Entailment is the relation that obtains between the premises and conclusion of a valid argument. Alternatively, it is the relation that obtains between facts when one logically includes or presupposes the other so, e.g. being red entails being coloured.

Some claims are rich with entailments; others are meagre. The claim that an object is red, for example, is richer--stronger we should say--than the claim that it is coloured. The proposition that a thing is red entails that it is coloured but not vice versa, that is, the former proposition is stronger than the later. In general, a proposition, P1 is stronger then a proposition P2 if P1 entails P2 but not vice versa.

Strength is a mixed blessing--indeed, from the epistemic point of view it is precisely in weakness that there is strength. The weaker a proposition is the easier it is to establish and defend: the less you say, the less likely you are to be proven wrong. By contrast, the richer a proposition is with entailments the more likely it is to entail something objectionable. Thus one strategy in argument is to show that apparently innocuous claims are richer with entailments than they seem, in particular, that they entail propositions which are clearly false and are thereby ‘reduced to absurdity.’

Opponents of women’s ordination typically suggest that the proposition that women can be priests entails further propositions which supporters either fail to recognise or wrongly fail to regard as objectionable. I suggest that in fact the objectionable doctrines which are alleged to follow from the thesis that women can be priests follow only if we make highly questionable assumptions, including most particularly the controversial assumption that there are theologically significant gender differences. Arguably, the burden of proof is on the opponent of women’s ordination to defend these assumptions.

Not all theses are created equal--some require argumentation if they are to be reasonably held, while others do not. Burden of proof considerations figure
importantly in moral and legal reasoning. There is a moral presumption in favour of treating all persons in the same way. This is not to say that we in fact ought to treat all persons in the same way in all situations but merely that it is policies which prescribe different treatment for which reasons are required. If, for example, I deal in dry goods, I do not need to explain why I charge two customers the same price for the same kind of item. I should have to explain if I set different prices for different customers. Now I may be able to provide a satisfactory explanation for such a policy. Perhaps I charge customers on a sliding scale based on their ability to pay, extend discounts to faculty or other classes of individuals, or give customers a discount for paying cash. Because there is a presumption in favour of equal treatment however it is different treatment, not similar treatment, that requires explanation.

If there is, as I have suggested, a presumption in favour of equal (i.e. same) treatment then the burden of proof is on the opponent of women’s ordination. This is not to say that there can be no compelling reasons to restrict the priesthood to men or, more generally, to treat men and women differently, but only that it is the case for treating men and women differently that has to be made out.

There are two tacks the opponent of women’s ordination may take. He may argue that treating men and women differently with regard to ordination is fair in virtue of gender differences which warrant different treatment in this regard. More plausibly he may argue that considerations of utility outweigh considerations of fairness in this matter. Arguably, fairness, while desirable, can be overridden by other considerations. Even if it is unfair to treat men and women differently, not only as regards ordination, but in the allocation of other social burdens, benefits and opportunities, there are conceivable circumstances in which such unfairness would be warranted, where the costs of fairness may outweigh the benefits.

Thus, if there are gender differences which are theologically significant then treating men and women differently in this regard may not be unfair and may indeed be warranted. Moreover, even if there are no theologically significant gender
differences, advocates of women’s ordination must still respond to cost arguments against women’s ordination which purport to show that the costs of ordaining women outweigh considerations of fairness.

II

I shall consider five arguments against women’s ordination, of which four either explicitly or tacitly assume that there are theologically significant gender differences in virtue of which the exclusion of women from clergy status is fair. The remaining argument, by contrast, is neutral with respect to this assumption: it purports to show that even if there are no theologically significant gender differences, considerations of fairness are overridden by considerations of utility. Before discussing these arguments, however, we need to consider what differences between men and women there are and how such differences might be theologically significant. When we talk about differences between groups, for example, differences in mathematical achievement between men and women or differences in height between Japanese and Swedes, we need to distinguish between on-the-average differences and across-the-board differences. Although the average height of Swedes is greater than the average height of Japanese, some Japanese are taller than some Swedes. Indeed, the curves for height overlap substantially. Similarly, when it comes to definable, measurable psychological characteristics such gender differences as exist—and empirical investigation shows that there are far fewer than folk wisdom suggests—are on-the-average differences. The only uncontroversial across-the-board differences between men and women are those characteristics which are definitive of being male or female and it is hard to see how such traits per se could be theologically significant.

