Institutionalized Subordination: Women’s Roles in the Byzantine Church and the Suppression of Their Leadership

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Early Christianity was quite unlike any of the other religions that existed in the Mediterranean in late antiquity. While the religion bore many of the patriarchal attitudes of surrounding cultures, it was radical in the positions that were afforded to women. In early Christian communities, women were recognized as coworkers, patrons, and even spiritual leaders. While these were roles that had been forbidden for women to hold publicly in pagan worship, because Christianity remained a religion practiced only in the private and domestic sphere these leadership positions conformed with the patriarchal culture of the empire. However, these roles changed drastically in the centuries following Emperor Constantine’s Edict of Tolerance in AD 313, which granted Christianity the title of \textit{religio licita} and made it permissible to be practiced in public. This event marked the beginning of a process of institutionalization that shifted Christianity from a private to a public religion, bringing women’s leadership into direct conflict with the Byzantine Empire’s prevailing social order and attitudes about women. The roles that women should be permitted to hold within the church became a hotly debated subject in the ecumenical councils that followed. Institutionalization and the backlash of patriarchal culture eventually led to the exclusion of women from church leadership, and limited them to roles that subordinated them to men.

In order to understand how women’s leadership developed in the early church, and also how their influence was subsequently reduced, an understanding of the culture of the Byzantine Empire is necessary. The culture of Byzantium was a direct continuation of that of the late Roman Empire. Patriarchy was the norm and women occupied an inferior position to their male counterparts. Considered to be the weaker sex both mentally and physically, Byzantine laws used this perception of women to justify the authority of a father over his daughter, and the authority of a husband over his wife. This rendered women as minors in the legal system for most of their
lives, with legal independence only obtainable after bearing a certain number of children, or upon the death of their father or husband.¹ Rigid gender roles and attitudes about masculinity and femininity laid out expected behaviors and activities for both sexes.

Within this culture there was a clear delineation between the public domain (*polis*), occupied by men, and the private domain (*oikos*) of women. The public domain was the center of political life, and was the hallmark of civilized culture and male identity in the ancient world. It was viewed as superior to the private domain, where women were expected to provide a comfortable refuge for their husbands, raise children, cook, spin and weave, and conduct the other necessary domestic work. At all times the man remained the center of the home as the *pater familias* and the link to the public world and civic action.²

Along with this separation of spheres, there was also the system of Greco-Roman gendered virtues. Men were associated with traits that were necessary for public and political life: justice, self-mastery, and courage. Women however, were associated with chastity, silence and obedience.³ These virtues were mainly what confined women to their own household quarters, as society felt that seclusion was the best way to preserve one’s virginity and chastity, and therefore one’s honor. Because woman’s supposedly tempting nature was traditionally a source of woe in the mythology of the many cultures that comprised the Byzantine Empire, ⁴ female sexuality had to be protected and guarded in order to preserve social order and morals. Furthermore, the nature of laws of inheritance, which passed from father to son, required that the

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¹ Torjesen, 43; Hylen, 20-21
² Torjesen, 59-60
³ Hylen, 23; Torjesen, 115
⁴ Pandora in Greek mythology, who unleashed evil into the world, and Eve in the Jewish tradition, who was blamed for original sin.
man be confident in the paternity of his children. A strong cultural pressure for virginity and chastity, preserved by seclusion, was a way to assure paternity.  

Despite their legal and cultural position as subordinates, women still held a considerable degree of authority inside and outside the home. Their role as keepers of home and family gave them responsibility over not only the domestic unit of the home, but over a great deal of the cottage industries within the home. As an economic unit, the home not only consumed goods but produced them for the home and sold surpluses, and women were responsible for directing any slave labor and production. Sometimes these duties would require women to venture outside the home, to purchase items for the home or for family visits. Women also exercised their authority as patrons and teachers: using their wealth to support public works, and raising their children in cultural values.

When Christianity emerged and spread within this cultural backdrop, it introduced new ideas about gender and the status of women in religion that were revolutionary for its time. Within early Christianity women were placed on more equal footing with men. The gift of God’s grace, and the pursuit of righteous virtues were not limited to free men, “…for nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ.” In the early centuries of Christianity in this region, women held positions of leadership as priests, teachers, and patrons, and were highly influential in the spread of Christianity. While many passages of the New Testament, the writings of the apostles, and other prominent Christian works are often conflicting in their attitudes towards women in these roles, it is still clearly evident that women played a crucial role in early Christianity, and actively participated in its dissemination.

