

# The Office of Woman in the Church, to the Present Day

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VARIOUS INFLUENCES are discernible in the history of woman's ministry in the Christian Church. Some of these influences are manifestly biblical, while others are secular. Even when the Church has been most concerned to implement biblical teaching, it has not been uninfluenced, in its interpretation of that teaching, by the customs and ideas current in contemporary society; and the fact that biblical teaching itself has a social background, which makes it necessary to distinguish between principles and their application, should not be ignored, as it often has been. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the history of woman's ministry, since it reflects a degraded idea of womanhood which is now outgrown, has no lessons (except warnings) for the Church of today. For the truth is that degraded ideas of womanhood are not confined to the past, and exalted ideas of womanhood are not confined to the present. In fact, as Canon Demant writes,

There is no general advance in the position of women as time goes on. Many primitive cultures are matriarchal and their return is sighed for by some people today.<sup>1</sup> In the ancient western world scholars find societies where women were held in high regard, where they had liberties and dominant influence.<sup>2</sup> In many periods and regions in the Middle Ages women's position was a strong one. They could influence secular society from their personal positions and from their official ones in the religious orders. Medieval popular literature, like that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is spiced with tales of men being bullied by their wives. Many Renaissance women won great esteem for their learning and leadership. And all this without any movement for women's rights. The denigration of women is not an age-long habit which has lately been cured by historical advance. Some of the most vicious and derogatory views on women were expressed as late as the last century and this. Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Strindberg regarded women as inferior creatures. Ibsen depicted them as such even with his theoretical belief in their emancipation. P. J. Mobius wrote of *The Psychological Debility of Women* as if they were entirely moved by instinct. Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character* (1926) appealed to Immanuel Kant for support in his polemic that woman is infra-personal. And all this in an age also influenced by J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*! The conclusion is that recognition of

women's powers, abilities and influence is not the result of a historical progressive movement but comes and goes with certain cultures and attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

We shall therefore proceed to trace the ways in which the different strands of biblical teaching relating to the ministry of women have been developed in Church history, noting as we do so the colouring which this teaching has received from the cultural circumstances of the Church.

### *The Married Life*

BOTH in the Old Testament and in the New, the married state is one of great dignity. According to the Old Testament, the purpose of woman's creation was that she should be the married helpmate of man (Gen. 2: 18-24): thus her vocation is all one with her husband's. It is not until we reach the New Testament that any explicit attention is given to the single state. In the New Testament the married state is likewise normal, even in those writings where ascetic ideals are held forth. Thus, in the First Epistle to Timothy, insistence on celibacy is condemned as a doctrine of demons (4: 1-3), widows under sixty years of age are bidden to remarry (5: 14), and the way of salvation for a woman is stated to be not as a pastor and teacher but as a wife and mother (2: 11-15). Elsewhere in the New Testament the honour due to marriage is both directly asserted (Heb. 13: 4) and magnificently illustrated (Eph. 5: 21-33). The wife and mother, though subordinate to her husband, is herself assigned a position of great dignity by both Testaments. She orders and governs her household (Prov. 31: 10-31; 1 Tim. 5: 14) and receives honour and obedience from her children (Ex. 20: 12; Dt. 27: 16; Prov. 30: 17; Matt. 15: 3-9; Eph. 6: 1-3; Col. 3: 20).

As in the Bible, so in the history of the Church, the normal role of woman has been as wife and mother, and her normal sphere the home. Even those women who have not married have very often devoted themselves to domestic duties. This does not mean that, whether married or unmarried, they have had time for nothing else. The spare-time service of married women has the encouragement of the New Testament, whether it takes the form of witness (Jn. 4: 28-29, 39-42; Acts 18: 26) or of ministrations to bodily needs (1 Tim. 5: 10), and an impressive survey of the voluntary work (evangelistic, educational and social) which has been developed in the Church since the nineteenth century is given by Kathleen Bliss in chapter 2 of her valuable book *The Status and Service of Women in the Churches* (London, SCM, 1952). Nevertheless, the bearing and early nurture of children is itself a very demanding responsibility, as is the supervision and care of a home, and the latter also falls mainly upon the wife because the husband is pre-occupied with earning their living. The vocation of wife and mother

has always been respected by Christians, but especially since the Reformation and in the reformed Churches, since the excessive emphasis which from the third century onwards was placed upon the celibate calling led to a certain disparagement of marriage, and to restrictions upon it, against which the sixteenth century Reformers strongly reacted.

