

“Accordingly, the light does not shine from the West!” How media discourse on the ordination of women constructs the role of women in church and society

Content

For a brief moment at the very beginning of the Awakening in the end of 1980ies and beginning of 1990ies, it seemed that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL), which is the biggest church in Latvia, like the rest of society was heading down a path of liberalization. The 1993 emergency election of the ELCL archbishop and the subsequent abolition of women's ordination showed that this was not the case. The church not only chose a different developmental vector but also launched a conservative mindset dominating in the next 30 years, against the background of a profound social transformation and change towards liberalization and gender equality. Through the reflection and discussion of this position in the public sphere, it had a potential of influence making the secular society's value scales to lean towards conservatism. Analyzing discourses of both Lutheran and secular printed media reveals how the church's stance on gender roles inside the church as well as equality at a specific time fostered the cultivation of certain values and norms in the other domains of social life, thereby deepening its influence on society in general.

Media discourses establish power relations between certain social groups and (re)shape how people perceive the roles of these groups. Therefore, the discussion about the case of banning women's ordination in the ELCL is significant and influences the understanding of gender issues, as well as the associated concepts of social equality and justice in post-secular Latvian society. The paper provides insight into the process of forming neoconservative arguments regarding gender roles, analyzing the debates on women's ordination in the ELCL in two leading Latvian print media ('Diena' and 'Latvijas Avize'), as well as in the weekly newspaper published by the ELCL, 'Svētdienas Rīts/ Sunday Morning' during two periods of particularly active debates: from 1993 to 1998 and from 2016 to 2023. The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method was used to trace the main arguments and analyze them in the context of Latvian society and the socio-cultural history of the ELCL.

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