AG AboutGender
International journal of gender studies

http://www.aboutgender.unige.it

Vol. 5 N° 10 anno 2016
pp. 145-165

Culture, Gender, and Traditional Authority: A Sociological Approach on Power Relations in Middle Eastern Churches

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Abstract

Women's limited access to top positions has become of particular interest in the last two decades. A small number of studies bring institutional barriers, attitudes and values in Arab countries into focus. Mostly they emphasize a functionalist perspective of religion as a structural principle; notably Islam is seen as a prevailing, if not as the foremost symbolic resource in Arab societies. Without neglecting the social relevance of religion in the Middle East, for example as an instrument of power maintenance, this article questions the notion of religion as an all-encompassing cultural value pool. Instead, culture is introduced as a pivotal frame of meaning providing individual action and thinking with basic orientation. I assume that these meaning patterns shape the forms of religious participation and leadership, the basis of their legitimacy as well as the direction of their transformation. This will be sketched by means of Arab Christian women in selected Middle Eastern countries. The central question is which meaning patterns are

shaping the power structures in the religious field of Middle Eastern societies and how far do they leave a margin for a change of its gendered constitution? The article discusses this by means of Christian women's religious authority in Middle Eastern churches. This will be done against the background of a qualitative data. This material sheds light on the generative principles of social interpretation and cognition in the religious subsegment of Middle Eastern churches including culturally framed notions of religious authority and spiritual leadership. Like in Islam, this religious segment is contingent on a specific power structure between the institutionalized theological leaders and the community. Nevertheless, I suppose that Arab Christian women have started to challenge the institutionalised system of power relations. The hypothesis is that a critical reconstruction of gender inequality is invented precisely through the lens of the dominant web of meaning. While these orientation patterns ensure social coherence, they simultaneously form the cognitive background for a challenge of authority structures. They are the starting point for women's growing aspirations towards participation in religious leadership.

Keywords: Arab modernity, gender hierarchy, power relations, religion

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, women's rise to leadership positions is an issue of growing relevance in international social science literature. Their limited access to top positions has become of particular interest in the last two decades, not only in women's and gender studies (Jamali, Sidani & Safieddine 2005, 582; Yahchouchi 2009)[1]. Next to socialisation and role theory, the relevance of cultural values has been highlighted in crossnational studies on the reasons for women's restricted opportunities for advancement, particularly in organisational and management theory. A small number of studies bring institutional barriers, attitudes and values in Arab countries into focus. They highlight

[1] For classical sociological approaches on gender, organisation and leadership cf. Rosabeth M. Kanter (1977; 1990); Barbara Reskin & Patricia Roos (1992) as well as Joan Acker (2009).

patriarchalism and traditional authority as culturally significant characteristics of women's exclusion. In this connection, the role of Islam is introduced as a particular cultural constraint that deteriorates women's possibilities and sacrifices hierarchical gender arrangements.

These approaches emphasize a functionalist perspective of religion as a structural principle; notably Islam is seen as a prevailing, if not as the foremost symbolic resource in Arab societies[2]. Without neglecting the social relevance of religion in the Middle East, for example as a category of belonging or as an instrument of power maintenance, this article questions the notion of religion as an all-encompassing cultural value pool that supplies the «ultimate ends» towards which action is directed (Swidler 1986, 273). Instead, culture is introduced as a pivotal frame of meaning that provides individual action and thinking with basic orientation. According to the *strong programme* of cultural sociology, it is this symbolically based reservoir of interpretation that shapes peoples' way of acting and thinking in all spheres of life. The web of meaning functions like a set of generative principles that simultaneously enable and constrain action, «allowing for the reproduction» as well as the «transformation of structure» (Alexander & Smith 2003, 12). I assume that these meaning patterns shape the forms of religious participation and leadership, the basis of their legitimacy as well as the direction of their transformation. This will be sketched by means of Arab Christian women in selected Middle Eastern countries.

