

# Women Clergy in Modern Western Mystery Religions

## Introduction

Unlike the mainstream Christian society which has dominated the West over the last two thousand years the mystery traditions have not excluded women nor have they treated them as our Christian Truth Tellers dictate. Rather the Western mystical tradition which has existed for thousands of years never accepted these sex and gender limitations. Within these temple walls both men and women serve and worship together and leadership is defined by ability and competence rather than sex.

In this paper we will look at some of the women who have been called to serve as the leaders of their schools, lodges and orders in recent history and see just how their experiences of religious service and leadership has differed drastically from those who seek initiation and ordination in the Cult of Christ.

## The Bearer of Misogyny to the World

Greco-Roman society was outright a male dominated world. Women were for making babies but men were everything else, including sex. The societal segregation extended to their religion and the Pagan cults of the Greco-Roman world sexually segregated their worshippers. It is no surprise then that when a new God was being preached to the Gentiles that such a deity would give preference to men and either tolerate or outright reject women.

This attitude was cemented in the early years of Christianity when people like Paul of Tarsus, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were writing concerning the foundations of the Christian Faith. All of these men were given a classical education in the Greek manner which also meant that they had adopted

the Greek attitudes towards women. Paul spoke of sex as a sin and argued that one must be sexually pure as the end was imminent and sex could stain the soul. It was taught that women were the root and cause of all evil and all failures in man.

This tradition of rejecting women in favour of the superior Man became a central tenant of the Christ Cult early on and was actually reinforced when Christianity became the official religion of Rome. Even today women are not allowed even the most basic of initiations in the Catholic Hierarchy; even Protestant offshoots have only recently allowed women as priests and the sects that do are in the minority. Christianity, as the official state religion of Rome has had great influence in shaping Western culture and our attitude towards sex and gender roles.

Over the last few years the feminist movement has helped many women to answer their call to the ministry. Women filled with the spirit but limited by Christian culture found the doors closed in their faces. Fighting for their right to serve God many women were forced to disobey their respective churches and perform the rituals and services of their faith outside of traditional circumstances. Almost in a revival of the earliest Christians these women celebrated the Eucharist in small home-based congregations.

Although some sects, such as the Episcopal and Anglican churches have finally allowed women to receive ordination, the Church of Rome has refused. In fact Pope John Paul II has said outright that the Apostolic Tradition doesn't have the Power to ordain women and, speaking infallibly from the Throne of Peter, stated that women will never hold any such positions in the church.

For Christians this means that women can never be leaders in their faith. It means that the church and the religion as a whole supports the continued subjugation and subordination of women for all eternity. An idea which is peculiarly consistent with the Greco-Roman attitude which has been

expounded since before the time of Plato. Such has been the foundation of our society's attitude towards women and with the religious authority stating that women will never lead it is only obvious that the adherents to that religion should agree with the principle in secular life as well.

## **Occultism's Hidden Society**

With the exoteric world allowing itself to be shaped by Greco-Roman rules concerning sex and gender there has continued to exist a hidden society which never adopted this inequitable relationship between the sexes. The Western Mystery Tradition has long held a very different attitude towards sex and gender relationships regardless of the external form that it may have taken. Neither the Gnostic nor Isiac traditions rejected the Mother Goddess. The Gnostics venerated Mary the Mother where the Christians literally thought of her as a tool by which God could squeeze out the Messiah. Such is the difference between those texts which we call Cannon and those which are labelled heretical.

Over the 2000 years of Christian dominance in the world the work and writings of the Adepti became extremely Christianized. This served both a defence against the inquisitive and violent nature of the Church as well as a way to make the mysteries more palatable for those newly entering into their ranks. Thus does the *Fama Fraternitatis* tells its readers not to wear one certain kind of habit but rather to follow the custom of the country. It is under these conditions that so much of the mystery writings of the Christian Era are shrouded in allegory and rife with gematric codes and obscure references. The Western Mysteries took on the habit of the Christ cult but maintained their separate identity.

