

The Ordination of Women: Insights of a Social Scientist

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The insights of the author are reprinted (by permission) from *What Is Ordination Coming To?* This 1971 report of the Geneva, Switzerland, Consultation on the Ordination of Women was prepared by the World Council of Churches (Department on Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family, and Society).

As a social scientist, I am glad to share the results of my study of the issues concerning the ordination of women. A few cautionary statements would seem to be useful at the outset. It is important to avoid or carefully temper any "statements of universality." It is risky when one says "all" or "always" when referring to human behavior. There "almost always" needs to be some qualification; limits need to be set to the application of statements of fact about human behavior. Hardly any statement I make, if any, is a universal truth. These generalizations are less true or useful in some circumstances than in others. Similarly, I am not willing to attempt "single-cause explanations" about so complex a study as human behavior.

The scientist attempts to establish propositions and generalizations that are useful. For him, what is true is that which is useful to his purposes. Hence, opposing statements of reality can be used to explain, control, predict, or even just describe different aspects and views of that reality about which a simpler, more parsimonious statement cannot be made. There are levels of reality and experience that cannot yet be reduced to scientific measurement without destroying or omitting certain particulars in the reality measured. The artist or philosopher, the poet or theologian, may be better able to convey understandings about some dimensions of the human experience than can the natural or social scientist. Conversely, some things the poet and artist can do only very poorly and inappropriately.

It is possible, intellectually or emotionally, to divide the concerns of the human experience into separated disciplines — biology, anatomy, sociology, psychology, and theology, for example. But in day-to-day operations, we rarely experience our lives in neat intellectual categories. It is important to realize, for example, that I do not function even now in a purely sociological dimension, even though my core discipline is sociology. In fact, I will be affronted if you reduce me to the category of “sociologist,” just as you should be affronted if I reduced you to the category of theologian or ordained woman. Each of us is more than a role identity; we are more than a label can convey.

Another cautionary point: I cannot bring to your attention in a short paper all the insights that I have been able to identify as relevant. This is true in spite of the limited attention given by social scientists to women in the church or in the ministry. Thus I shall present a choice of issues that seem to me crucial to remember. My goal is usefulness rather than exposition of social laws or ultimate truth. Whatever final statements are made, we will have had to deal with these issues or ideas, I believe.

I

Developmental psychologists remind us that human behavior is influenced to varying degrees by several dynamics. Our genetic heritage as individuals sets some limits on what we can do or become. The interplay of nongenetic physiological factors — nutrition, hormones, exercise, and physical trauma — are limiting and enabling factors. Many of our changes in behavior are the results of learning. We learn when our behavior changes in terms of ways of thinking, feeling, or acting from experiences we have had. Our behavior also changes as a result of our interaction with other people — called social learning, socialization, and acculturation. In addition, I believe that operative for all of us are certain idiosyncratic and individual factors resulting from choices, perceptions, interpretations, and responses. The bugaboo or tormentor of the neat scientist is the problem of will and choice. I know of no ordering of these factors which is successful in the sense that it pleases a significant majority of scientists. I merely state that it is my judgment that nature, nurture, and choice, all, are important in what human beings are to be, to do, or to become. My theological insights support this and add the notion that the purposes of God work here as well, though it is not at all clear to me now how he works and even when he works.

A sociocultural analysis of societies highlights the saying that “our ways are not the only ways of behaving.” One of the pervasive temptations humans face is to take a solution that has been successful in one context, and impose it in another context. We can and do learn from one another, and there are lessons in the past.

But there are many ways by which most human goals can be accomplished. From my training I have become aware that a plurality of patterns of behavior is the human condition. Yet, even here I get intimations that some feel there may be only one right way. It may be that we forget that there is a distinction between ways and The Way.

The social sciences remind us that similar behaviors can have very different meanings, and very different behaviors can have similar meanings. As I age, more and more I conclude that the meanings of the behaviors are often more important to me than the behaviors apart from their meanings. Wearing a clerical robe can mean anonymity, gratification of feminine strivings, or a position of status! Or it can be an assertion that one belongs to an ancient order of distinction. The meanings you get from my talking-behavior are central — no matter what my intentions are.

