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## FORMATION OF CULT OF FEMALE SAINTS IN CANONICAL GOSPELS AND APOCRYPHAL TEXTS

Romanchenko Valery (a)\*, Shalaeva Svetlana (b), Nozhkina Irina (c), Shmygina Oksana (d)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Saratov State Agrarian University named after N.I. Vavilov, 1, Teatralnaya square, Saratov, Russia, kseny1974@mail.ru

(b) Saratov State Agrarian University named after N.I. Vavilov, 1, Teatralnaya square, Saratov, Russia, clar13@yandex.ru

(c) Saratov State Agrarian University named after N.I. Vavilov, 1, Teatralnaya square, Saratov, Russia, nirina2007@mail.ru

(d) Saratov State Agrarian University named after N.I. Vavilov, 1, Teatralnaya square, Saratov, Russia, kseny1974@mail.ru

### *Abstract*

Based on a study of canonical gospels and ancient apocryphal texts, the paper analyzes the formation of the cult of female saints – images of Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Egypt. The formation of the cult of female saints is significant in the formation of Christian theology. The original Christianity had no consensus on the necessity of the very existence of the cult of saints. The preachers of Christianity saw in monotheism the most important difference between this religion and pagan beliefs. The veneration of saints seemed to some early Christian ideologists a violation of this principle. It is shown that later Christian theology began to give very great importance to saints, including women. In terms of credibility, their statements are equated with Biblical precepts. Great honors are given to them; most of the Christian holidays commemorate them. And this is no coincidence. The church considered the cult of saints as an effective means of strengthening religious ideas and deepening faith, affirming Christianity, growing its influence and ousting the cult of old gods from people's consciousness. The cult of the Virgin Mary is believed to be central and exceptional in modern Christian mythology. However, unlike most ancient cults, it does not come up immediately, but gradually, over several centuries. The formation and spread of this cult dates back to some ancient Eastern polytheistic religions where a female deity took a central place along with two other deities in a triad of chief gods.

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**Keywords:** Christianity, canonical gospels, apocryphal texts, cult of female saints, religion.



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## 1. Introduction

Being formed as a monotheistic religion, Christianity brings out one God, albeit one existing in three persons, Godhead. But, since Christianity was formed as a world religion following a breakdown with Judaism and being strongly influenced by late Neo-Platonic philosophy, a female deity was removed from the Christian Trinity, and replaced with the notion of the “Holy Spirit”.

The cult of Saints helped the Christian church in the conquest of ever new countries and peoples. To this day, the cult of Saints continues to be an instrument for strengthening the influence of the church and achieving political goals. The similarity of myths among different peoples illustrates a similar way of thinking in societies that are at the same stage of development, since the very origin of myths is the same. A universal myth is felt behind the biblical story of the Creation.

Since the very idea of the Divine is shaped in the process of mythological understanding of reality, the myth, the religion and the culture initially form an inseparable unity that subsequently results in a custom (cult) associated with a specific mode of action (ritual) and eventually a special reverence for gods (religion). The debate over what was in the beginning, a cult or a myth, is meaningless, since they developed concurrently and thanks to each other, like theory and practice did.

## 2. Problem Statement

The study aims:

- To explore the cult of images of female saints centered around canonical gospels and ancient apocryphal texts.
- To trace the way the image of female saints is drawn out in apocryphal writings.
- To identify the place that the images of Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt take in Christianity.
- To determine the significance of the cult of female saints in the spreading and assertion of Christianity.

## 3. Research Questions

By what means was the cult of female saints shaped, as stated in canonical gospels and ancient apocryphal texts?

What are the reasons for the popularity of the cult of Virgin Mary?

What is the role of the cult of female saints in Christian theology?

What is the influence of the cult of the female saints of Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt on the spreading and assertion of Christianity and on the development of European culture at large?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The paper aims to analyze the formation of the cult of images of female saints based on canonical gospels and ancient apocryphal texts and to determine the role of the cult of female images of Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt in the formation of Christian theology.

## 5. Research Methods

The study was conducted through the consideration and analysis of canonical gospels and ancient apocryphal texts dedicated to the formation of the cult of female saints. The authors used modern general theoretical and concrete historical literature related to the insights into the evolution of the cult of female saints under the formation of Christian theology. The research methodology involved the use of basic historical methods related to the comparison and analysis of material.

## 6. Findings

The mythological biography of female saints is given mainly by the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and numerous apocryphal texts (Peter, Thomas, Nicodemus, etc.). Different Gospels, to varying degrees, focus on certain aspects of the life of Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. This is due to the diversity of their creation, the struggle of early Christian denominations, and the gradual formation and formulation of the main dogmas.

