

Mater Nostra: The Anti-blasphemy Message of the Feminist Punk Prayer

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Abstract

In this essay I develop a blasphemy counter-discourse arguing that it was ecclesial and state authorities who committed blasphemies, which were condemned by Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer. Thus, the performance in this respect may be interpreted as an anti-blasphemy protest. The blasphemy list includes the collaboration of the church with the authoritarian state, known as heresy of Sergianism; Caesar and Temple idolatry, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary and Folly for Christ's sake. 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 and rape debates, Virgin Mary's belt, and its alleged miraculous ability to help women to deliver a baby – may be seen as allegories of feminist versus patriarchal opposition in Russian religious and political culture.

Keywords

Pussy Riot; Punk Prayer; Russian Orthodox Church; blasphemy; idolatry.

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Koshchunnitsy – a female plural form for a blasphemer – is a new word coined in Russia by a church official, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, while condemning Pussy Riot.¹ But what was seen as blasphemy by ecclesial authorities was in fact an anti-blasphemy message addressed to clergy, lay people and Russian society. Having accused Pussy Riot of blasphemy, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) provoked a blasphemy counter discourse as argued in this article.

The text of the Punk Prayer, interviews, speeches, and letters sent by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Mariya Alekhina from prison are full of Biblical references and interpretations of religious issues. However, Christian support of Pussy Riot in Russia is being attacked from several sides: church officials condemn Orthodox supporters as *traitors in cassocks* and *enemies of the church* (Gundyaev 2012); religious advocates are criticised for idealising or even canonising Pussy Riot as saints (Pussy Riot icons appeared first in Russia and then became a popular genre in the West); some nonreligious Pussy Riot friends associate any Christian rhetoric with the Moscow patriarchate inquisition.

The first open letter in support of Pussy Riot (6 March 2012) was written by an Orthodox Christian woman, Lidiya Monyava (Hospice *Faith* Foundation) and signed by 5739 believers, who asked Patriarch Kirill to show mercy to the imprisoned Pussy Rioters (Monyava 2012). They were castigated by church officials as impudent people who dared justify 'obvious sins' and 'blasphemy' and 'pretend to be more merciful than Our Lord who said: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6)' (Chaplin 2012; Vigilyanskii 2012). The implication was that the Pussy Riot activists deserved not forgiveness, but death. Fr Pavel Adel'geim (murdered on 5 August 2013) argued, referring to biblical Mother-Child imagery (both women kept behind bars had small children): 'God is more merciful than any of us: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isiah 49:15)' (Adel'geim 2012). Mariya Alekhina in her letter *de profundis* written on 13 April refers to Psalm 56: 'In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?' Because it is man and his bizarre law that are now making me a criminal. I can't believe it, as I can't believe that Christians are unable to forgive' (Alekhina 2012).

Orthodox Christian supporters, who represent a small minority in the ROC, may themselves be divided into two groups. The majority of them do not approve

¹ There were other new words coined as well, such as *pussyriot* (*Pussy* and *patriot*), *pussisteria* (*Pussy* and *hysteria*), *pusski* etc. Pussy Riot is such a new and complex phenomenon of Russia, that there is no proper Russian word to call members of the band. *Activists* or *artists*? *Singers* or *dancers*? *Girls* or *women*? The latter question often caused hot discussions. Whenever I called them *girls* (*devochki*) on the radio, men would phone and correct me that they should be called women because they have children. For men it was a matter of innocence, because they understood *girl* (both 'devochki' and 'devushki') as an equivalent of *virgin*. I and my friends among supporters of Pussy Riot usually call them 'devochki', 'devchonki', 'devchata' (which sound both familiar and tender), because some of us treat them in a mother-like way while others see them as friends – the motivation depends on the age of the speaker. 'Women' (*zhenshchiny*) in this context sounds official, rather cold or even unfriendly in Russian. The political context of the problem of nominalising Pussy Riot is analysed in Galyamina 2013.

of what Pussy Riot did in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior on 21 February 2012, but believe that the activists should be forgiven and released. The *minority of the minority* (the author of this article among them) applaud the Punk Prayer as a masterpiece of political feminist art which worked as a quiver of arrows, each line being an arrow that hit a moral social problem behind which one can find a blasphemy, or heresy, committed by the Church.

