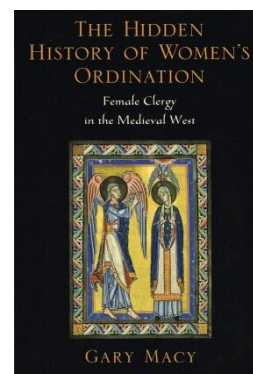


Gary Macy – The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West

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Summary

This is a fascinating and thoroughly documented book (original liturgies are printed as appendices). Macy demonstrates that women were ordained from the earliest times up until the 12th century in the same way as men, ordination then being understood simply as appointment to a particular office in the church (or in society). Ordination services were conducted by bishops, with the laying on of hands, prayer for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and the giving of a stole/book/other appropriate badge of office. There are parallel liturgies for women and men, with appropriate prayers and masculine/feminine endings – abbots/abbesses, deacons/deaconesses etc. Ordained women were charged with exercising a similar ministry to ordained men – eg abbesses had the same responsibility for leadership, hearing confessions, etc as did abbots.



During the 12th and 13th centuries [which we know to be a time of significant social and intellectual ferment, leading to many changes in perception] the understanding of ordination was revised, and it came to be linked with presidency at the eucharist, this role being restricted to men only. This can be interpreted in part as a result of the increasing power struggle between church and state, and the consequent need for clergy to be clearly distinguished from laity by some special office which laity could not exercise, and of the rediscovery/integration of classical texts into the intellectual environment – in particular Gratian’s incorporation of Roman law (which sharply differentiated between men and women) into the canon of the church, and the writings of Aristotle, who saw women as clearly and by nature inferior to men. As part of this new understanding, it was often declared that the previous ordination of women either did not happen or was not valid. Women disappeared from the equation, and came to occupy a much reduced role in the church. Celibacy was introduced as a requirement for ordained ministry in the same period.

It follows that the key question for our age is not ‘should women be ordained?’ but rather, ‘what is ordination?’

1. The State of the Question

Few historians have questioned the assumption that women have never been ordained in the Christian West. Recent research shows that the memory of ordained women has been nearly erased, or dismissed as illusion or delusion; this is a history that has been deliberately forgotten, intentionally marginalized and creatively explained away.

The history of Christianity is replete with references to the ordination of women. There are rites for the ordination of women; there are particular women depicted as ordained, and a number of roles limited to women are included among lists of ordained ministries. The controversy arises only because in later ages it was thought that women were incapable of being ordained – and therefore that they cannot have been ordained in the past.

Liturgist Jean Morin produced a monumental collection of ordination rites in Greek, Latin and Syriac in 1655, and concluded that as the same rites were used for deacons and deaconesses in the most ancient Greek rites, then deaconesses were indeed ordained. Later theologians insisted that the modern concept of ordination should be used to determine whether women were ordained in the past. Galot considered that ancient deaconesses of the Eastern church were sacramentally ordained. Joan Morris (1973) concluded that women were ordained, as abbesses, to administrative positions within the church from the earliest times, being given titles such as *Episcopa*, *Sacerdos Maxima*, *Praeposita*, and *Custos* of churches and exercising the powers of a bishop with regard to the jurisdiction of churches and people within their territories. Martimort (1982) concluded that both sexes were ordained deacon but only men served at the altar and continued to the priesthood – but uses modern theological categories to assess the validity of ordination of deaconesses. Otranto (1982) suggested women had functioned as priests in Italy and Brittany in the 5th-6th, based on a letter of Pope Gelasius I which condemned the practice of bishops allowing women to officiate at the altar. Like Martimort, he assumed service at the altar implied ordination, and vv. Aubert (1987) agreed that the ordination of female deacons in the Greek church was a true sacramental ordination; but pointed out that one cannot answer the question of whether women had received a true sacramental ordination in the 4th, because the concept of a true sacramental ordination did not exist then.

