

WOMEN BISHOPS: SOME ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The debate about women bishops in the Church of England is sometimes presented in terms of the potential damage which ordaining women to the episcopacy could do to our ecumenical relationships. This is a false fear. The Methodist and United Reformed Churches, as well as other Protestant churches in Europe, already ordain women as Bishops or receive the ministry of women in similarly senior positions. The Orthodox Churches, though unlikely to ordain women as priests in the near future, are engaged in internal debate on the subject. And whilst the Roman Catholic Church is explicitly against women's ordination, and forbids debate on the issue within its ranks, there are vocal Roman Catholic theologians and lay people who are urging change. This paper gives a brief outline of the situation in other churches regarding the debate on women bishops, concluding that the Church of England will be in tune with many ecumenical partners in progressing to women's full inclusion at all levels of ordained ministry.

Other Protestant Churches

The Anglican Provinces of New Zealand, Canada and the United States all have women bishops. There are women bishops in the Swedish and Norwegian churches (Lutheran), which are linked to the Church of England through the Porvoo Agreement. There are women bishops in the German Evangelical Church, which is linked to us through the Meissen agreement. The French Lutheran Church and the Moravian Church in the UK also have women bishops.

The Free Churches in Britain and Ireland do not have bishops as such, but have ordained women for many years, and have extensive experience of the ministry of women in positions of authority. The Methodist Church, which first ordained women ministers in 1974, has had woman Chairs of District (structurally equivalent to bishop), and female Presidents of Conference (equivalent to the Archbishop of Canterbury) for a year. The Methodists have entered into a covenant relationship with the Church of England, but have made it clear that any failure to accept the full ministry of women (including a ministry of oversight) would constitute a serious and theological obstacle to full unity. An episcopate in the Methodist Church would necessarily be open to women as well as men.

The United Reformed Church (URC), which brought together the Congregational and English Presbyterian traditions (which first ordained women in 1917 and 1921 respectively) has women ministers who are Moderators of Provincial Synods (equivalent to bishop) and currently has an ordained woman as Moderator of its General Assembly (equivalent to the Archbishop of Canterbury) the second to hold the post. In 1994 the URC declared itself an equal opportunities organisation: *"Equal opportunities is not an option for Christians; it is a moral, and getting to be a legal, imperative. Equal opportunities is about valuing individuals, getting the best person for the job, being the body of Christ."*¹

The URC further stated that it believed it had come to these conclusions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.² This contrasts sharply with the position taken by the Church of England conservative Evangelical group, Reform. This group claims that to make women bishops and give them authority over men would be contrary to Biblical teaching, and rejects modern notions of justice and human rights as against the true teaching of Scripture. However, the URC also holds a high view of Scripture.

In URC worship, the Bible is treated with enormous care and respect as the basis of faith. At the beginning of every service and at meetings of Synods and its Assembly, the Bible is carried in with due solemnity and placed reverently on the table. Indeed, the URC statement of faith and order declares that *"the highest authority for what we believe and do is God's word in the Bible alive for his people today"*.³

Both the United Reformed and Methodist Churches have clearly studied the Bible most seriously and thoroughly and come to the conclusion that the essential equality of men and women in church life and ministry is at the core of their belief and practice.

The Roman Catholic Church

At the official level, the Roman Catholic Church opposes the ordination of women. In 1994 Pope John Paul 11 issued an Apostolic Letter entitled *On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone: Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, making the non-ordination of women as close to infallible as possible. In theological terms this pronouncement was called "definitive" in the light of a previous Papal letter, *Instructions*, published in 1990, despite the fact there was no consultation with the world's bishops before the Letter was issued nor any echo of agreement on this question from the faithful.

An outcry in the Roman Catholic press and in personal writings followed *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and it can be reliably inferred that many in the Roman Catholic Church are opposed to this Papal statement. In 1995 Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XV1) forbade discussion of any possibility of female ordination, yet it is widely discussed, albeit sometimes in an atmosphere of fear. The movement for Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) is growing and has held two international conferences, and the Catholic Women's Ordination (CWO) group in Britain is active and organises training for ministry.

A number of Roman Catholic theologians, such as Sister Myra Poole and Dr Dorothea McEwan, have bravely written in support of the ordination of women to the priesthood.⁴ Many within the Roman Catholic Church are longing for change and are most grateful to the Anglican Communion for showing the way forward.

