

Women, Gender, and Religion

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What Does the Ordination of Women Then Mean for Women Now?

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Opinions on the Validity of Women's Ordination in the Past

[1] The historical information gathered over the last fifty years demonstrates fairly conclusively that women have been ordained in the past. The most recent examinations of the evidence have produced examples of ordained women from the beginnings of ordination in Christianity through the twelfth century. The papal pontifical from the twelfth century still contained the ordination rites for deaconesses. There seems little dispute among historians that women were considered just as ordained as men for over half of Christian history (Macy 2007a; Madigan and Osiek; Wijngaard; Zagano). But if this is so obvious, why is it that so many theologians and even some historians have tenaciously continued to assert that women were never “really” ordained? A brief review of writers on the subject is illuminating (a more complete discussion occurs in Macy 2007a: 21-33).

[2] Jean Morin, writing in the seventeenth century, was first to my knowledge, to argue that women were ordained validly as deaconesses since the same rites were used for deacons and deaconesses in the most ancient Greek rituals. Morin was also the first, again to my knowledge, to argue that the requirements for a true ordination demand (1) that the ritual be called an ordination, (2) that the ritual be celebrated at the altar by the bishop, (3) that hands are laid upon the one to be ordained, (4) that the stole is placed on the one to be ordained, (5) that the ordained receive communion under the forms of both bread and wine, and most

importantly (6) that the ordination be to one of the “major orders,” that is, priest, deacon, or subdeacon. In short, the ancient ceremonies had to meet the requirements for ordination as they would have been understood in the seventeenth century (3:143-51).

[3] The Jesuit, Jean Pien, in the eighteenth century and Arcadius Pankowski in the nineteenth century dismissed Morin’s conclusions. Women in the past had only received a ceremonial, not a sacramental, ordination, since their ordination did not allow them to preach or administer the other sacraments, particularly the sacrament of the altar (Pien: 1:iv, col. A; Pankowski: 42). In short, these ordinations did not meet Morin’s sixth criterion. The ordinations of women did not result in the priesthood. Josephine Mayer, Adolf Karlsbach, and Santiago Giner Sempere writing in the early twentieth century gave more nuanced responses against Morin. Ordination was a loosely used term in the early church, and so did not, and indeed could not, refer to full sacramental ordination (Mayer; Karlsbach: 49, 109; Sempere: 856). Marie-Joséphe Aubert would advocate this position particularly in 1987 when he quoted Yves Congar’s poignant evaluation of the question:

[Whether or not women were ordained in the past] is a bad question. I think that there is a certain *quiproquo* [*sic*] about the notion. Order in the ancient church, “*ordo*,” “*ordinare*” meant to establish a certain “order” in the Church. The question does not present itself as knowing whether this is the sacrament of Orders. Without doubt one might ask that today if one thinks of things in this way. But the ancients did not work like that. The question solely to be established about an “*ordo*” was whether it is *authentic*, the “order” of the female diaconate (127-28).

The question of the validity of orders in the past might be interesting, or even necessary to determine if women should be ordained now, but it was at best anachronistic and a question the early church would not have asked.

[4] Jean Daniélou was one of the first in a long line of recent scholars to review the historical data and conclude that the rituals for deaconesses and deacons certainly seemed to be the same, but since women deacons could not become priests, they were not truly ordained (7). That is, Morin’s criteria 1 through 5 were met, but not, once again, criterion 6. The most famous debate over the validity of the ordination of women in the past occurred between the French scholars Roger Gryson and Aimé George Martimort. Both provided lengthy examinations of the documents relating to women’s ordination but with different conclusions. Gryson concluded that deaconesses were really ordained because they received a laying on hands (Morin’s criterion 3) during their ordination (110). Martimort (243-47) rejected this ordination as valid ordination, as had Daniélou, because women deacons did not serve at the altar nor continue on to be priests (Morin’s criterion 6). Jean Galot, after another extensive discussion, agreed with Martimort. Even if the liturgy used for women deacons was the same as that used for men, women did not go on to the priesthood and, therefore, no “real” ordination took place (203-18).

