works written in exile, predominantly in France, by Russian theologians, which have been published extensively since the 1960s. The knowledge and attitudes of parish activists from the generations of their mothers and grandmothers – including views about the roles reserved to women in the Church and society – were, in their turn, shaped to a greater extent by traditional folk culture. A juxtaposition of these two generations and types of worldview is key to providing a comprehensive description of the condition of Orthodox Christian women in Poland.

The rather large group that are Polish Orthodox Christian women has still not been comprehensively studied. They remain undescribed and their role is arguably orientalised, sometimes downright trivialised, and in any case – considered from the dominant, “Western” perspective. As feminist thought and orthodox interpretations of religion seem to prove mutually contradictory, in analysing the social roles performed by Orthodox Christian women an altogether new methodology should be applied. Such methodology ought to defy the tendency, prevailing in the anthropology of religion (as well as in other fields), to impose Western norms on societies whose religiosity developed in a different manner and according to other paradigms. Anthropologists have thus far fallen short of sufficiently analysing and describing the Orthodox Christian community. Any attempts at rendering the life of Orthodox Christian women should in my opinion run independent of, if not in opposition to, feminist thought, which – while currently dominant in anthropology – is not necessarily best suited to analyse Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The analytical tools I intend to implement will allow to present the Orthodox Christian woman's role in her religious community from her own perspective, without imposing on her Western-derived emancipatory categories.