

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

Preface

C.S. Lewis saw the ordination of women to the priesthood as the first step in the deformation of Christianity into a different religion.¹

“Suppose the reformer stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might just as well pray to “Our Mother which art in heaven” as to “Our Father”. Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage was reversed, that the Church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. All this, as it seems to me, is involved in the claim that a woman can represent God as a priest does.”

Many of those who strongly oppose the ordination of women to the episcopacy and the priesthood would regard this claimed link to the genesis of a new religion tenuous at best. However, is Lewis’s hypothesis entirely without justification or merit? We need to address that question in a wider consideration of the background to the question of female ordination and in the context of feminism.

The Father and Feminism

Feminism is such a difficult thing to define and feminists are by no means agreed on what feminism is. For some, feminism is merely an attempt to redress inequality of opportunity between the sexes in employment and gender roles in the family and community. For others, feminism is a battle against the alleged repression of all things feminine by men; the only solution for which is an all-out gender war until the lost ground is recovered. There are religious variants of feminism based on the first view which are content to secure interchangeability of function between men and women at all levels of Church life. For these, working towards the first (legitimate) female Pope is a sacred

¹ Originally published under the title "Notes on the Way," in *Time and Tide*, Vol. XXIX (August 14, 1948), it was subsequently reprinted with the above title in the posthumous *God in the Dock* book, published by William B. Erdmanns, Grand Rapids, MI. <http://www.episcopalnet.org/TRACTS/priestesses.html>

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

task. Other more militant religious feminists, basing their views on the second model of gender war, regard Christianity as inescapably patriarchal and oppressive. These seek a new religion with some ties to Jesus, but essentially rehabilitating the goddess cult of former times.

This talk is not seeking to address every variant of feminism both moderate and radical, secular and faith based. I fear we should then get entangled in a morass of social comment, half-baked theories and contentious subjectivity. Rather, here, I shall attempt to consider the Person of the Father in relation to feminism as a whole, for there are some common themes in the general feminist reaction to this basic tenet of Christianity that God is our Father.

The first person in the modern era to address this issue from a psychoanalytic perspective was, of course, Sigmund Freud. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since Freud grappled with the tortured neuroses and psychoses of his repressed Viennese patients. Modern psychiatry no longer doffs its cap to the "Great Master" as it once did before. Nonetheless, Freud's assessment of Christian belief in God the Father is pivotal in trying to understand feminism's varying reactions against it.

Freud argued that "Father" was a projection by humans onto the nature of God. Some of us have had such lousy fathers on earth that, it is argued, we seek by way of compensation an ideal replacement Father in Heaven. This projection, therefore, neurotic. Deal with the neurosis, namely our half-concealed hatred for our human fathers, and the need to call God "Father" will vanish. In fact, for Freud, atheist as he was, much of the Christian religion was a neurotic coping mechanism for our frustrations and pains, painted onto the canvas of Heaven. The reason why Freud's view was so popular was its plausibility, at least at first hearing. Clearly God is neither male nor female. Did not Christ himself teach that: - *"God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and Truth?"* (John 4:24) Freud would not even admit that God was *like* a father. God was the illusion of an ideal father, made necessary by our anxieties and hurts. The plausibility of this approach would then lead many to suggest that, since our experience of human fatherhood was sometimes so cruel,

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

oppressive and corrupting, we should hesitate before calling God Father or encouraging others to do the same for fear of making eternal and immeasurable the pain of knowing the divine in the hearts and lives of those abused by their own fathers. This made faith in Jesus and His teaching an aspect of neurosis in the view of Freud. It was He, Christ, after all who started the whole “Father-thing” off!

Religious feminists often claim that, whereas the use of “Mother” would also be a projection, since all God-talk is symbolic and derived from our human experience, the Divine “Mother” should be offered as an alternative. “Mother” is warm and kind, (so we think), deeply imbued with the dark warmth and comfort of the earth, the breast and the womb. There is also a dark abusive side to this mother-talk also. Apparently, women sin as well as men! Those who support these views are often the same feminists who have no compunction in ripping human life from the womb in abortion and parading their sexuality in the media, (and goading men to do the same), on the grounds that this is empowering! The Earth-Mother, like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, also has sharp teeth and claws it seems! The Sky-Father is not the only one who abuses!

We all shrink of course from such perversions of fatherhood and motherhood and yet the logic of Freud’s analysis is inexorable. In the light of his analysis, religious feminists have argued that the language we use about God must be stripped of its gender specific references. God is re-envisioned as a Divine “Parent” but not Father; or at least if “Father” is to be allowed, then so also must “Mother.” We need, therefore, to revisit Freud’s basic premise that the invocation of God as Father is a compensatory mechanism for poor experiences of human fatherhood - if Christianity is to be freed from its false mischaracterisations as patriarchal and oppressive.