In April 2012 three Christian women (Irina Karatsuba, Elena Kaluzhskaya and I) launched a monthly *Concepts of Pussy Riot* seminar at Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Centre in Moscow, aimed at the analysis of those forty seconds that shook the world. The seminar agenda included the Holy Fool (yurodivyi) tradition (this will be elaborated on below), the feminist message, legal and illegal expertises in the Pussy Riot case, women and children in Russian prisons, Pussy Rioters as defenders of true Christianity, blasphemy, sacred space, Pussy Riot test, and many other topics (Kontseptosfera Pussy Riot 2012-2013). I opened a Pussy Riot School on the Internet in the hope that people, who believed that their religious feelings were insulted by the Punk Prayer, might change their minds when they learn that the performance had its roots in the Gospel and Christian counterculture (Volkova 2014). On 1–3 March 2013 Sakharov Centre hosted *Moscow Trials* – a re-enactment of three anti-artist trials – *Beware, Religion!* (2003), *Forbidden Art – 2006* (2007) and *Pussy Riot* – made by Swiss director Milo Rau (the performance was interrupted by Immigration service and Cossacks, later Milo Rau was denied Russian visa). The very first martyr of religious fundamentalism was the artist and poet Anna Alchuk who although having been found not guilty of the charge of inciting religious hatred (trial against *Beware Religion!*) was so affected by being subjected to humiliation, libel, slander and death threats that she committed suicide in 2008 (Ryklin 2006, 2013).

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, one of the Pussy Riot convicts, said in her closing statement (8 August 2012) standing in a glass cage, called 'aquarium':

I think that Christianity, as I've understood it from studying the Old and New Testaments, supports the search for truth and a constant overcoming of the self, overcoming what you used to be. It is not for nothing that Christ associated with prostitutes. He said we should help those who stumble, saying, 'I forgive them' but for some reason I can't see any of that at our trial, which is taking place under the banner of Christianity. I think the prosecutor is defying Christianity. (Tolokonnikova 2012)

This suggests that the conflict between the punk band and ROC caused a clash of two types of Christianity, 'a clash of Gods', as a New Zealand pastor Glynn Cardy put it (Cardy 2012).

The lines of the Punk Prayer: 'Mother of God, Virgin, drive Putin away!', 'Black robe, golden epaulettes', 'Church praises the rotten dictators', 'Patriarch Gundyai believes in Putin, He'd better believed in God' condemn the collaboration of the church with the authoritarian state, formerly known as the heresy of Sergianism,² as it refers to Metropolitan Sergius, who in his Declaration of 1927 pledged unqualified loyalty to a militant atheist state regime. Canon Michael Bourdeaux, the president of Keston Institute, compares the Pussy Riot

² Cf. also the article by C. Vaissié in this volume (editor's note).

protest against 'the illegitimate symbiosis of Church and State in the Russia of 2012' to the letter of Solovki bishops sent in 1927 from GULAG in which they opposed Sergius' compromise, and to the *Open letter* of Fathers Gleb Yakunin and Nikolai Eshliman condemning the anti-church persecutions under Khrushchev (Bourdeaux 2012). It is important to add that Pussy Riot became the first women whose voices against the Church collaboration were heard throughout Russia and abroad.

The political religion of Caesar ('believes in Putin') – as an object of Pussy Riot criticism – can be identified as Caesar Idolatry. This is demonstrated not only by Patriarch Kirill calling on lay people to vote for Putin (to the indignation of the activists), but also by an established practice of addressing first the Kremlin tandem of Putin and Medvedev, and praying to God second at the beginning of the liturgy in Christ the Saviour Cathedral. This Caesar idolatry is borne out by praising Putin as a blessed leader sent by God; by blaming the 1990s (when the ROC was as free as never before) as devastating years comparable to the Napoleonic War and Second World War, by praising the reign of Putin as that of peace and prosperity; by appointing St Serafim of Sarov as a heavenly protector of the nuclear shield of Russia, and so on.

The Caesar Idolatry results in what can be called Temple Idolatry (where the church building is more valued than God), as a symbol of the church-state symbiosis. In this sense, the performance took place in the most scandalous cathedral of Russia. Pussy Rioters were charged with hooliganism, rule-breaking behaviour, blasphemy of the Temple – very close to what Jesus was accused of. Their supporters referred to the conflict between Christ and the Temple, in particular – the Gospel's episode of Christ cleansing the Temple, where he expels money changers from the Temple, accusing them of turning it into a den of thieves through their commercial activities. The head of Russia's consumer rights watchdog, Mikhail Anshakov, claimed that Christ the Savior Cathedral housed a business centre including the offices of 15 commercial firms, a tyre-changing service, a dry-cleaners, a parking lot, a cafeteria, and jewellery shops. He accused Patriarch Kirill of 'trading in the House of God' and appealed to the state prosecutor to investigate what he said was the inappropriate use of the cathedral. On 25 July 2012 a political street artist Petr Pavlenskii staged a protest against the incarceration of Pussy Riot members in front of St Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral, sewing his mouth shut and holding a banner that read 'Pussy Riot act is a reenactment of a famous action by Jesus Christ (Mt 21:12–13)'.