The image of the Blessed Virgin is interesting for modern scientists, in particular being presented in the studies of Russian and foreign authors (Kazakov, 2014; Liang, 2013).

In the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse of John), the female image appears abstractly and mystically: “Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth” (Revelation 12:1–2). This image is distinctly impacted by the ancient Eastern religions, in which no deity had a clearly defined human appearance.

However, the following and the last mention of the female deity in the Revelation was of a slightly different character: “she gave birth to a male child ... and her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled to the desert, to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days” (Revelation 12:5–6). Thus, there is a certain decrease in the image – the symbol – allegory – is suddenly embodied in a person acting upon on the earth. The character mentioned returns to the earth, after the child – the deity – ascends to God, i.e. it can be assumed that the woman has lost her divinity. Thus, these Revelations suggest that nascent Christianity does not completely discard the female deity, but gives it mystical features and assigns a secondary role that, once performed, results in the female deity to lose her divinity.

The canonical gospels do not say anything about Mary’s background and childhood. The source of the data perceived by the liturgical and folkloric tradition was the early Christian tradition recorded around the year AD 200 in apocrypha, Book of the Birth of Mary, later called the Gospel of James. According to this legend, Mary comes from the messianic tribe of Judah, mixed with the priestly tribe of Levi from the royal family of David. Her parents were the righteous Joachim and Anna. They had no children for a long time. When they both were well advanced in years, Anna gave birth to Mary. From the age of 3, Mary was brought up at the Jerusalem temple, serving its shrines, doing needlework and getting food from the hands of angels. At 12, she vowed virginity. But 12 years was the age of majority and she could no longer stay at the temple. Then Mary was found a spouse who would guard her without touching her and respecting her vow. A miraculous sign – a dove flying out of a staff – pointed to the elderly

Joseph. He became the Betrothed. Since then, Mary began to live in his house, in Nazareth, taken care of by her pious spouse. One day, the Archangel Gabriel condescended to Mary to announce her that she would conceive and become the mother of the holy son born from the Spirit, and endowed with the dignity of the messiah (Annunciation). She was promised the miracle of virgin motherhood (Luke 1:26–38). Expecting a baby, she went to the house of Elizabeth, her relative, who also expected (sixth month) the son of the future John the Baptist. After a three-month stay, Maria returned home. Joseph was aggrieved to notice his wife's pregnancy and did not want to discredit her with a public accusation merely out of pity. However, an angel convinced him of the innocence of his Betrothed (Matthew 1:18–24). The apocryphal version conveys this episode in a slightly different way: Mary seemed to have been tested with bitter water, which curses unfaithful wives, as recommended in the Bible (Numbers 5:11–31). Her chastity was confirmed. By coincidence, Mary was destined to have a son in the messianic city of Bethlehem.

There was no guest room available for the woman who was tired after a long journey (Luke 2:7), and she wrapped her firstborn in cloths and placed him in a manger. Then, saving the baby from King Herod, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt, and after Herod's death they returned to Nazareth (Matthew 2:21–23). Further in the canonical gospels, the pilgrimage of the “holy family” to the feast in Jerusalem is described. During the feast, 12-year-old Jesus disappeared and preached (Luke 2:42–49). The relationship between the mother and her son is depicted as a harsh renunciation of the son from motherly love in the name of fulfilling his messiah. The tradition, both Orthodox and Catholic, presupposes Mary's physical or spiritual presence at the most important moments of her son's sufferings (meeting him while he was carrying the Cross (Luke 23:27), near Calvary, she was standing “at the Cross of Jesus.” Orthodox and Catholic traditions believe that after the Resurrection Christ, first of all, appeared to Mary.

The last years of Mary's life are described only in apocryphal writings. According to some Orthodox traditions, Mary participated in the assignment of places between the apostles, where they had to set forth as His agents for preaching. She got Iveria (Georgia) by drawing lots, but instead the angel showed her the path to Athos that was to become the world center of Orthodox monasticism. According to another version, she quietly lived in the house of St. John the Evangelist, spending her time praying and doing needlework. She also visited some places related to the life of Christ.

Events associated with the death of Mary symbolically repeat the most important semantic moments of her life: the announcement from the archangel Gabriel of imminent death (a new announcement in the “heavenly glory”). The recession, the separation of Mary's soul from her body, was followed by their miraculous reunion and the departure of the resurrected body to the other world – the apostles, who opened the tomb to show the departed to Thomas, found it empty.

