
WOMEN'S ORDINATION IN WORLD AND NATIONAL RELIGIONS

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Abstract

The problem of the ordination of women (consecration to the ministry) is becoming particularly relevant against the background of the ongoing advancement of gender equality in all spheres of public life including religion. At the same time, some Churches oppose the ordination of women, appealing to the established orders of religious life. The authors analyse world and national religions in terms of their relationship to women's spirituality and religious identity, give a general description of the ordination of women in world and national religions, in general, and the ordination of women in Christianity, in particular, present the climate of public opinion and organizational realities of women's ordination in Christian countries. It is concluded that ordination is one of the manifestations of religious identity, is directly related to the canons, the cultural tradition of religion, and, more recently, a shift towards gender parity not only of society but also of a particular religion represents the general trend of world and national religions in relation to women.

Keywords: ordination, church, clergy, Christianity, gender equality

1. Introduction

Religion is one of the main resources for providing the foundation for gender roles and gender identity. Although the Church is a very conservative social institution, the roles of men and women within are constantly changing. Most often, these changes are associated with the needs of the religious community to adapt to changes in the external environment, which has determined the relevance of studying the problem of women's ordination in world and national religions.

The share of women among Christian clergy in religious organizations is gradually increasing [1] and the acceptance of the idea of equal rights for women and men to be ordained as clergy is spreading among Western societies. However, religious communities, in a sense, preserve patriarchal orders and

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foundations. Indeed, today Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant Churches are not ready to recognize the right of women to be ordained as clergy [1, 2].

At the same time, several studies show that are women who still prevail among parishioners even in the most patriarchal religious organizations in the world, and especially in Christianity [2], and are women who have higher rates of worship practices in Russia [3]. Now it is impossible to predict for how long initiation into clergy will remain a ‘forbidden territory’ for women in the largest religious organizations in Russia, Kazakhstan, and some other societies [4]. In turn, according to the US Department of Labor, in 2020, 416 thousand ministers worked in the United States of America, 22% of whom were women [<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>]. Although this figure is still relatively low, it has an upward trend: gradually women are becoming more and more represented among the clergy of religious organizations in the United States.

Due to the controversial approaches to changing the role of women in the hierarchy of a religious organization, it was decided to investigate the modern understanding of women’s rights to ordination. One should start by noting the following important features of the interpretation of ordination. First, ordination has multiple meanings. Ordination in different Christian traditions can mean at least the following actions: monastic ordination, ordination to the diaconate, priesthood, or episcopate. The former is for the most part available to Christian women. However, when women are granted the right to be ordained as clergy in a certain religious organization, this does not necessarily mean fully equal rights with men regarding roles in the hierarchy of a religious organization [S.B. Cox Noel, *The Ordination of Women and the Unity of the Church*, 26.05.2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2610833>]. For example, the Church of Scotland allowed women and men to hold all Church positions, regardless of gender, only in 1968, although women in this Church had been appointed deaconess since 1888 [5].

Second, formal permission for women to be ministers is not always synonymous with genuinely egalitarian practices in the distribution of ministerial positions. Just as many believers in a formally patriarchal religious organization like the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) have egalitarian views, not all believers in a formally egalitarian religious organization are necessarily egalitarian. Thus, the seemingly egalitarian structures may be non-egalitarian in their operations [1].

In view of the above, the purpose of this article is to analyse the problem of female ordination (consecration to the ministry) in world and national religions and the possibility of determining gender parity.

2. An overview of the issue of women’s ordination in world and national religions

Evidence of women performing priestly functions is noted in various ancient Egyptian, ancient Greek, and ancient Roman sources. One of the most famous Roman cults that had only female priestesses was the cult of Vesta who

was the goddess of the hearth. The Romans worshipped the goddess, and the six priestesses, who were the living personification of Vesta, were endowed with tremendous rights and were honoured; their names often appeared in the works of ancient authors [6].

When it comes to Eastern religious teachings, researchers note that the teachings offer the believer to show their religiosity, as a rule, within the framework of the patriarchal paradigm, which greatly limits the possibility of officially exhibiting women's spirituality [7].

