

**Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's vision of gender:
An application of orthodox anthropology**

Olga Lossky-Laham

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, born in 1907 and died in 2005, is one of those twentieth-century thinkers who helped build bridges between Eastern and Western Christian traditions. Born German in Strasbourg from a Lutheran father and a Jewish mother, Behr-Sigel became French at the end of the World War and met Russian Orthodox students who had just fled the Bolshevik Revolution. She then decided to become Orthodox, but, as she said, "without renouncing the grace received in the Protestant Church". Her position at the crossroads of different languages, cultures and religions enriched the original thinking she developed during her long life. As a theologian, Behr-Sigel was particularly aware of the need for dialogue between theology and the contemporary world.

Among her many fields of reflection, such as Russian spirituality or ecumenical dialogue, the theologian deepened the question of the place of the laity in the community of the Church, especially women. Indeed, she had the opportunity to become a Lutheran pastor in her twenties, and this experience has deeply shaped her. How does Behr-Sigel approach the current gender issue based on the Orthodox tradition? I will first develop how she explores the Oriental Church Fathers to promote an anthropological vision rooted in the Trinitarian model. Then I will move to the application of such a model in the context of the ecclesial community in relation to women, before turning to the reality of Orthodox communities today and the specific question of women's access to the ordained priesthood in the Orthodox Church.

1. An anthropological vision rooted in the Trinitarian model

1.a. The rediscovery of the patristic vision

- the characteristics of the thinking of the fathers

The neo-patristic synthesis is a rediscovery of the Oriental Church Fathers in modern times. It began mainly in France in the 1930s and deeply influenced Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, who was a close friend of Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), one of the most important theologians of this

movement. This synthesis puts the emphasis on the relevance of the Fathers for our time, in a way that is far from any fundamentalist repetition. As Behr-Sigel explains:

"The Fathers usually represent opposing, seemingly irreconcilable tendencies in their writings. It is not every single one of these expressions that is normative. It must be placed in the whole (as are the "words" of the Scriptures). It is the consensus of the Fathers, reached under the strong impulse of the Holy Spirit thanks to fierce debates and crucifying struggles [...], a consensus received by the Church, also inspired by the Spirit, that is normative for us."

The rediscovery of the consensus of the Fathers today opens up access to a rich theology that can illuminate our debates today. As Behr-Sigel puts it:

"To be faithful to the Fathers means rediscovering their creative inspiration in order to proclaim it to the people of today. It also means trying to discern the signs of the times [...] in the light of the divine mystery, the mystery of Trinitarian love, the mystery of the acceptance and salvation of all humanity in the God-Man who is the sacrificial Lamb from the beginning and for the salvation of the world."

Updating the Fathers presupposes an understanding of their approach to the "divine mystery". The Fathers aimed to express the truth of faith not in a heuristic conceptual way that would attempt to define the whole mystery, but rather in an apophatic way. This means using negations to say what God is not, or presenting positive definitions of God as always incomplete. God is indeed always beyond the definition that a human mind can formulate, especially when we are talking about the very mystery of God, which is the Trinity. This approach is linked to the goal of theological knowledge itself, according to the Oriental Fathers: not a conceptual definition of God that can be explained by human logic, but an experiential, existential knowledge of the inaccessible God, a participation in the communion of love that characterizes the life of the Trinity.

How does Elisabeth Behr-Sigel present this "mystery of Trinitarian love" according to the heritage of the Fathers?

1.b. The Trinitarian Model

Synthesizing the thinking of her friend Vladimir Lossky, Behr-Sigel defines what a "person" is in the Trinitarian context of the three divine persons sharing a common nature.

"That the three divine Persons have the same nature, the same inner content, means that they contain each other, that each gives to the others all that it has. The Father, as the personal source of divinity, communicates it fully to the Son and the Spirit. The Son and the Spirit, finding their origin in the Father, also find their end in Him. In contrast to closed

individuality, to self-importance, the person in his divine fullness is openness, generosity, self-sacrifice. And it is precisely in this generosity that the person also realizes himself as absolute difference in the vivifying Trinitarian unity."