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Our cultures program us or socialize us to behave in predictable ways in particular situations. There is usually allowed a degree of deviance from the norms; but if extreme, such deviance can be disruptive and socially expensive, especially when it is flaunted. For example, all over the world, men do not mind being dominated by their wives (henpecked, we call it) as long as the man and his world do not know about it. (South American congregations can accept women priests when they don't feel they will be shamed for it.) Furthermore, we redefine or relabel behaviors so that they are within the definitions of our culture. Some Moslems can eat pork, as long as it is called something else. Certain behaviors become "unthinkable" because we have been taught that such behavior is not for us.

Yet much of human behavior is "scripted behavior" — humans have very few innate patterns of response that persist unchanged after the first few months of life. All that is clearly "human" behavior is learned behavior, and thus it is that the sins of the father are visited upon the child, just as their virtues are handed on, although our choices change the mixture. Even motherhood is learned behavior. From this perspective, women can learn to do anything that men can do except as biology limits and society permits. Women can learn to be ministers, and people can learn to interact as well with female ministers as with male ministers, with a new minister as with an old familiar one.

II

Social structures have to be maintained by certain patterns of roles through which functional needs are met. The maintenance of the structures essential for social survival — the identity of the actor — is usually less important than that the activity is provided for in the social system. The limiting factor has to do with interpersonal relationships — the involvement and investment of self in another

person. Deviation from the established norm of the qualifying identity is easiest in times of crisis and change. The deviations are even easier if the deviator is unimportant or if the deviation is somehow masked. If the people are used to robed ministers, a robed minister may be accepted sooner than one who is not robed — the gender identity is masked.

Where available job-fillers possess special qualifications or attributes that are essentially valuable at that time, the admission for the new type of job-filler is much more rapid. When they immediately begin to fill a deep need, assimilation is still more rapid. The early women ministers in America were outstanding persons, with rich endowments, and possessing a deep sense of call and commitment. The availability of appropriately gifted and trained persons makes it easier to change the rules that interfere with useful procedures.

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Every group must devise ways of replacing members and of socializing the new members. Otherwise the group dies. The Shaker communities in America provide a case in point. They failed to enlist and socialize new members — and it was not because their gifted leader was a woman!

When a social group develops a new basis for categorizing its members, the role assignments will tend to reflect this new basis. The process usually occurs only gradually and under pressure. Where personal experience is the basis for leadership, as in the indigenous churches in Africa, women have frequently been the chief ministers. Where the old secular disfranchisement of women, the poor, or the bonded was maintained, only the elite were eligible, and it was very difficult to break into the power block. The greater the degree to which the decision-making powers (usually the ultimate power) are held by an elite, the more difficult is the lot of the dispossessed as they seek to participate in decision-making power on the use of church moneys, *except* at the point of deciding not to give money!

The more diffused decision-making becomes in the social structure, the easier it should be for new categories of job-fillers to enter the various categories of participation — including the orders and rites of high symbolic and power status. Competence, not membership in an elite class, is the mark of the leadership of the community. It may be that part of the resistance to ordination of women is related to the struggle to maintain the position and powers of the elite groups. I have not made a careful test, among the churches, of this generalization, though my experience bears it out. The subjugation of women in the churches is only partially due to their lack of power and their unwillingness to use the power they have. After all, the elite tend to be the men of their families and/or their respected leaders. But the control of power is a central issue here, I believe.

Examination of the literature reporting role behavior research reveals that not

all problems in role relations arise from disagreement as to role qualifications or expectations. Some difficulty arises from the fact that each actor brings his own personality with him — difficulties often arise because the minister (or some parishioners!) have personality problems. We all are tempted to explain our difficult times by speaking of the “persecution of the saints,” when an objective observer would report that we are simple cases of “difficult people.” Some roles are difficult because of the internal contradictions in the role. My research indicates that the ministry role has just such internal contradictions. Many of the difficulties women ministers have are very likely characteristic of all ministers, or even of most people, whatever the role. From time to time it would seem to be a poor matching (able people misplaced).

