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Manoukian, Abel H.: **The Deaconesses of the Armenian Church**. Translated by David Zakarian. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2024. 196 S. (Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia 113), kt. € 38,00 ISBN: 9783402122761

In recent decades, diakonia has emerged as one of the central topics of international research in both ecclesiastical and academic contexts. This development is to be welcomed, for the theme is complex, multilayered, and bears directly on contemporary discussions concerning ecclesial ministry. Much debate has centred on what diakonia has denoted in different periods and historical settings, and how its nature might best be understood today. Considerable attention has also been devoted to the roles of deacons and deaconesses in the life of the Church. Closely related to this is the question—raised in many traditions—of whether gender has, or ought to have, any significance for the diaconal office(s).

It is this latter theme that Abel H. Manoukian's recent work, *The Deaconesses of the Armenian Church*, seeks to address. Published as vol. 113 in the "Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia" series of the Institute for Ecumenical Studies at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, the book is a revised and expanded version of research originally undertaken by the author in the 1980s and 1990s. It is a compact volume, handsomely produced, with elegant covers and well-chosen photographic material.

The book rests on the author's twofold conviction concerning the position of the female diaconate. On the one hand, Manoukian argues that the equality envisaged in God's creative purpose has not been realised in the history of the Church. He attributes this in part to "the considerable pressure from the social relationships of the time, cultural beliefs, the influence of the milieu and the daily life, and especially […] the patriarchal morals," which, he maintains, generated "a hierarchical division of dominance and subordination between men and women in the church." (7) Consequently, he contends, most "Apostolic churches," which continue to uphold a two-millennia-old "tradition," "do not permit women to be ordained or anointed as priests and to serve the church as equals to male priests in performing liturgical duties." (9.12) In his view, "[t]his is a real issue, yet the response remains uncertain and the position of women within the church is currently unresolved." (9)

On the other hand, the Armenian Church is presented as a noteworthy exception to this general pattern. The author openly acknowledges his affiliation with the Armenian Church and repeatedly praises it for having preserved and developed the tradition of deaconesses—what he describes as "the right to assume the first office" (13) in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, alongside bishops and priests. The book thus aims to demonstrate the historical depth and contemporary legitimacy of these claims.

From the perspective of historical theology, the table of contents appears encouraging. The first four chap.s proceed chronologically, beginning with "Jesus and Women of His Time" and moving through "Evidence in the New Testament," "Evidence in the First Three Centuries," and "The Classical

Period of Deaconesses (3rd–6th cc.)." The subsequent chap.s examine various local traditions, particularly within the Byzantine, Syrian, and Armenian Churches. Later sections address "Evidence from the Eighth Century: The First Armenian Female Hymnographers," "Evidence on Deaconesses from the 12th Century Onwards," and "Revival of the Female Diaconate in the 17th Century." The remaining chap.s treat the vestments of deaconesses and provide material from Armenian female convents beyond the borders of Armenia.

Despite this well-conceived outline, the book's scholarly execution presents certain challenges. First, the chap.s that address early Christian views of women and their ecclesiastical roles—as reflected in New Testament and Patristic sources of the first millennium—are extremely brief. While selectivity is of course necessary given the abundance of material, it is difficult to imagine how themes such as "Jesus and Women of His Time," "Evidence in the New Testament," or "Evidence in the First Centuries" could receive adequate treatment within sections that sometimes amount to fewer than one and a half pages of prose.

Moreover, the claims advanced in these chap.s are not consistently supported by sustained engagement with the primary sources or the relevant secondary literature. Patristic authors are occasionally mentioned, yet references to their texts are often cursory and, at times, problematic (as in the misinterpretation of Canon XIX of Nicaea, 20). Furthermore, even the early Christian evidence that the author does present generally does not indicate women's full participation in the hierarchical order; rather, it tends—according to the author, "unfortunately"—to deny it.

As expected, the famous Byzantine manuscript Barberini Gr. 336, with its description of the ordination of deaconesses, is invoked. Yet no analysis of the text is provided, nor any acknowledgement of the scholarly view that among Byzantine manuscripts, it constitutes a rather rare occurrence of this theme. In other cases, passages from sources belonging to entirely different periods or contexts appear abruptly and without adequate explanation of their relevance. For example, almost one third of the brief chap. on "Jesus and Women of His Time" consists of a medieval Armenian commentator's reflections on Mary Magdalene—an insertion that does little to strengthen the argument and risks leaving the reader uncertain about the methodological framework employed.

