

BOOK REVIEW: *FAMILY, SEX AND FAITH: THE BIOPOLITICS OF
THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH*

Kolstø, Pål. 2025. *Family, Sex and Faith: The Biopolitics of the Russian Orthodox Church*. Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press. 324 pages. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501779435>.

Pål Kolstø has written a book that sheds light on the concerns of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) with the private sphere, including marriage, divorce, child upbringing, domestic violence, reproduction and sexuality. He interprets these issues through Michel Foucault's (2007 [2004]: 1; 2020 [1976]: 138–141) notion of biopolitics and maintains that the ROC's involvement in the private sphere is deeply entangled with law, politics and ideology in Putin's Russia. Fieldwork in Russia was limited; instead Kolstø surveys church documents, secondary literature, the Church's online publications and public statements by key figures. This study will be useful for anyone interested in the production of narratives by the ROC, guidelines for church members, and the normative statements, writings and actions of activists. However, it is weak on lived practice, on the reception of normative ethics by individual believers, and on dynamics at the level of the family and parish. The studies of specific communities and regions and in-depth interviews would have strengthened this research.

Chapter 1 focuses on biopolitics, a discursive regimentation of sexual behaviour, as a theoretical framework for the book. However, the concept has only limited interpretative potential in the following chapters. Chapter 2, "Confessions and Confessors", examines the institutions of confessors (*dukhovniki* and *mladostartsy*), who impose conservative values on believers. The data Kolstø uses seem more relevant to the 1990s than to the first quarter of the 21st century. I am not convinced that the practices he describes can be treated as typical mechanisms for regulating most believers' intimate lives, because regular one-to-one communication with an authoritative *dukhovnik* or *starets* is an elite phenomenon. The majority of believers participate in rou-

tine confession before communion, which often does not delve deeply into a believer's life. Research on contemporary practices is lacking.

Chapters 3–5 deal with marriage, feminism and sexuality. While the book does not explicitly use feminist ethics, it provides numerous examples showing how widespread misogynistic views are among the clergy and hierarchy – striking, given that the majority of church members are women. On the other hand, the book includes examples of women expressing dissent or questioning authoritative positions (p. 97). Likewise, it demonstrates a male bias in discussions of cases where clergy take the side of frustrated men married to overzealous neophyte women who interpret canons on sexual abstinence too rigorously (p. 99). Sex, as a crucible between chastity and hierarchy, clearly reveals the strongly patriarchal stance of the ROC. Yet, it remains unclear on what level patriarchy operates: as doctrine, practice or discourse?

The general point Kolstø makes in these chapters concerns the porous boundary between the private sphere and ecclesial authority: the Church seeks to provide guidelines and to enforce them through pastoral guidance and confession. "The priest is not only allowed, but, it seems, also expected to ask questions, even rather probing ones" (p. 102).

Chapter 6, on juvenile justice, offers a balanced and well-informed account of the legislative debates on family violence, focusing on key actors, debates and documents. Kolstø points out that the very notion of domestic or family violence contradicts the ROC's view of the family as the "small church", an institution in which children are naturally protected. He distinguishes between conservative and

moderate critics of the law and traces shifts in positions between the early 2000s and 2015. Within the discourse analysed, legal intervention in family life is framed as destructive.

Chapter 7 addresses violence against intimate partners. As noted in Chapter 6, the Church objects to the use of the terms ‘family violence’ and ‘domestic violence’, as the Patriarchal Commission on Family, Motherhood and Children states unequivocally: “these expressions should not be used in state regulations at all” (Luk’yanova 2018). Kolstø begins with statements by moderates, including Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev), who opposed the decriminalisation of violence in close relationships. The book pre-sents evidence of domestic abuse cases and cites the well-known statements by priest Andrey Tkachev, who advised parishioners on how to deal with ‘insubordinate’ wives. Kolstø surveys discussions in liberal Orthodoxy and beyond, pointing to widespread victim-blaming and anti-feminist attitudes among the clergy. As elsewhere, however, he allows cases to accumulate without always fully theorising their implications, and a critical approach to gender violence is missing.

Chapter 8 deals with abortion. Kolstø follows scholars in religious studies and anthropology who have examined the ROC’s pro-life campaigns. He emphasises the contrast between the ROC’s ‘heavy artillery’ in opposing abortion and the relatively lukewarm response of the Russian state to calls for prohibition. Despite strong moral and religious arguments, abortion rates remain among the highest in the world.

Chapter 9 examines family planning. Even before the pandemic and the war, the ROC actively promoted large families using demographic arguments. Methods of family planning and the organisations supporting them are portrayed as suspicious and anti-Russian; questioning large families (*mnogodetnyye sem’i*) is deemed non-Orthodox, and the childfree movement is presented as scandalous. While Kolstø engages with major debates, in the final section, he relies too heavily on particularly extreme figures such

as Irina Medvedeva and Tatiana Shishova, who voice ultra-conservative views and do not represent mainstream views.

