

As European society tackles discrimination and strengthens equality, the Church of England's rejection of female bishops shows how religion is likely to appear increasingly out of touch.

by Blog Admin

*This week the Synod of the Church of England voted against the appointment of female bishops. **Mick Power** argues that the decision reflects deep-rooted principles of inequality between the sexes, which can be traced through the historical development of the major faiths. As European society tackles discrimination and strengthens the equality of its citizens, religion is likely to appear increasingly out of touch.*



The Synod of the Church of England has just [voted](#), albeit narrowly, against the possibility of women being ordained as bishops. Nothing new in that of course, except for the fact that the Head of the Church of England just happens to be a woman – Queen Elizabeth II. So, a woman can be queen and head of the church, but she cannot be a lowly bishop; this is one chess game in which the values of the pieces seem to be well confused. To understand why even a liberal Church such as the Church of England has such problems, we must look at the long and inglorious history of misogyny and religion, both of which have been bed-fellows for thousands of years.

Mount Athos has to be one of the most extraordinary places on the planet. Located on the Halkidiki peninsula in northern Greece, but only accessible by sea, it is an autonomous region of 130 square miles known as the Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain. It is home to 20 Eastern Orthodox monasteries, with a population of over 2000 that consists of monks and workers who help in the [monasteries](#). It is a spectacularly beautiful place and absolutely unique in one feature. Despite the population of over 2000, there are no women, girls, or female animals allowed on Mount Athos, not even as visitors. Females have to stay at a minimum distance of



Church in Broadwell, Oxfordshire (Credit: Tvpromo1, CC BY-SA 3.0)

200 yards offshore from Mount Athos. The existence of Mount Athos stands as a pinnacle of misogyny that is present in not only Christianity but in all the major religions.

Misogyny is complex in its societal origins and clearly is pre-Christian in its origin. We cannot lay the blame for misogyny solely at the door of Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, though they must take a large chunk of the blame for Christian misogynistic teachings. Gerda Lerner in her insightful work [The Creation of Patriarchy](#) identifies the more general issue of the subordination of women to men in the shift from small hunter-gatherer communities to the larger groups and urbanisation of the early civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. Lerner observed that in early warfare at this time, the defeated males were slaughtered, but women and children were taken into captivity, such that early slavery and ownership was of women by men. Women became the property of men, which became the norm even for the women who were part of the ruling class. I have also observed in my book [Adieu to God](#) how neolithic

farming groups invariably worshipped fertile mother goddesses because they linked female fertility with their dependence on the fertility of the earth and the seasonal cycles. However, urbanisation in early civilizations saw the subordination of the female goddesses to one or more primary male gods, reflecting the emerging social structure of these early civilizations. The key point is that misogyny, subordination, and sexuality seems to have become linked through the ownership of female slave-concubines.

In the example of Mount Athos, the location of sinful sexuality is clearly placed in the female of all species, yet another example of blaming the victim. It is the equivalent to the asymmetrical sexual relationship that occurs in prostitution – the female prostitute is labelled as the sinner rather than the man who visits the prostitute for sex. As Gerda Lerner argues, that is the advantage of the power relationship in a patriarchy. Male spiritual and political leaders can present themselves as being led astray by the subordinate temptresses who will do anything in order to survive.

The projection of sexual sin by men onto women is just one of a number of such projections that seem to have been institutionalised in the misogynistic beliefs of many of the world's religions. The example of the persecution of female "witches" by the Christian church during the Middle Ages has to stand as one of the all-time low-points in religious institutionalised misogyny. The publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Witches Hammer*, in 1487 by two Dominican monks, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, provided a handbook for the detection, interrogation, and torture of witches. The Dominican order had been assigned as the inquisitors by Pope Gregory IX in the 13th century, a task at which they excelled to the extent that they were known at that time as the "Domini canes", a Latin phrase that translates as the "Hounds of the Lord". Estimates range from 50,000 to 200,000 women who were put to death accused of witchcraft in the 16th and 17th centuries. Infamous witch trials such as those in Salem, Massachusetts, are remembered to this day.

However, for the sake of argument, let us assume that men are not inherently more spiritual than women, and that they are not therefore any closer to their gods. Let us assume instead that men and women are equal in spirituality, but that the factors that I have discussed in *Adieu to God*, such as urbanisation in the early civilizations, the development of patriarchal systems of control, and the move towards monotheistic religions, have created the illusion that men are more spiritual and women are more sinful. If such supposed differences are illusions manufactured by patriarchy, then under certain conditions we would expect women rather than men to be the spiritual leaders, similar to how in the neolithic communities female fertility goddesses seem to have been dominant because of the preoccupation with seasonal cycles and the fertility of the earth.

One example of a matrilineal religion of recent origin is Macumba, the African-Brazilian religion that has a number of sects throughout Brazil. The religion has its roots in the enslavement of African peoples who were shipped to South America to work on the plantations. Part of the interest for anthropologists and sociologists of Macumba is that any patriarchal power of the enslaved men was undermined by enslavement, so that spiritual power within the slave communities became female. However, in order to survive within a dominant culture of European origin, Macumba is a highly syncretic religion that draws not only on African religions, but also on Catholicism and on Brazilian Spiritualism.

The Macumba sect that has been studied most is that of Candomblé, which is predominant in Bahia state in Brazil. The priesthood of Candomblé is organised according to 'families', although the family members need not be blood relatives in the usual meaning. Each 'family' owns and has the management of a temple, which can be a house, plantation, or yard (terreiro). In most temples, especially the larger ones, the head of the family is always a woman, with her deputy being the pais-de-santo, 'father-of-saint'. During the earlier times of slavery, in contrast to the original African tradition, women became the diviners and healers. Upon the death of the female head her successor was normally chosen from among her "filhas-de-santo", often a female blood relative, typically a daughter. Most Candomblé houses are small, independently owned and managed by the female high priests. A few of the older and larger houses have a more formal hierarchy, though there is no central administration. The significant role that women play within this matrilineal religion is clearly part of the growing appeal of Macumba throughout Brazil and in other areas of South and Central America.

The moral of this story is that as European legislation moves increasingly towards equality between the sexes, the established religions stand out as anachronistic men's clubs with their politically-driven claims that because the god of monotheism is supposedly a man, so too must be his priests. However, the fact that religious belief is now in a minority in Europe and shrinking with each generation means that our churches and cathedrals have become the modern-day equivalent of the industrial revolution's cotton-mills. Religious institutionalised misogyny is just one of the many factors leading to such decline. In such circumstances, the traditional established churches will have to learn from fast-growing religious sects such as the Candomblé, if they don't want their churches and cathedrals to be turned into pubs and museums in order to survive.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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