

Women and the 16th Century

Jens Christian Kirk

An introduction to the possibilities for women to express themselves in the age of Reformation in Western Europe.

It is disputed whether or not Christianity contains an emancipatory core regarding women. Throughout the history of the Church the distribution of the sacraments and the privilege of preaching the word have been restricted to men. However, in times of religious or political unrest or turmoil women have played a vital part in the fight for religious freedom and the Christian faith. No century contained as much religious disorder in Western Europe as the 16th century. Following Martin Luther's ideas for reforming the church, the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the Reformed Churches and the Anglican Church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and created a whole new religious map of Western Europe. The intention of this article is to introduce you to the role and position of the women in this time of religious change.

It is, however, not an opinion piece on whether or not women should be able to become pastors or priests. Though in my opinion they should, as they are in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Scandinavia. It is not a critique of the present state of the Roman Catholic Church either, though it should be noted that I am a Lutheran theologian for a reason.

The Lutheran Reformation

Before getting to the main topic, I think a few notes on the Reformation as such would be helpful. The starting point for the Reformation was Martin Luther's protest against the industry of discharge letters in 1517. In the following years, Luther and other Reformers such as Philip Melancthon and the Swiss Huldrych Zwingli intensified their critique of the Pope and Praxis within the medieval Catholic Church. Schisms in the western Church seemed inevitable. The final schism, supported by a number of primarily German noblemen, followed the negotiations in Augsburg in 1530. The Lutheran confession – Confessio Augustana – was made in an attempt to clarify the belief as the genuine faith to the German Emperor. Upon his refusal, the Lutheran Churches were born.

To cover the basic principles in the Lutheran churches, it is highly focused on principles of sola gratia, sola fide and sola scriptura. Justification by God's grace and by faith alone and the Bible as the primary source of the divine will. Following the latter, the number of sacraments was reduced to two – Baptism and Communion – and Bibles were made accessible to all through translation into German. The monasteries were closed and celibacy for priests was abolished as well, as Luther regarded the matrimony as ordained at the genesis.

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Katherina von Bora Luther

Luther's wife, a former nun, is in many ways the core example for women following the Lutheran Reformation. She ruled her home, controlled the family's economy, raised and educated the children in the Christian faith.

The latter was a quite important task and a task that required literacy. Because of this, Luther and his fellow Reformers intended that everyone, even girls, should receive some sort of education that included the ability to read and write. Even today it is evident how much emancipatory power is provided through literacy. The Lutheran Reformation, in many ways, required that the major part of the population were literate; also the women. And if for nothing else the Lutheran Reformation should be acknowledged for this.

Katharina von Bora Luther was the backbone in the Lutheran family, but suffered a life in poverty after Luther's death. That did not, however, reduce her role as an example for women in the areas that became Lutheran. A woman's calling was to be married, to be a good wife and to raise her children as Christians.

The Noble Women

An interesting question regarding the Reformation is whether or not the kings and nobility that became Lutheran did so due to political or religious reasons. Both explanations might be given to some extent; however a distinct group within the nobility cannot be accused to let politics govern their religious beliefs – the noble women.

Both in Germany, Denmark and in France influential women such as Elisabeth von Brandenburg, Elisabeth von Braunschweig, Marguerite de Navarre, Jeanne d'Albret and René de France influenced their ruling husbands, sons and brothers in order to accept or acknowledge the Reformers and people believing their reform.

The two former accepted Luther's teaching by receiving both bread and wine in the communion, even though their husbands were Catholic. Later, they both somewhat ensured the possibility to exercise Lutheran Christianity in the areas governed by their husbands and later sons.

Marguerite de Navarre and her daughter Jeanne d'Albret were both highly influenced by the Lutheran teachings and later on the teachings of John Calvin. Marguerite was a sister of the French king, and as such closely connected to the court, and she did use that influence to hold back persecution of the Huguenots. Her daughter was married to another friend of the Huguenots, and as such she became a Huguenot leader during the civil wars, even though her son chose to become Catholic in order to become the King of France.