Rule-breaking behaviour in church is part of Eastern-Christian folly for Christ's sake tradition. Holy fools would cry and sing in church, interrupt the service, go naked, kiss and embrace wanton women in public, take off their pants, blame clergy and lay people for their sins. Fools provoked people to laugh at them, to be outraged, to throw stones, and so on. In this way they became the object of persecution and were ostracised like Christ himself was. People would attack them as those who destroyed sacred things and saw them as obsessed by demons which, as in the Pussy Riot case, may be seen as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Those few Russian Orthodox priests (Pavel Adel'geim, Gleb Yakunin and Vyacheslav Vinnikov) and academics who supported Pussy Riot, saw them as holy fool-like figures and as Christ-like ones. The Rioters presented themselves as carnivalesque and fools for God.

It would be more correct to say that Pussy Rioters used folly for Christ's sake tradition (as well as that of Russian skomorokhs, that is comical folk street

artists) as an artistic and protest strategy. As, for example, protopop (archpriest) Avvakum and his follower boyarynya (nobility rank) Morozova sometimes acted as holy fools in their protest against church reforms. However different historical contexts might seem, these three women, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Mariya Alekhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich, persecuted by the State and the Church's male leaders while supported by their adherents as symbols of social and religious protest, may be compared to Feodosiya Morozova, her sister Princess Evdokiya Urusova and a noblewoman Mariya Danilova, prominent old-believers of the 17th century schism who were arrested, prosecuted and starved to death.

The Punk Prayer actually follows Pater Noster as a guideline of how to pray, for it is short and points at major moral concerns of modern Russia. We can speak of a Pussy Riot feminine version of the Pater Noster (Our Father) prayer – Mater Nostra, the first line of which 'Mother of God, Virgin, drive Putin away' may be seen as a paraphrase of the last petition in Our Father: 'Deliver us from evil', for Putin in this context is a symbol of the repressive regime, of political violence and injustice.

The Rioters pointed at the gap between a well-developed Orthodox cult of Theotokos (the Virgin Mary), on the one hand, and discrimination against women in church and society, on the other. Women (except nuns) are not allowed to enter the sanctuary, to preach to the faithful and must cover their heads. The office of women deacons has been debated in Russia but has yet to be revived. The Church fails to involve itself in speaking out against domestic abuse, sexual harassment, widespread poverty, and yet condemns homosexuality. As Nadezhda Tolokonnikova said in a courtroom after parole hearings, Pussy Riot occupied the Ambo as a symbolic male space to show that women can speak from there as well (Nadezhda Tolokonnikova... 2013)³ – which may hence be interpreted as a spatial metaphor of women priesthood. A theatre director, Varvara Faer (who made two verbatim theatre performances about Pussy Riot), in this connection, suggested starting a feminist Occupy Ambo movement in Russia (Kontseptosfera Pussy Riot 2012–2013).

Before the Pussy Riot band was organised, Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich, as feminist activists, criticised the infamous archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin who suggested on 17 December 2010 that women in mini-skirts were to blame if they were raped. The feminist petition, backed by more than 1,300 signatures, urged the Patriarch to condemn 'discriminatory and insulting remarks about women by representatives of the Church' (Rossiiskie feministki... 2012). However Chaplin argued that 'the issue of inappropriate clothing remained', that a woman 'dressed and painted like a clown' was responsible for getting herself into trouble with 'idiots' in public places. About a year later women dressed as clowns came to Christ the Savior Cathedral to claim that the Virgin Mary was on their side.

³ I heard this statement while watching a stream broadcasting of the parole hearings in a Mordovia court (26 July 2013). No interviews were allowed there, but one journalist managed to ask a question. It seems like no video of the scene is available on the Internet any longer. So I asked Nadezhda Tolokonnikova to prove her statement and she wrote to me on 4 June 2014 that all three of them believe that women have a right to stay on the Ambo and speak to people from there.

The lines of the Punk Prayer, 'The Belt of Virgin Mary cannot replace mass meetings' and 'In order not to offend His Holiness / Women must give birth and love' refer to another blasphemy – that of manipulating public opinion with the alleged belt of the Virgin Mary, brought from Mountain Athos, and of using her authority in the parliamentary election campaign and in propaganda regarding so-called traditional family values. Mary's Belt was widely presented as a unique relic that can help women to give birth, which attracted thousands of them from all over the country. Ekaterina Samutsevich, on the contrary, repeatedly stressed her support of a family-free and child-free life-style.⁴

Several corporeal narratives in the background of the Pussy Riot story (women's dress code, rape debates, giving birth versus staying child-free) may be seen as allegories of feminist versus patriarchal opposition in Russian religious and political culture. Victims of a show trial, Pussy Riot activists, figuratively speaking, started their own Last Judgment of the Russian State and Church (Volkova and Karatsuba 2012).

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⁴ Cf. also the article of Vera Shevzov in this volume (editor's note).

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