Thereto, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach is used as a general heuristic frame. Bourdieu introduces religion as a social field that consists of strategic relations between different groups of actors with and without institutionalised power. These are on the one hand various types of religious specialists competing for the monopoly over religious goods, and on the other hand the laypersons without access to the administration of salvation goods (Bourdieu 2000, 56f.). The latter are nevertheless part of power dynamics that cause transformations, for example in the social forms of religious organisation as well as in the reservoir of the sacred knowledge. Interestingly, Bourdieu did not refer to the gender bias of power relations in this regard, although women are the carriers of modern and postmodern religion. In Christianity, women shifted from the periphery to

[2] Emile Durkheim and Max Weber focused on religion as a structuring principal (Bourdieu 2000, 40).

the centre of power relations, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, they are strongly marginalized in many sub-segments of the religious field, notably when it comes to the monopoly of power over the sacred. It is this relation of continuity and change that leads to the question which meaning patterns are shaping the power structures in the religious field of Middle Eastern societies and how far do they leave a margin for a change of its gendered constitution?

The article discusses this by means of Christian women's religious authority in Middle Eastern churches. This will be done against the background of a qualitative study based on 48 narrative interviews with Arab Christian women from various ecumenical organisations in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine (Winkel 2009, 2013), among them the Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA)[3], the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)[4] and the women's World Day of Prayer (WDP). The latter is a lay movement from about 170 member countries. An international organisation structure with an office in New York supports the annual realisation of a commonly shared worldwide day of prayer in March. Each year, this prayer is written by the women of a different member country for the whole world. For example, in 2016 from Cuban women, in 2015 from women of the Bahamas and in 2014, Egyptian women prepared the liturgy; this was the third time in the WDP's history[5]. Lebanon was WDP country in 2003 and Palestine in 1994. The organisation of the event proceeds in all member countries within autonomous national and local women's groups; they often continue throughout the year and exist for decades. Egyptian women for example organise the prayer since 1954, and in

[3] National YWCAs were founded between 1912 and 1914 in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine under the direction of the American Ruth Woodsmall; she served as the general secretary of the Eastern Mediterranean Federation of the YWCA between 1921 and 1928 (Garner 2004). The American YWCA started its work in the Middle East in the 19th century, namely as part of the missionary movements (Cruz 1999). YWCA groups in Egypt had been «initiated by British leadership (...) largely for the purpose of serving the British and European girls who were working in Egypt as governesses, nurses or teachers» (Sourial 1998). In 1912, a national committee was founded in Beirut, and in 1914, the foundation of the National Council of the YWCA in Egypt and Palestine followed. From the 1920s on, Arab women were increasingly integrated.

[4] The MECC is a fellowship that includes all Middle Eastern church families as equal members. These are the Oriental Orthodox family, the Eastern Orthodox, the Catholic and the Evangelical family. It was founded in 1974.

[5] Egypt had already been World Day of Prayer country in 1959 and in 1975. American Protestant women missionaries had launched the WDP in Egypt in the 1930s (Fadel 1986).

Palestine, it started in the 1960s[6]. In all three countries, Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical women are taking part.

The interviews with the Egyptian, Lebanese and Palestinian women, of whom many were parallel active in several ecumenical organisations as well as in their churches, shed light on the generative principles of social interpretation and cognition in the religious sub-segment of Middle Eastern churches. This includes culturally framed notions of religious authority and spiritual leadership. Like in Islam, this religious segment is contingent on a specific power structure between the institutionalized theological leaders and the community. Relationships are based on traditional authority and a hierarchical gender order that segregates women as theologians and as spiritual leaders. Despite the historical decision of the Fellowship of the Middle East Evangelical Churches[7], which voted for the ordination of women as full pastors in 2010, women's leadership is limited to selected positions in the religious field of Arab Christianity. This characterizes the social reality of women's commitment in all churches. Besides it is scarcely to be expected that the Eastern Orthodox Church family, the Oriental Orthodox and the Catholic one, which hold the vast majority of Christians, will adopt the model of the Evangelical minority in the near future.

Nevertheless, I suppose that Arab Christian women have started to challenge the institutionalised system of power relations. The empirical material illustrates that women from various denominations are questioning their position at the periphery of the religious field and the male clergy's monopoly to the centre. This will be discussed against the background of those orientation patterns that are reinforcing the stability of the traditional power structure in the religious field of Arab Christianity. The hypothesis is

[6] Egyptian women joined the WDP groups of American missionary women in the 1940s. They probably started in missionary homes for prayer and fellowship like the work of the YWCA. The Egyptian women took the WDP work over in 1954, when the Women's Union of the Evangelical Synod of the Nile was founded. During my stay in Lebanon in December 2006, I spoke to an elder woman of the Armenian Evangelical Church; she was the mother-in-law of Maral Haidostian, who led the Lebanese WDP committee at that time. Ms Haidostian sen. remembered that she had participated in the WDP in the 1950s. This indicates that the WDP might have also started in Lebanon in the 1950s.

