

Becoming St. Xenia: A Study of Sanctity and Madness

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The holy fool saints of Russia have a legacy for being heroes to the Russian people and an enemy to the Russian state. There is a multitude of captivating literature pertaining to this tradition as the Russian Orthodox Church has a large number of adherents, second only to the Roman Catholic Church. I find Russian Orthodoxy to be nuanced and the cultural significance of their saints to be rich. Soviet life and Bolshevik attacks on the church organization in the early twentieth century have created gaps in the continuity of literature due to the difficulty in publishing Russian Orthodox literature during times when printing was banned. However, literature that is readily available includes engaging narratives, folk tales, and appraisals that illustrate how dynamic the culture is. Through my work, I discuss one piece of this orthodox tradition by looking at the perceived sanctity and madness of Russian fools-for-Christ's sake. We must examine the multitude of relationships with regards to the holy fools, Russian Orthodox establishment, local communities, Muscovite cults, western adherents, and tsars of

The origins of the modern Russian Orthodox holy fool saint are from Greek Orthodox holy fools called *salos*¹. The holy fool fell out of favor in Greece and reappeared further east in Kiev and Russia where the Russian word for holy fool is *yurodivy*. The usage of the term *yurodivy* must taken in context because of the varying partisanship of individuals using the word and the overtones they may have applied to the holy fool. In Russia, the *yurodivy* were spoken of as *pokhabyi* with reference to the sincere act of holy foolishness.² Prevailing opinions regarding the holy fool had wild swings as the fickle marketplace of Russian sainthood caused a large

¹ Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 345-346.

² *Ibid.*, 345-346.

variance in the authority of the *yurodivy*. Throughout Russian history, laypeople and church leaders spoke of these quirky saints with reverence one day and with disdain the next.

When their authority was high, adherents revered many holy fools and when their authority was low, adherents tended to revere few holy fools. Narratives about the *yurodivy* were replicated and retold at times of cultural need, the seventeenth century is regarded as the holy fool's height of authority in Russia. These years of popularity soon led to a surplus of prospective saints—the reverent use of these terms within the church dissipated during the early eighteenth century. The word *pokhabyi*, previously used out of respect for the holy fools, shifted to connote the 'indecorous' and 'scandalous' behavior of these prospective saints. Prospective saints and their hagiographers had to adapt existing models of holy fool saints to find success in times when holy fools were disenfranchised. Xenia of St. Petersburg was an individual who evolved the prototype of the Russian 'holy fool' to fit her eighteenth century St. Petersburg audience. Despite the Orthodox establishment's condemning views of holy foolery she became a popular *yurodivy* revered by cults of peasants that saw her as a hero. Xenia developed an exuberant following during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries despite the fact that in 1731—the year of Xenia Grigorievna's birth—holy fools were threatened by the government-run Orthodox Synod and prohibited from showing themselves in Russian Orthodox congregations.³

The Russian Orthodox Church has venerated around 30 saints in Russia whom are categorized as *yurodivy*, or fools-for-Christ's sake.⁴ They were canonized due to the public's perceptions of madness, renunciation of all that is worldly, and their self-deprecating asceticism.

³ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴ Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels & the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 1-2.

Acts of self-denial and madness were seen by the saint's cult as abounding feats of asceticism capable only by those who are sanctified by God. Holy foolishness has been considered as a spiritual gift where sincere humility is displayed through self-deprecation alike to that of Christ, sincere holy fools were revered as "God's people".⁵ Xenia is an example of such a saint whom is still popular with Orthodox adherents and scholars today, scholar Sergey Ivanov refers to her as the 'transvestite saint' of St. Petersburg.⁶

As briefly mentioned above, views of the holy fool have evolved much throughout Russian history. Holy fools are inherently odd and controversial figures who possess a theatrical and storied place in culture. The status quo of holy foolishness has shifted in correlation with the opinions of the populous as well as the partisanship and authority of the tsar. This interconnectedness is because the discipline of holy foolishness and the autocratic tradition of the tsar emerge during the same era in Russia's history. To operationalize the relationship of tsar and holy fool—the tsars were a check on the *yurodivy* and the *yurodivy* were a check on the tsar.⁷