Notice how Freud starts. He takes something which is so obviously true, namely, that God is not literally a male person and then proceeds to deny the truth that God is Father, as if one followed the other. God, of course, can be Father without being male but only by recognising that all religious language is refined by the conviction that God is so utterly **UNLIKE** anything created. This is a most basic premise of Christian apophatic theology. We do not compare God (the Uncreated) to anything

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

(created). Therefore, God is not like a father, He is the Father, the Source, the Fount of all that is, with the Son eternally begotten from Him and the Spirit proceeding forth. There is an “outgoingness in Love” in God which makes “Father” the most singular and apt expression. True there is an analogy in respect of human fatherhood, but it is an analogy to human fatherhood, not from it. This truth lies at the very heart of the absurdity of feminism’s attack on God the Father. In Christianity, the Father is not imaged from our human fathers, for that would be to make God in our own image, a blasphemous idol. No, human fatherhood in its highest expression is imaged or derived from God the Father, (in other words, we are made in the image of God). As St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:14-15:-

“For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named.”

Now, there is one further matter to be addressed. If Genesis teaches that the image of God in manifest in men and women, then why cannot motherhood as well as fatherhood be derived from God in such a manner as to legitimise God as Mother as well as Father? The answer to this question lies in the nature of God’s creative power. God creates without dependency on another for He is sovereign and free and acts in the first instance alone. “Let it be”, as He says, and it is. This is not the action of a divine Mother. Mothers, in a human sense, act co-operatively and in a receptive manner. Motherhood is derived from the earth, not from the Godhead. This does not make motherhood any less holy. Orthodox venerate matter as the creative and fecund principle of life, but this life comes in the first instance from the “outside” as it were, from the Father. To derive motherhood from the Godhead rather than the earth would be to give God a womb and to make the Universe “her” Body. This is the very essence of paganism and it has resurfaced again recently in the works of such heretical theologians as Rosemary Radford Ruether who recast creation as the hatching egg of the Divine Mother.

For Orthodox Christians, motherhood is derived from the Theotokos, the Mother of God. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word, the Logos, being without form, in the Incarnation,

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

received our humanity, body, mind and soul from her. In so doing, the Trinity, one in essence and undivided, acted so that the Logos could come among us as man and save us. However, the history of religions shows that when God becomes Mother, “she” is revealed as a double-minded deity, not just a life-giver but also a life-destroyer, much as in the person of the Hindu goddess Kali who must appeased to stay her destructive power. The Mother of God is such an affront to feminists because her sanctity protests at this abuse of motherhood and the abominable fruit it has generated, sour and bitter to the taste; the infanticide of abortion, the masculinisation of women and the feminisation of men. The Mother of God is anything but weak and in the service of her Son she loses nothing of her feminine qualities. Likewise, the Apostles (of whom Our Lady is Queen), in the service of Christ, remain manly, yet with all motherly and pastoral care which is befits all the followers of Christ, both and female. This is why the Virgin is the Mother of all, men and women alike.

The only remedy for all these deformations of Christianity is to renounce Freud and his perversion of the Christian gospel and to return to a true biblical notion of God the Father and human fatherhood; the Theotokos, the created earth and human motherhood. This will only be achieved by acknowledging that men and women are equal but different in their relations and roles with each other, and that it is not an affront to everything decent and good to reserve some roles to men and some roles to women. Clearly this has a direct bearing on the ordination of women.

Finally, can this return to gender sanity be pursued while yet embracing a more moderate feminism which would pursue equality of opportunity in all realms of human life and work ... a feminism which is, shall we say, religiously neutral? I am not sure we can even do that. Consider equality of opportunity. Equal opportunities are good but what is to be made of them?

Do we send women into battle hardened troops into the front line? Well, yes, we do that now; but is that right that those most intimately involved in bringing forth life should join men in terminating it? Similarly, do we encourage men so inclined to emasculate themselves by gender bending behaviours (outside of the artistic traditions of burlesque and drag)? Well yes, this indeed has now

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

become commonplace, even encouraged; but is it healthy? Those who publicly challenge such views now routinely experience abuse and hate from activist groups and sometimes the destruction of livelihoods and visits from the police investigating spurious charges of “hate speech.” For example, is the author J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame defending the notion of “woman” (and therefore, a feminist hero) or is she transphobic (and therefore, an enemy of all that is good and true in human sexuality and gender diversity)?²

The west now promotes the idea that gender is irrelevant to function when all the evidence cries out that there are indeed distinctively male and female aspects of our humanity which, if to be honoured, must remain non-interchangeable in both roles and relations between men and women. The evidence is there practically speaking not only in the different ways men and women relate to each other, but also in the way the sexes relate to each other within each gender.

