Symbolic Violence and Women Priests in the Church of England

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ABSTRACT

Women priests in the Church of England are subject to discrimination that is legitimised and justified through gendered theologies. Through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, this article explores the harms perpetrated as women are constructed as differently human by both the Church's structure and by the theological discourses that define the social and the relational. Whilst the notion of misrecognition suggests collusion, the argument concludes that women priests navigate their recognition of symbolic violence and the silencing mechanisms in place, in different ways. The conclusion suggests that misrecognition needs to be reinterpreted and developed with more nuance to account for the agency of women priests, and that gendered theology should be treated as discourse through which symbolic violence is perpetrated to maintain masculine dominance.

KEYWORDS

BOURDIEU, CHURCH OF ENGLAND, COMPLEMENTARIANISM, GENDER AND THEOLOGY, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE, WOMEN PRIESTS

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Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the harms perpetrated by dominant groups against the dominated through discourse and messaging. This 'symbolic violence', defined by its obfuscation and therefore characterised by collusion from the dominated in their oppression (Burawoy 2019). Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, developed the theoretical intricacies of symbolic violence, and I have found his framework useful in exploring the experiences of women priests in the Church of England (Jagger 2025). I postulate elsewhere (Jagger 2021) that the relationship women priests have with the Church of England and the framework used to define domestic violence contain homologies. I use symbolic violence as the connecting thread while others more concretely connect symbolic violence with forms of gendered violence (Bardall 2020). The notion of symbolic violence has been applied and expanded in various arenas, such as political power (Harrits 2011), feminist cultural analysis (McRobbie 2004), and higher education (Watson and Widin 2015).

In this article, I set out Bourdieu's definition of symbolic violence in the context of women priests navigating theological objections to their priesthood. One key finding from my research is that definitions of symbolic violence need to recognise that women clergy develop awareness of such violence and negotiate the gendered institutional practices with *savoir faire* that gives rise to resistances. I suggest Bourdieu's concept needs to be expanded to account for agency, awareness, and subversions to avoid the trap of assuming women priests simply collude with the bifurcation of their identities into priest and non- (or fake) priest. I demonstrate the extent to which women clergy are subjected to symbolic violence perpetrated by the institution of the Church through discourse and practice, and by individual clergy men who oppose women's ordination. I treat theology as a type of discourse, rather than epistemology, and argue that complementarian theology and theologies that exclude women from ontological priesthood attack subjectivity and humanness in support of masculine domination. Such theological discourses mask and deliver symbolic violence by forming respectability around misogynistic othering of women.

Bourdieu and Symbolic Violence

There is, according to Bourdieu, a paradox in how oppressions, inequalities, and injustices are systemically (and easily) reproduced without significant resistances or rebellions from those who are dominated. In his work, *Masculine Domination* (2001), he writes:

> I have always been astonished by what might be called the paradox of doxa…that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (1).

Bourdieu lays out a social condition whereby oppressions (expressed in both institutional and relational contexts) go largely unchallenged because they are normalised and naturalised. One of the core conditions that make this possible is the obfuscation of oppression – that which is invisible is impossible to resist. Using masculine oppression as an example, Bourdieu goes on to state:

> I have also seen masculine domination, and the way it is imposed and suffered, as the prime example of this paradoxical submission, an effect of what I call symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), or even feeling (2001: 1-2).

In other words, the social machinery of oppression, inequality and injustice is sometimes hidden as it works to shore up the interests of the dominant, whilst undermining the subjectivities of the dominated. Moreover, such mechanisms are not simply hidden, but are *misrecognised* – that is, we mistake discourses and practices that harm us for something that is beneficial, benevolent or harm*less*. This misrecognition is a key feature of Bourdieu's definition of symbolic violence, since it explains collusion; that is, we are duped into acquiescing to attacks on our subjectivity because they

are framed in non-harmful terms (Bourdieu 1990). Resistance is not simply forestalled; the possibility of resistance is driven from our consciousness when we do not recognise a discourse or practice as oppressive. One mechanism for such obfuscation can be, for example, the delivery of messages through collegiality, where there is an absence of overt hostility. The kind word, the offer of support, and the benefits of the relational, obscure the underlying harms.

Identifying symbolic violence, therefore, involves awareness of three key markers: oppression of a dominated group in ways that harm subjectivity and status; obfuscation of the source and nature of the oppression (that is, varying degrees of misrecognition); and levels of collusion and acquiescence arising from misrecognition. The outworking of gendered theologies through relational encounters and through the institutional arrangements of the Church of England are, I argue, more precisely understood in terms of the harm to women if seen through this lens.