Thus the Trinity shows the paradox of an absolute unity of the three persons at the same time as an absolute diversity of each person. They are in total participation in what they are, in their divine essence, and this total self-giving makes them exist as persons from eternity.

When asked to develop a vision of the renewed communion of the Church, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel uses the image of the icon of the Trinity realized by the Russian monk Andrei Rublev at the beginning of the fifteenth century:

"Andrei Roublev, following a traditional allegorical exegesis of this narrative, depicts the persons of the Trinity in the form of three angels of wonderful youth and beauty sitting around a table. They bend towards each other in a movement full of grace, expressing the absence of any constraint as well as the total gift of self to the other. A unique life circulates between the three. They are different and one. [...] The icon conveys an appeal. It invites us to enter into a mystery of communion without confusion, without annihilation of the person, a mystery of self-sacrifice without servility, of love and mutual giving, in complete freedom."

As Elisabeth underlines, this icon is thus a call to people to participate in the divine life. The chalice in the center of the icon, in front of the angel who most likely symbolizes the Christ, is an allusion to the Eucharistic chalice. The sharing of this chalice during the Eucharistic celebration is the way to participate in Trinitarian love. Therefore, the assembly of the Church becomes the place where human persons can experience communion with God and with others, a communion in which the diversity of each is magnified and achieved, as is the case with the divine persons.

The relationship between the members of the new community has as its model the *perichoresis* between the Trinitarian persons, which means a total sharing of one's own qualities with the others. This movement of *perichoresis* is evoked by the circular composition of the icon around the central table, which illustrates the divine council. Such sharing leads to a total unity between the three Trinitarian persons, but a unity that respects the diversity of each person.

If we apply this kind of relationship to the human sphere, we can consider gender as one of the elements of this personal diversity: It is not called to be abolished, but to be transfigured in a relationship of *perichoresis*. This implies, as Elisabeth underlines, a mutual consent based on an unconditional love and not on a power relationship of any parts. Union without confusion of persons appears beyond all identity, called to be integrated into personal

conformity to Christ. This is why St Paul exclaims in reference to the baptized: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:27-29). This ideal of unity in diversity is the basis of relationship in the church community. No discrimination, especially of gender, can be justified there.

This Trinitarian model can thus become a concrete source of inspiration for the relationships between the members of the Eucharistic community.

2. Application of the model: the renewed community of the Church

2.a. What is Eucharistic community?

The Eucharistic community of the Church is catholic in the etymological meaning of this word, καθ' ὅλον, corresponding to the whole. This means that each community that gathers in one place for the Eucharistic sacrifice embodies the fullness of the Church, which is not the sum of all Eucharistic communities. Each believer can therefore share in this fullness of the Church as a member of a local Eucharistic community. As the Apostle Paul develops, partakers of the Eucharistic meal become "the body of Christ and his members" (1 Cor 12:27). Bodily participation in the body of Christ implies renewed relationships according to the Trinitarian model, which can then help to overcome the human temptation of domination and exclusion. Behr-Sigel explains: "Is it possible [...] to overcome the antinomy between the revendication of human freedom and autonomy and the affirmation of the catholicity of the Christian message, which refers not only to all human persons but to the *whole* human person called to find its fulfilment in God? Insight into this conflict in the light of the central mystery of the Christian faith, the mystery of Trinitarian love revealed in the Word made flesh who accepts all humanity without destroying it, without confusion and separation, could such insight be oriented towards overcoming the conflict? "

This approach is Christ-centered, for it begins within the Eucharistic communion with the physical sharing of bread and wine, which are the body and blood of Christ. Through Christ, God incarnate, the believer is introduced to the Trinitarian life:

"Unity in discernment is rooted in the [...] concept of God as personal love revealed by the Holy Spirit and explained by the Fathers. Love is the will to a total and original realization of the other. In Christ, humanity and human persons are called to participate in the Trinitarian life, which is a gift to the other, a greeting to the other, in supreme freedom."

