

EASTERN EXOTICA:

REFLECTIONS ON AN EASTERN ORTHODOX HERITAGE

Maryon Kantaroff

L'auteure, sculpteure à réputation internationale et féministe radicale, évoque son passé et son évolution dans l'Eglise orthodoxe de ses ancêtres bulgares. Son expérience religieuse la plus ancienne, se souvient-elle, était de crainte mêlée de répulsion et de fascination, d'ennui et d'enthousiasme. Enfant, elle s'inquiétait de la séparation des hommes et des femmes (et des enfants) dans la congrégation. Plus tard, après quelque temps dans la chorale, elle se mit à aimer ce dialogue musical entre le prêtre et la chorale, si important dans ce service religieux. Étudiante à l'université, elle se mit à questionner sérieusement les conséquences intellectuelles de cette culture exotique orientale dans laquelle elle était née, et la rejeta. De retour au Canada après 11 ans d'absence, elle revint à l'Eglise Orthodoxe et trouva un nouveau prêtre qui l'accepta, connaissant ses opinions féministes avancées, et, dans sa relation avec sa femme, lui montra que l'amour unit (alors que la doctrine divise). Quand elle regarde maintenant l'image de Jésus, elle voit une image d'homme se fondre avec celle d'une femme.

A sense of awe is what I most remember of my earliest religious experiences — a mixture of repulsion and attraction, excitement and boredom. Trapped by convention into standing still for hours, I was forced to listen to the endless dron-

ing of the priest, answered by the choir in an incomprehensible musical dialogue of medieval Slavic. Later I came to love that exchange of divinely inspired sounds, but as a child I was oppressed by the dark, cavernous interior of the old Greek Orthodox church on Trinity Street. The only light came from the clusters of candles, judiciously dispersed, dramatizing the already imposing rows of Byzantine saints lining the altar. In various mysterious niches icons of Madonna and Child had their own array of candles. Permeating throughout this flickering interior, where I was already overwhelmed by echoing sounds, was the death smell of incense. The subliminal distress these fumes evoked in me as a child was not unlike that an animal may feel on picking up a scent that spells "careful." I knew I could not be a child here — myself. Something else was required of me when I entered that "temple." Perhaps the process had already started with my baptism.

Surrounding me in soldier-like rows stood the Bulgarian and Macedonian congregation who had left their homelands to venture to the distant regions of America — men on the right side and women and children on the left. This observable fact I noted and continued to worry over right up to the moment I became a feminist. After that I knew why. Later, as the

poor immigrants struggled with the aftermath of the Depression and began to prosper, they built a large and imposing new church at Dundas and Sackville. Its airy interior, lined on one wall by tall windows, announced the adjustment of the well-dressed immigrants to the New World. Here the choir had its own balcony, mounted at the opposite end to the altar. This made it easier, when I was old enough to join the choir, to gossip and giggle between solos and the choir's liturgical responses to the singing priest. The priest, large, dark, and moustached, was also the father of my closest friend, Eli. Eli was the main reason for my attending church regularly (as well, of course, as the insistence of my parents), for this relationship gave me ample opportunity to regain the loss of power I suffered at my brother's hands. My brother, three years older, bullied me to the exact degree that I bullied Eli, to whom I was elder by three years. Thus it was God who provided me with my first opportunity to redress a wrong and see that justice was done. To this day I revere Eli for his unknowing and uncomplaining sacrifice. It would seem we were already both well on our way to being good little Christians.

The new church provided a fresh lease on life in many ways for its immigrant congregation. Since it was large and attractive, many

more people attended the services — and not all for religious reasons. In the 1950s exotic Displaced Persons began flooding in from Europe and made a beeline to church; thus they displayed to all that they were definitely *not* pinkos. Soon our church became a political hotbed. These were my favourite times, for these Displaced Persons were a different breed from the early immigrants — educated, often professionals, and full of the arrogance of their superior European culture. I loved talking to them in Bulgarian and began seriously to concentrate on improving my vocabulary. By this time I was attending the University of Toronto and could no longer give time to the choir, but occasionally I would miss the music or some old faces and would decide to join my parents for Sunday services, which they seldom missed.