It ought to be mentioned in this connection that some married women have played a very important part in Christian history through the eminence of their husbands and sons. Both in the East and in the West the wives and mothers of kings and emperors have had a crucial share in the extension of Christianity—among others, Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine; Olga, the grandmother of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, the ‘apostle of Russia’; Clothilde, the wife of King Clovis of the Franks; and, in our own land, Bertha, the wife of King Ethelbert of Kent.

Similarly, in those ages and areas of Christendom which have encouraged clerical marriage, the wives of the clergy have, because of their husbands’ office, played a unique part in the forwarding of the Church’s work. They have taken responsibility for the duty of clerical hospitality (1 Tim. 3: 2; Tit. 1: 8), and have been their husbands’ closest counsellors and partners in work among women, children and families.

### *The Ministry of the Widow*

BOTH the Old Testament and the New show a tender concern for the affliction and destitution of the wife who has lost her husband and the child who has lost his father (Is. 1: 17; Jas. 1: 27). He who oppresses them in their reduced and defenceless condition offends most heinously against God (Dt. 27: 19; Mk. 12: 40) who is their defender and vindicator (Ex. 22: 22-24; Ps. 68: 5; 146: 9; Is. 10: 1-4). In the earliest days of the Church, we find their poverty being relieved by other Christians (Acts 6: 1; 9: 36-41), and in the fifth chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy we find aged widows being enrolled for such relief. The directions there given are that only those who are without children or grandchildren to relieve them shall be enrolled (vv. 3-8), and only those who have reached sixty years of age (vv. 9, 11, 14), below which age they can provide for themselves or remarry (vv. 11-15; cf. 1 Cor. 7: 9, 39). Another condition is that they should have lived good Christian lives and ministered to the needs of others (vv. 9-10). Though their enrolment (v. 9) is, in context, primarily for relief, it is also a consecration to Christ, excluding subsequent remarriage (vv. 11-12; cf. 1 Cor. 7: 8, 34, 40); but remarriage earlier is apparently not excluded (v. 14), provided it was not in their first husband’s lifetime (v. 9). Nothing is explicitly said about their way of life after enrolment: their prayers (v. 5) are the natural consequence of their destitution, their upbringing of their children (v. 10) evidently refers to an earlier period

of their life, and their ministry to the needs of others (*ibid.*) would be most practicable before they became destitute. The danger of idleness (v. 13) suggests that they have no specific duties. Nevertheless, they would not be expected to desist from prayer after enrolment, nor (except in as far as their circumstances required) from beneficence.

From these tenuous beginnings, the early Church developed its famous order of widows.<sup>4</sup> The earliest clear references to this order are in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (*Pedagogue* 3: 12), Tertullian (*Veiling of Virgins* 9, *Monogamy* 11) and Hippolytus (*Apostolic Tradition* 11) about the beginning of the third century, but it is frequently referred to after this, in the documents known as Church Orders and elsewhere. How far the order was a new creation, based on the patristic interpretation of Scripture, and how far it was a development of traditional practice, one can only speculate. The directions given in the *Apostolic Tradition* and in the third century *Didascalia* (chs. 14, 15, 18) are mainly based on 1 Tim. 5, and it is noteworthy that there the office of the widow is stated to be not teaching, baptising or celebrating the eucharist, but praying. This is a function common to all Christians, Hippolytus points out, and the widow is therefore not to be ordained. In the *Didascalia* she is instructed to stay at home, and, apart from praying, is encouraged to work with her hands for the benefit of others. She is only to go abroad at the bidding of the bishops and deacons, for example to pray over the sick, with fasting and the laying on of hands. The teaching of the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the following century is very much the same (bk. 3, paras. 1-15), and it is there explicitly stated once more that a widow is not ordained (bk. 8, para. 25). On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and others list widows with bishops, priests and deacons as belonging to the clergy. The order of widows began to decline in the third century and disappeared about the end of the fourth, being replaced by the order of deaconesses, who could be widows, though normally virgins.

Another opening which at this juncture began to be supplied for widows, and for their traditional ministry of prayer and good works, was the life of the convent. At certain periods, large numbers of widows have devoted themselves to monasticism, for example in the Slavonic countries and Rumania during the Mongol occupation. Thus Militsa, widow of the last Serbian ruler Lazar (1371-89), founded a convent for the widows of the slain and became their abbess.