Symbolic Violence and Women Priests

My research is based on semi-structured interviews with 27 women priests in the Church of England. The cohort was largely white and included women at various stages of their ministry, from the newly ordained to retirees. Around half of the cohort identified themselves as Anglo-Catholic and the rest described themselves as 'middle-of-the-road' or evangelical in terms of church tradition. The stories shared with me build on other research on women's experiences of being priests (for example, Thorne,2000; Page 2011, 2014; Schofield 2023) evidencing the gendered barriers women clergy face in the Church, from the structural arrangements that differentiate clergy women from clergy men to the cultural and social sexism experienced by women priests.

In implementing the 1993 Act of Synod allowing women to be ordained as priests, the Church reified theological positions opposing women in the priesthood by creating a dual structure allowing parishes to opt for alternative oversight arrangements and to avoid the ministry of ordained women (Furlong 1998). This discriminatory structure is made possible by exemption from UK equality

legislation and relies on the use of theological discourse – the first stage of obfuscation since theology acts as a bodyguard protecting scrutiny of the misogyny underpinning women's differentiation in the priesthood. With the advent of women bishops, the framework was updated in the Five Guiding Principles (Church of England 2017).

Broadly speaking, theology is employed from Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical positions. Some Anglo-Catholics seek to maintain masculine domination over the sacramental and the ontological priesthood – the claim is that God appoints only men as priests, making women's ordinations and their sacramental actions invalid. From a different theological angle, conservative evangelicals are concerned with the preservation of male authority and headship based on interpretations of biblical texts. Less concerned with ordination *per se*, such complementarianism is also more generally applied to roles both in church and in the relational sphere. The notion that men's and women's roles are different but 'equal', inherent and divinely ordained, exemplifies Bourdieu's assertion that such boundaries are entirely arbitrary and designed to uphold ownership over symbolic power. The symbolic violence in complementarianism is the allocation of power and authority according to gender, supported by the misuse of the term 'equal' to obscure the perpetuation of masculine dominance in the term 'different' (Jagger and Tyndall 2024). The detail of these theological positions is well documented (Baker, 2004; Podmore 2015; Kirk 2016). The struggle over symbolic power that imbues theology finds an iteration in gender construction, meaning symbolic power becomes entwined with, and played out on the site of, women's priesthood. Theological expression that seeks to differentiate women from men in the exercise of authority over ritual and status has a dual purpose of maintaining masculine domination (albeit in complex forms) and offering protection against claims of sexism and misogyny. Against this background of structural and theological differentiation of women priests, I apply the three characteristics of symbolic violence discussed above; the impact on the subjectivity and status of women priests, the obfuscation of the source and nature of the oppression (whether it is misrecognised), and the levels

of collusion/resistance amongst women priests. Arising from the latter is my argument that misrecognition may itself be misrecognised and that collusion can be seen as a form of resistance.

My research indicates the impact of gender differentiation in the priesthood on women's subjectivity and status is significant. At a fundamental level, the institution places ordained women in liminality (Turner (1969 [2008]), whereby the ordination ritual is only partially recognised, and women are prevented from crossing the boundary into full subjectivity as priests. Liminality is not generated because individuals hold (private) positions that oppose women's ordination, but through the institutional accommodations that legitimise and validate these theological positions. However, the devolving of symbolic power to individual clergy men who claim women are not priests means symbolic violence is also perpetrated through the relational. In other words, the structural arrangements keep women in liminality but also give power to individuals to name women as non-priests which has both symbolic and material impact.

Symbolic liminality gives rise to material oppressions (such as limiting parish appointments for women), to spiritual oppression (such as people refusing to receive communion from women priests) and social oppression (how women clergy are received and treated). To be clear, the open bullying and harassment experienced by women priests, as egregious and violent as these experiences are, do not always fall within Bourdieu's definition of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is the behind-the-scenes reproduction of power through the mechanics of theological conscience (which cannot be refuted) and Church structure (which allows the institution to play both sides). Supported by the discourses of mutual flourishing and good disagreement, the arbitrariness of masculine domination is hidden at the same time as violence is perpetrated against women's subjectivity.

I have previously captured the institutional discourses of mutual flourishing and good disagreement within the discussion of symbolic violence (Jagger, 2025). Mutual flourishing is the principle established by the Church that those on 'both sides' of the debate about women's ordination should have their beliefs validated and should have access to the full array of spiritual

goods and rewards on offer within the priesthood. This is a false dichotomy since it is only women's subjectivity at stake. Mutual flourishing re-establishes the conditions for masculine domination and for the continued liminality of women in the priesthood. Good disagreement is the sharp end of symbolic violence, which arose out of the need to discipline women clergy openly protesting (Jagger 2025) and is an instruction designed to promote a false harmony by repressing challenging voices and aligning non-resistance to definitions of good Christian dispositions. The symbolic power over definitions of Christian behaviour – and therefore over symbolic goods – is the source of symbolic violence.