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5 Torjesen, 138
6 Torjesen, 63; Rautman, 44-45
7 Galatians 3:28
Examples of women being active in the early church as patrons can be seen in the New Testament. When Paul sought an introduction into the Christian community in Rome, he enlisted the help of a relatively wealthy woman of some status to carry his letter and provide him entry. In his letter to the Romans, Paul acknowledges the patronage of Phoebe, deacon of the congregation at Cenchreae, and who had “been the benefactor of many people, including me.” Identifying her as his *prostatis* (patron), Paul acknowledged her generosity and support of him.  

Other female patrons included women who traveled with Jesus and the disciples. In a passage from Luke, one of the female companions named was Joanna, wife of Chuza and manager of Herod’s household. She as well as the other women in the group helped to “support them [the disciples and Jesus] out of their own means.” Joanna’s personal connections to the ruling Herodian family would have helped ease the passage of the group by local officials. The financial patronage of these women and others across the empire helped support and protect the Jesus movement.

The New Testament also mentions female leaders of house-churches. Junia, whom Paul praised as “foremost among the apostles” was a leader in the early church alongside her husband, Andronicus, and was often praised by John Chrysostom as an example for Christian women. Phoebe of Cenchreae, Nympha in Laodicea, Lydia in Thyatira, and Mary the mother of John Mark presided over congregations that met in their homes. Women also led church congregations through prophecy, which was recognized as a top leadership position in the early

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8 Romans 16:2; Torjesen, 32
9 Luke 8:1-3
10 Torjesen, 32
11 Romans 16:7
13 Romans 16:1; Colossians 4:15; Acts 16:15; Acts 12:12-17
church by the apostle Paul. Prophets were believed to have charisma, or divinely conferred power or talent, and were the mediators of divine revelation. As such, they formed a vital basis of leadership for early Christian communities. Several women are named as prophetesses in both the New Testament and the later church histories. The Daughters of Phillip in Acts 21 are named as bearers of prophetic charisma, and are cited in the church history of Eusebius. In his ecclesiastical history, Eusebius cites several sources about these four women, which suggests that they were held in high esteem. Other prominent prophetesses he mentions are Prisca, Maximilla, Pilomena, and Ammia of Philidephia.

While these roles for women may seem revolutionary in the context of Roman culture, they in fact conformed to the traditional social order and gender roles because of the setting in which they took place. As Christianity was not a religion that was tolerated to be practiced in public like the dominating pagan religions or Judaism, which had special protection under Roman law as a religio licita, Christian congregations therefore met in the houses of their wealthier constituents. As the home was the dominant domain of women, and an area where women were expected to have competent managerial and industrial skills, women’s leadership in house-churches came naturally. This acceptance of female authority may have also arisen out of the nature of Christian fellowship, which emphasized the church as a spiritual family. As women were the dominant child-rearers and maintainers of family and home in Greco-Roman society, the authority of women as mothers may have lent them more influence within house-

14 I Corinthians 12:28
15 Jensen, 15; Torjesen, 23
16 Eusebius cites Clement of Alexandria (3.30.1), Polycrates (3.31.2-3; 5.24.2), Proclus/Gaius (3.31.4), Luke (3.31.5), and Papias (3.39.9)
17 Eusebius, 5.13.2, 5.14-19, 5.17.2
18 Torjesen, 55
churches. Women were also essential to church leadership and the Christianization of the empire simply because they had easy access to women’s quarters, which men did not. This gave them special authority over other women, and thus enabled them to act as teachers and leaders. While church leadership continued to take place in house-churches and model itself on roles associated with the private sphere there was no cultural barrier to female leadership.

This ceased to be the case, though, when Christianity moved out of the private sphere and into the public domain following the issuing of Constantine’s Edict of Tolerance. As Christianity began to attract the municipal elites, men strongly attached to Greco-Roman notions of gender and social organizations, a hierarchy based on male dominance was introduced into the church. While women’s leadership in the first and second centuries of the church had been widespread, their leadership came under fire from conservatives who were uncomfortable with female authority. The egalitarian principles of the Jesus movement came into sharp contrast with Byzantine gender roles of the time. While the roles of teacher and prophet were not constricted by gender, the social space in which they occurred was. Many sources that speak out against women’s leadership within the early Church were concerned with where women acted in these roles. At the ecumenical councils where this concern was discussed, opponents often sited notions of male honor and female shame, and the explicit boundaries between public and private.