71 In addition, some of our role difficulties relate to the inadequacy of the rewards systems. It is tempting to use an obvious thing like gender identity to explain problems when the gender factor is a magnetic cover-up for other less admissible motives for objections or less admissible explanations. The real source of difficulty may be incompetence or inappropriate preparation for the situation, or maladjustments in the social process, or unwillingness of the group to reorder priority or to deal with changed circumstances. Our relations may be destructive, inhumane, or lacking in Christian grace. The high level of performance of many women ministers, where they have been accepted, indicates that when the difficulties are present, or when they develop, they are not primarily due to the female character of the minister but to other factors, some of which have nothing to do with her even as a person.

It tends to be far easier to say that the churches consider it improper for a woman to be a minister than to say that we in the congregation are too rigid to respond to God’s new directions for the church, or that we are too jealous of our power position, or that we prefer to keep all women suppressed because we feel too incompetent to compete with them or work alongside them. Most societies seeking to resist the pressures to respond to changed conditions will grab any rationalization to justify their resistance, and the “will of God” proclamation has a powerful impact among those who love or fear God. Added to this is the noticeable tendency among God’s spokesmen to assume the prerogatives of God — to try to be God. As a Christian, rather than as a social scientist, I consider this to be the most pervasive temptation with which all of us have to wrestle: “to be as God” when we are so woefully unqualified. This may be part of the psychodynamics involved in the extreme opposition of many males to entry of women into the ministerial orders of the churches. That many women join the opposition is not surprising when one notes the effect of the oft-repeated and self-affirming definition that women are not competent, capable, or qualified. The same psycho-

dynamics operate for other suppressed peoples, both in the Christian community and in the secularized pseudo-Christian nations.

III

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An almost universal characteristic of social humans is that they behave very much in terms of their definitions of what the situation is. It is on this basis that “self-fulfilling prophecies” work. We decide the situation is a certain way, and then we begin to behave in the ways that make that situation develop into just what we defined it to be. We define a group as inferior, and then we treat the members in ways that make sure they will become inferior! Such a self-fulfilling prophecy is often at work with respect to the ability (or inability) of women to become ministers.

Whatever the biblical and theological insights are about the importance of gender in the distribution of responsibilities and opportunities in the life of the churches and the Church, the social sciences do not seem to give support to the notion that current gender distinctions in the churches are either necessary or useful in this present world, in terms of our stated values and goals. Even where we take into account the biological realities of gender and sexual distinctions, it becomes clear that there is more difference between the members of one sex in terms of biological patterning and potential than there is between the averages of the two sexes. Our stereotype of an absolute difference, a difference of kind rather than degree, is supported by neither the biological nor the social sciences.

Even contemporary modes of dress are upsetting our sexual stereotypes as to what is gender-appropriate. Once again males are wearing fancy attire and bright colors. And have you forgotten that women wore pants first, and that men used

to paint their faces? Our folklore can proclaim a complete difference between male and female, and our appreciation or depreciation of unique sexual qualities can continue. But male and female are more alike than they are different. I think we may be on the verge of a universal discovery of our common humanness — our common humanity is more significant than our sexual distinction. As a seeking Christian, I am disturbed that too often our theological formulations reflect contemporary culture rather than play a part in reshaping the status quo.

The social sciences can help us to explain why women are not being ordained, or why they are not allowed to be ordained, or why they continue to be the largest dispossessed category of people both in the churches and the larger society. I can even make some predictions as to where strains and stresses will appear in the social fabric of the churches and where women are more likely to be recognized for their competence and their potential as persons.

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I do not find evidence in the social sciences that this pattern must continue, or that it needs to continue, or that it is useful in terms of the goals and values of the churches for it to continue. Nor do I find any evidence of the religious institutions disintegrating where women are treated as full persons as much as men are. Rather, it appears to me that the Church is more visible in the churches where gender distinctions are lost in the discovery of the personhood actuality or potential of every human creature. We have too long let the cultural realism of Paul hide the more universal and fundamental insight of that same man regarding the significance of God's action in Christ in breaking down the walls between all categories of God's continuing creation in man.