The continued use of the word “ordination” for rites of initiation in to Christian ministry gives the illusion of perfect continuity. Yet for men and women, ordination had a far different meaning for the first half of Christian history than it would come to have in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Ute Eisen (1996) concluded from her study of the epigraphical evidence of women ministers in the early Christian centuries that ‘it is clear that women were active in the expansion and shaping of the Church in the first centuries: they

were apostles, prophets, teachers, presbyters, enrolled widows, deacons, bishops, and stewards' –they were office holders. Reininger (1999) notes the growing awareness among scholars that the understanding of ordination changed significantly in the 12-13th centuries, judgment about earlier ordinations is problematic. The present teaching that the three offices of deacon, priest and bishop constitute a sacramental unity and are thus different from any other office in the church is not consistent with pre C12th understanding and practice. Macy himself contributed an article (2000) which demonstrated that ordination in the early Middle Ages referred to any ceremony by which a person moved to a new role or ministry (*ordo*) in the church; and so nuns, abbesses and queens were described as ordained.

2. What did ordination mean?

An important change in the understanding of ordination took place some time in the 11th and 12th centuries in W Christianity. How was ordination understood before then?

The current understanding of ordination is that defined by Morin: the ritual must be called an ordination, be celebrated at the altar by a bishop, include the laying on of hands and the placing of a stole on the ordinand, that the ordained receive communion in both forms and that the ordination be to one of the 3 orders of priest, deacon or subdeacon. But until the C11th there was no necessary progression from deacon to priest to bishop. Deacons could become bishops, and priests could be ordained without having been deacons. The offices of deacon, priest and bishop existed independently. Until the C11-12th there were an additional 8 or 9 'minor' orders.

Gy (1957) argued that the term ordination originated with the political structure of the Roman Empire in which powerful societal groups were known as *ordines* (orders). The word was applied during the High MA to kings, abbots and abbesses. Fuchs (1963) found that until the C12th there was a close tie between ordination and the appointment to a particular congregation; only in the C12th would ordination become an appointment to spiritual service not tied to any particular community. Metz found that the Roman pontifical of the C13th also spoke of the ordination of doorkeepers, lectors, exorcists and acolytes. Ott (1969) pointed out that it was Pope Urban II who in 1091 first described ordination as limited to the priesthood and diaconate; the first definition of *ordo* appeared in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Peter linked order with power – 'something sacred by which a spiritual power and office is given to the ordained'. Alexander of Hales modified this in the C13th to 'order is a sacrament of spiritual power for some office established in the Church for the sacrament of Communion'. These became the standard definitions. So: a redefinition of ordination was begun in the 11th century and was completed by the early 13th century (;) .. that definition tended to condense ordination to the power given to priests to consecrate the bread and wine in the Eucharist.' Gy summarises: before the C12-13th, ordination was a dedication to a particular role or ministry, not the granting of a special power linked to the liturgy of the altar. Schillebeeckx locates this change in the 3rd and 4th Lateran Councils (1179 and 1215). He understands it to be rooted in the concepts of law borrowed from the newly discovered texts of Roman law; the priesthood was personalised and privatised, and something new appeared: an ordination tied to the power to celebrate the Eucharist.

Ordination in the early MA is defined by Congar: 'the words *ordinare*, *ordinari*, *ordinatio* signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a certain place, or better a certain function, *ordo*, in the community and at its service.' These words were used to describe the ceremony and installation not only of bishops, priests, deacons and subdeacons but also porters, lectors, exorcists, acolytes, canons, abbots, abbesses, kings, queens and empresses. They didn't even necessarily apply to a clerical state; Innocent III described canon lawyers as a separate *ordo*.

The rites of the Church of Spain from the C8-14th survive in a collection of MSS; the oldest includes rites from the C7-11th. The section for rites of ordination includes: clerics, sacristans, persons in charge of books, persons wishing to cut their beard; subdeacons, deacons, archdeacons, head clerics, priests, archpriests, abbots, garments dedicated to God, virgins, veiled women, abbesses. The Pontifical of Egbert bishop of York, C8th, includes prayers for the ordination of psalmists, doorkeepers, lectors, exorcists, acolytes, subdeacons, all of which were referred to as ordinations. The Gregorian Sacramentary attrib to Gregory the Great includes rites for all these too. Women's' *ordines* are included along with those of men, with no indication that they were considered different from those reserved to men. The C10th Romano-Germanic Pontifical includes several ordination rites for women among those of men – virgins, abbesses, deaconesses, widows taking a vow of chastity. It includes rites for priests, deacons, deaconesses, subdeacons, psalmists, doorkeepers, lectors, exorcists, acolytes, virgins, widows, abbots, abbesses and monks – ordination is not understood as limited to the priesthood and diaconate, but rather it celebrated and effected the move into a new ministry or *ordo* in the church. C12th Pontificals follow the same pattern; ordination is for both sexes and is not reserved for those ministries which serve at the altar.