In modern times, a new task has developed in some parts of the world for the woman whom advancing years and bereavement have released from the more onerous of her domestic cares. In most heathen countries where Christian missions are at work, the task of Biblewoman has hitherto fallen almost exclusively to widows. In these cultures, only the widow is free to minister to her fellow-countrywomen and their families in this way, and is acceptable in doing so.<sup>5</sup>

*The Ascetic Vocation*

SIDE by side with the married life, the New Testament sets out a vocation to celibacy on which the Old Testament is silent. We have already noticed that the enrolled widow is not to remarry, but the vocation to the single life is by no means confined to the enrolled widow. It extends to other classes of widows and to the unmarried, but only to those among them 'to whom it is given' (Matt. 19: 11; 1 Cor. 7: 7). Those who can receive the calling to celibacy should (Matt. 19: 12; 1 Cor. 7: 7-9, 38, 40), because the married are more vulnerable to tribulations (1 Cor. 7: 26-28; cf. Mk. 13: 17), because the Christian should cultivate a spirit of detachment from the circumstances of this life, including marriage (1 Cor. 7: 29-31; cf. Lk. 20: 27-36), and because it is easier for the unmarried to attend upon the Lord without distraction (1 Cor. 7: 32-35; cf. Matt. 19: 12). The effect that this teaching has had upon the history of the Christian Church, accentuated as it has been by ascetic influences from outside, could hardly be exaggerated.

From the beginning of Christian literature, evidence appears of men and women who deliberately followed the celibate vocation (Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 5; Athenagoras, *Embassy* 33), and with the coming of the third century we find attention being devoted distinctly to the case of virgins (Tertullian, *Veiling of Virgins*; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 13; Cyprian, *Dress of Virgins*, *Epistle* 61). Ignatius allows them to make their vocation known to the bishop, and Hippolytus rules that they are not part of the ordained ministry, which shows the public character that they have by his time acquired in the Church. In the fourth century, Basil (*Epistle* 199) and Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures* 4: 24) speak of them as an 'order', and they appear from the account of the historian Socrates (*Ecclesiastical History* 1: 17) to have been enrolled in a register and to be the recipients of public generosity. In the same century, the *Apostolic Constitutions* appoint for them a share of tithe (bk. 2, para 25; bk. 8, para. 30), so that they may have 'leisure for piety' (bk. 8, para. 24). In this period, poverty was no necessary part of their vocation<sup>6</sup>, and they lived not in communities but at home.<sup>7</sup>

Since virgins were allowed to make their profession at an early age, this situation involved the same perils which St. Paul foresaw would result if the younger widows were enrolled (1 Tim. 5: 11-13), and in the present case the perils became sad realities, as the writings of Cyprian, Basil and Ambrose (*The Virgin's Fall*) attest. Cyprian's remedy was to allow those who could not persevere to marry (*Epistle* 61). This, however, would not avoid the scandal of the broken profession, the root cause of which was the publicity now attached to the celibate vocation. The remedy generally adopted, however, was not to permit marriage or to make the celibate vocation a purely personal and private

matter, but to treat those who lapsed with a severity which must have been a contributory cause to their withdrawal from the society of the other sex into convents. Basil and Ambrose both counsel severity, and the sixteenth canon of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) gave it legislative sanction.

The gathering of professed celibates into monasteries and convents began in the fourth century, and in time obliterated the earlier system.<sup>9</sup> It was at this point that the other two elements in the monastic ideal, voluntary poverty and obedience to a superior, became associated with the celibate vocation. Voluntary poverty, like celibacy, has its roots in the New Testament, where we find not only grave warnings against the love of riches and moving exhortations to generosity addressed to all Christians, but a call to poverty addressed to the disciples and apostles (Lk. 12: 33; 2 Cor. 6: 10) and to those who are ensnared by wealth (Matt. 19: 16-30; cf. Mk. 9: 43-48). In the New Testament, however, the calling to celibacy and the calling to poverty have no necessary connection. Obedience to a superior has precedents in the New Testament, where submission and obedience in the home, in the congregation and in the state are basic principles of Christian living, but it is there balanced by stress on the individual's direct responsibility to Christ and to God, which takes precedence over all other relationships (Matt. 10: 34-37; Mk. 3: 21, 31-35; Acts 4: 19; 5: 29). In practice, the individual poverty of the monk or nun only too easily became the corporate wealth and luxury of the community to which he belonged, and the severance of one group of human relationships became the establishment of a new group of human relationships, even more inimical to a single-minded attendance upon the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