Chapter 10 addresses LGBTQIA+ rights, demonstrating that homosexuality is one of the least controversial moral issues within the ROC. The Church resolutely opposes any attempt to present such behaviour as a norm, and even more strongly as an object of pride. This monolithic stance contrasts sharply with theological revisionism among liberal Western Orthodox thinkers (Arentzen et al. 2022). At the same time, recent sexual scandals involving ROC hierarchs, such as Hilarion (Alfeev), illustrate discrepancies between official positions and private behaviour.

Chapter 11 turns to sex education in schools. Kolstø writes (p. 189):

The Orthodox activists maintained that the introduction of sex education in schools would not only have a negative impact on the moral and ethical integrity of young people but also, and no less important, it would be ruinous for the future of the entire population.

However, this contradicts survey evidence suggesting that most parents in Russia support sex education. Kolstø interprets opposition to sex education as part of a broader biopolitical struggle (p. 190), linking it with Western values and framing it as anti-Russian and anti-Orthodox. As an alternative, the subject of ‘family studies’ is promoted for grades 10–11, so far mainly at the regional level. Textbooks are authored by Orthodox activists, some connected to controversial figures such as Sergei Romanov, a spiritual leader in a female convent near Yekaterinburg who is currently serving a prison sentence for inciting hatred and encouraging suicide. Although presented as non-confessional, the course aims to “prepare high school students for creating strong, happy families by introducing them to a system of family values that are traditional for our Fatherland” (p. 197). These textbooks often promote non-scientific and ultra-conservative views (such as telephony, a pseudo-scientific theory that the wom-

an's body 'remembers' her previous partners and that this has genetic consequences for her children), sometimes diverging even from the ROC's official Social Concept, which does not display an adamant position on the use of contraceptives and does not promote telegony.

After these eleven chapters, the reader is left with an impression of highly intrusive moral governance in contemporary Russia, evoking associations with the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985). Chapter 12, however, complicates this picture. This chapter is based on the LegitRuss 2020 survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre as part of a project led by the author. It stands out as the only chapter addressing social attitudes that might reflect, or correlate with, normative moral theology. On key moral issues such as abortion, premarital sex and divorce, self-identified Orthodox believers differ only slightly – or not at all – from the general population (p. 214). In some cases (for example, attitudes to spanking children and wife-beating), Orthodox respondents are even less tolerant than the unchurched (p. 216). Surveys also show a lukewarm response to the introduction of religion in schools.

Two seemingly contradictory conclusions emerge. First, Kolstø argues that the agreement between public opinion and ROC teaching does not necessarily indicate the Church's influence; rather, the Church may be reproducing dominant social attitudes (p. 213). Second, he concludes that the ROC is out of step with its own flock and has failed to impose its social-conservative agenda (p. 215). These points, and the survey analysis more broadly, would benefit from deeper discussion. Key questions remain: what is the purpose of the ROC's discourse, and who is its primary audience, society or the state? If it targets ordinary believers, why is its impact so limited? Could it instead function as an ideology aimed at ruling elites?

The study of Orthodox family ethics, in my view, requires grounded, grassroots research using diverse methods. Even within internet-

based research, more innovative approaches could be employed, such as analysing discussion groups, online forums, high-traffic sites, user engagement or book sales.

Chapter 13 situates family ethics in a broader global context. Kolstø analyses the ROC's discourse on 'traditional values' as addressing both domestic and international audiences. He observes that the opposition between individual (or human) rights and collective rights associated with the Church and family reflects an ideological mixture rooted in the conservative turn of the late 1930s, when earlier Bolshevik ideas of collective child-rearing were abandoned. Drawing on Oleg Kharkhordin's (1999) study of the individual and the collective in Russia, he highlights slippages between notions of the community and the state. At the same time, he acknowledges persistent suspicion toward state institutions, especially evident in debates on family violence legislation. The result is a paradox: while the family is presented as foundational to the national community, it must also be "protected from encroachments from outside, not least from overweening state authorities" (p. 233).

In his conclusion, Kolstø engages with dominant interpretations of contemporary ROC narratives, including 'traditional values', bringing together key themes: discrepancies between norms and reality, the relationship between community, nation and state, and the alignment of conservative religious rhetoric with authoritarian political frameworks.

However, the argument that the Orthodox campaign for traditional values has been absorbed into Putin's ideological agenda is not entirely new, and several questions raised in the book remain unresolved. In particular, the gender dimension is less convincing. The analysis of normative statements about women's roles does not sufficiently engage with extensive scholarship on Russian feminism and post-Soviet debates on women's emancipation (Murav'yeva 2014; Gradskova 2020; Davidenko and Utkina 2024). Likewise, the suggestion that modern working women

broadly support patriarchal gender models risks oversimplification.

Nevertheless, Kolstø's study provides a substantial body of material and offers a useful foundation for future research on the politics of family values and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping debates on gender, sexuality and social order in contemporary Russia.

Irina Paert,
University of Tartu

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