This idea of Mary's bodily ascension to heaven, dating back to the early Christian apocrypha, was dogmatically formulated very late in Catholicism alone in 1950. The moment of the solemn crowning of Mary as the “Queen of Heaven” is characteristic only of the Western tradition. The Catholic Church declared Mary “Mother of the Church” in 1964.

It is obvious that the image of Blessed Virgin Mary is strongly mythologized and does not almost rely on the early Gospels. It represents, though, the development of a number of motifs of a female deity that existed in the Old Testament.

The Gospel of Luke, as follows from its content, resembles an ancient secular novel. It presents the episodes from the mythological, legendary “biography” of Mary. The narrative contains the data on her ethnicity: “... and God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin ... the virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:26–27). The Gospel refers to a Mary’s relative, Elizabeth, who was “of the daughters of Aaron” (Luke 1:5). This clearly indicates that the author considers Mary, i.e. the mother of the Christian god, as not only belonging to a Jewish community, but also marks the place of origin – a backward region of Galilee in the north of the Kingdom of Israel, where there were continuous protests against the Romans. The author even indicates the specific residence – the town of Nazareth. However, there is still no data on Mary’s family and the story of her marriage.

In the earliest of the synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, the Mother of God is introduced only once when describing one of the first sermons of Jesus Christ. It provides no information about the Mother of God, but emphasizes the difference between her characterization as a person and the divinity of Jesus. Christ is separated from of his human family and is portrayed as God. Thus, in this early Gospel the image of the Mother of God is just beginning to emerge, but nothing concrete is still indicated, except for the fact that her name is Mary.

In a stepwise manner, the first elements of an unfolding myth appear to state the Immaculate Conception of Mary of her son Jesus (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:31). In the Gospel of Luke, the above episode is significantly expanded due to the Annunciation. Thus, a wonderful and mythological element is incorporated into the biography of Mary, which is discordant with the entire image.

In the latest Gospel of John, Mary again appears as an active character: she is present at the crucifixion of Jesus: “His mother stood near the cross of Jesus, and his mother’s sister, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25). The same episode is repeated in a follow-up narrative included in the New Testament epistle, “The Acts of the Apostles”, where Mary appears to mourn after the death of Christ: “... they all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). Mary is attributed a behavior completely unusual for her – there are no indications in the Gospels that she communicates with the disciples of Jesus. Jesus’ relatives, his brothers, are also mentioned here, although it is not specified whether they are Mary’s children.

There are no other references to the Mother of God in canonical literature. However, as Christianity was developing and going beyond narrow nationalist communities, the cult of the Virgin as a female deity begins to take shape under the influence of other beliefs. All the events concerning her life were no longer set forth in canonical texts, but in apocryphal writings – works officially unrecognized as sacred, but approved to be read by the faithful for a long time.

Unlike the earlier texts, apocryphal writings provide the information about Mary mainly through the events of her life before the Annunciation. Her birth is described in parallel with the gospels that tell about the birth of Jesus Christ. In Apocrypha, Anna, who had lived with her husband for twenty years and had no children, was visited by an angel announcing that a daughter would be born. The miracles associated with the birth of Mary were enhanced with the episode when an angel appeared to Joachim (Mary’s father) to promise him a child: “... Know about your wife that she will conceive a daughter. She will be in the temple of God, and the Holy Spirit shall abide on her, and her blessedness shall be greater than that of all the holy women ... and she herself will be blessed and become the mother of eternal grace

(Sventsitskaya & Skogorev, 1999). There is still no mythical virgin birth, but its later inclusion complements this prophecy.

Further biography of Mary, as it were, confirms the idea of her initial pre-chosenness. According to the vow made by Anna even before Mary's birth: "... and I made a vow from the beginning of my path that, if you give me a son or daughter, I will dedicate them to you in your holy temple" (Sventsitskaya & Skogorev, 1999, p. 35). When she was three, she was taken to the temple. Such an action was practiced in Judea quite rarely and only with very noble people. When describing her life at the temple, the episodes associated with miracles are especially emphasized.

Thus, in apocryphal writings the name of Mary is more associated with magical, surreal, charmed events. The imagination is flying more and more, the element of the miraculous is enlarging: "The angels were very often seen speak to her and obey her with great reverence. And if someone, obsessed with some kind of infirmity, touched her, he immediately recovered" (Sventsitskaya & Skogorev, 1999, p. 38). At this level of legends, Mary turns out to be an intermediary between God and man, acquiring back then her principal cult function. Apocrypha depicts Mary who is interested not in earthly but solely in divine life, striving to devote herself to serving God: "of all the girls she was trained with to serve God, there was no other who was more engaged in vigils, more perfect in all virtues" (Sventsitskaya & Skogorev, 1999, p. 48).