One of the most conspicuous allegorical codes is the way in which Christ is portrayed. Rather than as a man or a God, the Christos is a reflection of the Logos and is seen as an obtainable state of

being. Christos is an internal process which involves the freeing of the internal Light of God. It is a process of spiritual death and resurrection in order to achieve perfection or Godhead or transcendence. The same story told in Alexandria of Osiris could now be told in Christendom of Jesus. This process of purification, spiritual development and resurrection as a Child of Light could now be argued as being part of Christian theology. One was simply trying to be like Christ, something that many saints achieved through the manifestation of Stigmata and, therefore, a worthy goal.

It is only now, in the 20th and 21st centuries with the advent of increased secularism that the tradition has begun to shed its local robes and start to teach in less guarded language. Although nowhere near the public accessibility that the mysteries enjoyed in Alexandria, Eleusis, Delphi or Thebes, the mysteries have only recently begun to make themselves known to the exoteric world. Such orders and groups as The Theosophical Society, The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, The Servants of the Light, The Builders of the Adytum and Fraternitas LVX Occulta have formed in the last 150 years and opened their Outer Courts to any and all seekers of the Light. Many still maintain their Christian garments or adopt the trappings of the East, at least in the Outer Court, but their inner contacts are purely those of the mystery tradition that has continued for thousands of years.

## **Women in the Modern Mysteries**

Since Helena Blavatsky founded The Theosophical Society in 1875 through to today the Western Mystery Tradition has recorded women leaders in almost every manifestation, group and order to make itself public. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn itself was founded based on contact with one Anna Sprengel (Sapiens Dominabitur Astris or S.D.A.) who authorized its foundation. In fact,

it is significant to realize that in Protestant 19th century England and America such religious organizations owed their foundations to women and both organizations initiated members regardless of sex.<sup>1</sup>

Many important women took up leadership roles in the various orders which followed the demise of the Golden Dawn. Violet Firth, who wrote under the name Dion Fortune, founded and lead the Society of the Inner Light through the early 20th century. The Servants of the light, initially formed as an Outer Court or non-initiate training program, now a full order in its own right, is today lead by a woman, Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki. The Builders of the Adytum in the US was also lead for many years by a women, Dr. Anne Davies. All of these women not only lead their own groups but are also amongst the foremost writers in their field.

As early as the late 50s, Anne Davies was officiating at worship services in the United States. Unlike the private ritual made up of initiates, this was a Protestant style public worship service.<sup>2</sup> Freely using the title 'Reverend', Davies fulfilled both the ritual and social duties which it implies. Anne Davies was, thereby, answering her call to ministry many years before the feminist movement began to put pressure on mainstream churches for the same privilege. Within the context of a mystery religion based on esoteric occultism such issues of sex and gender in the priesthood simply did not exist.

Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki, the current spiritual and administrative head of the Servants of the Light for almost thirty years has never seen sex or gender as an issue. In the mid seventies when she took over the post from W.E. Butler she says that gender was the furthest thing from her mind and that if her sex was an issue with anyone else she certainly didn't notice. Within the occult community such issues are simply non-existent. An antifeminist, Dolores supports an egalitarian world view when she

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<sup>1</sup> One of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn's membership rolls (probably Grand Lodge in London) shows that 43% of all initiates were women.

<sup>2</sup> The Builders of the Adytum (BOTA) has published a recording of one of these services under the name *An esoteric Qabalistic Service* with Reverend Anne Davies and the Temple Choir.

says “I don’t need to disempower a man in order to feel good about myself” (private conversation, Dec 02 2004). Like other occultists before her, she sees people as individuals without concern for their sex.

In part this may be due to the occult doctrine of reincarnation which states that a human soul will manifest itself in both male and female bodies during its long journey back to the Light. Such a philosophy effectively removes any possibility of sexual discrimination because that would only perpetrate that same discrimination against yourself.

It is significant that none of these women wrote anything about encountering discrimination or resistance to their leadership based on their sex. Dolores, in a phone interview, outright denied any sex or gender issues associated with her position either internally or externally. From talking to people who knew Anne Davies it seems pretty clear that Dolores’ experience is the rule and not the exception.