As has rightly been said,

All down the centuries the line of women 'religious' runs parallel with that of hermits, monks, friars and founders, the one complementary to the other. Far back in the age of the desert fathers, Pachomius was building a convent for his sister Mary. There were Basil and Macrina, Ambrose and Marcellina his sister, for whom he wrote his treatise on virginity, Augustine and Felicitas—his letters for her guidance in the government of her Community form the basis of the Augustinian Rule. There were Benedict and Scholastica, Francis and Clare, John of the Cross and Teresa, Francis de Sales and Jane Chantal, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, whose Sisters of Charity, founded in the seventeenth century, were the first Order of women to be unenclosed and given over to the care of the sick and poor.<sup>10</sup>

The monastic life flourishes in the Church of Rome to this day, and, in a reduced condition, has continued in the East; and the good it has done, in evangelism, in education, in nursing, in hospitality to strangers and care of the deprived, and in keeping before the Church a high ideal of Christian dedication, is immense.

In the reformed Churches, monasticism came almost to a complete

end in the sixteenth century. This was due partly to the contemporary corruption of monastic life, which lay not so much in excesses of asceticism as in luxury and idleness, but partly to more basic causes. The great Reformers (whatever may be true of their successors) were no enemies to the celibate vocation. They were, however, enemies to binding vows of celibacy, which they regarded as a perilous snare; to the seclusion which accompanied these vows (except among the secular clergy, whose immorality was a parallel evil); and to the denigration of marriage by which these vows were justified. They rejected the hoary distinction between precepts of obligation and counsels of perfection, pointing out that 'each man has his own gift from God, one after this manner, and another after that' (1 Cor. 7: 7), and that marriage is therefore not just a permissible vocation but the highest vocation for the man who is called to it. In the few convents which survived the Reformation, consequently, as a few did among the Lutherans in Germany and Denmark, the binding vows were abolished. One of these convents, the Augustinian nunnery of St. Marienberg in Helmsstedt, has continued to the present day, and a few more Lutheran and Reformed convents have been founded in this century. The Sisterhood of Mary at Darmstadt may be instanced, and the Iona community, which is a semi-monastic community of men and women in the Church of Scotland. Anglican convents, of the traditional type, were revived in 1845 under the influence of the Oxford Movement, and have since become quite numerous. If, however, the monastic life is really to flourish in the Churches of the Reformation, serious account will have to be taken of the theological critique which the Reformers levelled at unreformed monasticism, and the three ideals of chastity, poverty and obedience will need to be carefully re-examined, both individually and in their relationship with each other.

### *The Office of Deaconess*

IN Rom. 16: 1-2, St. Paul commends to the Roman Church 'Phoebe our sister, being a *diakonos* of the church that is at Cenchreae . . . that ye assist her in whatsoever matter she may have need of you, for she herself also hath been a succourer of many, and of mine own self'. Dr. Blum has argued that the participle before *diakonos*, and the genitive case following it, imply that it is a technical term and should be translated '*deaconess*'. If this is so, it lends support to the belief (which Dr. Blum does not, however, share) that in a later epistle Paul is again referring to deaconesses. This is in 1 Tim. 3: 11, where the subject is qualifications for the diaconate, and the statement is made: 'Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things'. The arguments against identifying the 'women' here with deacons' wives are that the Greek word has no article, and that nothing is said in the preceding verses about the qualities needed

in the wives of bishops. This suggests that Chrysostom, and most modern commentators with him, are right in understanding the 'women' to be female deacons. Nevertheless, the question cannot be considered as closed, and the ambiguous status of deaconesses both in the ancient world and in modern times must be partly attributed to legitimate doubt whether they are in fact female deacons or not.