Development of the power of the priest

The central role of the priest as administrator of the sacraments became essential to ordination only with its redefinition – previously the question of who had the power to perform rituals was less important than the question of who the community had chosen as their ministers. The power of the priesthood was expanding to take over almost all ritual roles in the church; abbots and abbesses had previously preached, heard confessions and baptized, but all these powers would be reserved to the priest in the C12th and C13th. But the most important function now reserved to the priest was the

power to celebrate the Mass, and it was accompanied by the teaching that only a properly ordained priest could make the risen Christ present in the Eucharist. This was clearly stated in the Fourth Lateran council (1215) in a new creed directed against heretical groups such as the Waldensians – ‘this sacrament no one can effect except the priest who has been duly ordained in accordance with the keys of the Church, which Jesus Christ Himself gave to the Apostles and their successors.’ The old understanding has gone. The church that emerged from the Council was something new – more clerical, hierarchical, centralised than its predecessor.

Conclusion

Ordination in the early Middle Ages did not have the same meaning that it would come to have after the twelfth century. Rather than the bestowal of a particular power and authority connected to the eucharistic liturgy and limited those offices that performed that liturgy, ordination referred to the process which one was chosen for a particular ministry or service in the church. tither, the term "ordination" was more or less interchangeable with the term "consecration" or "blessing" or even "making" or, in the case of nuns, "veiling." Any different ministries were considered to be ordained, including several ministries reserved for women. This did not mean that all those ordained were ordained to the same ministries, of course. In the next chapter, the various ministries that women did perform will be investigated in more detail. As will become dearer in the next chapter, women did indeed serve at the altar as priests and deacons, but that service was not a determining factor in judging whether they were considered ordained or not by their contemporaries. To argue that women were not ordained because they either did not or should not have served at the altar would be to impose definitions developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on this earlier period. To do so requires a theological judgment that only the later definition encompasses "true ordination." As described in chapter 1, this may be theologically justified in order to determine what authority this past brings to present debates on the ordination of women. As history, however, it is simply anachronistic.

The evidence that a broader understanding of ordination existed in the early Middle Ages is widespread. Popes, bishops, theologians, and the book of rituals used in ordinations bare witness to this more inclusive understanding of ordination. According to this definition of ordination, women were certainly considered to be ordained. However, the sources discussed here are deliberately limited. They were chosen to show that the ordained ministries of women were included among those for men and that the ministries for women were included among lists of clergy. There exist many other references to the ministry of women during this period, references that offer a much more detailed picture of the actual ministries that women performed during this period.

3. The Ministry of Ordained Women

‘It was not in the interests of those males who produced the vast canonical and theological collection of the C12th and C13th to “remember” either that women were ever ordained or that they ever performed liturgical functions reserved for males. Laws denying women access to the altar or to ordination would be preserved and would eventually be understood to be the true and only tradition.’ Sources were dropped or explained away, and only fragments remain.

Episcopae

There are 5 refs to women bishops in W Christianity: C9th Theodora episopa (mosaic in S Prassede, Rome); A C4-6th Umbrian tomb of ‘episcopa Q’; Brigid of Ireland, whose C9 life describes her ordination to the episcopacy (the bishop did it by mistake but once done it was accepted); Hildeburga, wife of +Segenfrid of Le Mans C10th, described as ‘episcopissa’; C6 ref at the Council of Tours to ‘episopia’ – probably meaning wife of a bishop. C6 in Gaul, married clergy had to agree, with their spouses, to live together chastely.