[7] The Fellowship is an association of Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Middle East. On its sixth general assembly, the fellowship decided to «support the ordination of the women in our churches in the position of ordained pastor and her partnership with men as an equal partner in decision making. Therefore, we call on member churches to take leading steps in this concern».
http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/81808_118508_ENG_HTM.html

that a critical reconstruction of social inequality is invented precisely through the lens of the dominant web of meaning. It is particularly the social texture of gender reciprocity, connectivity and relationality that simultaneously contributes to the maintenance of traditional authority and generates a realization of religious reality as a structure of gender inequality. While these orientation patterns ensure social coherence and interdependency, they simultaneously form the cognitive background for a challenge of customary authority structures. Reciprocity and connectivity are the starting point for women's growing aspirations towards participation in religious leadership.

This will be outlined in three steps. The generative principles of action and cognition in Middle Eastern societies and their relevance for the stability of traditional authority will be discussed against the background of Max Weber's classical notion of authority. Before, I will sketch in a first step how far Arab Christian women have shifted from the periphery to the centre of power relations in the course of the 20th century. Third, I will exemplify by means of the study's results how the women relate to the structures of power relations in the religious field and how far they succeeded to challenge traditional authority[8].

2. Arab Christian women's shift from the periphery to the centre of power relations in religion

When YWCA activist Twila Cavert[9] conducted a survey on women's ministries in the worldwide churches on behalf of the World Council of Churches in 1946 and 1947, churches in 58 countries responded. The poll represented «the first comprehensive set of data about women's involvement in local churches, their leadership in denominational life and their positions in church hierarchies» (Warren 1997, 122), among them also Middle Eastern ones. The interim report commented on this result:

[8] This develops against the background of an ongoing twofold structural inequality that Christian women share with Muslim women: first, in their commonly shared societal environment, and second within each religious context. Despite Christian women's self-empowering attitude, the religious symbolization of women in the Christian sub-segment itself did not change. Furthermore, Christian women's activities do not have any influence for the Muslim environment, as Christians are a minority in Middle Eastern societies and religious groups are strongly separated social realities.

[9] Cavert was a board member of the North-American YWCA in the 1930s and 1940s. The results of her study were published by Kathleen Bliss (1952).

> One is especially grateful for the cooperation of some of the older churches (...). The Greek Orthodox Churches in Greece, Egypt and Palestine, (…), the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and the Armenian Gregorian Church of the Lebanon have sent deeply moving documents and letters» (Gnanadason 1992, 239).

Leonie B. Liveris (2005) states that the Orthodox women «expressed a realistic description of their situation» in the reports; among them were a few, who had already been active in worldwide ecumenical organizations in the 1940s, like for example Mary Assad, a Coptic Christian, who is well-known in ecumenical circles[10]. It crystallized that the reports focused on women's interest in social justice and participation in contrast to the clergy's emphasis on spiritual matters; this was no characteristic of Middle Eastern reports alone. Twila Cavert summed up that women's feeling of extreme dissatisfaction with their status in the churches - «or rather, their lack of it»- was a commonly shared concern (Warren 1997, 123).

The present situation in the Middle East does not seem to be much different, in particular upon closer examination of women's ministries. Mary Mikhael, who served as the director of the women's program of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)[11], before she became the president of the Near East School of Theology (NEST)[12] in Beirut (1994-2012), severely comments women's situation in the churches. She emphasizes that it was not allowed to discuss women's ordination during her time as the program coordinator in the MECC (1988-1994). At all three Orthodox conferences that were initiated by the World Council of Churches as part of the Decade for the Solidarity of the Churches with Women (1988-1998)[13] «it was reaffirmed that doctrinally and historically/traditionally it is impossible for women to participate in the priestly duty» (Mikhael 2012, 59)[14]. Additionally, the Catholic Church continuously confirmed in the second half of the twentieth century that women will not receive the sacrament of priesthood, while the Middle Eastern Evangelical Churches «in general chose not to