It was during these later rare excursions into the religious realm that I began seriously to question the intellectual implications of the Eastern exotica into which I had been born. At first I was amazed by how little I knew of the actual belief system underpinning the Eastern Orthodox church. Then, as I made a point of uncovering more and more about the faith of my foreparents, I dismissed the whole structure as intellectually beneath me. Was I not now a firmly entrenched serious student of philosophy at the university? Nevertheless, I had been immersed since childhood in the special atmosphere of light, sounds, and smells, a special oriental mood that *is* the Eastern Orthodox church. The congregation was becoming visibly more Anglicized with each passing year, both in style and in speech, yet the ancient oriental religion had not changed its tenor. Occasionally now men and women would sit together — even *sitting* as opposed to standing was a cultural concession to the West. A profound schizophrenia was developing. The stylized Byzantine saints, held fast by beaten copper and

gold leaf, had reason for their deeply saddened expressions, for were they not at odds with this modern congregation? Was it not their Master who was crucified for our sins? But the congregation of the 1950s and early 1960s had other preoccupations — mostly worldly ones. And I was part of this split. The church then began to feel as oppressive to me as I had remembered feeling it as a child. Yet it stimulated and excited me both sensuously and intellectually — sensuously because of the stunning impact of gold and icons, candles and robes, sounds and smells, and not the least because of the people present; intellectually the stimulation was almost exclusively due to the people present. The ideological or theological underpinnings of this gathering hardly disturbed me at all. I was convinced that everyone who went to church did so for the same reasons I did — to meet and exchange with each other in a special atmosphere. I seriously doubt that any two people in any congregation could be found to agree on a concept of God or the true way to go about worshipping that concept.

By the time I returned to St. Cyril and Methody, after eleven years of living in England, eleven years of churchlessness had passed. I had by no means been lax on the spiritual side, but my many and varied spiritual pursuits had never once led me into a church in England. However, returning home after eleven years meant returning to church. Back in Canada, that was where I had to go to meet the people who had composed the bulk of the social fabric of my youth in Toronto. So I returned to church and found a whole new congregation, augmented by the children of the children of those original immigrants. A new priest, sent directly from Bulgaria, led this flock with deep humility, compassion, and a depth of psychological insight that astonished me. He knew of my radical-feminist views and accepted me into this

congregation with grace and sensitivity, while acknowledging fully the validity of my progressive views. Without apology, he showed by example that the true message of Christianity could not be at odds with the needs of evolving human consciousness. The doctrinaire differences between his patriarchal monolith and my feminism melted into mutual regard between us. When I observed the love and respect that flowed between this man and his wife, I understood why he could accept my feminism into his Christianity. Both he and his wife had learned the mystery and power of love. As I watched this male and female partnership gently minister to the social and spiritual needs of their flock, I wondered if it had been their Christianity that revealed this to them, or was it their ability to love that transformed their Christianity?

For them, individuals always came before doctrine. And such people are found in every religion and sect throughout the world, as well as outside all structured belief systems. Surely it is the doctrine that divides and the love that unites. What possible help could structures and dogmas be in the pursuit of Unity and the Divine? Clearly, some find their way in spite of the blocking doctrines, but at the cost of how much human misery? So nowadays when I go to "our" church, I have a vision of female saints encased in beaten copper, snuggled in between the rows of male saints. And when I look up at the picture of Jesus, I see His face merge into Hers. But I admit that this is not yet a reality, only my private vision.

Sculptor Maryon Kantaroff, Hon. B.A. (Art and Archaeology, University of Toronto) and postgraduate and art studies, London, England, has had many international exhibitions, commissions, and awards. Radical Feminist and lecturer, she operates The Art Foundry in Toronto.