Let us now examine the issue of the ordination of women to the threefold ministries.³

Women in the Diaconate

St Paul commended the service of those deacons who supported him and his ministry; and amongst these were counted a number of women. Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 is referred to not as a deaconess but as a “deacon of the Church.” Any assessment of a female diaconate has to recognise and accept that the New Testament fully supports this ministry and service. The groundbreaking research into this subject by Professor Evangelos Theodorou in 1954 was received and endorsed by the Rhodes Consultation of Orthodox bishops in 1988⁴ such that few doubt today that women were sacramentally ordained as deacons in the early Church. Kyriaki Karidoyanes

² <https://decisionmagazine.com/j-k-rowling-it-isnt-hate-to-speak-the-truth/>

³ I will not observe a semantic distinction between female deacon and “deaconess.” All the historical evidence shows that, although male and female diaconal roles did vary in antiquity, women were ordained to the diaconate in exactly the same way as their male counterparts.

⁴ *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*,” Gennadios Limouris, ed., (Katerini, Greece: “Tertios” Publications, 1992).

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

Fitzgerald⁵ has comprehensively assembled the evidence. Although uncertainties still remain as to women's liturgical diaconal participation in the early centuries, there seems to be no obstacle standing in the way of a contemporary reassessment of these questions. Much of the evidence supporting the revival of the female diaconate was assembled in the proceedings of an Orthodox Conference on the issue convened in 2014.⁶ I do not propose to repeat its excellent work here, but let us recall that in the early Church female deacons were involved in the preparation of women for baptism and in the exercise of pastoral care within the congregation. Although there is little or no historical precedent for the liturgical service of female deacons there is no reason to suppose that such service would be inappropriate today. Many women within the Church who do not necessarily believe they themselves are called to become deacons would be greatly supported by the Church's vision for the role of women in the contemporary Church.

The only persistent objection to the renewal of a female diaconate comes from those who believe that this is a political manoeuvre aimed at getting women, in due time, ordained to the priesthood and episcopate, the so-called "thin end of the wedge." This author accepts this as a very real possibility but is not at all persuaded that the Church should be prevented from doing the "right thing" because it fears pressures to do the "wrong thing."

Women in the Episcopacy and Priesthood

There is a huge body of work and research, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox on this vexed question so I shall merely summarise here the arguments both in favour and against and leave the readers to conduct their own research and reflection. Please bear in mind that the question should be correctly framed. Since the presbyterate derives everything ministerially from the bishop, the essential question resolves to something simpler and more straightforward: "should women be ordained to the *episcopate*?" (and therefore, the presbyterate). We shall then be in a position return to a revisit of Lewis's claim of new ministries and new religions.

⁵ Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church – Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Orthodox Press, 1998).

⁶ <https://ocf.org/presentations-st-phoebe-center-conference-women-diaconal-ministry-orthodox-churchpast-present-future/?fbclid=IwAR3ekrIW9ILw0b5ins67Z0OWE8r43tu5fevC7fSwMINRGOF5DuRIydZy7g>

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

Arguments in favour

1. Forms of ministry continue to evolve in the Church in relation to developments in culture and the requirements of effective mission.
2. Limitations on the roles of women in antiquity are culture specific and even Christ had to work within those constraints.
3. The idea that the priest in the altar "images Christ" and therefore must be male in gender reflects late Roman Catholic teaching ("*Inter Insigniores*" Vatican Declaration, 1976), and finds no place either in Orthodox sacramental theologies or in Orthodox liturgical texts.⁷
4. Women have great qualities and contributions to make to these ministries which are currently being neglected and which are arguably being called forth by God Himself. The equality and dignity of women with men, both created in the image and likeness of God and one in Christ without distinction, (Galatians 3:28) make a single sex ministry an impoverished ministry.
5. The issue of the ordination of women to the episcopate and priesthood has never been formally considered by a Church Council, ecumenical or local. Such scattered and few patristic texts as we do have⁸ on the matter hardly offer the Church a comprehensive and in-depth consideration of a question which is now well overdue for debate.

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html

⁸ St Epiphanius of Salamis (Cyprus) clearly, explicitly and strongly opposed the ordination of women (Panarion 49, 2-3; 78, 23; 79, 2-4, t. 2 GCS 37, pp 473, 477-479) but did so because he shared the widespread prejudice of his society at the time that 'women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited' (79, 1 6). St John Chrysostom took a similar view that women are not equal to the task. Neither, however, argued that the priesting of women was an *impossibility in principle*, just that it was a flawed idea in practice and never actually done before. Their reasons given do seem, therefore, to be culture specific, and neither theological, ontological nor of permanent value. Gnostics and Montanists are invariably opposed by the Fathers not because some of these ordained women (which was an incidental and secondary issue for them) but rather on account of their heresies.