A further difficulty concerns the author's approach to historical evidence. Manoukian depicts the earliest Christian communities as having adopted an egalitarian stance concerning ministerial duties, with various groups of women who "played an active role in the organisation of the early Christian communities and made significant contributions to the spread of Christianity." (12) Yet he holds that this praxis degenerated during the Middle Ages, with the Church gradually depriving women of previously existing opportunities to fulfil influential offices. Although this general narrative is familiar within certain strands of contemporary scholarship, it remains difficult to substantiate conclusively on the basis of sources from the first centuries—a tension that may perhaps explain the aforementioned scarcity of demonstrated evidence.

There is also a noticeable tendency toward anachronism. Late ancient and medieval sources are at times evaluated in light of modern categories such as "discrimination" or "open-mindedness towards women holding the office in the church." (48) The author further commends the impulses of the French revolutionary women's movement and "the demands of the feminist movement of the twentieth century" (12.56) as models for contemporary ecclesial developments, though without clarifying how these movements relate—or fail to relate—to the ancient and medieval contexts under discussion.

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After surveying the New Testament and Patristic evidence, the reader might expect the Armenian material to offer substantial confirmation of the historical presence of deaconesses functioning in clerical roles. Surprisingly, however, the majority of the evidence presented seems to point in a different direction. Manoukian does provide evocative depictions of certain eighth-century Armenian women "inspired by the Holy Spirit," (38) who contributed significantly to hymnody and ecclesiastical education. He also discusses medieval continuations of the late ancient practice in which deaconesses assisted with the baptism of women, and he describes their liturgical functions within female monastic communities. Yet he simultaneously acknowledges that these practices were "not prescriptive" (56) and did not entail duties comparable to those of priests.

Even the chap. titled "Revival of the Female Diaconate in the 17th Century," though promising in principle, focuses largely on the existence of female convents in which a small number of nuns were designated as deaconesses, often engaging in charitable work or scribal activity. If, however, as the author asserts, "[t]he tradition of conferring the rank of deaconess upon women […] was undoubtedly a continuation of a long-established custom in the Armenian Church," (68) then it would be important to clarify from what, precisely, the seventeenth-century development constituted a "revival."

A similar lack of clarity is found in the subsequent chap.s. Although Manoukian presents many interesting details regarding Armenian female convents and an orphanage where nuns exercised philanthropic and educational responsibilities, the evidence drawn from the sources is—as the author himself acknowledges—rather sparse. It therefore sheds limited light on the precise ecclesiastical roles of these women. Even in the few instances where deaconesses are said to have participated in liturgical celebrations outside the convent, in parish contexts, the author expressly acknowledges his uncertainty concerning the underlying rationale.

In summary, two methodological concerns warrant mention. First, while the book offers a wealth of historical detail tangentially connected to the topic, the evidential basis remains limited and its analysis correspondingly superficial. Secondly, the scholarly focus is occasionally obscured—on the one hand by the affective language employed in describing the female diaconate, and on the other by the framing of the discussion within contemporary discourses on gender and individual "rights." The result is that the reader may at times find it difficult to determine whether the work aims primarily to offer historical analysis or to advocate a particular ecclesial position, especially in the concluding remark that "[t]he demand for women to attain the title and authority of a priest and a bishop will logically follow the diaconate." (145)

None of this is to deny the complexity of the topic. Discussions concerning the diaconate are intrinsically challenging, for the terminology itself is far from self-evident. In both academic and ecclesial dialogues, interlocutors frequently assume that terms such as "deacon," "deaconess," or "diakonia" carry the same meaning for all parties, while this is rarely the case. For one, "deacon" may primarily denote an ordained minister responsible for liturgical functions; for another, the emphasis may lie on charitable or administrative tasks. When such divergences go unnoticed, participants speak past one another. Even when they are acknowledged, integrating these distinct understandings into a coherent ecclesiological framework can often prove challenging.

In recent years, major scholarly contributions have greatly clarified these interpretive and terminological issues. Since John N. Collins's landmark study[1] considerable progress has been made.

[1] John N. Collins: Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources. Oxford 1990.

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More recently, the edited vol.s *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity*[2] have offered substantial insights into the tasks of deacons and the nature of diakonia. Notably, however, despite their breadth, these studies do not address the Armenian linguistic and ecclesial sphere—a field that surely deserves careful investigation through a well-structured academic study grounded in historical and systematic theological evidence. It is to be hoped that such work will emerge in the future.

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[2] Bart J. KOET/Edwina MURPHY/Esko RYÖKÄS (ed.): Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries (WUNT II 479). Tübingen 2018; Bart J. KOET/Edwina MURPHY/Esko RYÖKÄS (ed.): Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The Third Century Onwards (WUNT II 606). Tübingen 2024.

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