Presbyterae

Lots of refs, often but not always referring to wives of priests. 5 inscriptions refer to presbyterae, all C4-6th, from Italy, France, Croatia and Sicily. The Sicilian tomb is of the presbytera Kale (no ref to marital status); one in Calabria is for the prebytera Leta, erected by her husband (no mention of his being a priest). A graffito from Poitiers commemorates that ‘Martia the presbyter made the offering togetghe rwith Olybrius and Nepos’ – scholars confirm it refers to Martia as a minister who celebrated the eucharist along with 2 men, Olybrius and Nepos’. A fragment from Croatia mentions a sacerdotae, using the fem Latin word for priest not the Gk word presbyter. Another inscription from Croatia refers to presbytera Flavia Vitalia. Some of these may refer to wives of priests (Councils of Tours, 567 and of Auxerre 578 use the word in this way), but other sources suggest women were ordained in their own right. Council of Nimes (397) protests against women being ‘assumed into levitical service’ and Pople Gelasius complained that ‘women are confirmed to minister at the sacred altars and to perform all matters imputed only to the service of the male sex.’ Women were administering the eucharist in Brittany in C6th. Gregory the Gt was concerned that an abbess called Sirica had even after her ordination as abbess continued to wear the dress of a presbyta.

Surviving rites

Women certainly did distribute communion in the C10, C11 and perhaps C12. There are texts for the services in 2MSS, one for use by nuns in Benevento, the other is a eucharistic prayer with feminine endings. IN the C10 the bishop of Rome blesses women, deaconesses and prsbyterae at an ordination ceremony for priests and deacons. The Grogorian sacramentary contains a prayer for the making of an abbot/abbess; the C8th *Liber sacramentorum Gellonensis* includes a

prayer for 'when an abbot or abbess is ordained in the monastery', as does the C9th *Liber sacramentorum Augustodunensis* and the C12th Roman sacramentary. 3 C9-10th MSS include commentaries on church law and say a deaconess is an abbess, ordained through the imposition of hands by the bishop, and pointing out that there were presbyterae in the gospel.

So – some women did minister at the altar as priests with the support of at least some bishops until at least the C9th. They were not specifically called presbyterae – another group were, at least some of whom were the wives of priests. Presumably they were called presbyterae because they performed the functions of priests. By the C10 there were no more presbyterae. +Atto of Vercelli says the ancient laws speak of deaconesses and presbyterae because devout women were ordained because of a shortage of workers.

Deaconesses

+Remigius of Reims left a servant and part vineyard to his daughter Helaria the deaconess. Rade Gund, wife of King Clothar 1, left him and was consecrated a deaconess by +Médard of Noyen. There were deaconesses Anna in Rome in the C6, Theodora in Gaul and Ausonia from Dalmatia. There are also refs from the C7-9th. The Council of Paris in 829 protested against women distributing communion. Abbesses were considered deaconesses because they could read the gospel during liturgies.

Ordination rites for deaconesses survive from the C5-12th. Earliest in the W is the C8th Pontifical of +Egbert of York, where the ordination service for a deacon has parallel prayers for use in the ordination of deaconesses. The C9th Gregorian sacramentary gives the same prayers. The C10 Romano-Germanic Pontifical has a complete liturgy for the ordination of a deacon and of a deaconess, within a Mass, and including the giving of a stole.. Canonical commentaries describe deaconesses as ordained through the imposition of hands by a bishop.

An alternative portrait

The wives of bishops, priests and deacons were obliged by church law from C6th to separate from their husbands and live continently, as widows, virgins, nuns do. The titles *episcopa*, *presbytera*, *deaconess* are not used in the canons of the councils to refer to spouses of clergy before their ordination. Clerical marriage was forbidden in the C12th. There is good evidence to suggest that some bishops allowed women to participate at the altar – and that others disapproved. This disapproval later became the received wisdom of the Church.