The functions of the deaconess in New Testament times can only be inferred. The help that Phoebe might require from the Roman Church was no doubt mainly material, and since the apostle draws a parallel between this help and the help that Phoebe had given to himself and others, it has been supposed that she was a woman of means. It is no objection to this that she was a female deacon, for it must be insisted that the diaconate was an office of considerable dignity, as is not only stated in 1 Tim. 3: 13, but is implied by the fact that in 1 Tim. 3 and Phil. 1: 1 the deacons are closely linked with the presbyter-bishops, and these two offices alone are singled out from all the ministries of Christians for special attention. The deacons should probably be viewed as assistants to the presbyter-bishops. There is, however, a possible objection to the belief that Phoebe was a woman of means in the fact that in this case she would hardly have needed material help from the Roman Church. It seems more likely, therefore, that the help which she gave to St. Paul and others she gave in her capacity as deaconess, and not as woman of means, and consequently that she gave it not out of her own resources but out of the resources of the church at Cenchreae.

Apart from ministering to material needs, the deaconess would doubtless share in the other assistant functions of the male deacon. These would not in the apostolic period include teaching the congregation (1 Cor. 14: 33-36; 1 Tim. 2: 12-15), but it is noteworthy that in 1 Tim. 3 aptness to teach is not required of the male deacon either, as it is of the bishop (v. 2; cf. Tit. 1: 9). From the position in which the reference to deaconesses is inserted in 1 Tim. 3, it may be inferred that what follows does not apply to them and that they would not normally be married, no doubt because motherhood and the care of a home would make it difficult for them to fulfil their diaconate. Nevertheless, there is certainly no prohibition of marriage here, as there is in the case of the enrolled widow.

The next reference to deaconesses comes early in the second century, in Pliny's *Letter 96, To Trajan*.<sup>11</sup> The letter is written in Latin, and he refers to those in the Christian congregation who are called *ministrae*. There is then silence about deaconesses until the third century *Didascalia* (ch. 16). The order of widows had come to prominence in the meantime, and since the silence of a writer who gives so full an account of the various orders in the Church as Tertullian cannot be accidental, any more than that of a writer who treats them so systematically as Hippolytus, it seems likely that widows for a time did duty for deacones-



ses. The order of widows began to decline in the third century, as we have seen, but the *Didascalia* and the later Church Orders show the two offices co-existing for a time, the deaconess sometimes taking the pre-eminence (as in the *Apostolic Constitutions*) and the widow at other times (as in the *Testamentum Domini*). In the *Didascalia* the deaconess is a female deacon, and like the male deacon is a personal assistant to the bishop. She assists at the baptism of women, for modesty's sake, but may not herself baptise (which, at the bishop's bidding, the deacon may do). She also instructs the newly baptised women. She visits women in their houses (which, if they have heathen husbands, a deacon could not do without arousing suspicions), ministers to them when they are sick or infirm, and informs the bishop of any who are indigent. Additional duties mentioned in documents written a century or so later are keeping the doors at which women enter church and supervising them in their places (*Apostolic Constitutions* 2: 57; 8: 28) and taking the eucharist to them in their homes when they are sick (*Testamentum Domini* 2: 20). In the East between the fourth and ninth centuries some deaconesses were eminent teachers,<sup>12</sup> and they were sometimes appointed to be superiors of convents.

According to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, deaconesses are to be appointed from among those who are virgins or at least once-married widows (bk. 6, para. 17). They are to be ordained by the laying on of the bishop's hands (bk. 8, paras. 19-20). Like the widows and virgins, they have a share of tithes for their maintenance (bk. 2, para. 25; bk. 8, para. 30). In the following century, the fifteenth canon of the Council of Chalcedon likewise rules that they are to be ordained, and are not to marry after ordination. The minimum age that it fixes for their ordination is forty.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, ordination was not favoured in the West, and several Gallican synods of the fifth and sixth centuries forbade them to be ordained.

It will be obvious from all that we have said that there was a good deal of assimilation between widow, virgin and deaconess; and just as the widow at one time did duty for the deaconess, so after the disappearance of the order of widows about the end of the fourth century the deaconess did duty for the widow; similarly, when the order of deaconesses itself disappeared, about the tenth century in the West and about two centuries later in the East, the nun did duty for both. The disappearance of the deaconess has been attributed to the decline in the number of adult baptisms, but other factors may well have been the magnetism of the convent and the development (from the fourth century onwards) of the conception of the diaconate as a first step to the priesthood.