[5] In 1997, Hans Jorissen (95) and Peter Hünemann (109) summarized the arguments for and against the ordination of deaconesses in contrasting articles. Both scholars agreed that the basic argument against the ordination of deaconesses in the past was based on the definition of ordination as sacerdotal service at the altar. Since deaconesses had never served

at the altar (at least in that capacity), then any ceremony that they may have undergone could not be a true ordination (again, according to Morin's criterion 6). More recently, in his *Priesthood and the Diaconate*, Gerhard Müller argued strongly against the validity of past ordinations of women as deaconesses. The church has determined that the three offices of deacon, priest, and bishop constitute a sacramental unity, and hence, are significantly different from any other function in the church. This sacramental unity is the essence of ordination. "If the deaconess and the subdeacon are not allowed to carry out the duties of the presbyter or the deacon, then they have not received such a commission in their blessing or consecration either, and thus *are* not deacons" (150).

[6] Modern Orthodox theologians opposed to the ordination of women take a similar position on the validity of the ordination of deaconesses in the past. According to Kyriaki Fitzgerald (112) and Valarie Karras (315), the diaconate is part of the fullness of priesthood shared by the three orders of bishop, priest, and deacon. Therefore, since women cannot be ordained as priests, they cannot have been ordained as deacons, as the diaconate is merely the first step in the process of becoming a priest. In short, women deacons are not real deacons, but merely an unordained ministry in the church that was inaccurately described as ordained by ancient authors.

[7] On the other hand, studies by Dirk Ansorge (61-62), Joseph Ysebaert (435), John Wijngaards (44), and Phyllis Zagano (203), building on the study by Gryson, argued that the ordinations of deaconesses in the past *were* valid because they contain the same liturgical features as those of men, that is, the laying of hands and the presentation of a chalice by the bishop (Morin's criteria 2 and 3).

The Theological Issue

[8] This recitation of scholarly minutiae may seem boring, but the point I want to make is this: the essential question for theologians has remained the same for centuries, that is, are ordination rites for women and the ministry of women in the past similar enough to those in the present to serve as evidence of a tradition that would, in part, justify the ordination of women in the present? The question assumes, of course, that similar ceremonies in the past would indicate a similar intent to ordain women into the diaconate or presbyterate, and that such ceremonies would effect such an ordination. In short, the issue remains of what constitutes a valid ordination, and whether past ordinations of women fit the criteria for valid ordination.

[9] For historians, the questions are more straightforward: Were women considered ordained by their contemporaries? Did they undergo rites called ordinations by their contemporaries? Was the same concept of ordination applied equally to women and men? If the answer to these questions is "yes," then women were ordained – period. Since the answer, in fact, to these questions is "yes," for historians, women were ordained.

[10] To pick another example, Elizabeth I of England was considered (eventually) by her contemporaries to be queen; she was consecrated as a queen and acted as if she were queen. At least by the time of her death, there was little question about that in the realm of England, and if you did question it your own death might be at issue. Today, Elizabeth II is also considered to be queen, she was consecrated as a queen and acts as if she is queen. Of

course, if any one did doubt that and I cannot imagine anyone would, death would not result. As far as historians are concerned, they are both queens. However, they have far different powers and roles as queen. Elizabeth I both reigned and ruled. She made laws and enforced them with all the power of the state behind her. Elizabeth II gives the occasional inspiring speech and tries to keep her children and grandchildren out of the tabloid press. Historians do not ask if Elizabeth II is “really” a queen because she has little if any of the power associated with queens of the past. This, however, would be a valid question for philosophers or theologians. What is it that makes someone a “real” queen? Does a “real queen” have to both rule and reign or just reign?

[11] Theologians, however, have a tougher job. Ordination in the past, as Congar, Aubert, and others clearly point out, was understood differently in the past than in the present. Many, if not most, of the criteria carefully laid out by Morin were not considered necessary for ordination before the thirteenth century or, in the case of laying on of hands, much later (Macy 2007a: 23-48). Being ordained in the tenth century meant something quite different than it would in the twenty-first century, just as being queen of England meant something quite different in the sixteenth century than it does now. Therefore, theologians have to determine which definition of ordination is the correct one, the real one, the one God wants, and then determine whether ordinations of women in the past fit that definition.

