

**WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes attitudes of clergy and the laity from eight Christian denominations. Control variables include demographic variables, religious denomination, clerical status, selected religious beliefs, and attitudes towards Mary, the mother of Jesus. The principle question and dependent variable is this: "women should be considered equal to men in all areas of church leadership."

**INTRODUCTION**

What is the role of women in church leadership? What should that role be? These are questions which religious communities debate. Yinger (1970) wrote that

The concept of role is one of the key meeting places of personality theory and sociocultural theory, for it represents an internalized style of life for the individual and at the same time a cultural blueprint of approved behavior for certain designated members of a society.

Weber (1958) noted the important influence of religion on daily life:

The magical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas of duty based upon them, have in the past always been among the most important formative influences on conduct.

He said (1958) that the 'callings' we follow are very important for our concept of self:

... Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church's control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one.

Thus, the question of the *role* of women in *church* leadership may be a very important one to address.

There are contradictory interpretations of the history of the role of women in church leadership. Pope John Paul II (1994a) declared

Priestly ordination, which hands on the office entrusted by Christ to his Apostles of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the faithful, has in the Catholic Church from the beginning always been reserved to men alone.

In contrast, Torjesen (1993) reports that

Giorgio Otranto, an Italian professor of church

history, has shown through papal letters and inscriptions that women participated in the Catholic priesthood for the first thousand years of the church's history.

She further points out that the

last thirty years of American scholarship have produced an amazing range of evidence for women's roles as deacons, priests, presbyters, and even bishops in the Christian churches from the first through the thirteenth century.

Priestesses were the norm in some non-Christian societies. Goodrich (1990) writes:

Priestesses thrived in ancient societies in which religion, art, and science were not as yet disjoined. They freely practiced priestcraft in temple communities supporting as many as six thousand priestesses at one site. Such a temple, at Ephesus has recently been excavated and exhaustively studied by archeologists. In ancient Asia Minor, Greece, Africa and Europe priestesses were venerated, as priests still are today. Women as well as men were then holy persons and leaders in their societies.

Indeed, "... priestesses still officiated in Britain, Gaul, and Scandinavia around 500 A.D." (Goodrich 1990). However, she also indicates that some of these priestesses were non-Christian while others were Christian:

The historical 'Velleda,' like a 'Gertrude,' was a Druid priestess who defended Gaul. Isolde was a noble Irish priestess trained in medicine at the time Saint Brigid became the first Bishop of Kildare. (1990)

Within the Catholic Church, Ferrara (1994) in commenting on some of the theological and historical problems with the papal pronouncement of John Paul II cited earlier, points out that discussion of the issue of females in the priesthood is not as yet a closed

**Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents, Mary in the Christian Churches Today Survey**

Gender		Race		Marital Status		Age	
Male	64%	Anglo	88%	Single	15%	19 or under	2%
Female	32%	Black	2%	Celibate/Single	7%	20-29	5%
(N=384)		Hispanic	7%	Married	71%	30-39	19%
		Asian	1%	Separated/Divorced	7%	40-49	21%
		Indian	1%	(N=393)		50-59	26%
		Other	1%			60-69	18%
		(N=394)				70 or over	9%
						(N=396)	
Education		Income		Religion		Church Position	
8th or less	1%	Under \$10K	7%	Orthodox	4%	Pastor	46%
Some High School	1%	10k to 19,999	10%	Lutheran	23%	Assistant Clergy	7%
High School	7%	20k to 29,999	22%	Methodist	14%	Deacon-Elder	3%
Some College	11%	30k to 39,999	24%	Episcopal	15%	Regional-	1%
Bachelors	18%	40k to 49,999	15%	Catholic	17%	National Clergy	
Masters	45%	50k to 59,999	10%	Presbyterian	19%	Seminarian	1%
Doctorate	15%	60k to 69,999	5%	Southern Baptist	6%	Layperson	42%
Beyond Ph.D.	4%	70k to 79,999	3%	Assemblies of God	2%	(N=393)	
(N=393)		80k plus	5%	(N=396)			
		(N=388)					

issue. However, Pope John Paul II (1994a, 1994b, 1995), hoping to close the issue, has issued at least three recent statements on women, declaring them to be equal to men, yet having different roles than men in the church. Torjesen (1993) suggests that

Christian churches need to return to their own authentic heritage, reject the patriarchal norms of the Greco-Roman gender system, and restore women to equal partnership in leadership of the church and participation in Christian life.

There are numerous ordained women in the United States today. Ward (1991) reports that

The first woman ordained with the full authority and blessing of her denomination was Olympia Brown, a Universalist who was ordained by the St. Lawrence Association of Universalists in 1863.