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

Arguments Against

1. Christ only chose and called male disciples, even though He had ample opportunity to call His Mother and many other women around Him, all of whom He treated as equals without the usual cultural inhibitions of His time restraining Him. This raises the question as to why apostolic leadership and sacramental function were consistently seen as male prerogatives in the New Testament and ever since in Church Tradition and practice. Our Lord was never reluctant to challenge traditions and practices which were contrary to the will of God.
2. Spiritual leadership in the New Testament Church seems to be reflected also in the ordering of Christians families and the relations between men and women within them. This should hardly surprise us since the Christian family is also considered a “little church”, particularly in the writings of St Paul. In Ephesians 5:21-33 the Apostle combines his consistent teaching on the absolute equality of dignity and value between men and women with God-given differences in male-female roles, always conferring spiritual leadership on the father not the mother. He compares this to the relationship between Christ and His Church. Christ spends His life for the Church, but He is also her head. What happens in Church is reflected in the Christian family. In Christian societies it needs to be reflected there also – but we are way past that situation now of course in the post-Christian secular west. Why should the Church follow the ways of a God-rejecting world rather than her own divine commands?

Addendum: A Final Reassessment of Lewis’ Argument

Since the Orthodox do not believe that the priest at the altar has to be male because Christ was male, then it follows (as Metropolitan Kallistos has shown ⁹) that the priesting of women cannot be objected

⁹ “Women and the Priesthood” ed. Thomas Hopko, *“Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ”* - Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, page 45 (SVS Press, Crestwood NY, 1999)

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

to on those grounds. Moreover, the contention of Lewis that a woman standing at the altar would thereby change the sexual symbology of the Godhead and the invocation of God as Father seems a weak and unsupported argument. The fact that some post-Christian feminists have gone down that route has its explanation in other factors already discussed (*correlation is not causation*). A stronger argument can be made that the ordination of women to the episcopate, and hence to the priesthood, would undermine the God-given relations of male and female in the Church, in families and society.

Let us finally consider the much misunderstood (and false) prohibition of females in the altar.

Appendix – Women in the Altar?

Why do women not have a blessing to enter the altar? Let us modify the question. Why do women of *a certain age* not have a blessing to enter the altar? This modification is necessary for the following reasons. "A certain age" means between puberty and the menopause. It is a common practice for example in the Church of Russia for older women (usually but not always nuns or widows) to assist the priest in the altar. Moreover, when female deacons were common in the church (women canonically over 40) they certainly did serve in and out of the altar; indeed they were ordained in the altar with much the same rite as the men and invested with the same orarion (stole).

Why then do women 'of a certain age' not have a blessing to enter the altar? The answer is that they might be passing *blood*. It has absolutely nothing to do with being female per se. For example, strictly and canonically, if a priest was to cut his finger during the preparation of the Gifts and if it should bleed, then he would immediately have to leave the altar and not proceed with the Liturgy. Therefore, because this is about blood and not about gender, where does the shedding of blood taboo come from? In short, Judaism. This is the reason for all the elaborate rules about when women can and cannot enter church, the altar and when they may or may not receive Holy Communion. This a relic from the Mosaic secondary law ... which should have been dispensed with centuries ago. The ritual prescriptions for the "churching of women" only entered the Orthodox service

The Father, Feminism and the Ordination of Women

books in the 15th century and they have no business lingering there today. The omission of the words referencing the alleged uncleanness in connection with the issue of blood in women is now made an option in the Initiation Service Books of the Antiochian Church. In 1993 the Holy Synod of Antioch decreed that the blood taboo should have no place in contemporary Church Eucharistic practice such that women used to stay away from church in their confinement or during menstruation. Pre-pubescent girls have often served in our Antiochian altars from place to place and time to time, but it is not a practice that has been universally observed or even approved of by all our bishops. It remains to be seen whether the logical development from the recognition of the inappropriateness of this blood taboo in the Church will lead eventually to a blessing for all women (of whatever age) being able to enter the altar and serve. This is not, as some suppose, the beginning of a path toward women priests but it is a matter that needs resolution through education, since it is an issue that is rarely clearly understood ... namely and to repeat, that this is about blood, not gender.

POSTSCRIPT: By the way, the author did once cut his finger ... but he did not leave the altar. It would have been incomprehensible to people if he had. Moreover, who wants to know if he had had an involuntary "nocturnal emission" (as the books quaintly put it) the night before? Strictly speaking, that would also have precluded him from serving. Clearly then the taboo is not even really about blood but rather bodily fluids. None of this frankly should have any place in our Tradition. It is a relic from Judaism long overdue for removal and reform.

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