[10] She held leading positions in the World Christian Student Federation and the Young Women's Christian Association; in the 1980s, she became the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.
[11] This is the leading ecumenical umbrella organization in the Middle East.
[12] NEST was the first institution of higher theological education in Lebanon.
[13] The church decade was realised in analogy to the United Nations Decade for Women (1976 – 1985).
[14] Cf. for the Orthodox churches Sophie Deicha (1999).

tackle the issue officially» (Mikhael 2012, 59), although it has been raised there, not least by Mikhael herself. That the Fellowship of the Middle East Evangelical Churches finally accepted in 2010 «that there is no theological or biblical reason to deny women being ordained»is also an effect of Mikhael's commitment.

In this regard, Mary Mikhael is an interesting example for the possibilities that women achieved in the last two decades of the 20th century. The question is, whether her case represents a turning point that topples the glass ceiling, or if it is an exceptional case, which did not interrupt the «"glass escalator" that advances men to the top positions (…) as a means of generating organizational legitimacy» (Adams 2007, 99)[15]. Various aspects are indicating the latter. Mikhael represented a top leading position, but in religious education. She continuously worked for women's full ordination; it is accepted now, but in a minority context only and its practical realization in the Evangelical church family is yet to come. Thus Mikhael's case can be seen as a prime example for the segregation between education and ministry in the religious field of power relations. This will be sketched in what follows along selected historical developments.

Women's access to positions in religious education primarily developed since the 1960s; this includes the Orthodox Churches, although the Evangelical Churches had a pioneer function in this regard resulting from the inheritance of missionary's educational institutions. In contrast, women's admission to the study of theology in institutions of higher education developed much slower; additionally, theological graduation rarely leads women into a position of spiritual leadership until today. At large, the horizontal segregation of women's inclusion in the religious field is clearest in religious education; women are nearly exclusively working in this segment. This holds true, although women have gained a high visibility in some Reformed churches as preachers, as Sunday school teachers and as group leaders, particularly in Egypt and Lebanon. Accordingly, the horizontal segregation of the religious field is strongly connected with a vertical segregation; spiritual leadership positions are usually bound to the pastorate, which is a sacrament in Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Although women can nowadays study

[15] Jimi Adams focuses on congregational leadership in North-America. He refers to the concept of the invisible glass ceiling. Adams' empirical results demonstrate that the ceiling is not hidden in religion; instead gender discrimination is actively and openly projected. Adams terms this a stained-glass ceiling (Adams 2007, 99).

theology in all Middle Eastern Churches, they are still often recommended not to do so, because the possibilities for theological professions are rare.

Apart from that, women have gained a variety of new roles, both in the Orthodox and the Catholic as well as in the Evangelical context. Only a minority of these roles includes a leadership function with theological or sacramental responsibility or even with full access to a head position that seriously questions the monopoly of the male experts. One of two publicly known examples is Rola Sleiman at Tripoli's Evangelical Church; Sleiman functions as a vicar next to the head pastor since 2008. When the position of the pastor was vacant, she convinced the elders to give her the responsibility for the community[16]. The second example is Rima Nasrallah van Saane, who directed the Department of Christian Education and Spiritual Life at the National Evangelical Church in Beirut in the 2000s; she functioned as a kind of assistant pastor, which included services for women and children, but no administration of the sacraments for the whole community, when I met her in December 2006. Nasrallah van Saane actually aspired to a position as a full pastor, like Najla Kassab, who is an educator in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Kassab became the first licensed preacher in her church in 1993. In 2007, the Evangelical Synod of the Nile ordained a female presbyter for the first time; women's admission as elders is accepted in Egypt since 2006. But women's full ordination as pastors was not approved before 2010[17].

