

Introduction to the Special Issue on Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer

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This special issue of *Religion and Gender* studies the interrelationship between political protest and religious culture in the Pussy Riot case, looking at the interferences of gender, religion, politics and art in Pussy Riot's famous performance in Moscow in February 2012 and in its multiple afterlives and resonances. The political art collective Pussy Riot's protest in the form of a 'Punk Prayer' invoking 'the Virgin Mary to chase Putin away' in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012, the video of this act on the internet, and the subsequent persecution and court sentences against three of the performers, Ekaterina Samutsevich, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, whereby Tolokonnikova and Alekhina were sent for two years in jail, engendered serious political and religious controversies within Russian society that had also worldwide ramifications. At the backdrop stands the current post-Soviet reality of a close alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the power-vertical state system under Vladimir Putin. Messages of the three convicted Pussy Riot members during their trial, and of Tolokonnikova and Alekhina from the detention camps, contributed to their international fame and revealed a very different side of these rioting 'punk-girls', who turned out to be culturally

and philosophically well-informed and eloquent young women. For the sake of Putin's image before the Winter Olympic games in Sochi, Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova were released on 23 December 2013, about two months before their prison sentences were due to end. They immediately took the stages of national and international political protest anew, using the enormous media attention they attracted after their release to reaffirm their anti-Putin stance and to demand prison reform in Russia.

During their trial and defence and subsequently during their stay in and eventual release from the camps the women were closely followed by the international media and they were widely supported by statements and public acts of solidarity from mainly foreign, that is North/Western, scholars, politicians, and artists. Vigils, protest actions, conferences, and research groups have been organised in response to the case.¹ With the help of these parties a number of texts, letters and comments of the accused women were circulated via the electronic media and through publications created for this purpose (Pussy Riot 2013a,b). Research shows that the western media coverage of this case outside Russia is strongly framed in terms of the accused and convicted women being victims of repressive state and religious regimes and courageous heroines defending the freedom of speech and human rights, in particular the rights of women and LGBT persons (Van Zinnen 2013).² The fact that the accused women – academically trained in arts and humanities in Moscow – referred to Russian philosophers and (dissident) writers, to theologians and biblical scholars, and to Western gender studies specialists evoked comments and debates on their motives, intentions and sincerity, in particular regarding their stance toward

¹ The idea to compose this special issue springs from an (international) research collaboration group initiated by the three editors. This interdisciplinary research group received a grant from the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) for the period 2012–2014. It consisted at the start of sixteen scholars from the Netherlands, Germany and Russia and it gathered several times for explorative meetings on the Pussy Riot case. Three main themes were addressed: *the accusation of blasphemy, the dynamics and re-invention of (religious) traditions, and the role of aesthetics: reflection on the visual aspects*. For all three thematic research complexes, the questions of religion in public discourse, religion and (sexual) politics, and religion in a post-totalitarian context turned out to be of utmost relevance. The research meetings resulted in various lectures and publications of the individual members. See the project webpage 'Iconoclashes. Interferences of Gender, Politics, Religion and Art in the Pussy Riot Case', <http://noster.org/theme-groups/iconoclashes-interferences-of-gender-politics-religion-and-art-in-the-pussy-riot-case/> and <http://www.in-a-sec.com>. Katya Tolstaya's introductory essay in this special issue stems from her participation in this group and consists of some critical reflections on assumptions and approaches in studying the Pussy Riot case. The second aim of the research group has been to give support to the imprisoned members of Pussy Riot, keeping personally in contact with them, and to sustain organisations and scholars in Russia that seek to act in support of Pussy Riot and its members in their own local contexts. The interview with Ekaterina Samutsevich in this special issue also has emerged from this research collaboration.

² As Anya Bernstein (2013: 221) observes: 'Most Euro-American coverage of this famous trial focused on familiar dichotomies between free speech and blasphemy, the secular and the sacred, or even rationality and obscurantism, and in general seemed bewildered by what appeared as a disproportionate reaction of the Russian state to this affair'. For a contrary position see Adomanis 2012.