This concern over gender roles and the boundaries of public and private life is expressed by Paul in his comment on women’s public speech in I Corinthians 14:34-35: “The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their

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19 Torjesen, 82  
20 Jensen, 69  
21 Torjesen, 40
husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” For Paul, women’s speech in the household would always reflect subordination to men. Women’s speech in public was worrisome because female subordination to men was unclear. This cultural need to maintain women’s subordination to men is also evident in Paul’s instructions that “any woman who prays or prophesies” must be veiled. By veiling their hair, women showed a concern for sexual modesty and a public acknowledgment of their subordination to men.

Opponents of female leadership further invoked social conventions of women’s inferior nature as cause against their leadership. They argued that it was the lot of women to be subordinates, interpreting the curse pronounced on Eve in Genesis 3:16 to mean it was woman’s fate to be ruled by man: “Your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you.” Furthermore, the statement in I Timothy that “…Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” was used to demonstrate women’s secondary position and justify it by placing the blame for original sin on a woman. Opponents also claimed that women were not serious enough to be in positions of leadership, pointing to the absence of women at the Last Supper. In the following passage from the Statutes of the Apostles, a second century manual on church organization, the Greco-Roman stereotype that women lacked the serious nature required of leadership is touted:

John spoke, “Have you forgotten, brothers, that our Master, when He has asked for the bread and wine, blessed them and said, ‘This is My body and My blood,’ He did not permit the women to be around us?” Martha said, “It is because of

22 I Corinthians 11:5
23 Torjesen, 41-42
24 I Timothy 2:11-14
Mary, because he saw her laugh.” Mary said, “That was not the reason I laughed. He said to us before when He taught that the one who is weak will be saved by the one who is strong.”

While the arguments of those who supported female leadership in the church are not preserved in the historical record, it is clearly evident from church manuals that women were allowed to continue to act as deaconesses in the Byzantine church. The reasons that women were needed in this office are revealed in the Didascalia Apostolorum, where the Bishop is instructed to take on deacons as helpers: “a man for the administration of the many necessary concerns and a woman for service to the women.” It goes on to stress the necessity of deaconesses for the baptism of adult women, which required anointing the woman’s naked body with oil, and was felt to be improper for male clergy to perform. The Didascalia also reveals the importance of women to the church ministry through their easy access to the women’s quarters of pagan homes. Since men were banned from women’s quarters, deaconesses were necessary for the conversion of the empire. However, the office held lest prestige and authority than it had in the first and second centuries, and the statements of the ecumenical councils that followed reveal that deaconesses were marginalized in church leadership through their lack of a true ordination.

Unlike the other church offices held by men, members of the diaconate held an ecclesiastical blessing (cheirotonia) and not a true ordination (cheirothesia), a distinction that is drawn out in the Statutes of the Apostles. Their ordination was for service to the Bishop, not for priesthood. As such, deaconesses were banned from liturgy and could not act as counselors or

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26 Didascalia Apostolorum, XVI
teachers.27 Their ordination was simply to distinguish them from the laity, and to grant them authority to carry out duties prescribed to them by the Bishop. This distinction made their subordinate position to men clear, as deaconesses had to depend upon male clergy to lead services. Further evidence of women’s leadership as deaconesses being marginalized is seen in the stringent qualifications they had to meet to hold the office.

At the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, controversial questions of church law were clarified and the following qualifications of deaconesses were issued:

Only a woman who is over forty may be ordained a deaconess, and then only after thorough examination. If, however, she marries after ordination (cheirotonia) and a long period of ministry, she has scorned the grace of God and shall be excommunicated, along with her partner. (Canon 15)

Incidentally, the minimum age for deacons was twenty-five (Canon 14). This disparity between the minimum age of ordination for men and women was derived from Byzantine stereotypes about women, and the perceived threat of female sexuality. Women, especially young women, were considered to be much less serious than men, and it was believed that older women had learned to better suppress this part of their feminine character. Older women were also not viewed sexually, having passed menopause, and so posed no threat to church morals and order.