Abbesses

Described as ordained; their role was the head of a monastic community, just like an abbot. Their ministry is clearer than that of *episcopae*, *presbyterae*, *deaconesses*. They were regarded as ordained as any other clergy in the early MA, and exercised the functions later reserved for the male offices of bishop, priest, deacon (but they were regarded as ordained not because they exercised these functions but because they were appointed to the office). The Mozarabic rite includes ceremonies for both abbots and abbesses, both beginning with a vesting in the sacristy, with mitre, and ending with a staff and copy of the rule plus a kiss of peace from the bishop. Abbesses heard nuns' confessions, gave penances not only for their nuns but sometimes for people of the surrounding area. Despite laws from church councils, abbesses and holy nuns were often described ministering around the altar.

Abbesses were regarded as deaconesses, the living continuation of the ancient ministry founded by the apostles. They read the gospel, distributed communion, taught young women and sometimes young men, heard confessions, gave penances and absolved from sin.

Conclusion

*First and most important, women were ordained in the early Middle Ages. According to the understanding of ordination held by themselves and their contemporaries, they were just as truly ordained as any bishop, priest, or deacon. The ordination rites for deaconesses and abbesses have been preserved, and they closely parallel those for deacons and abbots when they are not in fact interchangeable. The rites for *episcopae* and *presbyterae* have been lost, although it is possible that rites for bishops and priests were also used for women. At the very least, there are references to rituals of "conversion" during which the wives of bishops and priests took on lives of continence after the ordination of their husbands. In all these cases, women moved to another ministry, or *ordo*, in the church, and the ceremony for that move was an ordination.*

To argue that these ordinations were not "true" ordinations since they were not ordinations to service at the altar, or because they did not always involve the laying on of hands or lead inexorably to the ministry of priesthood, would be at best a theological judgment based on the standing these women would now have in some Christian communities (if they were alive), and is anachronistic. A theological judgment that such ordinations do not meet modern criteria is itself fraught with problems peculiar to the discipline of theology and raises its own concerns.¹⁸³ Historically, however, there can be no question of the validity of such ordinations. There are rites for the ordination of women; there are canonical requirements for the ordination of women; there are particular women depicted as ordained; and a number of roles limited to women¹ are included in lists of ordained ministries. The evidence is simply overwhelming.

Further, the ministries to which these women belonged encompassed all actions that came to be reserved only to the male diaconate and presbytera. Some bishops allowed women to serve at the altar leading the Mass or at least celebrating with men at the Mass. Some bishops allowed women to distribute communion, and the liturgies for these services have

survived. Abbesses least certainly heard confessions, gave penances, and absolved from sin. B abbesses and episcojxie administered churches that were the equivalent of, sometimes were, dioceses. Some abbesses wore the miter and wielded the staff as powerfully as bishops, and one, Brigid, was held to have been ordained a bishop in hagiological lore. Of course a number of council members, bishops, and popes were appalled that women were serving at the altar and condemned such activity. These are contained particularly in the councils of the Merovingian bishops cited so frequently in this chapter. The decrees of these councils, as well as the *History of the Franks* by Gregory of Tours, are most important sources for the history of the church during this period. They dominate the scene in a way that gives them disproportionate weight in understanding the role of women in the early church. As important as they are, they need to be carefully put in their proper places. They are not "the church," but at best speak for one party within the church. They represent the wishes of a group of reforming bishops from one area of Europe, and the decrees of these councils were not binding outside their own diocese. The same is true for the letters of the popes. They were the bishops of Rome who at times claimed a much wider authority. Some bishops agreed with those claims; some did not. The claims and counterclaims for papal power have a long and checkered history. What is clear from the evidence is that the reforms of the Merovingian councils mostly failed. Clergy did not become celibate or chaste. They continued to marry and continued to have active sex lives with their spouses. We have much less evidence from this party within the church, and so their views tend to fade in importance. Yet they may well have been the majority. In the same way, the evidence shows that the laws banning women from the altar, or from touching any of the objects associated with the altar, were ignored or unknown to the women discussed above. One simply cannot assume that the statement of a pope or a council from this period represented a decree of some unified "church" or that such statements were known or followed even within the area from which they originated. Statements by popes and councils are often wish lists, and not all wishes are fulfilled. It is the history of the decrees of the popes and councils that misleads. They were gathered up by the reforming bishops first of the Carolingian period and then of the eleventh- and twelfth-century reformers into massive collections of church law that gave the impression of unity and uniformity, as indeed they were meant to do. Once so gathered, the wish lists of disparate councils and popes were understood as descriptions of how the past once was and now, once again, ought to be. The program of reform of the Merovingian bishops was taken up by the Carolingians (among other reform projects). The Carolingian reformers seemed to have been no more successful in imposing celibacy and/or continence on the clergy than were the Merovingian bishops, nor did they seem to have much success in deterring abbesses and deaconesses from ritual roles that had, by then, become traditional.