Although mutual flourishing and good disagreement are part of the machinery of masculine domination in the Church, I see the employment of these discourses as an indication that the obfuscation of symbolic violence is failing or deficient. The hierarchy of the Church (representing the dominant) is required to step in to shore up masculine interests and stymie challenges to the liminality of women priests in more obvious ways. The reliance on collusion (often unconscious) on the part of the dominated group to maintain conditions needs to be shored up by the creation of obligations. Women priests are aware of their liminality, but must navigate the respect theological conscience demands, the obfuscating discourse of the supportive institution which has facilitated the partial acceptance of women into the priesthood, the invention of spiritual capital around Christian disagreement (amounting to non-challenging and silent disagreement) and the cruder valorisation of clergy men who perpetuate and perpetrated gendered symbolic violence by wielding tools provided by theological discourse.

In my research, women told me how their subjectivity as priests is at stake. The rejection of their ordained status questions the most fundamental basis of calling and vocation – women are framed as misunderstanding their call, or as not having been called at all. One participant, Wendy, talked about encounters with clergy men who deny her priesthood. She stated:

> They were sort of questioning my vocation, even though I'd been through three years of discernment, three years of training, the Church of England had recognised my vocation, but they were saying, 'No, God hasn't called you to this'. That was the hardest thing. Not so much the biblical arguments, which I don't agree with, but I can accept their integrity, their belief. But when someone says to you, 'God hasn't called you to this', that was it, really.

Recognising her liminality in the denial of the ontological value of her ordination, this woman priest sees a line is crossed in the erosion of the nature of women's relationship to the divine, which harms her sense of self. This is how women are constructed as differently human through the discursive. Another participant recognised women clergy's differentiation in these terms; 'the fight is over what felt like, you know, are women really human?' The fundamental othering process is rooted in misogyny but is laundered by claims to theological and ecclesiological insight and conscience.

Alice, an Anglo-Catholic priest, described the damage to her identity when she is constructed as a fake priest. Given the importance of the sacramental role of the priest in Anglo-Catholicism, the impact of denying the ontology of women's ordination is amplified in the context of performing rituals. When women are denied the status of priesthood, their actions and words as priests are stripped of symbolic meaning:

> I think identity is a big thing…particularly [with] the men in my deanery who are not affirming of women's ministry. Although they are never unkind to me, there is, I know it, I know that they think that what I'm doing is made up almost.

In this account, there are clues to how symbolic violence operates; there is an absence of hostility and as I discuss below, relationships between ordained women and men who refuse to acknowledge women's ordination can be warm and supportive. The damage to subjectivity, though, is understood by those on whom symbolic violence is focused.

Further, symbolic violence infuses the use of biblically supported conscience-speak; Wendy is less resistant to positions that undermine her identity as a priest if they are derived from biblical interpretation. The discourse of integrity and congruence of personal beliefs deflects from and obscures the violence being done. Symbolic violence is not simply the declaration that women cannot be priests; it is embedded in the symbol system in which the 'victim' herself is invested. In other words, the violence may be recognised by women priests but is difficult to resist (or even name) due to a protective symbolic shield discursively constructed by appealing to the notion of faithfulness to biblical principles.

The delivery system for gendered oppression within the Church is wrapped up in notions of benevolence, piety, and institutional harmony. As Alice states, there may be an absence of hostility; indeed, some women priests experience kindness and support from clergy men (often described as 'lovely') who remain opposed to women's ordination. Wendy goes on to describe how she views those who oppose women's ordination:

> For a priest who believes that [women cannot be priests], then that's fine with me…If it's thought-out theology and that's what they believe, I'm not going to say they're wrong, because they've got integrity in that. In the same way that I've got integrity in what I believe.

Wendy's approach is exemplary 'good disagreement'. In Bourdieusian terms it also illustrates how the harms to women's subjectivity are overlayed and obscured by notions of integrity and thoughtfulness. So gentle is the symbolic violence, that Wendy is unwilling to (openly) say such a priest is wrong. The qualifying clause, though, is that by going along with claims to theological integrity, she can also claim such symbolic goods for herself. The 'arbitrary boundary' (Bourdieu 1991: 118) that characterises symbolic power is revealed here, but the symbolic violence generated is one way; only women's subjectivity is eroded in this trading of symbolic currency.

