

Speaking Different Languages: the use of 'gender equality' in the debate on women's ordination in Latvia

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This paper examines the contrasting discursive frameworks employed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia Worldwide (ELCLW) concerning women's ordination. We argue that the divergence between the perspectives is at least partially grounded in differing epistemic, cultural, and historical contexts that shape each group's understanding of concepts like gender equality.

ELCLW's support for women's ordination frequently invokes gender equality as an essential human right, aligning the issue with broader socio-political principles such as workplace anti-discrimination and social justice. This approach reflects ELCLW's historical development within international, often Western, Lutheran communities that embrace egalitarian values. For ELCLW, women's ordination is part of a larger struggle for equality, transcending purely religious considerations to address both societal and ecclesial equity. Conversely, ELCL representatives largely reject gender equality as relevant to ordination, framing it instead as an external, secular ideology at odds with traditional Lutheran doctrines. For ELCL, ordination status does not alter the inherent worth of individuals, and hence the discourse on gender equality does not intersect with theological stances on ordination. This view stems from a unique Latvian historical experience marked by Soviet rule, during which religious practice was tightly controlled, and later by post-Soviet nationalism, which fostered a conservative stance toward Western sociopolitical ideologies. In this context, gender equality is often viewed as a Western imposition and thus extraneous to Latvia's religious life.

By highlighting the contrasting uses of "gender equality," we reveal the nuanced ways in which socio-historical experience informs theological discourse on women's ordination. This study thus underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping theological debate, offering insights into how modern religious discourse navigates and incorporates issues of gender and equality.