The revival of the office of deaconess is an achievement of the reformed Churches, and effectively dates from 1836, when the Lutheran pastor Theodor Fliedner founded a Deaconess Institute in his parish of Kaiserswerth.<sup>14</sup> Fliedner's deaconess was suggested by the ancient

orders of deaconess and widow, but was more than a little influenced by the Sisters of Charity in the Church of Rome. The influence of monasticism is evident in the fact that the continental deaconess practices the monastic ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience, though without vows, that she wears a habit, and that much of her work has always been done in communities, which serve both as training centres and as hospitals. All the same, the majority of deaconesses are attached to parishes, and they may marry, though by doing so they cease to be deaconesses. Many also go out as foreign missionaries. Their primary work is pastoral, but they are not ordained, as is natural in Churches which do not ordain deacons either.

From Germany, the deaconess movement rapidly spread to other countries, supplying as it did a new outlet for the energies of dedicated women without domestic responsibilities, such as had not been open to them between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Deaconesses are now to be found in many different countries and denominations, and it is noteworthy that the order has recently been revived by the Orthodox Church in Greece. In England, the office developed side by side with other new ministries, such as those of the Salvation Army officer and Church Army sister, the lay parish worker, the Church social worker and the woman missionary. Single women had begun to be sent out as missionaries about 1827, when Mary Newell was sent to Malacca by the London Missionary Society. On the mission fields, women often had exceptional scope for their ministry, owing to the dearth of male missionaries. Other ministries for women which have now developed are those of directors of religious education, trained youth leaders, Sunday School organisers, chaplains' assistants (as in hospitals, prisons, universities and the armed forces), lay workers attached not to a parish but to a deanery or a team ministry, and teachers of theology.<sup>15</sup> Many of the Free Churches have female lay preachers, and the Church of England recently decided that women should be admitted to the corresponding auxiliary office, that of lay reader.

In the Church of England, the first deaconess to be authorised by a bishop was Elizabeth Ferard, set apart by the Bishop of London in 1862. From England the movement spread to other parts of the Anglican Communion, and in 1889 the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA passed a canon giving the deaconess a degree of recognition which she had still not attained in England. Even this canon left many questions unanswered, and in January 1899 Bishop William Collins of Gibraltar published an influential article in the *Church Quarterly Review*, which was later reprinted as Appendix 7 to the 1919 report on *The Ministry of Women*, pointing out the serious ambiguities surrounding this office. Was the deaconess allowed to marry, or was she not? Was she appointed for life, or was she not? Was she ordained, or was she not? The Lambeth Conferences of 1920 and 1930, prompted by

the 1919 report, went a considerable way towards solving these questions (in Resolutions 47-52 and 67-70 respectively). They resolved that the deaconess was allowed to marry, that she was appointed for life, and that she was ordained (though, like the deacon, only in an auxiliary capacity). The Conferences recognised her as a female deacon, but in order to avoid the implication that she could proceed to the priesthood, they ruled that her office 'should follow the lines of the primitive rather than of the modern Diaconate of men'. The Conferences went on to outline her duties, on the pattern of early Church practice, including the right 'with the license of the Bishop, to instruct and preach'. The permission to marry was at variance with the practice of the fourth century, of course, though not with that of the first.<sup>16</sup> The anomaly which remained was the assertion that her diaconate was not the modern diaconate. This made it possible for Anglicans to go on contending (as in the new Canon D 1 of the Church of England) that 'The Order of Deaconesses is not one of the Holy Orders of the Church of England and accordingly Deaconesses may accept membership of any Lay Assembly of the Church of England without prejudice to the standing of their Order'.<sup>17</sup> Resolution 32 of the 1968 Lambeth Conference has now opened the way to the removal of this remaining anomaly, by recommending the revival of the perpetual diaconate, and the recognition of deaconesses as not only true deacons but modern deacons within that context. This would make it possible for most of the discrepancies of function between the deacon and the deaconess to be removed, and for deaconesses to sit in the deliberative assemblies of the clergy, not of the laity,<sup>18</sup> without any implication that they are probationer-priests.

