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Elisabeth Behr Sigel

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Mme Elisabeth Behr Sigel was, perhaps, the most significant Orthodox woman of the 20th century who delivered the 2003 Florovsky Lecture at Saint Vladimir's Seminary. She was born in Alsace, France in 1907. Her father was Protestant and her mother Jewish. She studied theology at the Protestant Faculty in Strasbourg and then began a pastoral ministry. But it lasted only a year.



She then went to Paris to study theology. During her studies she came into contact with the Russian Orthodox diaspora and joined the Orthodox Church through her friends and colleagues of the Russian emigration. She was influenced by some of the most important theological figures of the era (Metropolitan Evlogy, Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdokimov, Lev Gillet, Maria Skobtsova, etc.). At the age of 24, she officially embraced Orthodoxy. In time she met and married a Russian immigrant and engineer Andry Behr. They would have three children who would provide an impressive number of descendants.

During the Second World War, the family was living in Nancy where Elisabeth taught in the public school system. She was active in the resistance movement during the Nazi occupation.

After the war she taught at the Catholic Institute of Paris, the Theological Faculty of St. Sergius, the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur near Jerusalem and the Dominican College of Ottawa. She was also member of the editorial board of the magazine *Contacts*. Behr-Sigel taught worldwide and published many orthodox books and articles in English, French, and German.

She served the Church in many capacities. She devoted much time and energy to the promotion of women in the Orthodox Church — respectfully, almost humbly but with firm conviction and solid theological arguments. She became known for her tireless ecumenical activity.

On November 26 2005, **Elisabeth Behr-Sigel** died while reading in bed. She was 98.

Her book, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, is available in Greek, as well as a number of her articles published in Synaxis (Σύναξις) and Kath'Odon (Καθ' οδόν).

Christopher d'Aloisio

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, a father of the faith

She was undoubtedly the most famous Orthodox woman theologian of the 20th century. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel was born on 20 July 1907; she left this world for eternity on 26 November 2005 at the age of ninety-eight.

We inherited from this great lady a theological legacy of great value. All her life she was a faithful servant of the Lord. She has been a living witness of the ecclesiastical life in Western Europe for almost a century.

In homage to the memory of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel I would like to develop two themes that were dear to her and that are still relevant: the ministries of women in the Church and the Ecumenical dialogue. However, these of course were not the only interests of the theologian, but in these two topics, her contribution has been particularly significant.

One of the most sensitive issues that of the place of women in Orthodoxy leads us, from the start, to the issue of the diversity of ministries in the body of the Church. In fact, the Church of the first centuries knew a wide diversity of ministries, a diversity that the passage of history has lessened, but never abolished. It is in this sense that we should understand the words of Saint Paul, particularly in the Epistle to the Ephesians (4, 7-13). The apostle also teaches the Corinthians that the diversity of Church ministries doesn't go against the unity of the body; on the contrary, unity is based on the diversity of the charismatic gifts from the unique Spirit (I Corinthians 12). It is really the Spirit and not some member of the Church that establishes a faithful person in a function of Church service. Today and in many places, diversity has been replaced -for a while probably -by some hierarchical ministries in a manner foreign to the evangelical spirit because it is based on fear of authority. For the divine Paul and the apostolic tradition, the authority of the Church is conceivable only in a communion of love and not in relationships of hierarchical domination (cf. Romans 12,3-21). It is not impossible that we have here, in this evolution, one of the historical reasons for the disappearance, in Orthodoxy of a variety of ministries within the Church.

The participation at the Eucharistic Liturgy is a parameter that allows us to evaluate the evolution of the ways the Church is administered. In the authentic tradition it is clear that the Eucharist is the hieratic act accomplished by the whole body of the Church. During the Liturgy it is the assembly of the whole Church that offers the oblation to God the Father, because by the incorporation of the Church the baptised are at the same time consecrated to and participating in the vocation of Christ the High Priest. Across the centuries, especially since the Constantinian and Justinian periods, the Church has made its administration more systematic in the manner of the imperial State, establishing an ontological separation between the simply baptised and the ordained ministers as if only the latter were consecrated. The model has prevailed in the Eastern Church until our days, with more or less success. The transformation of our societies and particularly the emergence of Orthodox communities in countries of Western Europe has given the Church since the 20th century the possibility to reflect again on the question of ecclesiastical functions. Our theology has never denied the richness of the first

times, evidence of the living and life giving presence of the Holy Spirit in the assembly of the Saints, the *ecclesia* of the all the consecrated faithful.

Nowadays, the diversity of ministries taken on by the faithful that have not been ordained to the diaconate or to the priesthood is more obvious. Generally, everyone already agrees that it is imperative to give a greater place to the service of the laity in the Church community. Functioning of laity as teachers of catechesis is an obvious example. The question of diversity of ecclesiastical functions is put back on the agenda, certain functions are to be redefined others to disappear or reappear.