He further (1991) indicates that in 1986 there were almost 21,000 ordained female clergy, representing about 7.9 percent of the ordained clergy in the United States. In his summary of a 1986 survey of denominations he concluded that of 221 religious groups surveyed in the United States 84 ordained women, 82 did not, 49 were unclear and 6 had no clergy. That is to say, more than one out of

three of the religious groups in the United States ordain women. Recently, females have been elevated to the bishop's chair. Torjesen (1993) reports that the first female Episcopal bishop in the U.S. was ordained in 1989.

The purpose of this study is to examine what contributes to support or opposition towards the attitude that women should be considered equal to men in church leadership. In 1990 a survey of lay and clerical members of eight Christian denominations was conducted (Boccardi 1990). As Greeley (1972) has indicated "...denominationalism is a central characteristic of American religion." Among the questions asked was one concerning support for equality among the sexes in church leadership. This study examines those factors which influence support for egalitarianism in church leadership.

#### DATA COLLECTION

The questionnaire addresses contemporary Christian concerns. This purposive sample (N=399) consists of clergy and laity of various Christian traditions in the United States, representing eight traditions: Greek and Coptic Orthodox, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist and Assemblies of God (Pentecostal). Respondents were surveyed in Boston, Dallas, Houston, Manhattan, Minneapolis, Richmond,

San Antonio, and San Francisco. A full description of the sampling procedures are reported in Boccardi (1995).

The scope of the questions covered attitudes towards Scripture, liturgy, patristics, Christology, ecclesiology, Mary, ministry, devotion and ecumenism. The answers to the questions were coded in this way: 4) agree strongly, 3) agree slightly, 2) can't decide/don't know, 1) disagree slightly, 0) disagree strongly. Background questions included information on: religious tradition, racial background, gender, educational background, age, position, marital status, annual income, church activities and church attendance.

### Characteristics of Respondents

This data set provides a sample with sufficient diversity to make comparisons between groups (see Table 1). There are twice as many males as females, almost 9 of 10 are Anglo, 7 of 10 are married. The median age is in the low 50s. This is a very educated group: the median level of education is at the masters level. The sample is not particularly affluent — median income is in the mid \$30,000s.

The sample includes respondents from eight Christian denominations. The sample design provided that more than half of the respondents would hold some clerical role in their church (which perhaps helps explain the high education and less than outstanding incomes).

The lay people in the sample are active in their churches. Ninety-four percent are members of one church group or more. They are also frequent attenders at church services. Ninety-seven percent of the lay respondents attend church two to three times a month or more. These are not people only nominally affiliated with their particular denomination.

### SUPPORT FOR EQUALITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND RECENT DENOMINATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The survey included only one item which taps the concern of this research: "Women should be considered equal to men in *all* areas of church leadership." Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with this statement on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This single item indicator, because of its clear wording, could be said to have face validity regarding the concept of support for equality in church leadership. It should be noted that this

item emphasizes "all" areas of church leadership, and thus is broader than asking whether or not ordination should be open to women.

The eight denominations in this study have different experiences with the ordination of females in the twentieth century. In 1914, the Assemblies of God became the first of these eight denominations to ordain women. The United Methodists and Presbyterians began ordaining women in 1956, followed by the Southern Baptists in 1964.

Recently, Southern Baptists renewed conflict on this issue. According to Ward (1991) "In 1984, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution opposing women's ordination." The resolution read, in part, that the Southern Baptist Convention

...encourage the service of women in all aspects of church life and work other than pastoral functions and leadership roles entailing ordination. (Melton 1991)

However, Melton (1991) pointed out:

Because of the very loose authority the Convention wields over individual congregations, this resolution cannot force congregations to expel women pastors already in place, nor can it prevent congregations from ordaining others.

Although approval of female ordination was far from unanimous among American Lutherans and Episcopalians, the American Lutheran Church began ordaining women in 1970, followed by the Episcopal Church in 1976. Roman Catholics and Orthodox have not ordained women in this century.