These examples demonstrate to what extent the glass ceiling still functions: at large, women's scope of action has been broadened, but mainly in the realm of religious education and social fields like the work with elder people, the needy and children. In single cases, women got the chance to work as theological and spiritual leaders with sacramental functions under limited conditions in the Evangelical context. Participation as full pastors has yet to be realized. Nevertheless, women expanded their abilities and skills; this is accompanied by the acquirement of educational expertise and vocational competence. As Alissa Walter (2011) describes by means of the Egyptian example, this is also rooted in the minority situation of Christians in the Middle East, which is increasingly experienced as problematic. It resulted in a growing concern for the possibili-

[16] Sleiman started as an education adviser. Cf. http://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/christians-middle-east-women-427940.
[17] For Kassab cf. http://www.welt-sichten.org/artikel/2831/nicht-auf-die-talente-der-frauen-verzichten

ties to strengthen the church communities from within. Women's advancement is accepted as a core element in this regard. Consequently, women are gaining a growing number of opportunities for leadership roles, but without putting the expert's position of the male clergy at the centre of the religious field at risk.

The segregation of the religious field in the theological and the educational sector has a longstanding history that can be traced back to the 19th century. This includes the same pattern of single, unique women that did spiritual work like in the case of the Lebanese Evangelical Adéle Jureidini Hajjar (1893-1971), who worked with a female missionary and who was ordained by an Arab pastor in 1920; but this was no breakthrough for women's theological leadership, like in Egypt, where a pastor ordained two women in Minya in 1970. The Evangelical Synod of the Nile discussed the case, but finally decided «to sidestep the controversy by neither accepting nor rejecting the women's position» (Walter 2011, 75)[18]. Already the so-called bible women had not affected the religious field of power relations; they were trained by missionaries to make house visits and to read from the Bible and to engage in evangelistic conversations next to the missionaries. This invention started in the last decades of the 19th century and lasted in Egypt until the early 1960s. Alissa Walter (2011, 60) introduces the Egyptian bible women thus as «the first type of public ministry and church employment» in Egypt. But only a small number of women had followed this programme that was cancelled by the Synod of the Nile.

Since the 1960s, the situation has changed insofar, as the possibilities for women's participation in community activities have started to grow continually. Next to Sunday school teaching, which came already into being in the 1920s, social clubs and prayer meetings played an increasing role. Training in group leadership was another activity to strengthen community structures with positive effects for women. During the decades they have become more and more visible in various voluntary ministries, for example as group leaders and as elders. In the Orthodox and the Catholic contexts, nuns are active

[18] Rima Nasrallah (2006) studied the exceptional case of Adèle Jureidine Hajjar. Hajjar was ordained in 1920 before the National Evangelical Church of Beirut was established. Other historical cases are researched by Christine Lindner (2011), for example the case of the Syrian Protestant Rahil Ata, who supported the first female American missionary in her evangelization work. Regarding the Catholic and the Syrian Orthodox communities, Lindner points out that already in the 17th and 18th century selected active women can be found who established new monastic orders on Mount Lebanon.

in youth work and other social services. While the development includes a growing number of vocational activities in the Evangelical context, whether in schools, hospitals or kindergartens, the degree of voluntary work in the Catholic and the Orthodox realm is much higher. At large, women are getting new positions in the religious field; they are taking various forms of social and spiritual responsibility, but women's ordination and theological leadership itself remain controversial and meet with resistance in the majority of the Arab church families. The religious field of power relations is clearly segregated, horizontally as well as vertically. This result will be engrossed in a next step by means of sociological notions of authority and leadership.

3. Traditional authority and leadership in a cultural sociology perspective

Religious, historical, and sociological studies have shown that all three monotheistic religions are characterized by power relations and «institutional policies» (Ecklund 2006, 81), that are curtailing women's participation in the religious field to a variable extent. Next to the variances in the social forms of women's involvement *among* religions, there are also significant differences *within* religions regarding to social environment and historical context as the case of Middle Eastern churches demonstrates. The different opinions on women's ordination and the multiple forms of participation that women developed are an expression of the possibility of change as well as the persistence of power relations in the religious field of Middle Eastern churches. The male leaders strongly compete for the monopoly to the custody of the sacred, while women are typically representing the group of religious actors without institutionalized power resources; this also includes decision making bodies like synods. A closer look at the relation between structural principles of authority on the one hand and general meaning patterns of social cohesion on the other hand explains the longevity of gender inequality in this regard.