Russian-Orthodox faith. Within Russia the Pussy Riot members received rather marginal public and intellectual support; polls show that the great majority of the Russians assented to the accusation and sentence, and many intellectuals and opinion makers openly loathed and ridiculed the performance (cf. Bernstein 2013; Lipman 2012; Shvarova 2012). Within a year after the conviction of the Pussy Riot members a bill explicitly prohibiting religious insult – which did not exist before in post-communist Russia – was adopted by the Federation Council (Russia's Upper Chamber of Parliament), with reference to the Pussy Riot case (see Article 19, 2013).

The editors of this issue propose that Pussy Riot's performance in the Moscow Cathedral serves, in a manifold way, as a litmus paper: for the authorities in settling the 'right' relation between state, church, and individual; for the acting women in claiming artistic and political freedom in their engagement with religious symbols and sacred space; for the public audience in Russia and the Western world (both in different ways) in finding confirmation for their own ideas about freedom of expression, democracy, feminism, the role of religion, and blasphemy (cf. Katya Tolstaya's opening essay in this special issue).

Among the issues that raised debate and attracted the attention of a wide international audience, some are of particular relevance for the study of religion and gender. Which 'iconoclashes' (Bruno Latour) are brought about by the Pussy Riot performance and by the interpretative reception of the event in different communities? What is the role of the gendered female body, female sexuality, and female symbols (Virgin Mary) in this political/religious protest? How does the accusation of blasphemy relate to the issue of female corporeality? What are the similarities with and differences from other performances in which the female body invades and appropriates the world of religious symbols (for example, Madonna, FEMEN, the Tunisian Amyna Tyler)?

As guest-editors of this special issue on 'Pussy Riot as Litmus Paper: Political Protest and Religious Culture', we are delighted to present a collection of articles and essays that address these and related questions and that, we hope, may substantially and critically add to the rising amount of studies and reflections related to this subject. The contributions in this volume, for the greater part written by scholars and activists that have a personal background in or familiarity with politics and life in Russia, qualify for their well-informed perspectives on the situation of gender, politics and religion in contemporary Russia. They analyse and problematise Western as well as several 'domestic' interpretations of the Punk Prayer against the backdrop of social and historical formations in Russia and in the face of current challenges in Russian society. The articles highlight methodological questions with regard to Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that can neither be reduced to some single issue of the interpreter's preference nor to projected desires of a Western agenda. The authors apply a variety of theoretical concepts, methods and approaches to gain a better understanding of how gender, religion, politics and art do intersect in the Punk Prayer and its interpretations both in Russia and worldwide.

In alignment with the focus and scope of *Religion and Gender*, all articles seek to contribute to in-depth reflection on the Punk Prayer as a particular manifestation of religion and gender in the public domain. On the meta-level, the authors critically engage with discourses that have shaped its interpretations so far, and they try to find answers to the fascinating question why the Punk

Prayer, in its distributed form as internet-art, contains such an explosive potential, and for whom and what exactly. Perhaps most remarkable in this collection of articles and essays is that the majority of authors underscore the importance of locating Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer at least on the edges of an ongoing battle about 'authentic' Orthodoxy in post-communist Russia. The relation Church-State is here the matter of prior concern. By discussing the paradoxical role that gender plays in drawing or shifting the boundaries of Orthodox identity in the highly power-loaded ecclesial-political arena, the authors actively enrich social theories on gender and religion.