### *The Limits of Women's Ministry*

IN the New Testament, as was universally recognised until modern times, St. Paul sets definite limits to the ministry of women. In 1 Cor. 14: 33-36 he rules that they are not to speak in the congregation: *a fortiori*, therefore, they are not to teach there. The consequence is drawn out explicitly in 1 Tim. 2: 8-15, where he directs that, unlike men, women are not to teach or to lead in prayer. (The supposed inconsistency of this second passage with 1 Cor. 11: 5 is imaginary; if it was when leading in prayer that the Corinthian women removed their veils, St. Paul would naturally say so, but his subject was the removal of veils, and the fact that he does not stop to condemn them also for leading in prayer need not be taken to imply that he approved of this practice.) In both passages he grounds his prohibition on the subordination of women, as taught in the Old Testament, and in the second passage he makes specific appeal to the order of creation and to Gen. 3: 16. The subordination of women is therefore by nature (cf. also 1 Cor. 11: 8-9): it goes back behind the Fall, and still obtains after the

coming of Christ. The deductions which St. Paul draws from this subordination are less important than the principle of subordination itself: the deduction that women must not even open their mouths, and the deduction that they must not uncover their heads, both seem to be conditioned by contemporary custom (1 Cor. 11: 16; 14: 33, 36), and the deduction that they must not teach may be similarly conditioned. If so, it would be permissible in changed circumstances for women sometimes to teach, and sometimes to lead in prayer, but not to assume an office in which they would normally do so, and in which they would exercise discipline, since this would be to usurp authority over the menfolk in the congregation. Thus, they should not assume the office of presbyter-bishop, an office which carries with it authority over the congregation (as the title 'overseer' or 'bishop' implies, and as is stated in 1 Thess. 5: 12; 1 Tim. 5: 17; Heb. 13: 17, 24; 1 Pet. 5: 2). Nor should they have a predominant voice in church-government.

The early Church maintained Paul's rule that women should not speak or teach (Tertullian, *Baptism* 17, *Prescription* 41, *Veiling of Virgins* 9; *Didascalia* 15; *Apostolic Constitutions* 3: 6; *Testamentum Domini* 1: 40; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 14), and further forbade them to administer the sacraments (Tertullian, *loc. cit.*; *Didascalia*, 15, 16; *Apostolic Constitutions* 3: 9). It ordained them to the diaconate but not to the priesthood, and this is not to be attributed to male prejudice, since the early Church freely admitted (as we have seen) that the female deacon could do things for women which the male deacon could not. The examples which later occur in the East of deaconesses exercising a teaching ministry probably reflect a change of custom in the ways of publicly expressing female subordination, and also a growing emphasis on the ministry of the sacraments rather than the ministry of the word as the prime prerogative of the priesthood. To the same two causes may be attributed the striking prominence of lay theologians (women among them) in the Eastern Orthodox Church of today.

Prophetesses were always exempt from the ordinary restriction on teaching, and supposed prophetesses appeared both in the heretical sects of antiquity and in mediaeval Europe. Female preaching was known among the Anabaptists and the early Independents and Methodists, and became common among the Quakers, as it has since become in the Salvation Army and in revivalist movements generally. The Salvation Army was one of the earliest denominations to admit women to its authorised ministry without distinction, though it should be borne in mind that Salvation Army officers do not administer sacraments. The modern emancipation of women has, however, led to a widespread movement towards their ordination, on the same terms as the ordination of men. The universities and the learned professions have been opened to women, and it has been plausibly asked why, if they can study and teach theology at university level, they cannot be ordained.

The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Catholic and Anglican Churches have withstood this movement towards ordination (the latest Anglican decision on the subject, in Resolutions 34-37 of the 1968 Lambeth Conference, being characteristically cautious), but many Churches of the Congregational and Presbyterian families have now taken the step of ordaining women to the presbyterate. In 1958, 48 of the 168 member-churches of the World Council of Churches reported that they admitted women to the full ministry (21 gave no reply). The Congregational Union of England and Wales took the step of admitting them as long ago as 1917; the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland also took the step some considerable while ago; the Presbyterian Church of England did so more recently; the Church of Scotland did so in 1968, the first ordination taking place in 1969; while the Methodist Conference resolved in 1966 that women may properly be ordained but that unilateral action would be inexpedient pending the outcome of the Anglican-Methodist union scheme. The Dutch Reformed Church is another church which has recently admitted women to full ordination: it has done so as from the beginning of 1968. Two united Churches ordain women in this way—the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ in Japan (the Kyodan). The three national Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia have now admitted women to the priesthood, but in Norway and particularly in Sweden they have done this under pressure from the state, and opposition continues unabated.<sup>19</sup>

The authority that women have in the Church is not, of course, determined simply by their opportunities of ordination. The power that they exercised from about the seventh century, particularly through the religious orders, has been exaggerated but was certainly considerable.<sup>20</sup> In our own day, women are increasingly being admitted to a share in Church government,<sup>21</sup> and though it is becoming customary to remove all restrictions here, female representatives give as yet no sign of gaining an undue predominance over male ones.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> eg Gordon Rattray Taylor, *Sex and Society*.