In Arab modernity, it is a particular type of authority that structures social interdependency. It is Max Weber's ideal type of traditional authority, which characterizes the social field of religion as well as other social spheres of life. This ideal type is based on

the belief in the sanctity of tradition, in contrast to charismatic authority that is «resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person» (Weber 1978, 215). According to Weber, religion is an important example for traditional authority structures; the authority figures «feel they have a legitimate right to expect willing obedience to their command» (Coser 1977, 226), while the subordinates consider their demands as reasonable. Typically, traditional authority is deeply intertwined with patriarchalism in Middle Eastern societies. Max Weber introduced it as the most important type of traditional domination based on 'individual deference', 'compliancy of the subordinates' and a 'belief in the inviolability of things as they ever where'. Interestingly, Weber did not reflect on its gender bias, although the male head, the father figure, is the root of the matter. Weber designed patriarchalism instead as a gender neutral ideal type of leadership in contrast to the – likewise gender neutral – ideal type of rational rule. In other words: as Max Weber viewed the dominance of the male head «as an inherent traditional right of the master» (Weber 1978, 231), the subordination of women is the unquestioned, "natural" counterpart. In this view, power can only be shared between men.

In contrast, historian Hisham Sharabi (1988) envisioned patriarchalism as a gender-related principle. He revealed the continuity of this authority type in modern Arab societies as a structural principle that does not only characterize kinship und household relations. Modernisation change has not supplanted this traditional form of domination; instead it has been strengthened: it continues as a constitutive feature of new institutional settings and modern organisational culture in all social spheres of life, whether economics, politics, science, or religion. Sharabi refers to the diffusion of this structural principle in Arab modernity and its ubiquitous relevance as neo-patriarchalism:

> Neopatriarchy is the product of the encounter between modernity and tradition (…); it is modernized patriarchy. Whatever the outward modern forms of contemporary neopatriarchal family, society or state, their internal structures remain rooted in the patriarchal values and social relations of kinship, clan and religious and ethnic groups (Shukri 1999, 40).

Against this background, Christian religion in the Arab realm can be understood as a traditional, patriarchal system of power relations composed of male «spokespersons» competing for the monopoly to the custody of the sacred in contrast to religious actors without institutionalized power resources (Bourdieu 2000, 42). Like Weber, Bourdieu ignored that the structure of the religious field of power relations is gender differentiated. And neither Weber nor Bourdieu or Sharabi explained why individuals support this power structure respectively how docility and obedience are culturally engendered. A closer look at the cultural codes of meaning structuring individual action reveals that – and how– the belief in the legitimacy of traditional, male-based leadership is culturally ensured. It is a particular texture of social interdependence and mutual reliance that enforces the principal of patriarchalism as an unavoidable orientation and action frame.

This texture is an amalgam of gendered reciprocity, connectivity and relationality. It is composed of the primacy of relations in contrast to task and the priority of group interests in contrast to individual concern. The complementarity of social tasks ensures reciprocity on an equal basis; it does not consider of importance that tasks are *de facto* gender differentiated. Instead, the notion of mutual obligation that is based on the primacy of relationships is a kernel of social cohesion. Mutual commitment aims at the «unity and solidarity of the collective», but not at «absolute and individual (…) equality» (Stowasser 1996, 33). The notion of identical obligations regarding the group is a typical feature of patrimonial relations, where loyalty is given in return for protection or other kinds of support. Consequently, domination is not only an «inherent traditional right of the master» as Weber stated, but «it must definitely be exercised as a joined right in the interests of all» (Weber 1978, 231) group members. As an effect, gendered status differences are organized by complementary roles and reciprocal services within a hierarchical structure. Part of it is the complementarity of women's and men's group involvement, namely as communal members of equal rank in moral and spiritual terms, without necessarily being equal in terms of their position in the hierarchy of a social field.

Next to gendered reciprocity, two other elements are ensuring the coercive nature of patriarchalism. Relationality and connectivity are two further orientation patterns that align an individual's identity towards the group and cause a strong sense of belonging.

Thus it is not only the patriarchal culture based on traditional legitimacy of male authority that leads an individual's actions and orientations towards group interests. According to Suad Joseph (1999), an individual learns to identify with the group in the first instance and develops a relationally and connectively based self-understanding. She defines relationality as a process, «by which socially oriented selves are produced» (Joseph quot. after Rosenberg 2001, 33), while connectivity inheres the notion of fluid boundaries of the self. As a result, group relations are always more important than task or individual interests. How far this texture of gendered reciprocity, relationality and connectivity shapes Arab Christian women's religious commitment will be discussed below.