Nevertheless, opponents of women’s ordination suggest that the obvious across-the-board differences, which are not per se theologically significant are indicative of undefinable je ne sais quoi differences between men and women that are. Thus: ‘men and women are not the same things with different fittings! The different fittings indicate an interior difference the level of spirit.’1
Invoking je ne sais quoi, gender differences for which there is no empirical
evidence and which cannot be characterised except as the kind of differences which
license treating men and women differently and for which there is no direct empirical
evidence is question-begging. Why can’t women be ordained? Because of ‘interior
differences at the level of spirit.’ What is the nature of these differences? Well, they’re
the sort of differences that mandate different roles for men and women in the Church
and preclude women from being ordained.

Arguably, however, the following arguments against women’s ordination
assume that there are theologically significant across-the-board differences between
men and women.

**The Straight Biblical Argument**
(1) Women can be ordained to the priesthood only if women were called to be
apostles.
(2) Women were not called to be apostles.
(3) Therefore, women cannot be ordained to the priesthood.

We could worry (2), citing Junia, however (1) is more problematic insofar as it
would seem that the only available reason for holding it is the assumption that there
are theologically significant gender differences.

We cannot adopt the principle that individuals of a sort F cannot be ordained if
Jesus could have ordained Fs but did not because this would exclude gentiles and, in all
likelihood, people who can crack their knuckles in both direction and others possessed
of traits that were not, as a matter of fact, represented amongst the Apostles. The
plausibility of (1) rests upon the tacit assumption that gender, unlike knuckle-cracking
virtuosity, is theologically significant, hence that the exclusion of women, unlike the
exclusion of virtuoso knuckle-crackers, makes a theological statement.

It may be suggested that, insofar as gender is more salient than knuckle-cracking
prowess and more widely represented in the population, it is likely that Jesus’ exclusion
of women was intentional whereas his exclusion of virtuoso knuckle-crackers was
unintentional. Nevertheless, even if we grant that Jesus intentionally excluded women
from amongst the Apostles it still does not follow that his intention was to exclude
women from the priesthood subsequently. His intention may have been to accommodate the social arrangements of his time.

This is not to say that he was ‘bound’ by the social prejudices of his time or ignorant of the requirements of fairness, but rather that he chose to act within these social constraints in order to achieve his ends. He chose to work with the stuff of the material world and the cultural milieu of first century Palestine, and to submit to the constraints this imposed on his action, not to commend them but in order to become truly incarnate. He worked as a carpenter because that was the family business, not in order to commend carpentry as a profession for his followers. There is no compelling reason to think he intentionally excluded women in order to mark gender as theologically significant or establish the tradition of an all-male priesthood in perpetuity.

Other arguments against women’s ordination make explicit reference to alleged gender differences, including the Misbegotten Male Argument, which invokes Aristotle’s notion that female progeny are begotten when the process of generation goes awry:

(1) Jesus intentionally excluded women from amongst the Apostles
(2) Excluding women from this role would show moral turpitude unless either (a) the agent was ignorant (bound by the conditions of his time) or (b) it were proper to exclude women from the priesthood.

The Misbegotten Male Argument
(1) Defective individuals cannot be ordained to the priesthood.
(2) Women, in virtue of their gender, are defective.
(3) Therefore, women cannot be ordained to the priesthood.

Even if, absurdly, (2) were correct, the argument fails since it does not explain why the ‘defect’ of female gender is significant while other defects, e.g. baldness and obesity, are not. The assumption again is that being female is theologically significant in a way that male-pattern baldness is not.
These days Aristotelian a priori biology is out of favour. According to current doctrine, while in no respect inferior to men, or defective, women are nevertheless ineffably different. On one view, there are sets of ‘complementary’ properties constitutive of the archetypal Masculine and Feminine respectively--let of say M- and F-properties--which men and women exemplify. To be an adequate image or ‘icon’ of Christ--a crucial requirement for priesthood--an individual must essentially or predominantly exemplify M-properties thus:

**The Vive la Difference Argument**
(1) A person can be ordained to the priesthood only if he [predominantly] exemplifies M-properties
(2) No woman [predominantly] exemplifies M-properties.
(3) Therefore, no woman can be ordained to the priesthood.