The question of feminine ministries in the Church is part of the current questioning of the ministries. Within the framework of reflection on the history and theology of the feminine diaconate led by the group «Femmes et hommes dans l' Eglise» (Women and men in the Church), Elisabeth Behr- Sigel, together with a group of clergy and lay people, wrote, in Autumn 2000, a letter to the primates of all the patriarchal, autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox Churches in favour of a creative restoration of deaconesses. The magazine *Service Orthodoxe de Presse* gave an account of this event: » ... the Signatories underline that the possible restoration of the feminine diaconate constitutes an important question that has been asked of our Church and in our Church for decades. This ministry, they remind us, existed and was flourishing in the time of the Fathers of the Church, as has been shown by serious historical studies. It was at the time quite a complete ministry, liturgical, catachetical and philanthropic at the same time, adapted to the social structure of the age. This question was put back on the agenda at the beginning of the 20th century by the initiative of Saint Nectarios of Aegina, a Greek bishop who died in 1922, and by Saint Elizabeth, Grand-Duchess of Russia, martyred in 1918. But it is particularly in the last 30 years in the context of a deep cultural mutation and of ecumenical dialogue that the possible restoration of deaconesses imposes itself on (he conscience of the Orthodox Church as a burning problem.

In the case of ordination to the priesthood, there is still a certain amount of reflection to be done, said Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. Nowadays the arguments going against such an ordination can be summed up by the symbolic or iconographic character of the function of the priesthood. The theologian Behr-Sigel proposes to diminish this argument, reminding us that the Eucharist is not only a memorial, but also an anticipation of the banquet in the Kingdom where the division of the sexes as we know it will be changed. «To insist heavily on the masculinity of Christ, God made man -anthropos-is it not falling into a form of Nestorianism? That is to say

deny the real union in Christ of God and Man. This question was asked by the theologians present in Rhodes [at the pan-Orthodox consultation on the place of women in the Church and of ordination of women, organised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate from the 30th October to 7th November 1988]. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel goes on to propose a deepening of the notion of the person being the image and resemblance of God. She warns against a possible distortion of the understanding of the icon: it is not a naturalist portrait. «In the martyrdom of Blandine (of Lyon) attached naked to a stake, offered by her executioners to the beasts and offering herself in sacrifice to God, in the ecstasy of faith and love, her companions in the fight contemplated 'the image of Christ' who was comforting them. 'She was for her brothers an exhortation. She, the little one, the feeble one, the despised, who had put on the great, invincible athlete, the Christ. Thus said the letter of the Christians of Lyon to the Churches of Asia Minor cited by Eusebius in his History of the Church (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Histoire Ecclesiastique*, 1. II, *Sources chretiennes*, 1955, p. 17). Is it not this kind of transparency -how unreachable to the sole human strength -that is expected from the priest ?'

These few words do not sum up exhaustively the thoughts of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and I only submit them to your charity for reflection and not necessarily in order to convince you. She herself, actually, was not what one could call a militant, but a lay theologian who put her reflection at the service of the Church. She always knew how to step aside before the pastors covered with the charisma of authority and her propositions were never peremptory affirmations, but an effort to revitalise the Church life. She insisted particularly on the fact that the impossibility of giving a simple answer does not exempt from the duty of asking complex questions.

In the field of relationships between divided Christians, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel played a pioneering role. Coming herself from Protestantism, she has always kept a strong link with her roots, a questioning capacity about the reality of Orthodoxy, that could have become sclerotic. From her youth, she understood her attraction to Orthodoxy not as a rejection of Western Christian experiences, but as a deepening of those. Through her friendship with Fr. Lev Gillet, the «Monk of the Eastern Church», Elisabeth Behr-Sigel knew the painful beginning of the dialogue between Christians, practically outlined by Protestants followed by Anglicans on one side of Europe, and the Church of Constantinople on the other side, quickly followed by all the patriarchal, autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox Churches. The Roman Catholics joined the movement next and in a different way. For Elisabeth Behr-Sigel as for all the people who have inspired the ecumenical movement, the dialogue and the search for unity is not an optional choice of ecclesiastical hierarchies, nor a professional speciality to some elite clergy, but a way of being among Christians,

an existential necessity that affects the witness of the unique Church of Christ in the world. Very significantly, in her writings, the French theologian names the Churches in the way they name themselves and not in the way the other Churches qualify them; for example, she only uses with quotation marks the adjective «uniate» for the reason of the pejorative connotation with which this qualifier is filled, in the benefit of the «Catholics of Eastern rite».

She did not ignore the resurgence of proselytism in some Christian communities of Western origin dispersed in Eastern Europe, but she kept a critical distance from the events and knew how to witness a great respect for the other Christians without condemning a whole Church family due to the indigenous behaviour of some of its members. The attention given by Elisabeth Behr-Sigel to the terminology is a sign of patristic wisdom; our tradition gives a great importance to names.

In the same way she was reluctant to use the word «Churches» in the plural when discussing dialogue towards unity, because in this approach, it is the One and Holy Church of Christ that manifests itself in a process of reconciliation. The division of the Body is unbearable when the Gospel is open before us.

At last with many other Orthodox thinkers, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel understood as a manifestation of the providence of God the presence of Orthodoxy in the West. For her, the Orthodox of Western Europe are charged with a particular mission because of their permanent contact with other Christians: to formulate the Orthodox Tradition of the Church in a renewed language, in a world which is in constant evolution. Like the Fathers of the Church, we have to proclaim the mystery of salvation in an intelligible way for the people we speak with. It is not we who choose the people with whom we cross paths, it is the Father who sends them to us, or rather who sends us to them. To talk to the world today, we have to love it in its strengths and in its weaknesses, and tell it about the Christ we know. This great lady, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, was sought to take on this charge until the dusk of her life, with true pastoral concern towards the next generations. May God rest her soul in peace and grant her eternal memory.

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