Theological Understandings of Ordination in the Past

[12] The differences in the understanding of ordination are both significant and striking. Ordination before the thirteenth century was certainly not limited to the priesthood and those orders that led to it. It referred to any ministry performed for a particular community. The priesthood was only one such ministry. The Dominican theologian and historian Yves Congar summed up the research on this issue succinctly:

. . . ordination [for the first twelve hundred years] encompassed at the same time election as its starting-point and consecration as its term. But instead of signifying, as happened from the beginning of the twelfth century, the ceremony in which an individual received a power henceforth possessed in such a way that it could never be lost, the words *ordinare*, *ordinari*, *ordinatio* signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a certain place, or better a certain function, *ordo*, in the community and at its service (180).

One was chosen and consecrated for service to a particular community and only that community. Ordination did not give one a power one could exercise anywhere.

[13] Furthermore, up until the eleventh century, there was no necessary progression from deacon to priest to bishop. Deacons, even in the most important sees, could move directly to the episcopate and priests could be ordained without ever having been deacons. According to the excellent study of sequential ordination by John St. H. Gibaut, ten popes between the years 715 through 974 were ordained bishop directly from the diaconate and were never ordained priests at all (235-39). The first deacon who bothered to be ordained a priest before ascending to the See of Rome as pope was Gregory VII in 1073 (296, 301). Finally, only in 1947 did Pope Pius XII rule that the laying on of hands was the only

“matter” necessary for the ordination of a priest for Roman Catholics (*Sacramentum ordinis*, pars 3). Clearly, ordination has meant more than one thing in Christian history.

[14] Yet, most of the theologians I have mentioned, whether for or against the validity of women’s ordination in the past, assume that there is one unchanging definition of ordination that can be applied to all ordinations at all times in Christian history to determine their validity. That definition corresponds roughly to the one laid out by Jean Morin four hundred years ago.

The Platonic or Gnostic Understanding of Tradition

[15] The question not asked by most theologians addressing the question of ordination raises a deeper problem. How does one determine that Morin’s definition of ordination is the correct, the true, the real definition if, in fact, there have been different definitions in the past? One possible solution is to argue that there is an unchanging platonic form of “ordination” in the mind of God. We know what that form is because the Church tells us what it is. One might argue here that the older form of ordination better approximates the divine understanding of ordination since it is more ancient and persisted for longer than the more recent form. I do not know of any theologians who make this argument, but it is possible to do so. Conversely, one might also argue that the ordination of women in the past was invalid because the present teaching on ordination better represents the divine understanding of ordination. Here a theologian would argue that this is so because the present magisterium holds this definition.

[16] This type of platonic theology can be characterized as follows. First, it is aggressively ahistorical. The true meanings of texts not only are not dependent on their historical contexts, they cannot be read as if they are. Secondly, the interpretation assigned to texts is treated as immutable. It does not and never has changed over time. Thirdly, texts from the magisterium exist in a vacuum. They are completely self-referential and dialogue with no other source except scripture, which is also self-referential and treated as simply another document of the magisterium. Finally, the teaching of the Church to which these documents refer is also ahistorical and consists only of magisterial documents, including scripture as interpreted by the magisterium.

[17] In sum, this is a Gnostic theology of history. By Gnostic, in this context, I mean that the meaning of important texts exists independently of the historical, cultural, economic, and social circumstances in which and from which those texts were produced. The meaning of these texts exist in some spiritual realm, unaffected by any vicissitudes that might affect their embodied form as text. Furthermore, the meaning of these texts can be understood and interpreted correctly only by those who have the knowledge and power to do so. This ability is not based on scholarly expertise or wisdom gained from experience, but solely on power passed on by institutional designation. The ability to correctly interpret texts is assumed to come directly from God. Finally, the meaning given to texts is justified solely by institutional power, as reflected in other texts produced by those wielding similar power. The system is closed and self-referential. Only those with the power to ascertain the meaning of texts can understand God’s will as contained in those texts, and only texts produced by those so empowered are legitimate sources of God’s will.