The cult of Mary was established in the IV–V centuries. She began to be called "Theotokos" and "Mother of God" – expressions dating back to ancient titles of goddesses. For the first time, Mary got this title in the writings of Eusebius of Nicomedia, a 4th-century Eastern Church bishop. But Mary was absolutely recognized as the Mother of God in AD 431 at a council in Ephesus, convened by the decision of Theodosius II, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire.

If the mythology of the Virgin Mary is poorly developed in Christianity, the cult of "holy" women is even less represented. One of these images is that of Mary Magdalene. She was born in the city of Magdala. That is how she came to acquire her name. According to the gospel narrative, she was possessed by evil spirits and freed from them by Jesus Christ (Luke 8:2). After this, she followed Christ and served him, sharing her wealth (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:3). According to Western tradition, Mary Magdalene is sometimes identified with a sinful woman, who in the house of a certain Simon poured some oil over the Christ's head, washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her long hair (Mark 14: 3–9; Luke 7:37–50). Mary Magdalene is viewed by Christians as a repentant harlot. This image is very popular in Western literature and painting.

Mary Magdalene was present near Calvary (Matthew 27:56) and was a witness to the burial of Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:61). After this, disobeying the Sabbath ban, she went with other women to the grave of Christ, found it empty, and was informed by the angel of his resurrection (Mark 16:1–8). When Mary saw her Risen Lord, at first she did not recognize him, mistaking him for a gardener. After instant recognition, she took upon herself the mission of proclaiming the Resurrection to the apostles (John 20:14–18). The sources say quite a lot about Mary's mediation service. That is why, in the Orthodox tradition, she was bestowed an "equal-to-the-apostles" title. An even later tradition says that during her apostolic activity, Mary Magdalene met with the emperor Tiberius and presented him with a painted Easter egg with the words "Christ is Risen!" (Tulupov, 2001).

In Christian traditions, the image of Mary Magdalene is often intertwined with the image of Mary of Egypt. This is a very real person, presumably existing in the V century.

According to the earliest version, at the age of 12, she left her parents living in an Egyptian village for Alexandria. She stayed there for seventeen years as a harlot, until she joined a crowd of pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. But, when at the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Mary, together with others, tried to enter the Church, but some invisible force “three and four times” held and did not let her in. Admonished by such punishment, she vowed to continue to live in purity and asked the icon of the Virgin Mary to be a surety. Only then did Mary of Egypt enter the church and bow to the Holy Cross. She was given a sign that, upon crossing the Jordan, she would find blissful peace. Mary went to the beyond-the-Jordan desert, where, after seventeen years, she finally found peace. There came “great silence” for the hermit. The clothes of Mary of Egypt wore out. She had nothing to cover her naked body with, and she was tormented by summer heat and winter cold. First, she fed on the harsh grasses of the desert, and later generally ceased to need food. With no books and no literacy, she acquired wonderful knowledge of the sacred texts. For forty seven years, she met not a single person or beast. Following 47 years in solitude, Mary of Egypt met the monastic priest St. Zosima who gave her half of his hematium (outer clothing) to cover up nudity. Zosima witnessed miracles and listened to the story of Mary. At her request, a year later, on Maundy Thursday, he came to the shore of the Jordan with holy gifts. Before his eyes, Mary crossed the river, as if by land, took communion from his hands and came back. A year later, Zosima found her body and buried her with the help of a lion that came out of the desert.

Both of these saints, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, provide the basis for the stories of harlots, especially popular in the Middle Ages in the West. Separate motives of the legends about them were transferred from one to another.

Thus, the cult of female saints has become an integral part of Christian scriptures, thereby enriching them. It contributed to a large extent to the Christian Church in the conquest of ever new countries and peoples. To this day, the cult of female saints serves to strengthen the influence of the Church. The similarity of myths among different peoples illustrates a similar way of thinking in societies that are at the same stage of development, since the very origin of myths is identical. A universal myth is felt behind the biblical story of the Creation.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study enabled the authors to come to the following conclusions.

Firstly, much of the Bible retained its original mythological character, including the story of the creation of the woman, which is not demythologized to this day.

Secondly, the popularity and breadth of the cults is attributed not only to the efforts of the Church and leadership elite, but also directly to a social focus of the cult, because believers perceived the saints as heavenly protectors before God.

Thirdly, the cult of saints has been used for many centuries as an ideological tool for strengthening state power and Christianity. This is vividly demonstrated by both European and Russian history.

Thus, the formation of the cult of female saints in Christian theology does not begin immediately, but subsequently occupies one of the central places in the system of Christian dogma.

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