How does this participation in the Trinitarian life concretely affect the relationships between people in the ecclesial community, especially between men and women?

2.b. The Royal Priesthood

It is important to underline the fact that when Elisabeth Behr-Sigel developed a reflection on the specific place of women in the Church, she first deepened the question of the laity as a whole, showing that women and men have a common vocation: To become priests of creation. Rooted in Scripture, especially the First Letter of Peter (1 P 2:9), Behr-Sigel's theology of the royal priesthood is developed primarily on the basis of the twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Nicholas Afanasiev. Following him and the patristic tradition, Behr-Sigel affirms: "The Eucharistic assembly is an assembly of priests who serve God in Christ." It insists on the sacrament of anointing after baptism, which is a "consecration of the person in his or her wholeness, called to offer oneself and others, as well as the whole creation for which one is responsible, to the Creator." The royal priesthood, common to all the baptized, is a responsibility towards the world which all believers, women and men, are called to sanctify by offering it to God. The communion that believers form does not aim to affect only a fortunate few, but to include all people.

Elizabeth defines the characteristics of the common priesthood as "the consecration of the whole life, especially the whole relational life, as brought to light by the anointing of all parts of the body as a *seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit*. This is a call to see God in every action, word and thought. Those who are consecrated [...] are the priests of their own lives, in their professional activity, in their conjugal life." This common priesthood gives every baptized person, men and women, the responsibility to be a witness of Christ in every single moment of life.

In this movement, the question of gender becomes secondary. As Behr-Sigel reminds us, quoting St Gregory of Nazianzus, "for man and woman there is the same Creator, for both the same clay, the same image, the same death, the same resurrection". There is therefore a unique vocation to the royal priesthood, as a responsibility towards the world, to which women and men are called through the unfolding of their own personal charisms given by God.

2.c. A new division of the charism according to persons and not according to gender

According to the Trinitarian anthropology developed by Elizabeth, every human being - where gender is one of the particularities - is called to open up to the relationship of unity in diversity. In a society where the symbolism associated with masculinity and femininity has

changed due to the transition from a patriarchal model to one based on gender equality, the personal charism can be considered separately from the gender of the person, probably for the first time in the history of the Church. As Elizabeth says:

"The diversity of ministries in the Church is articulated through the diversity of *charisms*: gifts given by the Holy Spirit not to a group defined by gender, but to persons. Unique persons, in that mysterious unity that cannot be reduced to a cultural stereotype of male and female."

As we have said, in the humanity restored in Christ, there is only one salvation for all human persons, regardless of their gender. Our ecclesial communities are called precisely to show this restored nature in Christ and not the pre-existing fallen order which implies the supremacy of one sex over the other.

It is in this spirit that we need to draw conclusions today about the personal rather than gender dimension of the charism: Women can be called to teach, to provide pastoral care, to become a spiritual mother, to make decisions within the parish and the diocese, while men can be called to functions that are traditionally considered more feminine, such as catechism, food preparation.... Following this vision, Elizabeth was one of the first women to be a lay person responsible for her parish. She was active in both the parish council and the diocesan council and had a practice in pastoral care. However, we must emphasize that although in many places in the Orthodox world women can use their variety of charisms for the community, too often this involvement remains informal and the fact that no charism or service in the Church is tied to a particular gender is not officially recognized. The practice of a community in which all genders can realize their specific vocation according to the Trinitarian model is still far from widespread in the Orthodox world, let alone the ordination of women.

3. Embodiment of the renewed community today

3.a. A gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy

It is paradoxical to think that Christianity, whose foundation is faith in the incarnate God, Christ as "Emmanuel" - "God with us" - has too often tended to show a split between its teaching and the reality of its application in the world. The Orthodox Church in particular too often took refuge in the heavenly vision and hope of the coming kingdom to justify a passivity towards the earthly organization that does not respect each person in their specific

identity. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel is one of the theologians who clearly appeals to an "orthopraxis", i.e. a way of acting that corresponds to doctrine. She defines the ideal ecclesial community as a "community from which every kind of domination, of enslavement, every exploitation of one person or group of people by another is banished. The vocation of the Church is to enlighten this aspiration with the Gospel. The Church must be the sign and seed of such a community in the history of humanity." Embodying the Kingdom of God in history, in the concrete lives of people, is a great challenge for Christianity and consists in promoting a coexistence in which there is no place for discrimination, especially regarding the relationship between men and women who are equally called to the royal priesthood. Believers must learn to embody their theology in this world but independently of any social influence. This can be possible by discerning in the heritage of the Church's tradition what is essential to the encounter with Christ and what is linked to a transient social order.