[18] There are numerous problems with this theological approach. First and most obviously, one must carefully “proof-text” all historical references to avoid any apparent or real contradictions in magisterial statements. If the magisterium seems to have changed its mind on an issue, this must be either ignored or explained away. Second, one must decide who constitutes the magisterium. Here the theological question then becomes one of authority. Who is meant by “the Church”? Is the Church best represented by the majority of theologians, or the magisterium, or the pope? And if we decide that it must be, for example, the pope, then it must be asked, which pope? The pope in the thirteenth century, or the pope in the sixteenth century, or the pope now? If we say the pope now, then were the theologians, the magisterium, and the popes of the past wrong? Could they not ascertain the mind of God? If they could not do so then, how are we sure they are doing so now?

Development of Dogma

[19] One solution to this devilish problem was proposed by John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century and has received considerable support subsequently (on Newman’s notion of the development of dogma, see Tilley: 110-16). According to Newman and those who have adopted his approach, doctrine develops over time. Theologians, magisteriums, and popes of the past were not wrong; they were merely incompletely and inadequately expressing a truth that would be more fully understood later in history. After sufficient discussion and after unanimous, or nearly unanimous, consensus over a significant period of time, issues are agreed to have been settled and are pronounced to be so. Newman’s theory is very eloquent and has received even more eloquent defense and elaboration by modern theologians; this brief introduction to this concept of development of doctrine hardly does it justice. Even in this outline presentation, however, one can see that the ordinations of women in the past could not be considered valid in this approach. One of the more interesting aspects of this theological approach to tradition is that the present always takes precedence over the past. Our understanding of doctrine now is more developed than that in the past, and so, presumably better. Put simply, the present trumps the past.

[20] Despite its theological sophistication, however, similar problems arise with this approach to tradition. How do we know when development of a doctrine has stopped and fullness has been reached? The church historian and federal judge John Noonan has pointed out that several moral issues in the past were assumed to have been fully settled by the magisterium for centuries but then eventually changed. The church has, for example, reversed its firm acceptance of slavery, its fixed opposition to usury, and its firm denial of freedom of conscience, to name only the most obvious cases discussed by Noonan. In his words:

Just as in physical science, experiment and discovery compel the abandonment of a once-prized theory, just as in theology the temporal power of the pope over Rome, Italy, the Western Hemisphere, and all the islands is no longer defended, so in morals, experience and new perceptions compel the abandonment of past positions. Abandoned, they are seen to be mistakes. . . The Church, in effect, although not always in words, acknowledges that it erred and moves on to the new doctrine. Doing so, it confronts change,

acknowledges change, and affirms its own life as a living and growing body (202).

[21] Most theologians opposed to the validity of women's ordination in the past, either explicitly or implicitly, adopt one of these two theological positions to justify their judgments. What they do not address are the problems raised by their theological positions. These are problems, clearly, of authority, which I would submit is the crux of the issue. The question of the validity of women's ordinations in the past depends entirely on one's theology of authority in the present. This is a problem history cannot solve.

The Adaptive Understanding of Tradition

[22] There is, however, another way to understand tradition and to judge the validity of women's orders in the past. This approach to understanding tradition has been admirably presented by several scholars, most notably Orlando Éspin, Terrence Tilley, and Dale Irvin (see also Macy 2006). According to this theological approach, tradition is adaptive (this is my own term, not that of the scholars cited above). Each generation passes on its own version of the past, necessarily excluding some things and adding new things, or at the very least, adopting new interpretations of the past. This "traditioning," this passing on of rituals, doctrines, memories, stories, and even structures is not fixed, but has a life of its own. It necessarily changes to meet the needs of each present generation. Just as we are shaped by the past, as our culture understands and passes on that past, so we shape the present and future by our understanding of the past and by our decisions about what of the past to pass on and how to pass it on to future generations.