A prominent example of this balancing act is found in Russia's most famous chronicle about the *yurodivy*. The story is set in 1570 during Ivan the Terrible's pogrom in the towns Novgorod and Pskov. The story tells that the grand prince stopped in a yard and wanted to get a blessing from Nikola the Fool during the plundering of Pskov. Nikola the Fool told him to, "Leave us quickly, my sweet. You have nothing to flee on!" Then one of Ivan's horses fell and, "The Grand Prince hastened to depart, and did little evil."⁸ In this tale, the *yurodivy* is crystallized as a hero of the people in saving them from further massacre and plundering. This tale's popularity and its emotional anti-oppression message cemented it in Russian folklore. The

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 350-351.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 285-286.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 291-296.

population used this story repeatedly when taking strong stance against what they deem as oppression, utilizing *yurodivy* as their iconographic heroine. The famous thinker, novelist, and essayist Fyodor Dostoevsky was fixated on this tale that was retold to him during the nineteenth century. Literature regarding holy fools influenced Dostoevsky so profoundly that he wrote fiction about the holy fools often emphasizing their ‘positive roles’.⁹

The tale of Nikola the Fool is reiterated not only in folk tales but also in numerous works of hagiography, the *Lives* of Arsenii of Novgorod, Nikolai Kachanov, and Vasilii the Blessed echo Nikola the Fool’s rejection of Ivan the Terrible’s authority. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Nikola’s prototype is duplicated *en masse* and holy foolishness became a mainstay in Russia. Following the *Life* of Nikola, *yurodivy* were viewed as authority figures who acted boldly and independently against the oppression and massacres of the tsar. Their saintly audience collectively utilized them as political tools to trump the authority of the tsar and gave the people hope for the future.

After Ivan the Terrible’s reign, there was a period where *yurodivy* weren’t subjugate to the tsar. In the late sixteenth century the *yurodivy* had so much support that Tsar Feodor and ruling elites recognized the *yurodivy* as high authority figures. This was one of the only instances where the Russian majority was behind the holy fool. Tsar Feodor left gifts at the grave of Vasilii the Blessed where miracles were said to occur. Vasilii the Blessed’s post-mortem cult flourished during tsar Feodor’s reign that began in 1584.¹⁰ Historical narratives from the late sixteenth century illustrate this time of romance between the saint and their audience. The celebrity of the *yurodivy* was so great that even the tsar gave a nod to the saints and cults. Spiritual capital was

⁹ Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky’s Novels & the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 174.

¹⁰ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 303-304.

given freely to holy fools that were at their height in Moscow, the centralized home to the Russian Orthodox Church. Muscovite cults were growing and multiplying fervently during the prime of the *yurodivy* as a cultural and religious institution due to the proliferation of such popular *yurodivy* cults beginning with that of Vasilii the Blessed's in Moscow.¹¹

Muscovite Russians in particular were fervent in glorifying those whose behavior was so contrary to societal norms that they were seemingly mad. What the *yurodivy* meant to their cults was subjective to each layperson, but their collective significance to the cult as a whole body can be prioritized: followers regarded *yurodivy* as sanctified people who could directly intercede with God for them—perform miracles from the grave—as well as protect them from oppressive rulers. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the widened replication of folk tales entrenched the image of holy foolishness in Russian life. Prospective saints arose in most of provincial Russia as fertile ground for cult support extended all over the country.

By the mid eighteenth century, St. Xenia's time, the attribution of a fool-for-Christ's sake was sought by many different people and used liberally without bases. This surplus of prospective saints indicated the end of the holy fool's authority as the bubble for holy foolishness reached a critical mass and burst in years following. At the outset of this era, stricter scrutiny was applied to holy fools as supply exceeded demand. The legitimacy of prospective saints was to be disregarded by Church establishment and the tsar during the mid eighteenth century and in the twentieth century by Bolshevik and Soviet regimes.¹²

The cultural fabric and institutional purity of the *yurodivy* was threatened in the eighteenth century by all of those who pledged insanity under the guise of holy foolishness. Some prospective saints pledged insanity because they knew how pervasive this tradition had

¹¹ Tsar Feodor was supposedly labeled as a 'benign fool' himself.

¹² Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 311.

become and how profound the cult followings were in cities and the provinces. Hoards of different holy fools were unscrupulously chronicled about in hagiography that was intentionally pieced together from bits and pieces of previous work. During the eighteenth centuries, the Russian Orthodox Church did not venerate many saints from this deteriorating discipline. This was a time where the *yurodivy* lost their piety because their hagiographies were less sincere and often written for entertainment's purpose.¹³ In reading some of the later hagiography I have noticed that these works were becoming less about the prototypes of other holy fools like Vasilii the Blessed but more about advocacy for different interest groups and entertainment.¹⁴ Holy foolishness reached a critical mass because there were many vagabonds and laypeople looking for fame under the umbrella that was holy foolishness.