4. Defining women out of ordination

Hugh of St Victor (Paris, C12) wrote that bishops were part of the *ordo* of priests, not separate. The teaching that Jesus only founded 2 orders (deacon, priest) was widespread by 1140. A *sententia* from the School of Laon insisted: 'the presbyterate and diaconate only are called sacred orders'. It paved the way for the concept that all other orders were not truly orders at all, or their ordinations ordinations. It didn't affect deaconesses, who were held to be deacons, or abbesses, likewise. But another change did threaten the right of women to ordination; the C4th commentary on the letters of Paul (Ambrosiaster – thought then to be Ambrose) became increasingly copied. It argues that Paul was not speaking of ministry for women even in Romans (deacon Phoebe) or 1 Tim 3.8-13 (requirements for deacons/deaconesses). The *Glossa ordinaria* of the School of Laon (early C12) also insists that 1 Tim 3 is speaking of wives of deacons. These two teachings, the *sententia* and the *glossa*, removed any possibility of women being considered as ordained. The final stage comes with Gratian's *Decretum*, which says (in a discussion of whether a woman can give testimony against a priest) that women are not able to advance to the priesthood or even diaconate. 'Here was a clear and unambiguous statement that women could not be ordained either as priests or deacons, the only *ordines* recognized as truly ordained in this new definition of ordination. Within a fifty-year period, the centuries-old tradition for the ordination of women had been reversed and denied.'

Abelard mounted a last ditch stand, arguing that women belonged to the diaconate as much as men; it was the most thorough and passionate defence of women's orders of the high MA. He drew on tradition – Origen, Claudius and Cassiodorus all advanced the position that women help ministries in the church and Romans proved it. Rabanus Marus, Sedulius Scotus, and the anon C11th commentary on Paul all understood his letters as establishing the ministry of women in the church. Ivo of Chartres and Hugh of St Victor, C12, continued to refer to the minor orders as ordained, as did later C12th writers.

The canonical debate

The situation in the second half of the C12th was in flux. Most C12th canonists followed Gratian; but 5 refs to presbyterae and deaconesses found their way into the *Decretum*. None of the Merovingian legislation did, though – the memory of the earlier ministry of women was being expunged from official ecclesial sources. Rufinus, relying on the *Glossa ordinaria*, wrote about deaconesses in a way which marked a turning point in the understanding of the ordination of women. He defined ordination as ordination to the altar and distinguished it from an 'ordination' that is just a commissioning for a particular ministry – this enabled him to reconcile the clash of authorities authorising and forbidding female ordination, particularly with regard to deaconesses and abbesses. Abbesses were thus clearly ordained in this second, non sacramental way. This dealt neatly with a thousand years of refs to women's ordination. The distinction between 'true' ordination and mere blessing was a huge success. The majority of canonists and theologians followed his lead in not only

denying that women could be ordained, but also in believing that women had never been ordained. Not only were the practices of Western Christianity to be changed, but also history itself. In one of the most successful propaganda efforts ever launched, a majority of Christians came to accept that ordination had always been limited to the priesthood and the diaconate and that women had never served in either ministry.' By the beginning of the 13th most canon lawyers were convinced that women had never been ordained and never could be ordained. But they could be, and had been, blessed so that they could perform special functions – like reading the gospel at matins. Within a century women lost all standing as ordained clergy. They could not be ordained. They never had been truly ordained, despite any authorities to the contrary. All women were now simply laity.

Innocent III thundered against abbesses for doing what they'd always done.