## **The Experience of Wicca**

Modern Wicca and the Neo-Pagan movement was developed by students of the Western Mysteries in the early 1900s. Intended as a more accessible form of the mystical tradition (as opposed to the intensive years of study normally associated with the Western Mysteries.<sup>3</sup> Wicca was meant to be a religion, a version of the mysteries to which anyone could come, in which anyone could worship and where anyone could join the Priesthood.<sup>4</sup> The basis of the Wiccan Rite is based on duality and energy transference. Unlike Christian sects, their version of the ‘Eucharist’ requires both a Priest and a

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<sup>3</sup> A student of the existing orders was generally expected to study all aspects of occult science including Alchemy, Magic, Astrology, Tarot and especially Qabalah. Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki compares this training to that of any PhD graduate. Wicca expects no such intensive study.

<sup>4</sup> Wicca has a three degree grade system. The first degree is opened to anyone that the High Priesthood of the group agrees to initiate. Anyone initiated to the first degree may act as Priest or Priestess in both the worship services as well as the community. In practice, though, this is generally the responsibility of the Second Degree or High Priesthood. The Third Degree confers autonomy and anyone achieving this degree may form their own coven and initiate as they see fit. Other than this there is no extended hierarchy with the WCC (Wiccan Church of Canada) being the only known exception.

Priestess to perform. Socially the head High Priest and High Priestess play Father and Mother to the coven/congregation.

Wicca is a religion of duality which worships both a God and a Goddess. Although the Goddess is the general focus of most worship as the Universal Creatrix, both Male and Female, Masculine and Feminine forces must be present for public rituals. The Great Rite, which is today performed using symbols of dagger and chalice is the central religious worship of any Coven. The ritual, and thus any public worship service, cannot be performed without both sexes. This differs a great deal from the Christian rite which is performed by a single person. This means that, no matter what, the ritual must be unbalanced when it comes to energy polarity. Regardless of this difference, Wicca can teach us much about how women fit into the clergy and how they fulfill their duties in a Western religious context.

## **Conclusions**

Within the Western Mystery Tradition the mainstream attitudes concerning sex and gender are entirely non-existent. This is an interesting discovery as it applies to the current concerns in the Christian sects. Because of the fact that women have been spiritual leaders in this context we can speculate as to what the effect will be when women are accepted into the mainstream clergy.

The experiences within the Western Mystery Tradition have been quite positive. Women parishioners, for lack of a better word, find their female clergy to be extremely sympathetic, understanding and capable of discussing and addressing issues which most men find uncomfortable. For example, there are many issues related to women's health and life experience which no man is really capable of fully understanding, especially in a spiritual context.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true of life changes such as menstruation and menopause or in the context of relationships.<sup>6</sup> Even men find it easier to talk to

<sup>5</sup> As opposed to a purely medical context as in the case of physicians.

<sup>6</sup> Male Christian clergy has, historically, handled these subjects very badly, especially when it comes to domestic

women about their feelings and their spiritual nature as they tend to feel that they can let their guard down. And of course no woman who has suffered abuse by her husband or father is going to be comfortable talking to a male Priest.

It is unfortunate that religious prejudice will probably prevent anyone in the Christian Church from examining these existing examples. The value of seeing what women clergy have to offer in a Western context should make it easy to justify the inclusion of women in a ministerial role. If it wasn't for the innate misogyny of the Christian faith they would see that these other traditions have experience with women clergy and have a great deal to teach about the experience. Women have been a valued part of clergy and religious leadership in the modern Western Mysteries for over a hundred years. Its just a shame that this experience hasn't had a wider influence in mainstream Western culture.

The bottom line is that women have been equally as influential as men in the Western Mystery Tradition and have well proven themselves as religious leaders within this context. Whether or not other religious traditions will accept this proof or not is something that only time will tell.

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violence issues. The Catholic church still forbids divorcees to remarry or live in 'sin'. You get one shot at a relationship and regardless of how terrible an experience it might be you are bound until death.



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