In response, one can accept these mystical-Jungian notions about Masculine-Feminine polarities while rejecting the association of Christ with M-properties or one may simply dismiss the whole mythopoetic framework.

Some feminist theologians take the first tack, suggesting that the exclusive or primary association of God with M-properties is improper and that the ordination of women is in fact required in order to secure a ‘compete priesthood’ which adequately reflects the nature of divine reality. Arguably, the latter approach is preferable.

It is precisely the thesis that there are theologically significant gender differences together with the contention that women ought to be ordained in virtue of these differences which (together with further assumptions) is rich with just those entailments that many orthodox Christians find objectionable. Consider, for example, the objectionable suggestion that contrary to the classical conception of God as ‘pure act’ we ought to conceive of God as also ‘receptive’ in recognition of God’s archetypally Feminine aspect. Women’s ordination, the story goes, entails the recognition of the divine Feminine. If, however, we reject the mythopoetic thesis that men are [primarily] active while women are [primarily] receptive, the ordination of women will not entail any such revision of our understanding of God as pure act.
Finally, amongst arguments which assume the existence of theologically significant gender differences, the Authority of the Undivided Church Argument makes this assumption implicitly. It turns on the claim that bodies within the Church, as defined by Apostolic Succession, ought to maintain unity as regards theologically loaded matters.

**The Authority of the Undivided Church Argument**

1. No body within the Church ought to act unilaterally in theologically loaded matters.
2. The decision to ordain women is theologically loaded.
3. Therefore, no body within the Church ought to act unilaterally in ordaining women.

This argument depends crucially on a distinction between those matters which are ‘theologically loaded’ and those which are mere matters of custom or discipline. (2) requires that the question of whether women can be ordained as priests is a theological one unlike, e.g., the question of whether clergy can marry which is a mere matter of discipline. To make the distinction here, however, it would seem that we should have to assume that there are gender differences which render the question of women’s ordination theologically loaded. Thus, arguably, like the first three arguments, this too assumes that there are theologically significant gender differences.

**III**

The most compelling arguments against women’s ordination turn on weighing the likely benefits of ordaining women against the probable costs. It is these arguments which, I suggest, it is crucial to address not only because they are the most rationally compelling but because I suspect that the reasons adduced in these arguments are the factors that really motivate popular opposition to women’s ordination and to the entry of women, both lay and ordained, into leadership positions within the Church.

We can weigh the costs and benefits of ordaining women recognising that a good deal of disagreement on this matter comes from differences in the values assigned to the consequences of adopting the policy and in the assignment of probabilities to projected future consequences of continuing the practice. Even in the absence of
theological reasons against women’s ordination, the costs may in fact outweigh the benefits and militate against women’s ordination.

Some costs and benefits are as follows:

**Costs**

(1) Ecumenical efforts involving Roman Catholics will be set back and the Church may become more strongly identified as Protestant.

(2) Dissent, bad feeling, and practical difficulties concerning hiring, conscience clauses, etc. may arise.

(3) The Church will lose members who object to the ordination of women.

(4) The Church will be perceived as unreflectively caving in to secular trends and will go further down the slippery slope to unprincipled tenderness.

(5) Religious practice, which is already identified as a primarily female preoccupation will become even more strongly identified as feminine and male participation in the church will be further undermined.

(5) is especially significant since it raises a number of important issues which, I suspect, motivate much opposition to women’s ordination.

**Benefits**

(6) [Assuming there are no theological objections to the ordination of women] greater fairness will result.

(7) There will be greater pool of applicants for clergy positions, allowing for greater selectivity.

(8) The Church will retain or attract members who might otherwise be put off by the policy of excluding women from the priesthood.

(9) Members of the Church will have the option of dealing with either male or female clergy.

(10) Women who are [putatively] called to be priests will be benefited.

IV

What disturbs many people is the often unarticulated sense that religion is already ‘too feminine’ and the worry that opening all leadership roles to women will make it more so. Moreover, there is the fear that unless men are given special benefits they will be unwilling to remain within what is already a predominantly female institution--or perhaps unable to cope with the monstrous regiment of women.