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Reneé de France lived after her marriage in Italy. This was a much more hostile environment for the Lutheran teachings due to the close distance to Rome, and the close relations between the Italian nobility, the Pope and the most influential cardinals in the Vatican. In her position, she sought to provide some sort of safe harbour for Huguenots, which eventually became impossible.

Of course the noble women and their actions were made possible due to their status in society. Their lives were seldom if ever threatened; they were all literate and already had the possibility to express themselves on religion. That does not mean that their efforts were not of great value for the Reformers

The writing women

But also “ordinary” women took action in defending the Reformation for example, in writing. Argula von Grumbach wrote a series of letters in the early 1520s in Ingolstadt, defending a young student accused of heretics, subscribing to the teachings of Luther and the other Reformers from Wittenberg. The writings were widely published and she earned Luther’s respect for her defence of the faith. It is possible that her writings were motivated by the fact that no men came to the defence of the student and that in this particular situation a woman had to step up. Nevertheless she spoke up, she defended the faith and the Reformers accepted and valued her contribution, while her opponents regarded her as a troublemaker.

Katharina Schütz Zell called herself a church mother, largely derived from her role as a pastor’s wife. The marriage to the pastor Matthias Zell was in itself controversial and even more so was the fact that she defended the marriage in published writings. She had received a lot of theological schooling in her childhood, and she continued to educate herself after the marriage both by reading, corresponding and talking to the Reformers. After Matthias Zells death and as the Reformed Church became more established in Strasbourg, where she lived, she became an even more controversial figure; Even to the Reformed pastors in the city. She continued to write, and conducted a funeral as no male pastors in the city were willing to perform the burial; an outrageous act for a woman.

Both of the former examples envision the emancipatory potential in literacy and forebode a much more empowered laity and to some extent shows what could have been regarded as the empowering of women in a religious context. The Reformation opened a window of opportunity for women to express themselves publicly on religious matters. However the window closed again as the new churches became more organized. Regardless, the cornerstone for later emancipation and empowerment had been laid, due to women’s required literacy to raise and teach the children.

Just to mention two other women who used the window of opportunity to express themselves on religion, and to interpret the faith for others, I'll point to Marié Dentière; who lived most of her life in Geneva fighting for John Calvin's reform, and later quite controversially for women's right to preach, and Olimpia Fulvia Morata; daughter of an Italian scholar, and highly educated in languages and religious matters, who, had she not died 28 years old, had the potential to become a beacon for women's possibilities in society and empowerment on religious matters.

Teresa de Avila - The empowered nun

Within the Catholic Church the convents were options primarily for noble women to escape marriage, and a possibility to study as well as express themselves. Before the Reformation the closure of the convents was not as strict as after the Catholic Reformation following the Council of Trent. In some convents, women were allowed to walk the streets, and in most the nuns were able to receive and talk to visitors.

This changed after the Council of Trent, and the Closure became very strict. The nuns were not to be seen or see the outside world. They were only allowed to talk to other nuns and to a priest during confession.

After the Council, Teresa de Avila founded the Discalced Carmelite convents. She envisioned a convent physically enclosed but with the possibility for the enlightenment of the nuns. She adhered to a strict poverty shared equal by all in the convent and the prioress. The prioress received an enhanced role, as spiritual teachers, healers and guardians for the nuns. In other words, the position of prioress provided a possibility for women to become religious leaders. Admittedly a possibility for a very few women, to be a leader of women, but in the early years of the Discalced order, it was a very powerful position that granted a lot of autonomy, that later on was obtained.

Conclusion

In the 16th century, a window of opportunity opened for women to express themselves, teach and interpret Christianity, both in the areas where Luther's and Calvin's reform caught on, and in the areas that remained strictly Catholic. This window was closed again as the Protestant churches became more organized and the Catholic Church reacted theologically on the new situation at the Council of Trent. In some ways, the possibilities in the late 16th century for women to express themselves were poorer than before the Reformation due to the abolishment of the monasteries in the Protestant areas, and the more strict closure in the Catholic areas. As literacy spread among the laity, also among women, the cornerstone for a later movement for women's emancipation were laid.

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About the Author

29 years old, Master of theology, Member of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. General Secretary in Ecumenical Youth - The Danish SCM, married to Mette Helene and Father to Selma Sofie.