Despite these restrictions, deaconesses remained a numerically significant group in the church of the Eastern Empire. A law issued by Justinian I, which ordered the freezing of

27 Statutes of the Apostles 4-10, trans. Horner, 308.
employment in order to reduce the clergy of St. Sofia, reveals that even with cuts deaconesses made up twenty percent of the clergy.\textsuperscript{28} Several deaconesses are mentioned by name by the church historians of the fifth century. In Sozomen’s church history he mentions six deaconesses, including Olympias, who was supported and praised by John Chrysostom.\textsuperscript{29} Theodoret also mentions two deaconesses in his ecclesiastical history: an anonymous woman and Publia.\textsuperscript{30}

Deaconesses were far more common in the East than in the West. This may be due to the fact that the Western Empire was suffering from invasions by tribal groups and was extremely weak politically. Whereas the Eastern Empire in this period was experiencing a cultural golden age.\textsuperscript{31} By the seventh century, however, deaconesses disappear completely from the available sources. There are two reasons for the disappearance of deaconesses. The successful conversion of the empire was one factor. As Christianity overtook pagan religions, Deaconesses’ easy access to women’s quarters for conversion was no longer necessary. The shift from adult to infant baptisms also rendered the office of deaconess obsolete, until eventually women ceased to act in this role.\textsuperscript{32}

The majority of women in the Byzantine Empire participated in the church as part of the laity. Monastic life and philanthropic works were the main roles that women assumed. The taking of Monastic vows was particularly appealing for women of all demographics. For young women monastic life offered an alternative to marriage, and a small degree of independence. Monasticism also offered financially stability and care for less fortunate women. Many parents

\textsuperscript{28} Justinian ordered that there should be no more than 60 presbyters, 100 male and 40 female deacons, 90 subdeacons, 110 lectors, 25 psalmists, and 100 ostiaries. Justinian \textit{Novellae}, 3.1.
\textsuperscript{29} Sozomen names Necteria (4.24), Matrona (7.21), Pentadia (7.7) Nicarete (8.23), Eusebia (9.2), and Olympius (8.9,24,27). Olympius was praised by Chrysostom for her support of him in his exile. Madigen, 28.
\textsuperscript{30} Theodoret, 3.14-19
\textsuperscript{31} Jensen, 62
\textsuperscript{32} Talbot, I. 133; Jensen, 69
gave their daughters over to nunneries if they were unable to procure a husband for her, whether because of mental illness or physical deformities. Widows also often took monastic vows as a means of obtaining financial and emotional support.

Within the convent women were able to carry on a small amount of independence. Matrons were responsible for managing the convent’s finances and for procuring supplies. As such, they were expected to be educated, and this offered women an opportunity to pursue a meager education. The nuns were responsible for maintaining the convent, which included making clothes and growing food. Despite their relative independence, nuns were still very much subordinates within the church. Since women were forbidden to serve as priests, male clergymen would lead services. Additionally, many convents were under the supervision of a male head.33

Women who did not take monastic vows often pursued philanthropy and patronage, although under the care of husbands and male relatives. Philanthropia (love for humankind) was a practice strongly promoted by the church. It was considered a demonstration of one’s faith and love for Christ, and a way of obtaining God’s mercy. Women demonstrated their philanthropia publicly by ministering to the sick in hospitals and caring for orphans. More often, though, women demonstrated philanthropia indirectly through donations of land or money, or through patronage of Christian organizations and art.34 This was because there was a certain degree of risk associated with women’s philanthropy.

While philanthropy provided a socially acceptable reason for women to leave the home, the Roman beliefs about women and suitable behavior were still very strong. Women were still expected to remain in the home and to defer to their husbands’ authority. Those who left the home and interacted with the poor, particularly other men, ran the risk of their virginity and

33 Talbot, I. 137-139
34 Talbot, II. 106
chastity being called into question. Philanthropic women also had to take caution in how much they gave, lest their husbands or male relatives should feel they were spending too much. The dangers of women’s philanthropy within this patriarchal culture is evident in the story of Saint Mary the Younger, who was beaten to death by her husband after she was accused of adultery and of squandering the family fortune through her charitable works.\textsuperscript{35} The care women had to take to display their subordination to men is clearly evident, a trait that is universal across all church roles for women.

The greatest effect of institutionalization upon all women’s roles in the Byzantine church was the clear subordination of women to men. The bringing of the church into the public sphere created a strong cultural backlash from those who felt threatened by female church leadership, which went against the prevailing social order where men dominated. As a result, the nature of the church hierarchy was organized in a way that marginalized women’s leadership and conformed with the wider culture of Byzantium.

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\textsuperscript{35} The story of Saint Mary the Younger is summarized by Talbot, II. 110-11.


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