4. Challenging traditional authority

Most studies focusing on the religious field of gender-related power relations, concentrate on women's ministries and clerical leadership roles (Wallace 1993, 2000). Lay women's organisations are only recently studied in this regard. They are of particular interest, because they directly demonstrate how far women question their position at the periphery of the religious field. Arab Christian women's commitment to ecumeny is a special example for lay women's ambition for religious involvement. The results of my study demonstrate how the gendered texture of reciprocity, relationality and connectivity moulds women's action in the religious field of power relations. Following Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, these patterns function as a set of socially incorporated dispositions and worldviews that are more or less taken for granted and that are not fully reflexively accessible; they shape people's ways of acting and their problem-solving strategies in view of social rules.

How women are responding to the gendered power structure, and how the interaction between its maintenance and its challenge through women's participation develops, will be highlighted at two points. First it is of interest, how women take up activities in the religious field; the second concern is women's encounter with the religious hierarchy and their own positioning in the field. In this regard, the World Day of Prayer (WDP) is instructive, because it is an exclusively religious movement in contrast to the YWCA or

the MECC; women are entirely taking theological responsibility for its realisation[19]. Although the WDP takes place only once a year, namely on the first Friday on March, its constantly recurring perennial organisation results into permanent work structures. These are the national and the local WDP committees. Typically, women are invited to participate and nominated for a leading position in a committee by older members; relationality is thus of high relevance for the entry into a WDP group[20]. The coordinator of the Palestinian WDP committee for example narrated how the Evangelical women started in the 1980s to enlarge the committee; she was approached by the pastor's wife of another church: «the wife of Bishop X from the X-Church (…) called me. She said "Lina why don't we work together?" I said "why not, I don't have any problems"» (LH, 2). In a second step, Lina pursued the same strategy and called women whom she knew from interdenominational cooperation in other organisations: «and I started- ehm you know- calling friends- my friends from other denominations, I started calling (…) two ladies from the Orthodox Church, others who are my personal friends and (…) they came together and we started organising the prayer» (LH, 4)[21].

The women take the responsibility for the composition of the committee, for the preparation of the prayer and they decide on its procedure; not only Lina strongly insisted that this is «women's work» (LH, 9). Thus it seems at first sight that the WDP "only" mirrors the religious gender segregation; but the WDP women intend to cross the lines of this segregation. They do not see the prayer as a women's affair, but as a constitutive contribution for the church community as a whole: «It's our day. And it's supposed to be in the church» (BR, 9). From this perspective, women become the focus of attention as spiritual leaders; they claim theological responsibility for the prayer and its realisation in the church building. Consequently, they do not hesitate to engage in competition

[19] Beyond the mentioned organisations, the sample of 48 interviews also included interlocutions with women from local and regional organisations that understand themselves as ecumenical in their outreach and their identity. In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, neither their original names nor those of the interviewees will be mentioned. Additionally, other information like time, place and biographical data are anonymised.

[20] Parallel, hierarchy is of relevance, too. In some cases, pastor's wives were addressed to join the committees, because they are already highly visible in the religious field.

[21] Transcription conventions are used according to Gabriele Rosenthal (1997); bold letters are used for very strong emphasis, underlined letters for emphasis, dash for interruption. The references refer to the transcripts of my interviews (Winkel 2009).

with the clergy: «The problem is (…) to be free from the hierarchy of the church. We can take advice, but we can't do what- you know- they oblige us to do» (LH, 3).

Hierarchy is experienced as a very sensitive issue; thus, the clergy's opinion is carefully handled: «you really have to be very careful how do you do it and we don't offend anybody» (DB, 7). The importance of relationality is here in evidence.

A quotation from another interview illustrates once more the reason for this considerate approach. Domination is not accepted in any case, for example, if it is not exercised in the interests of all group members. Parallel, dominance is balanced against the relevance of reciprocity, relationality, and the priority of the group. The challenge is to «find the balance» as Maryam explains, namely «between you as an individual and plus this group of people who are part of your community» (MZ, 12). This includes the possibility to take advantage of the group's loyalty and the leader's support, for example regarding the WDP's recognition by the heads of the churches. The Lebanese women for example decided to invite a clergy as a speaker: «we choose our pastor, the head of the union, (…) because we invited many, many ladies from Orthodox and Catholic churches, (…) they have a special respect for men clergy you know (…), so we said it will be nice, if we do that as a start» (AM, 12).