The classic version of the woman's religious identity in Eastern religions is monasticism. In Buddhism, there is an institution of nuns, a spiritual order founded for women by the Buddha himself. The founding of a women's religious order was a revolutionary step for ancient India, as there had been no community for women before. When organizing an order for women, Buddha took into account the specific features of women's social status in the tradition of Brahmanism at that time [8]. In Buddhism, a woman has the religious potential to achieve the same results as a man. However, it is more difficult for a woman to overcome her emotional nature, due to psychophysical characteristics. In achieving enlightenment - the ultimate goal of the teachings - there is no difference between men and women, provided that they become monks and nuns [8].

At the same time, in another Eastern religion - Hinduism - the cultural practice of initiating women into various spiritual orders along with men (purohits and pujaris) is preserved. Moreover, women can be gurus - spiritual mentors, although to become one, ordination is not needed [9].

In Japanese Shinto, a woman's religious identity is instituted through the Saiin priestesses, who are the emperor's female relatives. However, the institution of one's spirituality involves giving up marriage and childbirth. Although, in the post-war period in Japan, female priesthood, in general, became widespread [H.H. Kobayashi, *The Miko and the Itako: The Role of Women in Contemporary Shinto Ritual*, Senior Capstone Projects, 2013, 160].

Classical Islam offers a completely different view of women's spirituality. The semantic centre of the debate is the possibility of the existence of female imams who control collective prayer. Three out of four Sunni schools, as well as Shia scholars, believe that a woman can only lead the gathering of women in communal prayer. According to all religious and legal schools that exist in Islam, a woman cannot control the communal prayer of both sexes [10].

However, recent discussions of this matter in Muslim communities have been corroborated by the argument that the spirit of the Qur'an and some controversial hadiths show that women are capable of leading mixed-sex prayer meetings as well. The ban on such activities is only the result of sexual discrimination in the Middle Ages and is not part of true Islam [10, p. 71].

The local interpretation of a woman's religious identity in China is represented by the nusi phenomenon. A nusi is a mosque exclusively used by women. Imams and all parishioners in such mosques are women, while male presence is prohibited. A group of women receives religious education to work

in such mosques. However, in communities where nusi operate, women are not allowed into male mosques. Recently, attempts have been made to open mosques of this type in India and Iran [10, p. 196].

Judaism has its own view of women's ordination, within the framework of which it is possible to trace the evolution of attitudes towards the place of women in the official structure of the traditional Judaism from complete denial to progressive cooperation. Until the 20th century, Orthodox Judaism did not allow women to be rabbis. However, in the first half of the 20th century, in reformed Judaism, there are initially isolated cases of women appointed rabbis, which became quite widespread after the Second World War. This situation was especially facilitated by the decision of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which in 1983 allowed women to be appointed rabbis [11].

The situation that emerges with the admission of women to the the traditional Judaism hierarchy in Judaism is largely consonant with the ideas and innovations that occur in Christianity, which will be discussed in more detail below. Christianity, as a world religion, is the most open to reforms and innovations, especially those that are determined by the ideological factor.

Table 1 features an overview of the results of analysing the role of women in world and national religions.

Table 1. An overview of the role of women in world and national religions.

Religion	Role of women
Roman religion	Performing priestly functions (cult of Vesta)
Buddhism	Monasticism
Hinduism	Initiation into various spiritual orders (purohits and pujaris)
Shinto	Performing priestly functions (Saiin priestesses, female relatives of the emperor)
Classical Islam	Leading a congregation of women in communal prayer
Chinese Islam	The function of the imam in mosques for women (nusi)
Reformed Judaism	Admission to appointment as rabbis

Thus, the problem of women's ordination is rather symbolic; it represents the general tendency of world and national religions in relation to women. The woman is given the opportunity of spiritual self-actualization but only on the condition that such self-actualization will not interfere with the development of male spirituality. A woman can exhibit her spirituality only within the framework of the patriarchal system of spirituality. The spiritual practices offered to women are a copy of a masculine religious experience, schematically adjusted to a woman's situation.

3. Women's ordination in Christianity

There are precedents for women's ministry in the history of the Christian Church; there is evidence that in the early Christian churches women had leadership roles [12]. However, in 352 the Council of Laodicea forbade women to be priests, to head churches, and to approach the altar, and in 398, the Fourth

Synod of Carthage clarified: "a woman, no matter how educated or holy, cannot teach men in the congregation ... cannot baptize" [12]. Since then, almost one and a half millennia passed before the opportunity for the spiritual leadership of women in Christian churches was acquired: from the 19th century, some Protestant churches began to allow women to be ordained as clergymen. This trend continued into the 20th century and continues to this day [13].

