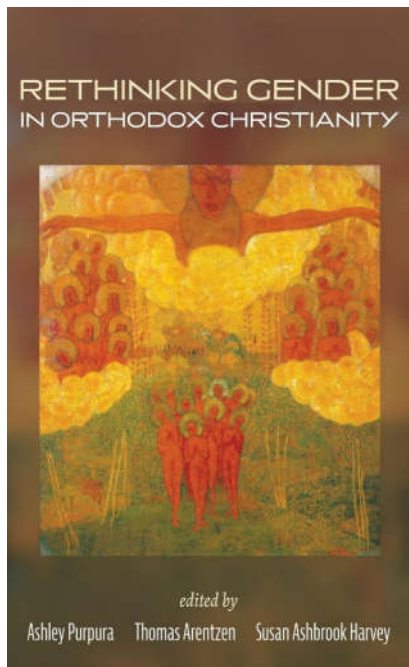


Purpura, Ashley, Thomas Arentzen & Susan Ashbrook Harvey, eds, *Rethinking Gender in Orthodox Christianity*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications (An Imprint of Wipf & Stock Publishers) 2023. pp x & 251. ISBN 978-1-6667-5526-8.



*Reviewed by
the Rev Dr Stephen Sharman*

This excellent volume contains thirteen essays written by a selection of Orthodox theologians who examine various aspects of the question of Gender. Many of them focus on the place of women within the Orthodox Church and a few of them advocate the ordination of women as deaconesses and presbyters.

The book begins with a valuable introduction which explains the book's source in a series of conversations in Oslo concerning "Gender and Sexuality in Orthodox Christianity" (p. 9) The introduction explains how the volume was assembled and the motives that led its authors to compile their contributions. Some wrote as scholars; others wrote from their personal experiences. As a result, a rich variety of scholarship was assembled. The Introduction ends helpfully with these observations which deserve to be quoted at length, "The volume considers not only the life of women, but also the construction of gender in Orthodox contexts more broadly. It submits both reconsiderations of the past and recommendations for the future. It challenges our assumptions and assumes new challenges. We wish to offer an original contribution regarding what is at stake in naming or identifying as a man or woman" (p. 12). In this reviewer's opinion, the authors of this volume have accomplished their aims.

It is difficult to do justice in one short review to thirteen different papers. Inevitably much is lost in the attempt. This reviewer plans to call attention to a small selection of the papers in this volume while apologizing to the authors whose papers have been neglected.

We begin by examining Stavroula Constantinou's useful paper, "Monastic *Gynealogy* The Maternal-Feminine Structure of Byzantine Women's Asceticism" (pp. 88-103). In her fascinating paper, she examines relationships in Byzantine women's monasteries. One she describes as vertical, that is, the relationship of mother and daughter both mother and daughter in religion and mother and daughter in a family relationship. Daughters inherited the leadership of the monastery from their mothers. The other relationship was horizontal, that is, the relationship among religious sisters. That might include a family relationship in which blood sisters served in the same monastery. These relationships were common in monasteries in other parts of the Christian world. In Anglo-Saxon times in England, Eanflaed and her daughter, Ælflæd, both ruled the monastery of Whitby. This reviewer suspects that similar patterns also existed in male monasteries.

A second useful paper is Donna Rizk-Asdourian's "Women and Their Position within the Liturgical Life of the Coptic and Oriental Orthodox Churches" (pp. 182-200) This paper is useful because it talks about Churches which are little known in Western Canada where Orthodox usually means either Ukrainian Orthodox or Greek Orthodox. Rizk-Asdourian describes the various roles in which women serve in their parishes, choirs, readers and the diaconate. She reports that the late Pope Shenouda III ordained twenty-seven to the female diaconate (14 June 1981, p. 195). Rizk-Asdourian adds that the Pope's action was not well received in many parts of the Coptic Church.

A third useful paper is Susan Ashbrook Harvey's "Women, Men and Gender in Christianity: Historical Reflections on Past and Present" (pp. 34-59) This writer examines the world in which Christianity emerged and the roles of men and women in the families and society of the time. She asks an important question. To what extent should the patterns of community life of those days shape the life of the Church in our days? The reader is left to consider her arguments and decide for himself.

Other essays in this volume examine the theoretical foundations for the work of the writers. Among them are Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi's "Women Should Be Silent in the Churches' (I Corinthians 14:34): When Stereotype Meets Gender" (pp. 45-33) and Ashley Purpura's "Orthodox Gender Equality and the Challenge of a Sanctified Patriarchy" (pp. 104-122)

Two essays in this collection examine the vocabulary and theology in the prayers which accompany the birth of a child and the mother's return to Church following childbirth. They are Eirini Afentoulidou, "Childbed Prayers: Historical Development, Discourses, Chances" (pp. 149-168) and Carrie Frederick Frost "Purifying the Churching Prayers: Reconciling the Post Childbirth Prayers with the Church's Theology" (pp. 169- 181) For these authors the prayers are problematic because they teach that childbirth is accompanied by ritual impurity. They are convinced that this is a heritage of ancient Jewish practice which no longer belongs in the Christian Church. Further the prayers are also problematic because they teach a subordinate role for women in the Church.

The ordination of women to the presbyterate is a common theme of many of the papers in this volume. Teva Regule, in her paper, "The role of Women in the Liturgical Life of the Church" (pp. 201-222), asks an important question, "Is it always about Ordination?" She argues that an undue focus on the ordination of women to the presbyterate conceals the other important ministries which women could, and in her opinion should, do. Olga Lossky in her paper "Incarnating the Heavenly Reality of the Church: Some Contemporary Applications for the Ministry of Women" (pp. 223-234) uses Elizabeth Behr-Sigel's concept of a "New Community" to reflect upon the various ministries in which a woman might serve God and His Church. Some of her words will illustrate her thought: "Inside the life of any community, the present need is not to claim a female priesthood in order to obtain visible proof of gender equality – this would just perpetuate a clericalist (or even feminist) vision of the relationships in the Church. Instead, there is a need to work to actualize the heavenly model" (p. 242).

This book is well worth reading. It provides a richness of theological thought on the important topic of the role of women in the Orthodox Church in our times. This is the book's greatest strength. The book also has problems. In

the various discussions of the possibility and the desirability of ordaining women to serve as deaconesses, deacons and presbyters, the authors examine the reasons that they support these innovations. Apart from critiques of the work of Fr Thomas Hopko, there is little attempt to engage with the theology which lies behind the opposition to this innovation. This is a noticeable weakness in this volume.

The value of the book is enhanced by the section which identifies the contributors to the collection of essays. Each essay is enriched by lengthy bibliographies. The indices and footnotes strengthen the book. These features are not always seen in scholarly books these days and their presence is welcome.

About the reviewer. Father Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.