In view of the rapid development of Western societies during the twentieth century Behr-Sigel affirms that the ecclesial community should also evolve without giving up anything of its tradition or renouncing the heavenly vision of the new community, but on the contrary to make it more effective. "To recognise that the light of Christ has transfigured the patriarchal lifestyle does not mean that the Church should perpetuate that lifestyle," she says. She therefore appeals to "invent new words and inspire new attitudes, while remaining faithful to the evangelical and apostolic core of the Church's faith".

The message of Christ, who paid special attention to women and gave them a special role despite the patriarchal trend of his time, as Behr-Sigel points out, is at the base of the revolution of mentalities. The search for equality of all people, regardless of gender, is definitely rooted in the Gospel.

In order to achieve a correct "Orthopraxis" reflecting the theology of the Church, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel led a patient pastoral mission in different contexts, especially in parishes, to explain the correct vision of the Orthodox tradition in relation to women and to appeal for a development of mentalities in relation to some local customs which clearly discriminate against women within the Church. In particular, she founded a Paris discussion group called "Women and Men in the Church" which was dedicated to this issue and helped to change the view in Western European communities. Her struggle for a correct application of Orthodox anthropology in relation to women also had a great influence on the Orthodox American sphere, where she became a model of inspiration. Her writings on this subject are still a reference for many theologians who are aware of the need to evaluate the traditions of the Church in the light of a correct Orthodox anthropology.

3.b. The specific question of the ordination of women

As a former pastor and as a theologian deeply involved in ecumenical dialogue, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel ventured to ask a question that had never been asked in the Orthodox world in her time: Are there theological reasons why a woman cannot be ordained priest in the Orthodox Church? Does the fact that only men become priests have an overriding significance or is it just discrimination related to the patriarchal context in which the Church has developed?

Behr-Sigel explored the subject through deep theological study, both biblical and patristic, which led her to formulate the previously developed vision of the "new community" that once postulated that the charism depends on each person, regardless of gender. She read the Church Fathers particularly carefully to illuminate their view of women and discovered a far less misogynistic vision than what could be expected from these men, mostly monks and priests. During this work of contextualization, she discovered that the role given to women in the church belonged to a cultural approach rather than a theological meaning. She dared to suggest that this was the case even in relation to the ordained priesthood. I will briefly summarize her representations on this subject here.

Behr-Sigel divides the arguments against the ordination of women into three categories: first, those belonging to the cultural sphere (such as the subordination of women), second, those linked to a special role for women, and third, the iconic argument. The first arguments do not come before the equality of all human beings, which we have already illuminated in Elizabeth's vision, developing the Trinitarian model and recalling the equality of salvation for women and men. The second arguments are developed according to the vision of Paul Evdokimov. This theologian of the Russian emigration, who was a close friend of Elizabeth, had an idealized image of women and considered gender as a component of nature that determines the person. In the beginning, when she was first led to address the issue of women in the church for a conference on the subject in 1976, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel followed the essentialist vision of her great friend and predecessor. But then, when she began to think more deeply about it herself, she had the courage to argue against this approach.