The restriction of the priesthood and other desirable positions within the Church to men may be seen as an affirmative action policy for an ecclesiastical minority. Dean
R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, in their 1979 study of factors influencing church commitment note that ‘all research on Protestants and Catholics shows higher church attendance and religious commitment for women than for men’ that is not explicable by characteristics other than gender, which arise because the Church accommodates, promotes and rewards stereotypically feminine preoccupations and behaviour:

Women, in general, are found in all research to be more conforming to social norms, more anxious, more nurturant, and more affiliative, and these traits are congruent with traditional church behaviour. Sex differences in church behaviour are apparently components of broader sex-role differences.²

As a consequence of the popular identification of traditional femininity with religious values and ‘spirituality’ the church can be an uncomfortable place for many men and perhaps even more so for women who deviate from the traditional norm. Since the research cited by Hoge and Roozen was compiled, almost 20 years ago, women in large numbers have entered traditionally male domains and expectations about sex roles have changed. Citing extensive recent empirical data, social psychologist Carol Tavris has argued persuasively that many of the character traits and behaviours thought to be characteristic of males and females in virtue of innate biological differences or early development are in fact induced by the social and professional roles men and women typically occupy.³

Ironically, as women in growing numbers have become increasingly uncomfortable with sex roles, some advocates of women’s ordination and participation in church leadership have become keen to promote a ‘feminine’ ethos that many women find oppressive. New style femininity is superficially different from traditional femininity, but the core values are strikingly similar: nurturance, non-hierarchical organisation, preoccupation with feelings and relationships, and an ‘ethic of care.’ Women fear, with good reason, that the new presbyter is the old priest writ large. And many men see the feminist theologians’ program, which has become associated with women’s ordination, as a move to make Christianity, already too ‘feminine’ for their tastes, even more ‘feminine.’
Historically women attempting to enter traditionally male enclaves have adopted two very different strategies. The first, and most obvious, has been to debunk popular wisdom about sex differences in order to show that women qualify for admission according to the same criteria by which men qualify. The second strategy has been to exploit popular wisdom about sex differences in order to make the case that women in virtue of their peculiar abilities or character traits are especially suitable for entry into the positions in question or, indeed, that the entry of women will result in beneficial changes.

Within the Church, many of the most vocal supporters of women's ordination have attempted to exploit this difference strategy. Many accept both folk wisdom about empirical differences between men and women and their opponents' contention that gender is theologically significant and, indeed, hold that the proposition that women can be ordained as priests is incompatible with traditional theological views. As a consequence they associate women's ordination with the theological claim that women's ordination entails the rejection of traditional theological views and the empirical conjecture that women's entry into leadership positions in the church will result in radical changes to the institution.

Christians who are committed to traditional theological views and accept this association will reject women's ordination--the feminist theologian's *modus ponens* is the 'traditionalist's' *modus tollens*. I have suggested however that there is no compelling reason to believe that there are theologically significant gender differences, hence that the proposition that women can be ordained as priests is innocuous, inconsequential and meagre in its entailments and that it does not, in any case, imply any program of theological revision or 'reimaging.'

Most members of the Church who are uneasy about the entry of women into the ordained ministry of the Church are perhaps more worried by the empirical conjecture that it will result in changes in the life of the church which they regard as undesirable than by the alleged theological ramifications. They imagine feminists
mangling favourite hymns and texts, encouraging Goddess-worship and conducting interminable workshops on the spirituality of Julian of Norwich. They also fear that women in leadership positions will lack the authority or decisiveness to conduct the business of the Church effectively. Again, strategically, friends of women’s ordination should not attempt to show that such consequences are desirable but rather cite empirical evidence which suggests that they are unlikely to come about as a result of the entry of women into leadership positions.

Opponents of women’s ordination are legitimately fearful of what women’s ordination may entail. I have suggested that it entails very little and that this supports the case in favour of it. Moreover, the message of the Gospel seems to be that we ought to act in such a way as to minimise the importance of sex, race, class, blood kinship and other unchosen, natural affiliations in people’s lives: in Christ there is no male or female, no Greek or Jew, no slave or free. This is the most compelling reason to reject the view that gender is theologically significant and with it arguments against women’s ordination.

Harriet Baber is Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Diego

3492 words


2Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, "Research on Factors Influencing Church Commitment" in Understanding Church Growth and

3Carol Tavris, The Mismeasure of Woman (Simon & Schuster, 1992)