This special issue opens with the introductory essay of Katya Tolstaya, 'Stained Glasses and Coloured Lenses: The Pussy Riot Case as a Critical Issue for Multidisciplinary Scholarly Investigations'. According to Tolstaya, the Pussy Riot performance and the ensuing case posed a challenge not only to power structures in Russia, but also to scholars studying post-traumatic post-Soviet Russia. The case exposed the complex of ideology, image- and myth-forming on all societal levels, not least regarding the Russian Orthodox Church and church-state relations. This essay proposes a kaleidoscopic approach in order to discuss the relationship between these images and the persons who gave rise to them by their performance. Can we come closer to these persons and what does this mean for our interpretations? This essay also discusses epistemological limits of scholarly engagement with the 'other' by scrutinising the question of objectivity and normativity in the humanities and the constraints of approaches such as the insider/outsider dichotomy and the linguistic and narrative turns. Given the heterogeneity of present-day Orthodoxy, there is no identifiable Orthodox 'other' or 'insider'; and this leads to the question how to define 'Orthodoxy' itself. In this essay Tolstaya thus identifies a paradox which is yet to be solved.

In the next part of this special issue, four articles are presented that discuss the Pussy Riot case from sociological, historical, philosophical and cultural analysis perspectives in a gender-critical way. They problematise reigning frames of interpretations of the Pussy Riot case and their underlying binary assumptions regarding religion and what is outside or anti-religion, Eastern and Western perspectives, insiders and outsiders to religious traditions, normative and aberrant female behaviour.

In her fascinating article, Vera Shevzov applies the insider/outsider criteria to Pussy Riot's intervention into the religious-political domain, and connects it with the critical role that gender plays. The performing women can be seen as outsiders that intruded the space of the male-dominated church and church-state relations. Their action is perceived by many as a mockery of faith. Also Patriarch Kirill casted the women as outsiders in the tradition of violent communist anti-church campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s. However, Shevzov argues that by looking at the role gender plays, it becomes clear how the protest is to be understood as actually challenging the boundaries of insider/outsider to Orthodoxy. The appeal to Mary in the Punk Prayer claims an insider position and hits the heart of traditional Russian mythology. It raises the question of religious loyalty. The debate that emerged about the authenticity of the prayer shows how Pussy Riot has challenged the identity of Orthodoxy as 'civil religion' or 'state ideology' in post-Soviet society and its lack of 'authenticity'. Shevzov concludes that the power of Punk Prayer in religious context most likely stems from its demand for discernment and judgment on these issues.

The article by Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld, 'Lost in Translation', takes a critical stance against the way North/Western supporters of Pussy Riot incorporated the Punk Prayer in their own schemes of interpretation. Pop-stars like Madonna and others read it as anti-religious protest and as a version of Riot Grrrl feminism. They tend to identify the sexualising protest-actions of FEMEN with those of Pussy Riot. However, by incorporating Pussy Riot into the North/Western canon of queer-feminist punk their actual issues are made invisible. In such a framework, religion appears as a source of sexist and homophobic oppression. According to Wiedlack and Neufeld, alternative readings from, for example, Russian art traditions and feminism should include a diversity of issues, and highlight as the main targets the politics of Putin and the Kremlin, and the tight connection between religion and state. The authors call on Western interpreters to be far more aware of the diversity of positions within Russian Orthodoxy, and not to play off religion against sexual rights. Instead of confirming 'Eastern otherness' one should ask for hegemonies and power structures that are at work in adapting the Punk Prayer to North/Western agendas.

Cecile Vaissié writes from a historical perspective and presents Pussy Riot as heirs of the Russian dissidents. She states that there is a direct link between Pussy Riot and the former dissidents who criticised the compromises that the Russian Orthodox Church made with the Soviet state. Vaissié describes a not so well-known episode of dissident history, namely that of a group of Orthodox feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Leningrad. They celebrated the Madonna and promoted an ethical Christianity against the public lies of Church and State. Although Pussy Riot never explicitly refers to these early Orthodox feminists, Vaissié finds similarities in the way they combine feminist demands with challenges to the authorities and appeals to Virgin Mary. Overall, she states, the dissident history has continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the KGB/FSB has not ended its influence on the Church, and Pussy Riot can be well understood within this movement of truth-seeking people who denounce the Church for betraying Christian values.