### BACKGROUND VARIABLES AND SUPPORT FOR EQUALITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Background variables need to be tested to see if they have an influence on support for equality in church leadership. Gender, race, marital status, age, education, income, denominational affiliation, and clerical status may all have independent influences on attitudes towards women's role in church leadership. For example, in other studies, gender has been seen to play a role with regard to support for female ordination. Jelen (1989) in a study among Roman Catholics found that "...men are more supportive of female ordination than are women." He has also speculated the Catholic males who do oppose ordination base their

**Table 2: Support for Equality (Percent Strongly Agree) in Church Leadership by Background Characteristics\***

Ethnicity	Education	Clerical Status	Religion
Hispanic	48% M.A. or above	74% Lay	63% Assemblies of God
Non-Hispanic	68% Some College to B.A. High School or less	57% Clergy	69% Catholic
			80% Episcopalian
			81% Lutheran
			79% Methodist
			13% Orthodox
			81% Presbyterian
			12% Southern Baptist

\*All tables Pearson chi-squared  $p < .05$

opposition on the notion of a specialized role for females. He postulates (1989) that for Catholics who oppose ordination "...Mary may provide Catholics with a model of an important, but separate, female role in Church affairs."

All of the background variables in Table 1 were tested to see if they were associated with support for equality in church leadership. Several of them do have an influence in the bivariate case: ethnicity (race dichotomized into Hispanic and NonHispanic), education (recoded into three categories), clerical status (clergy vs. lay), and religious affiliation (see Table 2). Income and marital status do not have statistically significant relationships with support for equality in church leadership. In addition, gender, although studies of Catholics alone have shown it to have an influence on approval of female ordination, does not have an influence on support for equality in church leadership among these respondents from eight Christian denominations.

In the bivariate case, Hispanics are less likely than NonHispanics to support gender equality in church leadership. Clergy are more likely than lay to support such an approach. The more highly educated the respondent was, the more likely she/he supported a policy of equality for women in church leadership ( $\gamma = .37$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ).

More than three-fourths of the Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians surveyed support equality in church leadership. Almost half of the Catholics strongly support it. Less than one of four members in the Assemblies of God, Southern Baptist, and the Orthodox churches surveyed agree with this position.

## RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND SUPPORT FOR EQUALITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The data set contains a number of items with regard to religious beliefs and the religious imagination (in particular the stories about Mary with which the respondents may agree or may disagree). A reasonable hypothesis would be that those images of Mary which are more egalitarian in content, such as Mary as model, elder sister in the faith, partner in prayer, contribute to support for equality of women in church leadership. A second hypothesis seemed plausible: agreement with this statement: "Attention to Mary's role in the Christian community can be a positive factor for the feminist movement" would show positive association with support for the statement that "Women should be considered equal to men in *all* areas of church leadership." Neither of these hypotheses hold up to empirical testing. None of the egalitarian or warm, nurturing images of Mary (such as "Mary as my spiritual mother") available in the data, nor the question about Mary and feminism are associated with the attitude regarding women and church leadership ( $p > .10$ ).

Three religious attitudes are associated with support for equality in church leadership in the bivariate case. The measures did all concern Mary, the mother of Jesus. Two dealt with beliefs: "Mary is the Mother of God" ( $\gamma = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and "I believe in the virginal conception of Jesus within Mary's womb" ( $\gamma = -.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These both tap that model of Mary as Virgin and Mother. The third referred to one's relationship with Mary: "Mary plays a significant role in my life" ( $\gamma = -.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Support for equality within the church is influenced by all three of these religious

**Table 3: Regression Equations of Influences on Support for Equality in Church Leadership**

	Model A		Model B		Model C		Final Model	
	Background + Attitudes		Background + Attitudes (trimmed)		Model B + Religion <sup>A</sup>			
Clerical Status	-.23	(-.08)						
Ethnicity	-.71	(-.13)*	-.76	(-.14)**	-.32	(-.06)		
Education	.20	(.18)**	.17	(.15)**	.19	(.17)***	.19	(.17)***
Mary Significant	-.05	(-.05)						
Mary, Mother of God	-.04	(-.06)						
Virginal Conception	-.26	(-.22)***	-.29	(-.24)***	-.13	(-.11)*	-.14	(-.12)***
Orthodox					-.79	(-.10)		
Lutheran					1.33	(.40)**	1.26	(.38)***
Methodist					1.28	(.31)**	1.21	(.29)***
Episcopal					1.13	(.30)**	1.08	(.28)***
Catholic					.35	(.09)		
Presbyterian					1.11	(.31)**	1.05	(.29)***
Southern Baptist					-.98	(-.18)*	-1.05	(-.19)***
Contant	3.25***		3.20***		1.72***		1.83***	
R Squared	.13		.12		.35		.33	
Adjusted R Squared	.12		.12		.34		.32	

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.0001

<sup>A</sup>Religions are compared by dummy variable analysis with Assemblies of God as the baseline.

Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients and, in parentheses, standardized regression coefficients.

attitudes (chi-squares significant at < .05). Results show that 68 percent of those who strongly disagree with the notion that Mary is the Mother of God, 96 percent of those who disagree with belief in the virginal conception of Jesus, and 70 percent of those who are clear that Mary does not play a significant role in their personal life strongly agree that women should be considered equal to men in all areas of church leadership. The *less likely* one is to: see Mary as the Mother of God, believe in the virginal conception of Jesus, or see Mary as playing an important role in his/her life, the *more likely* that person is to support equality for women in church leadership.

#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCES ON SUPPORT FOR EQUALITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Tests of background variables and religious attitudes indicate that a number of variables potentially influence support for equality in church leadership. Multiple regression analysis allows control of each variable's influence on this dependent variable (see Table 3).

The direct influence of the background

and attitudinal variables are tested (Table 3, Model A). Results indicate that the apparent influence of clerical status, the stance that Mary plays a significant role in one's personal life, and the belief that Mary is the Mother of God, does not hold up in a multivariate analysis. Ethnicity, education, and beliefs regarding virginal conception do significantly influence the response variable in the same direction as in the bivariate results. The regression equation is re-estimated, deleting the non-significant variables (see Table 3, Model B).

Regression analysis was then conducted to bring in the potential influence of religious denomination (see Table 3, Model C). Dummy variable analysis allows the inclusion of nominal level variables, such as religion, in regression analyses (Lewis-Beck 1980). The results show that religious affiliation is an important characteristic to examine (the amount of variance explained increases from 12 percent for Model B to 34 percent for Model C). The apparent influence of ethnicity disappears when religious denomination is brought into the analysis. However, the effects of education and belief concerning virginal conception still

hold.

In dummy variable analysis, one of the categories has to be chosen as a baseline. Since the Assemblies of God is the denomination in this study with the longest modern practice of female ordination, membership in that denomination was chosen as the baseline. Regression analysis indicates that Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians are all significantly more likely to support gender equality in church leadership than members of the Assembly of God. Catholics and Orthodox do not differ from members of Assemblies of God, while Southern Baptists are significantly less likely than all the other denominations to support equality in church leadership.

Trimming all non-significant variables from the equation (see Table 3, Final Model), results show that religious denomination, belief about the virgin birth, and education all influence the attitude that women should be equal to men in all areas of church leadership.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The researcher found that education, belief in the virginal conception of Jesus, and religious affiliation all have independent influences on support for the equality of women in church leadership. The more highly educated a person is, regardless of beliefs and religious affiliation, the more likely that person will acquire egalitarian attitudes with regard to the roles of males and females in the church.

One might expect that those denominations with the longest recent experience with the ordination of women to be those which would support equality for women in church leadership at all levels. This does not necessarily follow. Assemblies of God, the denomination with the longest modern experience of female ordinands, does not differ significantly from the two denominations who do not ordain women (Catholics and Orthodox). Further, members of a denomination that does have ordained women, the Southern Baptists, support equality for women in the church at significantly lower levels than members of both the denominations who have no currently ordained women (the Catholics and Orthodox). However, members of the other Christian denominations that do ordain women (Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians) are significantly more likely than Catholics and Orthodox to support equality for women in all forms of church leadership.

Results have shown that respondents who believe in Mary as virgin-mother are less likely to support equality of women in church leadership; that egalitarian images of Mary neither enhance nor diminish support for women's equality; and that the strength of one's relationship with Mary does not influence attitudes regarding church leadership. Contemporary feminists have a variety of perspectives regarding the role of Mary in the Church. Stances range from Mary as an impossible ideal used to keep women in line to Mary as a symbol of liberation and female independence.

Those who see the Marian ideal as a means to control women cite the history of Marian devotion. Carr (1990) states that

Feminist scholars have shown that the tradition of Mariology was begun in the fourth century by church fathers who extolled Mary as the sinless virgin - and - mother, the epitome of spiritual motherhood, in contrast to Eve as the symbol of sin, the flesh, and matter.

She goes further, and writes (1990):

For Mary has been the subject of an idealizing Mariology that sought to venerate her at the expense of real women and that projected onto her the passive virtues of submission, humility, and docility that women in a misogynist and patriarchal Christian culture, were expected to imitate.

Other feminists have alternative approaches. Callahan (1993) writes that

Mary's virginity and virgin birth can be interpreted as symbols of her autonomy, signaling her direct relationship to God, unmediated through any hierarchically placed male, spouse or no.

Respondents in this study apparently are more likely to link their image of Mary as a virgin-mother with the role of women being a supportive one in the pew, rather than the role of standing up front in the pulpit.

Finally, with regard to the primary question of this study, "What contributes to support or opposition towards the attitude that women should be considered equal to men in church leadership?" the answer is: religious denomination, educational level, and belief in the virginal conception of Jesus.

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