<sup>2</sup> eg Charles Seltman, *Woman in Antiquity*; J. Cercopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, ch. iv.

<sup>3</sup> In the report *Women and Holy Orders* (London, CIO, 1966), p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> On the history of this order, and of women's ministry in general, see the elaborate Anglican report of 1919, *The Ministry of Women* (London, SPCK), and J. Daniélou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (London, Faith Press, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> See Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> See Cyprian, *Dress of Virgins* 7-11; Ambrose, *Virgins* 12.

<sup>7</sup> On asceticism in the first three centuries, see J. O. Hannay, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* (London, Methuen, 1903), chs. 1-3, which must, however, be treated with caution.

<sup>8</sup> On the early history of convent life, see I. Gregory Smith, *Christian Monasticism from the Fourth to the Ninth Centuries* (London, Innes, 1892), pt. 2, ch. 9.

- <sup>9</sup> See H. B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal* (London, Kelly, 1913), pp. 66-74, 302-305.
- <sup>10</sup> These sentences are quoted from an unpublished essay by Mother Jane Margaret, CSMV.
- <sup>11</sup> On the deaconess of patristic times see, in addition to the literature cited earlier, A. Kalsbach, *Die Altkirchliche Einrichtung der Diakonissen bis zu ihrem Erlöschen* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1926).
- <sup>12</sup> See Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, pp. 14-15.
- <sup>13</sup> For the ancient rites used in ordaining deaconesses, see the 1919 report on *The Ministry of Women*, appendix 14.
- <sup>14</sup> On the modern deaconess, see *World Council of Churches Studies No. 4: The Deaconess* (Geneva, WCC, 1966); Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, pp. 79-94, 156-159.
- <sup>15</sup> See Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, pp. 36-38, 94-110, 124-131; Kathleen Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action* (London, Bles, 1962).
- <sup>16</sup> The canon of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA at that time confined the office to virgins and widows, and ruled that it was vacated by marriage. This followed fourth century practice, as modified in the Lutheran Church. The canon was not brought into line with the Lambeth resolutions until 1965.
- <sup>17</sup> A similar anomaly exists in the Methodist Church of Great Britain, with the added complication that the Methodist Church does not ordain deacons. The Methodist deaconess, like the Baptist deaconess, is sometimes given the oversight of a congregation, with authority to administer both words and sacraments.
- <sup>18</sup> As the report *Women in Ministry* (London, CIO, 1968), p. 47, explicitly proposes.
- <sup>19</sup> See the report *Women and Holy Orders*, ch. 4 and Appendix 3B; Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, ch. 4; Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of Women in the Church* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1955), pp. 83-88, 94-95, 100; G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1946), pp. 87-89. As regards the situation in Sweden, reference may also be made to a remark of Gustav Wingren's, that Bertil Gärtner 'is among the most prolific exegetes in Sweden. He has a considerable influence on young ministers, and in his monographs and essays has rejected on biblical grounds the recent decision of the Church of Sweden to ordain women to the ministry. Alone among Swedish New Testament exegetes (Gösta Lindeskog takes the opposite and therefore positive standpoint in this question' (*The Main Lines of Development in Systematic Theology and Biblical Interpretation in Scandinavia*, Richmond, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1964, pp. 5-6).
- <sup>20</sup> This question may be studied in the 1919 report on the *Ministry of Women*, Appendices 8 and 9.
- <sup>21</sup> See Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, ch. 5.
- <sup>22</sup> The information which the author of this article has derived from the authorities quoted above has been supplemented with information supplied by Deaconess Lorna Fry, of the Council for Women's Ministry in the Church; by Miss F. G. Weeks and Miss J. G. Baldwin, of Dalton House, Bristol; by Mrs. V. A. Zander, of the Russian Orthodox Church; and by the Rev. Aksel Solbu, of the Church of Norway. All this the author gratefully acknowledges.