The institution of holy foolishness, the *iorodstvo*, and the literature that goes with the institution headed in a very exploitative direction during the seventeenth century. Authors crafted outlandish sounding hagiography for their own ends including public advocacy and protest.¹⁵ The prominent example of this political partisanship in hagiography is found in *The Tale of the Appearance of the Icon of the Mother of God on Sinichia Hill* where a story about a vision of a boy named Timofei is told. The hagiographer makes no mention of any particularly *yurodivy* characteristics present in this boy and instead opts to list many holy fools including Nikola the Fool and others. This technique of hagiography was to plug other celebrities from within the folklore to earn credibility for their own prospective saint and political project. The hagiographer of *The Tale* undertook tireless efforts to attain credibility by convincing the reader that the prospective saint belongs to this credible line of saints. During *The Tale*, the hagiographer's true

¹³ **Ibid.**, 331.

¹⁴ **Ibid.**, 335.

¹⁵ **Ibid.**, 335.

intent comes out, “It is not right to trust pagans, as many of us who are called Christians now go and consult pagan Latins.”¹⁶ The familiar discipline of the *yurodivy* is exploited here as a means to an end, *The Tale* is utilized as a partisan’s tool to speak out against those who interact with people of Latin descent.¹⁷

Hagiographers attempted to sway influence through borrowing the nostalgia and authority of already venerated holy fools. By employing these tactics hagiographers experienced relative success at deluding the lay population as Ivanov says that the *yurodivy* had a “special political immunity”¹⁸ The Russian Orthodox authority was not amused by hagiographies akin to *The Tale* and did not venerate saints with this type of partisan hagiography. The organized church was never on board with the politicized and sensationalized holy fool and their inherent authority waned. Prospective saints like these were called out by many as charlatans ‘feigning insanity’ during the eighteenth century. The *yurodivy* became compromised and were persecuted at this time by Peter the Great who had very strong opinions towards the sensationalized holy fools:

Any sensible person can see how many thousands of such lazy beggars can be found in Russia... who devour the labour of others with their impudence and their feigned humility... and who drive ordinary simple people insane... They slander high authorities, yet they themselves take on no Christian responsibilities. They go into church but think it has nothing to do with them, so long as they can carry on their shrieking in front of the church.¹⁹

Peter the Great named St. Petersburg after himself and made it the official capital in 1712 after capturing the important Baltic Sea outlet in 1703 from the Swedes when it was just a small

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁹ Polnoe sobranie postanovlenii i rasporyazhenii po vedomstvu pravoslavnogo ispovedaniia Rossiiskoi imperii, i (St. Petersburg, 1879), 30.

fort. This was a strategic move with reference to Peter's modern sensibilities. He is famous for his progress and reformations in 'Europeanizing' Russia with plans for building infrastructure, baroque architecture, and reforming social structure.²⁰ His social impact is most influential as we talk about *yurodivy* and their persecution in Russia. St. Xenia's success is curious because there was no previous tradition of the *yurodivy* in St. Petersburg and Peter the Great strongly abhorred the *yurodivy*.

One of the only popular cults to actually succeed during this time of insincere holy fools was the cult of the aforementioned St. Xenia who lived from 1731-1803 in St. Petersburg, the burgeoning capital of the Russian empire. Her success and veneration as a rare modern holy fool saint is result of the methodology of her hagiographer to fit the hagiography to the needs of the St. Petersburg audience and the broader Russian public. Despite Peter's strong opinions towards the *yurodivy*, The *Life* of St. Xenia is one of the only hagiographies originated in modern Russia that survived to be perpetuated with an ardent cult following. Her cult following peaked during the mid-nineteenth century but the Russian Orthodox Church didn't legitimize her until her formal canonization in 1988.²² The survival of her saintly authority during a time of persecution by the Church via the tsar *must* be linked to Russian society's perpetual fixation with stories that are bizarre, fantastic, and grotesque. The most famous Russian poetry and prose often balance in

²⁰ John H. Appleby, "The Founding of St. Petersburg in the Context of the Royal Society's Relationship with Russia," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 57 (2003): 273-284.