However, during the 1st-8th centuries, there was a special category of women (deaconesses) who accepted ordinations and had certain Church duties but were excluded from participating in the administration of the sacraments. However, the institution of deaconesses did not exist for long and disappeared after the spread of female monasticism. The tasks assigned to the deaconess included: preparing women for baptism, helping clergymen at the baptism of women, works of mercy - visiting the sick and the poor, placing women in the temple, and supervising their behaviour during the service [14].

The Apostolic Epistles indicated that the deaconess was completely dependent on the husband-the priest and could not do or say anything without his permission (a postulate that is also found in Buddhist female monasticism), but at the same time, women who come to the deacon or bishop could not do this without deaconesses [14].

Moreover, in the ancient Christian Church, there was a special type of clergy who were elected from among the widows - Church widows. Their origin is associated with the words of the Apostle Peter from the First Epistle to Timothy. The duties of these women were to constantly stay in the temple, sing psalms, and decorate churches. Visiting patients is also one of their duties. Officially, the Church widows are mentioned for the last time in the rules of the Trull Council (691-692). With the development of female monasticism, Church widows, as well as deaconesses, disappear from the Church hierarchy, their power functions are transferred to nuns [15].

However, the disappearance of these manifestations of women's religious identity can be associated with the final establishment of Christianity as a state ideology that uses the power mechanisms of patriarchal culture. Christianity was forced to remove women from the Church hierarchy because their way of religious identity did not fit into the hierarchical structure of the Church.

In 1977, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome officially proclaimed that women should not be ordained. The rationale for this decision was the fact that among the twelve apostles there was not a single woman. Later, 1987 was officially declared by the Catholic Church 'the year of the Mother of God'; women were encouraged to remember their traditional roles as wives and mothers [16].

Reformed Christianity takes a slightly different position regarding women's ordination. On this issue, Protestant Churches are divided into liberals and conservatives. According to J. Morris, the issue is so pressing because, unlike the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Protestants do not consider themselves bound by tradition and defend the right to independently interpret Holy Scripture [17]. Moreover, the ordination of women can be seen as a

consequence of the work of the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The first female priests appeared in Protestant Churches at the beginning of the 20th century, but the most significant changes began only in the middle of the 20th century, when, first the Methodist and Presbyterian and then the Lutheran and Episcopal Churches decided to ordain women bishops [18].

In the Church of England, women are allowed to hold the office of deaconesses but their position is highly uncertain. Officially, deaconesses belong to the laity and until recently they were prohibited from performing basic religious rituals, including marriage. On the other hand, a deaconess can, just like a priest, perform some sacraments, for example, conduct a baptismal ceremony. As noted by Nancy Duff, in 1986 the Standing Committee of the General Synod, the governing body of the Church of England, prepared a report that examined the legal aspects of admitting women to the priesthood [19].

Despite the widespread misconception that today Christians can only be ordained priests in Protestant Churches, women can be priests in the Churches of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches (UU) (as opposed to the RCC) [<http://www.utrechter-union.org/page/157/home>]. These Catholic churches dissociated themselves from the RCC at the end of the 19th century, and one of the controversial issues that caused the separation was the dogma of the Pope's infallibility adopted in 1870 [20]. The first female priest in the UU was Angela Berlis in Germany (ordained in 1996).

Moreover, there is currently a movement of Roman Catholic Women priests [<https://romancatholicwomenpriests.org/>] and the separated Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests [<https://arcwp.org/>], who, among other things, ordain Catholic women with the observance of apostolic succession: since the first Catholic women-bishops were ordained by the bishop of the RCC (albeit contrary to the formal position of the Vatican), the corresponding female bishops can pass the inheritance to the next ordained.

4. Women's ordination in Christian countries - the climate of opinion and organizational realities

According to Miller, in 2010 in the United States, the level of support for the ordination of women was 73%, 22% were against, and only 5% were undecided [N. Miller, *The Ordination of Women in the American Church*, Faculty Publications, Paper 150, 2013, <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/church-history-pubs/150>]. If we include the population of the Catholic faith in the sample, the data for 2010 do not change significantly: 71% support the ordination of women, 23% are against it. As of 2013, the majority (59%) of Roman Catholics in the United States believed that women should be given the right to be priests. Among those American Catholics who attend Mass every week, almost half (45%) think so.