[23] The Church has had and continues to have a diversity of traditions, customs, memories, and practices from which it can draw to meet present needs. At each particular moment in history, she can reach back into her storeroom to retrieve the old and accept the new (to paraphrase Matthew 13:52). With two thousand years of history behind her and with a diversity of traditions developed in different cultures, the Church has a rich and fecund heritage from which to draw. Dale Irvin calls this the rhizomatic structure of tradition: "As rhizomes grow below as well as above ground, in the daylight of the present, so the historical pasts that traditions incarnate grow more diverse genealogically as they become more complex in the present" (47).

[24] In this approach, there is no fixed and unalterable definition of ordination. Rather, each generation passes on to the next a structure that can and must change, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly, to meet its own particular demands and needs. In such an understanding, the past can be immensely liberating. Understanding that things have not always been the way they are now, and even more importantly, theologically, that they are not inevitably the way they are now, frees us to make changes just as we in fact we have in the past (Macy 2007b). This approach does not obviate the problems of authority raised above; in fact, it complicates them since it gives authority to the entire community of the faithful who pass on the tradition to the next generation in the home, in schools, in churches as well as in papal and episcopal pronouncements.

[25] How then does one choose from among this abundance of riches what should be done, what can be done? In the end, this is the work of the Spirit, discerned by us in our best and, at best, halting way. To quote Denise Carmody:

The Spirit of God is not extrinsic – egg wash at the end to give the baked loaf a tan. The Spirit of God – divine providence, charismata, grace – is a crucial part of the whole process. It is the leaven, the vitamin, perhaps even the protein or carbohydrate without which we starve. It is the oxygen, the light, the spiritual medium without which we would have no thought or will or religious emotion. It is easier to say where the Spirit is than to be sure where it is not. It is harder to set boundaries to its operation than to deny it is always at work. The church that only pays lip service to the Spirit is immature in the extreme (88-89).

[26] This centrality of the Spirit, a Spirit of love according to Carmody, must be our touchstone for choosing our tradition and for forming the church of the future. Noonan ends his study with the same point:

The rule of faith, according to Augustine, follows (from the great commandment of love): “If it seems to anyone that he has understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them in such a way that by that understanding he does not build up that double love of God and of neighbor, he has not yet understood them.” Development proceeds directed by this rule. The love of God generates, reinforces, and seals the love of neighbor. What is required is found in the community’s experience as it tests what is vital. On the surface, contradictions appear. At the deepest level, the course is clear (222).

[27] In this adaptive understanding of tradition, women’s orders were valid in the past because the community of the faithful accepted them as valid. Of course, it also follows that if the community would accept the validity of the ordination of women now, it would be theologically valid. The community honestly seems to be divided over the question of whether we should or can ordain women at present. The central questions to be asked (and prayed over) in this model remain: what would charity demand? Where is the Spirit moving? What would best serve the community and allow it to fulfill its deepest calling to be the embodiment of the love of God?

So What?

[28] How does any of this affect the ministry of women in the Church today? Does any of this history and theology have relevance? I would argue that it has great relevance. First, one cannot simply claim that women were ordained in the past, or not ordained, because the ordinations of women in the past meet, or do not meet, a definition of order presently preferred by the magisterium. One must understand such claims as theological statements that require much thoughtful explanation. Why do you choose that particular definition of ordination, given that the definition has changed over time? What theological assumptions are you making when you make that claim, and how can you justify those claims?

[29] Secondly, the question of the validity of women's orders in the past is at best a secondary issue if we adopt the third approach to tradition described here. We are free, it can be argued, to ordain women in the present even if they had never been ordained in the past. If things have changed in the past, they can change in the future. Nevertheless, to know that there is an ancient tradition that understood women as ordained ministers bestows the blessing of an esteemed past on women's ministry in the present. Tradition is, after all, one, if only one, important factor in choosing the future.

[30] Even more importantly, the scholars who have wrestled with this question have opened another intriguing possibility. Why not pass on to future generations a diversity of understandings of ordination, some of which welcomed women into full ministry? From there we can create a future in continuity with our entire past, including that past which honored women more than some people claim that the present is free to do.

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