Bernard of Botone's Apparatus on the Decretals of Gregory IX (1245) became the Glossa ordinaria for the Liber Extra (the official collection of all new laws from the papacy) has this:

A woman in fact is able neither to preach, nor to teach because this office is foreign to women, nor to touch the sacred vessels . . . nor are they able to veil nuns . . . nor to absolve them. . . nor to judge, unless clearly some noble [woman] has this from custom . . . nor to take authority upon themselves . . . nor is she able to be a procurator in court. . . nor is she able to plead in court. . . and generally the office of males is forbidden to women.

This catalog of caveats would be repeated in successive commentaries and become the standard teaching in schools of canon law. 102 The debate over the ordination of women was swiftly settled by the canonists. Gratian had stated that women could not be priests or deacons, and his opinion prevailed. A few canonists had objected, arguing that references in the Decretum itself to presbyterae and deaconesses was proof that women had at least at one time been ordained. These references were explained away in a threefold process. First, the ordinations to which the literature referred were not true ordinations. Second, the presbyterae and deaconesses to whom the literature referred were not true priests or deaconesses. Finally, a definitive argument was offered to remove any possibility that women ever had been or ever would be ordained. Women, in their very existence as women, could not receive the character of holy orders. Even if the rite of ordination were performed over a woman, it would simply have no effect.'

The theological position

Peter Lombard offered the first definition of the sacrament of orders: 'If, however, one asks: what is it which is here called order, it can indeed be said to be a certain thing, that is, something sacred, by which a spiritual power and office is given to the one ordained. Therefore a spiritual character is called an *ordo* or grade, where the promotion to power occurs' (*Sententia*). This is new: ordination is tied now to power rather than to vocation, to status not to appointment. Some canonists regarded ordination understood thus as irreversible; others did not. The *Summa Aurea* of William of Auxerre likened ordination to baptism, and described the priesthood as the most worthy of orders because of the priest's ability to consecrate the body and blood of the Lord. The sacrament of orders began to be identified exclusively with service at the altar because only this service, as embodied in the priesthood, could make the risen Christ present in the liturgy. This reached its full articulation in Alexander of Hales' commentary on the *Sentences*. So the definition of ordination that is still that accepted by most Christians was now complete. Ordination was not a ceremony making the entry of a member of the church into a new service or ministry; ordination was a ceremony empowering a member of the church for one purpose, the consecration of the bread and wine during the liturgy in order to make the risen Christ present at that liturgy.' The other orders (minor orders) just existed to make the priesthood possible.

Conclusion

*Rarely in history has ritual practice and understanding changed so rapidly and so completely. In the 1130s, Abelard could still staunchly defend the *ordo* of deaconess as divinely instituted, as truly ordained, and as still functioning in the guise of abbesses, one of whom was his own wife, Heloise. By 1230, such a defense would have been most unlikely, if not in fact unthinkable.*

Two changes comprised this shift. First, ordination was redefined. Rather than a ceremony that celebrated the move to a new ministry in a particular community, ordination became a ceremony that granted power and a new spiritual status to a particular individual. Second, ordination was focused on only one ministry and one power, the ministry of the priesthood and the power to consecrate the bread and wine during the liturgy of the Mass. Other roles were quite quickly relegated to the ordained, and only the ordained, such as hearing confessions and preaching. However, the central power and the central ministry of a priest (and to a lesser extent to a deacon) was the ability to make the risen Christ present on the altar. This power set aside priests from all other believers, marking them with an indelible character that made their ordinations irreversible. They became a different kind of believer, if not a different kind of human being.

This change in the definition of ordination did not automatically exclude women. After all, women had been and, according to Abelard, Heloise, and many others, still were deaconesses. If deaconesses were the same as deacons, then they too were ordained even under a definition that limited ordination to the presbyterate and the diaconate. But at the same time that theologians and canonists were redefining ordination, they also began a process of expunging the memory of ordained women from Christianity. First, commentaries on scripture denied that the apostle Paul had ever referred to deaconesses in his letters. In fact, only heretics could so read the letters. Next, Gratian, based on this reading of scripture, denied that women could aspire to either the priesthood or the diaconate. Commentators on Gratian debated this point, but the majority of writers and the prevailing opinion argued that women, in their very essence, were incapable of

receiving the character of ordination and therefore could not receive the power or ministry that accompanied that character. If women could never be ordained, then they never were ordained. All references to presbyteries and to deaconesses were then carefully explained away. Presbyteries must refer to the women who baked the bread or did the laundry for the church. Deaconesses were really nuns who were given a special blessing that allowed them to read the Gospel during prayer. At best, these women were the wives of ordained men, when ordained men had still been allowed to marry. No real ordination had ever occurred for any woman at any time in Christian history.

