MUSCOVITE WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF THE HOLY: GENDER AND CANONIZATION

Recent studies have shown that the miracle stories of Muscovite saints provide valuable insights into the involvement of local men and women in the initial stages of the popular worship of saints. While scholars intuitively acknowledge the participation of both sexes in the medieval Russian saint-making process, the role of gender in this process has not yet been fully appreciated. This study seeks to investigate the question of what role women played in the establishment of saints’ cults in Muscovite Russia. An examination of women’s religious activities in Muscovite hagiographical sources will show that women did not simply conform to standards of behavior prescribed by the church authorities but rather expressed their choice of prospective holy figures. In many cases women even were able to put their own gender-specific stamp on the emerging medieval Russian canonization procedure.

Any serious study of medieval Russian saints’ cults must grapple with the process of saint-making in pre-Petrine Russia. Paul Bushkovitch has refuted the long held scholarly assumption, based on E. Golubinskii’s work, that an identifiable official canonization procedure existed in Russia since Kievan times. Nevertheless, Bushkovitch also focuses heavily on evidence that points to the involvement of the Orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchy in the cults of Muscovite saints. Like Golubinskii, he assumes that canonization is a highly regularized procedure, which includes public inquests, a central church hierarchy that plays a leading role, and the fulfillment of certain requirements, such as the presence of a vita, as the norm. Such a developed


2. Bushkovitch, Religion and Society, 75.