²¹ One of the most notable reforms was the Table of Ranks that Peter I devised to be able to draw parallel rank between civil and military service. The Table of Ranks was the basis for Russian society all the way up until 1917. Men had to choose the civil service or the military service and often bribed their way up the ranks to earn privilege and influence. Xenia's *Life* tells us that her husband was a Colonel who had the privilege of attending court.

²² "Blessed Xenia of St. Petersburg." Orthodox Church in America. Accessed March 26, 2012. <http://www.ocafs.oca.org/FeastSaintsViewer.asp?FSID=100297>.

a liminal area between belief and unbelief—I believe that St. Xenia’s *Life* is in that fertile ground between what is believable and too fantastical to believe.

St. Xenia can be compared to holy fools from the works of Dostoevsky who viewed the *yurodivy* with the highest respect and regards these figures as ones can restore Russia through the promotion of a ‘self-sacrificing love of others’.²³ In his work, he crafted many of his characters in this romanticized image of the *yurodivy*. In his novel *Crime and Punishment*, a girl named Sonia is regarded by the protagonist Raskolnikov as an illogical person for sacrificing herself in the service of her poor family and sick mother. Raskolnikov questions Sonia’s sanity when he sees her self-denial. Dostoevsky drives the point home as Raskolnikov ends up losing his sanity completely and then ultimately admits his heinous crimes to the authority of *yurodivy* Sonia before he does to the authority of the police officer. Dostoevsky tried to display how the true authority and standard to live by is that of the *yurodivy*. I believe that St. Xenia’s situation is very similar to that of Sonia’s, they both seem to be mad at first which draws the audience to the *yurodivy*, but then the audience finds both of them to be sanctified and holy as their missions are to serve the poor classes in Russia. Causally, this comparison displays how Xenia’s madness results in the attribution of sanctity to her thus fitting the Biblical sentiment that the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Corinthians—the Biblical bases for holy foolishness.

St. Xenia’s hagiography tells how her audience views her ascent to the authority status of *yurodivy*. It is notable that in the eighteenth century in St. Petersburg, a new city at the time, had no established tradition of holy foolishness.²⁴ Due to this, her success was entirely reliable on her relationship with the community around her in St. Petersburg. Her hagiography tells us what was

²³ Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky’s Novels & the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 160.

²⁴ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 351.

going on in her time and what formed her into a Saint. In diving into her hagiography we learn that Xenia's husband was ranked advantageously on the Table of Ranks system as a Colonel. He had the privilege of attending court due to his status as a Colonel. Xenia's husband was not a man who lived a Christ-like life and was a heavy drinking singer at court. He ultimately died at a drinking party when Xenia was 26. The hagiographer conveys that this was the turning point in her young life. After his death, Xenia had grave fears surrounding her husband's eternal fate. After the Colonel's passing it is said that she went into exile for a decade and upon her return to Petersburg took on his soul in order to pay penance for his sinful life.

Upon her return to the city, her behavior was self-deprecating as she was perceived as an unabashed transvestite by donning her husband's military uniforms around the streets of St. Petersburg for 45 years. She looked the part of a wandering vagabond in men's clothes. Even though she was dirt poor, when people would give her money, she would just give the alms back to other poor in the same way that previous hagiographies tell about their holy fool saints.²⁵ Her hagiographer tried to display how she fits the heroism and selflessness of *yurodivy* prototypes of old.

There doesn't seem to be any real political partisanship present in this hagiography similar to that of the *The Tale of the Appearance of the Icon of the Mother of God on Sinichia Hill*. The only partisanship that I see is her raising awareness for inequality in modern life and her advocacy for the poor and sick. However, I see this advocacy as being synonymous to the mission of Christ and his church. It is written that Xenia helped the poor find jobs and the sick find healing. The hagiographer's writing about St. Xenia can be linked to the exemplar of Jesus and his disciples who fed the poor and healed the sick in many New Testament accounts. Her

²⁵ "Blessed Xenia of St. Petersburg." Orthodox Church in America. Accessed March 26, 2012. <http://www.ocafs.oca.org/FeastSaintsViewer.asp?FSID=100297>.

pious acts were often in private; an example being where she helped to stack bricks in the middle of the night for the building of Smolensk Chapel. Her odd behavior was criticized by many youths in St. Petersburg, but ultimately she reached such a height of authority that people would invite her into their homes for her blessing and the endowment of God's gifts. She lived on the streets and gave away all of her husband's material possessions to the dismay of her family.²⁶ She adapted previous ideas of holy foolishness to fit the needs of her audience in St. Petersburg. This audience was desperate for a figure that could help them with their overwhelming poverty and it appears that the hagiographer's accounts show her fitting the bill. Her cult's peak in popularity came about in the 1820's.²⁷ This can be attributed to the resurgence of the holy fool during *yurodivy* romanticizing literary movements of Pushkin and then later on in the nineteenth century with Dostoevsky.