According to European polls, 86% of Catholics in the Netherlands support the ordination of women, also 74% of Catholics in Spain, 71% in Portugal and also in Germany, 67% in Ireland, 66% in Canada, 65% in Great Britain, 62% in Australia and 58% in Italy [R.M. Davidson, *The Bible Supports the Ordination/Commissioning of Women as Pastors and Local Church Elders*, Faculty Publications, Paper 60, 2010, <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/old-testament-pubs/60>]. If the support for equal rights for women and men to be ordained as clergy continues to grow among believers, eventually the RCC will have to change the official position from patriarchal to egalitarian, and, consequently, the ordination of women in the largest religious organization in the world, which is now the RCC, is not an illusory but rather an inevitable future. However, this future is not necessarily near: as the experience of some other issues (for example, the use of contraception) shows, disagreements between the position of the Church and the views of the majority of believers can last for decades.

In the Anglican Church, as of 2020, women accounted for 28% of the clergy; at the same time, both archbishops of this Church are men, and the percentage of women among the bishops is significantly lower than among the clergy of lower ranks (only 5% are diocesan bishops and 11% are vicars) [The Worldwide Anglican Church (WAC), <https://www.worldwideanglicanchurch.org/>].

On the other hand, there is a much more egalitarian situation in the Church of Sweden: since 2014, the Church of Sweden has been headed by a woman Bishop Antje Jakelen, the percentage of women ordained as clergy there reaches 45%, and women prevail among students of educational programs preparing for ordination to clergy [The Lutheran World Federation. Church of Sweden, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/church-sweden>].

5. Discourse on women's ordination in Christianity - key arguments for and against

The key arguments by the supporters and opponents of women's ordination in Christianity are presented in Table 2.

The controversy between supporters and opponents of gender equality in terms of worship in Christianity continues, since not only Christianity but also some other religions in different parts of the world remain largely androcentric.

6. Conclusions

An analysis of the phenomenon of women's ordination has shown that ordination is one of the manifestations of religious identity, is directly related to the canons, the cultural tradition of religion, and, more recently, a shift towards gender parity not only of society but also of a particular religion.

Table 2. Arguments in the discourse on women's ordination in Christianity.

Arguments by ordination supporters	Arguments by ordination opponents
The principle of equality of all people regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus!" (Galatians 3.28)	This refers to being equal in Christ, not roles in the Church. The apostle Paul forbade women to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14.34), as well as teach and rule over men (1 Timothy 2.12); Eve's prevalent guilt in the Fall.
There are some images of prophetesses in the Old Testament, and there were ministries of presbyteras and deaconesses in the Christian Church of the first centuries.	Recalling the ranks of ministry in the Church, the apostle Paul speaks of bishops, presbyters and deacons exclusively in the masculine gender.
Any discriminatory theses against women in the New Testament are conditioned by the historical context dominated by patriarchal attitudes and practices. Having risen, Jesus appeared initially to Mary Magdalene and her companions, and not to the male apostles.	According to God's original design, a woman was created as a helper for a man. All twelve apostles were men.
There were many precedents for the spiritual leadership of women in the history of early Christianity (some of them are even mentioned in the New Testament).	Precedents of female clergy are cases of heresy.

The problem of women's ordination represents the general tendency of world and national religions in relation to women. Women are given the opportunity of spiritual self-actualization but only on the condition that such self-actualization will not interfere with the development of men's spirituality. A woman can exhibit her spirituality only within the framework of the patriarchal system of spirituality. The spiritual practices offered to women are a copy of a masculine religious experience schematically adjusted to a woman's situation.

Various scriptures preserve the idea of gender equality before God, and, consequently, equal opportunities to represent their religious identity. At the same time, the selection of ideas about male and female roles in religious communities, as in the case of biological and psychological concepts, is in favour of emphasizing the differences between the sexes and the secondary nature of women in relation to men. A change in the gender regime of official religions is taking place but most religious communities are hesitant to make significant changes in the forms of female religiosity and service, as they are wary of internal discord.

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