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Introductory Information and Introduction

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The aim of the *Journal* is to create a worldwide forum for the presentation of Hindu-Christian scholarly studies, book reviews, and news of past and upcoming events. Materials selected for publication will be balanced between historical research and contemporary practice and, where possible, will employ analytical and theoretical analysis set within the context of our shared contemporary experience. Contributions are invited and may be addressed to either the Editor or the Co-Editor. Articles of roughly 4000 words are preferred, though occasionally longer pieces will be published. Send manuscript in paper form as well as on diskette. A style sheet is available on request. The *Journal* adopts a policy of non-gender-specific language where applicable. All articles are subject to review before acceptance and may be edited in the course of publication.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE main topic of this issue is women and priesthood. Neither Christian nor Hindu communities speak monolithically on the question as to whether women may be admitted to the priesthood or be formally installed in positions of leadership. The four essays presented here take up the issue theologically, historically, and with an eye to contemporary debates and actual innovations.

Susan Ross, in the opening essay, gives an overview of some of the positions Christian churches over the centuries have taken on the issue of women's ordination to the priesthood and summarizes theological reasons both for and against this type of ministry. Her particular focus is on the Roman Catholic Church (the world's largest Christian denomination), which during recent decades has witnessed a vigorous debate over the question of whether women may be ordained. The official stance of Roman Catholic leadership continues to exclude women from the priesthood, and Ross presents the theological reasons used in support of this prohibition. But she also presents various arguments employed in favor of women becoming priests.

Maura Ryan, in the second essay, approaches the question of the ordination of women to the Roman Catholic priesthood from an ethical perspective. In drawing on contemporary feminist theory, she raises questions about both the morality of sex-specific roles as well as the symbolic character of ordination. Drawing on the work of Christine Gudorf, she notes how the reservation of priesthood to males fails the test of justice in several respects. She also observes how in the vast majority of Roman Catholic parishes in the United States that are without priests women in effect have taken on the role of pastor and many of the duties normally associated with priests, but without having received formal ordination. Ryan goes on to note that the official ecclesial rejection of women's ordination

may be seen as part of a broader concern to uphold and define traditional Roman Catholic identity and core values in the face of modernity's many changes and challenges. But she suggests that the ordination of women to the priesthood would be an expression of a social and humanitarian justice that is a standard Roman Catholic ideal.

In turning to the Hindu traditions Laurie Patton examines evidence from antiquity to determine what priestly roles were available to women and on what basis. Women not only recited mantras in certain sacrifices and rituals and presided over marriage rites, but, according to Mimamsa, they also enjoyed ritual authority by virtue of being married. Both husband and wife were qualified to sacrifice only as long as they remained in the married state, and neither husband nor wife could sacrifice alone. Patton then considers further possibilities for women today to become sacrificing priests according to the rules of Mimamsa. She speculates that a woman might be able to sacrifice in the absence of a husband if she made use of a reproductive technology available today but not in the ancient world. Also the fact that in ancient times women, and not just men, were regarded as mediators of the Veda, suggests that women ritual experts today are well qualified to inquire into the nature of *dharma*. She goes on to argue that the very nature and purpose of dharmic and sacrificial action "must include women's actions and women's well being as part of their definition. And if this is so, then women's ritual participation and leadership may well be crucial."

Vasudha Narayanan concludes with an essay about the many meanings and functions associated with the notion of Hindu priesthood, e.g. conducting domestic rituals and sacraments or performing rituals in temples, and she gives examples of women's increasing access to priestly duties

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today. She notes that the wearing of the sacred thread, normally reserved to men in the upper three castes and which invests them with priestly authority, has undergone innovation in modern times to include, for instance, a Vaishnava Scheduled Caste in Bangalore. Both men and women of this community recite and teach sacred scripture and thus have assumed one of the functions normally associated with male Brahminhood. In Pune, too, there are groups which in modern times have invested young Brahmin girls with the the sacred thread. Narayanan gives other examples of recent expanded admission of women to priestly duties: performing death rites in Kerala, conducting Vedic sacrifices in Maharashtra, officiating over temple rituals in South India, even without *diksha* or formal initiation. She suggests that perhaps one reason for the growing amplified role of women in priestly contexts is the current dearth of male Brahmin priests. In addition, she adds, it is the “very diversity, plurality, and lack of centralized authority in Hindu traditions” that helps enable spontaneous change to occur.

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