The groundwork for Xenia's post-mortem following was laid during the eighteenth century as Russia rose to become a western economic force with increased wealth but also stifling poverty. St. Xenia's mission was to help those on the disenfranchised fringes of the income spectrum as modernization was increasing the wealth of elites. We find that modernity did not negate the cultural significance of *yurodivy* saints. The idea of a saint having 'reverent folly' or a link between sanctity and madness of behavior prevailed despite the arrival of modern concerns. When the community of pious observers saw the folly of St. Xenia, they still perceived an 'aura of sanctity' as her madness was treated as spiritual gift.²⁸ The Russian public continued to respect the holy fool's brand of asceticism and tradition prevails today—the holy fools share their reverent folly and are rewarded with spiritual capital.

²⁶ **Ibid.**

²⁷ **Ibid.**

²⁸ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 314.

In seeking the origins of this ‘reverent folly’ as an overriding trait of the holy fool, we must look at where the Russian idea of madness linked with sanctity comes from. Xenia’s audience noticed her madness immediately because her appearance was that of a transvestite and her cult then found that sanctity was lying beneath the eccentric exterior. The odd tradition of giving the fool authority in Russia comes from Paul’s writing in the New Testament as well as Greek Orthodox life. The Russian Orthodox Church venerated a Greek *salos* named Symeon of Emesa who lived in the sixth century and was canonized under the Greek Orthodox tradition. The *Life* of Symeon of Emesa shows his acts of self-deprecating asceticism: according to the hagiographer, he threw nuts at women in the congregation and dragged a dead dog into town but at the same time he fed the hungry and performed miracles. This provided a prototype for later hagiographies of Russian saints like Xenia. In Greek culture, the idea of the *salos* has its origins in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians as the concept of holy foolishness is discussed in the New Testament Cor. 1: 20-21, 3: 18-19:

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise... If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God.²⁹

Outside of Pauline holy foolishness, Greek life was also greatly influenced by the thoughts and writings of Socrates and Plato. Plato when talking about Socrates says that, “He spends all his life teasing mankind, and hiding his true intent.”³⁰ This iterates how in Greece there might be some kind of foundation where real wisdom may be lying beneath seemingly odd behavior and “ridiculous discourses.”³¹

²⁹ **Ibid.**, 19.

³⁰ **Ibid.**, 15.

³¹ **Ibid.**, 15.

Byzantine *salos* Symeon of Emesa and Andrew the Fool had such strong Orthodox cults in Byzantium that these cults then reappeared in Kiev and elsewhere in Russia as hagiographies in Byzantium were translated to Russian for the first time in the early eleventh century.³² The *Life* of Andrew the Fool was of particular importance because Andrew is said to be from Russian Novgorod and as a result his following flourished greatly in Russia, his *Life* was recapitulated dozens of times and his legacy still remains within Eastern Orthodox tradition today.³³ This initial batch of holy fools were documented as eccentric individuals whose behavior was beyond societal norms of their time. Holy foolishness shifted across time and culture but we can draw parallels between past holy fools and St. Xenia.

Xenia's hagiographer adapted her brand of holy foolishness in order to engage her contemporary audience with the prospective saint. The hagiography exposed the audience to Xenia's eccentricities and the audience deemed her to have 'reverent folly.' Sanctity was ascribed to her and the *yurodivy* Xenia amassed and continues to amass spiritual capital from her audience. Her audience continues to pray to their saint for blessings as she is viewed as a guardian of the poor and sick. St. Xenia's sanctity and madness built her into a formidable *yurodivy* whose project is one of restoration. Her success and popularity as a *yurodivy* in the Russian Orthodox Church is profound as she is often remembered for her compassion for the poor and her eccentric ways.

³² *Ibid.*, 202.

³³ *Ibid.*, 257.

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