5. Conclusion – an essay on context

Why did this happen, and why did it happen when it did? Partly because the understanding of women that developed during the high MA could not conceive of women responsibly holding any position of authority.

1. Gregorian reform and celibacy

The innovations of Gratian, the *Glossa ordinaria* and Peter Lombard were the logical result of the reforms of the C11th. The context was the struggle between the papacy and secular rulers – with rival claimants for the papal throne. The struggle for the control of the church between lay lords and the papal office must be seen as the backdrop to the redefinition of orders that took place as part of the struggle between priest and lord. Emphasizing the difference between laity and priesthood was an essential part of the claim to supremacy of the priesthood/papacy over secular lords. In order to effect the separation, the reform movement insisted on the continence of the clergy. They pored over church law and highlighted those laws that most strongly upheld the sanctity of the priesthood and the power of the papacy. At first clergy were expected simply to remain continent; then celibate. The dominant model for the church thus became not family but monastery. One tactic was to denigrate women, seeing them as unclean.

2. A new understanding of women

Celibacy in itself didn't rule out women – an argument needed to be made that women were not the intellectual/spiritual equals of men. It would come from Roman law and Aristotle. Roman law had become interwoven with Church law since Gratian; the second version of the *Decretum* expanded it further. Canon law chose to follow the parts of Roman law which stressed the control of the *paterfamilias* over children and spouse (Roman law itself gave women many legal rights including public activity and owning/controlling property). Women were seen as unreliable and intellectually inferior to men; and therefore subject to them. Meanwhile the philosophy of Aristotle was introduced into the theology, law and medicine of the C13th; and Aristotle clearly taught the inferiority of women. Medieval scholars selected consciously both from Roman law and from Aristotle (many of whose teachings were denied by the Church).

3. Use of Scripture

Decretum interpreted 1 Cor 10.7 as teaching that women were not made in the image of God, only man is. This teaching became standard. Genesis was held to show that the Fall was the responsibility of the woman, and that women are not now to have authority over men, or to teach. As a woman first seduced a man to sin, the seductive powers of women were highlighted. Female leaders and teachers in scripture were dismissed as anomalies; Gratian understood this as imperfections that God allowed in the past but no longer apply under the New Covenant.

Conclusion

The larger context is the struggle to define and defend an exclusive claim for sacred power. In earlier centuries, kings, queens, emperors and empresses were considered ordained – but they were laicised by default when the new definition reduced ordination to those who serve at the altar. The issue was power. Both women and lords had ancient claims to the ordained state, the leaders of the C11th reform movement denied both sets of claims. The reformers wished to create a clear distinction between those men who controlled the sacred and all other Christians. All sacramental power was consolidated into the hands of the presbyterate, and this defined to be exclusively male and celibate. This was not a crude grab for power; the reformers believed they were purifying the church. But the effects of the revolution on women were devastating.

Historical and theological postscript

Women functioned in the early MA as ordained ministers; not ordained as ordination would come to be understood from the C12th on, ie as receiving a personal irrevocable power to serve at the altar, but commissioned for particular roles in particular communities. The important point is that so were men. Men during this period did not receive a different, superior form of ordination from women. Both understood themselves to be ordained in the same way.

The theological implications are greater. The fact that women were ordained once does not argue for or against their ordination in the present. But it does highlight the fact that the present definition of ordination is different from the earlier one. For over half of Christian history, a different definition of ordination prevailed. It cannot just be assumed that the earlier definition was a tentative or failed attempt at the present definition. If the current definition of ordination is to prevail, it must be argued that the definition of the later MA is proscriptive for the present. Some theologians argue that the earlier understanding would serve us better now.

Appendices – prayer and rites for ordination, excerpts from primary sources.