Elisabeth reminds us of the fundamental freedom of the person, "a freedom which, without negating gender, transcends it". She shows that Evdokimov's proposed division of charisms by gender belongs to a romantic vision of a passive womanhood over an active manhood, a vision he supports with the idea that the woman has a special connection with the Holy Spirit, while the man is more connected to Christ. Fr Thomas Hopko, an American theologian, goes

further when he asserts that the hierarchy between man and woman that is to be reflected in the Church is linked to the intra-Trinitarian hierarchy itself. Let us recall here the argumentation of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, based on biblical and patristic anthropology: Every human person is called by a similar process to a unique redemption, that is, to become a child of the Father with a total union in Christ through the energies of the Spirit. As we have said, gender is a characteristic of the person, but not an essential characteristic that would determine the nature of salvation. Therefore, the idea that the ordained priesthood is a male prerogative according to its nature is not relevant.

Lastly, Elizabeth discusses the iconic argument against women's priesthood: the priest who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice at the altar stands as a symbol of Christ and should therefore, like Christ, be a man. "The emphasis on Christ's maleness despite the fact that his humanity saves all humanity contradicts [...] patristic Christology and soteriology", she writes, referring once again to the idea of a universal redemption for all through Christ. Moreover, she recalls that the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered by the Great Priest Christ himself, "to him who offers and to him who is offered", as it says in a prayer of the liturgy of St John Chrysostom, and is completed by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the sacred gifts. The priest stands as an icon of Christ not in relation to gender but in relation to the words of institution as well as the gestures.

Let us emphasize here that another role of the priest in the Orthodox Church is to symbolize the prayer of the congregation and to lead it before the altar, therefore we can say that the priest is also an icon of the Church itself. In many prayers and hymns the Church is symbolized by a female figure, for example the Bride of Christ. We could then object to the iconic argument for the male priesthood that the priest could also be a woman when he or she stands before the altar on behalf of the whole church.

Regarding the Eucharistic sacrifice, Behr-Sigel dares to ask: "Why could these hands and this tongue [offering the sacrifice] not be those of a Christian who has been baptized, anointed, received communion, i.e. in a word, *become Christian* - according to the deep sense of Orthodox Christian initiation - through communion with Him who is the Anointed of the Holy Spirit Himself, Christ? "

Elizabeth's conclusions from her research are clear: "Nothing in her faith, no theological reason seems to prevent the Church - if she sees fit - from consecrating, i.e. blessing, a Christian woman to exercise an office which is an expression of the common priesthood of all believers, as it also points to the One who is the only divine source."

Although Behr-Sigel always called for deepening the argument regarding the ordination of women or not, she was never an activist to promote this idea within the Orthodox Church. She was too aware of the multiple realities of this Church, especially between the Western and Eastern countries, and the need to move forward step by step, using pedagogy and reconciliation rather than militancy. Her aim was indeed to embody a model of diversity rooted in the Trinitarian vision, respecting the uniqueness of each human person, regardless of gender, race, social status, etc., and not to promote a new order of matriarchy in which women would seize control in the Church as revenge for all the centuries of being under the domination of men.

Conclusion

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel's thoughts are very valuable for us today in deepening the question of diversity in church communities with regard to gender. Rooted in the Western rational way of thinking and in the Oriental Christian tradition, she always put emphasis on the words of Christ who invites us to "discern the signs of the times" (Mt 16:3). This means recognizing contemporary challenges and trying to formulate responses in the light of the Gospel. Behr-Sigel dared to confront the sensitive issue of the position of women in the church, which is commonly seen as a rather regressive place in terms of gender diversity and adheres to a patriarchal model. Drawing on the tradition of the Church, especially the Greek Fathers of the Church, Behr-Sigel expressed in terms that are understandable today what the correct theological vision is in relation to gender: a vision rooted in the contemplation of the Holy Trinity, in which there is a perfect balance between the unity of nature and the diversity of persons. Eucharistic communion aims to participate ontologically in this balance, so that each human person can be integrated into the communion of the Church in all their uniqueness. Behr-Sigel's demonstration that charisms are personal and not linked to a masculine or feminine nature, as well as her invalidation of the traditional argument against women's access to the ordained priesthood, is a powerful appeal to overcome the gender discrimination still prevalent in the Church. Like Elizabeth, we must fight this battle not aggressively but conciliatory, keeping in mind that there should be room in the Church for every person who is sincerely seeking God.