The Orthodox Churches

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches do allow free discussion of the issue of the ordination of women. In

¹ Documents of the United Reformed Church (*The Basis of Union, and Schedule D: A Statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church, version 1 and II*)

² *ibid*, 3 *ibid*

1988 the Ecumenical Patriarch convened a special Inter-Orthodox symposium in Rhodes on “*The place of the woman in the Orthodox Church and the question of the ordination of women*”. The consultation had problems with the ordination of women to the priesthood but believed that discussion of the topic should continue. It did, however, agree that the “*apostolic order of deaconesses*” should be revived, concluding in its official report that “*there is ample evidence from apostolic times, from the patristic, canonical and liturgical tradition, well into the Byzantine period (and even in our own day) that this order was held in high honour*”. The Report goes on to describe how the deaconess was ordained within the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy with two prayers, receiving the Orarion (the deacon’s stole) and Holy Communion at the altar. It concludes that “*the revival of women deacons in the Orthodox Church would emphasize in a special way the dignity of woman and give recognition to her contribution to the work of the Church as a whole*”.⁵

In 1997 the Ecumenical Patriarch gave a further statement on the issue, following Orthodox consultations on the place of women held in both Damascus and Istanbul: “*The order of women deacons is an undeniable part of the tradition coming from the early church. Now, in many of our churches, there is a growing desire to restore this order so that the spiritual needs of the people of God may be better served. There are already a number of women who appear called to this ministry*.”⁶

Despite this, there are still no women deacons in the Orthodox Churches, although the Church of Greece in 2005 voted to allow the ordination of women Deacons in monasteries. There are a number of reasons for this: the Orthodox Church always moves slowly; there is fear of division within the Church; the Russian Orthodox Church, which in 1988 was one of the most keen on the revival of the Diaconate, has faced a huge backlash from reactionary and anti-ecumenical factions since the overthrow of Communism in 1989; and other Orthodox Churches are reluctant to act without the Russians.

The discussion has, however, moved on. A number of Orthodox theologians, such as Professor Grigorios Larentzakis of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, who teaches Orthodox Theology at the Roman Catholic University in Graz, and currently serves on the Dialogue Commission of the Conference of European Churches, have stated that as there were women deacons in the past and could be today, and, as orders cannot be divided, there are no theological reasons why women cannot be ordained as both priests and bishops.

Professor Constantinos N. Yokaris of the University of Athens concluded as long ago as 1997 that “*there are thus two dogmatic reasons why the divine grace of the Holy Spirit cannot be prevented by the biological elements of human nature such as maleness or femaleness: the christological unity of human nature, and the*

pneumatological diversity of the human person. Priesthood as a spiritual gift and power belongs only to persons.”⁷

Similar views are expressed by Bishop Kallistos Ware and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, an Orthodox Theologian, in their book, ***The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church***. Behr-Sigel states that “*there is no strictly theological reason against it. On the contrary, for the image of God is present in women just as much as in their male partners, transcending sexual difference without denying or obscuring it. As for variety of ministries, i.e. opportunities for service in the Church, it arises out of the variety of charism, gifts given by the sovereign Spirit, not to a group defined by their sex, but to persons, unique persons.*”⁸

She goes on to acknowledge that to ordain women as priests now would give rise to schism in the Orthodox Church and counsels that “*in view of this risk we must be patiently impatient*”, but she is clear that women’s ordination would not represent a break with Orthodox tradition. Rather, she urges, “*we must never give way to threats from obscurantist fundamentalists, who are often Westerners who are recent converts to the Orthodox Church.*”⁹

In his part of the book, Bishop Kallistos considers the issues of tradition, anthropology and the meaning of priesthood. In the light of these he poses the question, “*Is there any specific reason why women cannot become priests?*” He does not find any convincing arguments against the priesthood of women in any of these areas. He goes on to explore the concept of priest as icon of Christ, pointing out that in Orthodox theology (unlike that of the Latin West) the celebrant speaks not as the representative of Christ but of the church of men and women. In union with the people he recites the epiclesis, asking the Father to send down the Spirit and so effect the consecration. At this crucial moment, as throughout the Eucharistic prayer, he is not “*Christ’s vicar or icon, but – in union with the people – he stands as a supplicant before God*”.¹⁰ Thus, though there is a sense in which the ministerial priest is Christ’s icon, Bishop Kallistos does not find that this in itself excludes women from the priesthood.¹¹ Indeed, he argues that the debate must continue in a spirit of expectation and hope.

Back to the Church of England

It is clear that women are already exercising authority as Bishops, or in positions equivalent to that of Bishop, in many of our sister churches in the Protestant tradition. It is also clear that the Holy Spirit is inspiring movement and debate on the issue within the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Relations with many Churches would be enhanced if the Church of England had women in the episcopacy. We must therefore act according to the Spirit’s leading in our own context, when the time is right for us.

For key facts on the ecumenical situation see **WATCH Briefing Notes For Debate on Women Bishops: A5, B4 and B11**

4 *Making All Things New: Women’s Ordination (a Catalyst for Change in the Catholic Church)*, Dorothea McEwan and Myra Poole; Canterbury Press, 2003

5 *The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women (Report of the InterOrthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece, 1998)*; ed. Gennadios Limouris; Tertios Publications (for the Ecumenical Patriarchate), Katerini, 1992

6 *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the “Signs of the Times”*; ed. Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald; World Council of Churches Publications; Geneva; 1999

7 *ibid*

8 *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*; Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware; World Council of Churches Risk Book series; Geneva, 2000

9 *ibid*, 10 *ibid*, 11 *ibid*

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