At large, the women of the sample handle the relation between hierarchy, dominance and connectivity not only in a pragmatic way, as Maryam's conclusion shows, but they are deeply convinced by the primacy of relationship and group orientation: «I think that's part- part of the empowerment is to be able to balance. Not to rebel**.** Because you, at the end of the day, you do rebel, when you are finding that balance, you do rebel. But you do- you do it in a way that you are still part and parcel of this community (MZ, 12)».

Consequently, taking advice is part of a customary consultation process within patriarchal structures; this includes involving the heads of the churches, not only to inform them, rather to ask for their recognition: «Not to over- to interfere in the text or something, but to get the blessings. Otherwise it won't work. » (LH, 6) This way, the women ensure the inclusion of the WDP in the church communities as women's contribution; as a result, they can act on behalf of their communities as church representatives in the

international and the national committees. The Palestinian committee for example approached the heads of the churches, when they prepared the WDP liturgy in 1994:

> «(…) so we made a letter, we send it to the Roman Catholic Patriarchate, to the Anglicans, to our Bishop (…), to the Armenians, to all denominations, (…) we went to the tops. So when we went to the Greek Orthodox, the bishop, (…) he said we bless you» (LH, 11).

This kind of consultation is an expression of the imperative to balance group interests and to consider relations; but it is also a possibility to place women's interest in the field of power relations. When the committee in Jerusalem was unexpectedly rejected to give a sermon in a particular church, the women did not decide to skip it, but to look for another church: «for some reasons the Bishop did not want a woman to preach (…) in his church, okay. (…) So, what we did, we decided all together that we will not skip the homily, but we will go somewhere else» (DB, 7).

This decision is an expression of women's critique of hierarchy and domination for its own sake as well as a demand for reciprocal involvement.

At large, the women of my sample do not openly protest against the structures of religious power relations, but they work for positions in the religious field that are closer to its centre and include them on a reciprocal basis as the following statement shows: «I do not want to minimize the value of the ministry of men, contrary I want to strengthen it and I want to be part of it» (IM, 9). That way, gender equitable notions of church community are developed; they reflect reciprocity, connectivity, and relationality as basic patterns of social meaning, like for example in Duriyyah's statement in which she summarizes her experience in the WDP: «it was really an involvement (…) yes women can take part, (…) it is this sharing that you are part of- creation of God and as a woman you really have that right» (DB, 3).

Women in Middle Eastern churches do not want exclusively to be seen as consumers of sacred goods with minimal religious competence; they rather want to be officially included as professional theologians and spiritual leaders on a reciprocal basis.

5. Résumé

Although the WDP is an exceptional event in the course of the church year, Arab Christian women view it as an integral part of community life. For them, the WDP is no women's affair, but they are preparing it for the churches as a whole. Once a year, they are the ones, who invite the community, the pastors and priests to a service led by women. That way the WDP makes a difference: Against the background of basic orientation patterns like reciprocity and connectivity, the experience of the WDP reveals that women are first and foremost excluded from positions at the centre of power relations, although they are equipped with professional religious competence. Bourdieu has ignored this gender bias in the structure of religious power relations. Furthermore, he failed to notice women's rich and multifaceted contributions to the production of sacred goods.

From the perspective of Arab Christian women's experience, the WDP work is in unison a possibility to express the claim for inclusion and to unveil the imbalance of power relations. Standard for valuation is the social texture of reciprocity, connectivity and relationality. Although this cultural web of meaning ensures the persistence of traditional authority and patriarchalism, it simultaneously functions as the starting point for women's experience of exclusion as theologians and spiritual leaders. Because of their strong feeling of related- and connectedness, women realize the lack of reciprocity in involvement, which causes their discontent with the structures of inequality. This is put in a nutshell in the final quotation of one interviewee: «it is my role (…) to really help our community (…), allow me to do it, involve me as part of the church» (DB, 15). The WDP is only a small step in this regard, but it demonstrates women's aspirations towards the religious field of power relations and their experience of structural inequality as incompatible with basic principles of social life. At large, the relevance of the cultural setting for (religious) gender structures has been turned out to be of high explanatory power.

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