Anna Agaltsova's article starts from the observation that in Western discussions about Pussy Riot the gender issue is very prominent, but that it seems to be nearly absent in Russian discourses. She conducted group interviews with older and younger generation Russians to find out how collective female identities are constructed in response to the 'critical event' of the Punk Prayer. Her method is that of critical discursive analysis. Agaltsova concludes from this field research that feminist talk does not play a role in the perception of Pussy Riot. There are, however, differences between the young, post-Soviet generation and the older generation. The first mostly acknowledge the agency of Pussy Riot, though they use diminutive expressions to talk about it (like 'insane' and 'prostitutes'). The older generation still embraces the closed we-identity of the Soviet period. Most interesting is that the young respondents are aware (with Pussy Riot) of the 'rotteness' of the situation but this does not lead them to fresh new interpretative repertoires. Seeking for connectedness, they balance between old and new repertoires, and uphold the traditional image of the woman as a pure and spiritual mother.

Three shorter, sparkling, and thought-provoking essays form the next part of this special issue. Elena Volkova, one of the main public supporters of Pussy Riot in Russia (cf. Volkova 2013) and closely related to the women, approaches the Punk Prayer as a blasphemy counter discourse. She proposes that the Punk

Prayer may be interpreted as a feminine version of the Lord's prayer – Mater Nostra. Several corporeal narratives in the background – women's dress code, rape debates, and the alleged miraculous Virgin Mary's belt – may be seen as allegories of a feminist versus patriarchal opposition in Russian religious and political culture.

In Finland, during the Pussy Riot trial, a solidarity action took place near the Orthodox Cathedral in Helsinki. Teivo Teivainen analyses how this event was framed by a hysterical Russian media campaign as the story of 'a scandalous gay professor who was insulting the orthodox religion and core family values by obliging young girls to shout homosexual slogans.' In his essay, he applies an intriguing 'double hermeneutic', being both the researcher and the object of the episode.

Nataliya Tchermalykh takes the coincidence of two political events in December 2013, the Euromaidan-protests in Kiev and the release of the two Pussy Riot members from prison in Russia, as starting point to ask: is there any causality between the two? Might it be that new myths of political resistance are created through the media?

Finally, an interview with Pussy Riot member Ekaterina Samutsevich completes this special issue. Ekaterina Samutsevich is one of the activists involved in the political Pussy Riot actions, among which the performances in the Elokovo Epiphany Cathedral and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow from which the Internet-video of the 'Punk Prayer' was assembled. Together with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, Ekaterina Samutsevich was initially convicted of 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred' and sentenced to two years imprisonment. However, unlike her two friends, she was released because the guards of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral stopped her before she pulled her guitar from the case, and thus formally, she did not actually take part in this performance.

The idea of an interview with one of the convicted Pussy Riot members was raised in the NOSTER research group started by the editors of this special issue (see note 1 above). Katya Tolstaya conducted this interview in the Russian language and formulated questions that are related to her critical methodological reflections discussed in the introductory essay to this issue. Other (sometimes slightly edited) questions were formulated by members of the NOSTER research group, in particular by Elena Volkova, Vera Shevzov, Heleen Zorgdrager, Caroly van Oostende, and Nataliya Tchermalykh. These questions concern two topics: feminism and gender related themes, and the situation around the armed conflict in Ukraine. Ekaterina Samutsevich was presented with the questions in Russian; she answered them in an e-mail dated 9 September 2014. As her answers reveal her idiom and style we decided to publish the bilingual version of this interview. The translation into English has been provided by Katya Tolstaya and Stella Rock.

As guest-editors, we express the wish that this special issue of *Religion and Gender* may contribute to the ongoing discussion of the meaning of Pussy Riot's historic intrusion of the religious/political space by presenting well-informed contextual Russian perspectives and by employing hermeneutics that take local and contextual, as well as ideological, political and academic-conceptual differences in consideration. Part of the attraction of studying the Punk Prayer-event is that everything comes together, that the entanglements are too many to catch, and that the story of these entanglements simply goes on. We have

no illusion that any final words have been said on the matter, but perhaps our authors succeeded in opening some unexpected windows by re-presenting the story in different terms. This would already be a major academic and political achievement.

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