Another participant, Suzanne, reinforces the gentleness of symbolic violence through the absence of hostility; 'I respect them because they are not misogynist, they are not aggressive with it, they are not antagonistic, they are not deliberately making divisions along the way.' And Louise describes her bishop who does not ordain women in warm terms; 'he's been very helpful, very supportive…he has got a very good reputation from the women clergy.' Valerie, speaking about a vicar from her youth, described him in the warmest terms:

> I loved [him] to bits. Very gentle, pastoral man. And I just accepted his teaching. If asked, his view was that women couldn't be ordained. Lovely, lovely man. And I never questioned it because he was such a lovely man and to me, he radiated God's love.

These comments map closely onto Bourdieu's description of symbolic violence. It is through 'gentleness' and the relational and emotional economies that messages eroding the subjectivity of women are delivered. Yet Wendy, Suzanne, and Alice, indeed all the participants in my research, are aware of the assaults on their subjectivity as priests, even as they engage relationally and offer to share the symbolic goods inherent in theological conscience.

Misrecognition?

Misrecognition is the third condition Bourdieu associates with symbolic violence – subjectivity is undermined in such delicate ways that it passes as collegiality or faithfulness to conscience. However, misrecognition is far from consistently shown in my research. I argue that Bourdieu's defining boundaries need to be stretched to account for levels of awareness and agency amongst those subjected to discourses and practices that harm their subjectivity. Bourdieu himself makes room for misrecognition being a sham, or a performative dialectic (1999), and in Wendy's comment above, there is an element of the transactional performativity; by allowing integrity to shield the oppressive gendered theological discourse, she claims the same integrity for herself.

So, I frame responses to the construction of women as differently human, through the prism of the priesthood, as misrecognised misrecognition; that is, performative misrecognition, transactional misrecognition, and safety valve misrecognition. My research suggests that women priests are aware of their liminality, but naming and challenging the violence *requires skills to navigate the layers of obfuscation and deflection*. Moreover, under certain conditions, symbolic violence goes entirely unchecked. But misrecognition can be *performed* to allow for subversions, such as women priests developing paradigm-changing somatic theology or embracing theological 'heresy'. Transactional misrecognition allows symbolic violence to occur, but not without some form of extraction. For example, one participant acted as deacon for a male colleague who did not recognise her priesthood, but she used the arrangement to shore up her subjectivity rather than succumbing to the violence against it – on the surface, she colluded, but her sense of self was affirmed by her ability to perform as a deacon, but not be defined as a deacon. Finally, misrecognition as a safety valve comes into use when women priests are willing to see theological conscience as genuine epistemology so that other parts of their subjectivity are preserved. In the case of Wendy, making allowances for theological conscience of those who deny her priesthood is also leveraged to protect her own version of theological truth.

Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition as a characteristic of symbolic violence requires troubling and nuance to allow for a variety of ways of colluding-as-subversion. I argue that the definition of symbolic violence does not require a purity in the definition of misrecognition. Sometimes, symbolic violence is recognised, but the appearance of misrecognition becomes part of a strategy of resistance. In other words, symbolic violence can be visible but entangled with other conditions of subjectivity. In the case of women clergy, symbolic violence is often recognised but naming it and challenging it requires navigating multiple disciplining strategies.

Conclusion

My research into women's experiences in the priesthood of the Church of England provides an opportunity not only to reveal how symbolic violence is perpetrated, but also to challenge Bourdieu's pessimistic reliance on misrecognition as part of its definition. My intention in this article has been two-fold. Firstly, I have shown how theology that constructs women as differently human – which I argue should be treated as discourse rather than epistemology – is an example of symbolic violence, where masculine dominance is supported by undermining the subjectivity of women in the priesthood. Such violence is perpetrated by the institution of the Church, that legitimises and valorises gendered theologies through its structure, and by individual clergy men whose gendered beliefs are protected from critique by the constructed idea of theological conscience that supersedes the ideals of social justice and gender equality. Secondly, I have argued that the notion of misrecognition that lacks nuance, that describes the duping of 'victims' so they assent to and collude with the harms inflicted on them, does not capture the nuance of women clergy responses to symbolic violence. Women in the priesthood recognise their liminality and the undermining of their subjectivity, but because the institutional context prevents open acknowledgement and resistance, they use forms of misrecognition – performative, transactional, and safety valve - to navigate the institutional, social and relational forms of symbolic violence. Understanding the complexity of responses of women priests to the oppressive theological blanket that smothers their subjectivity may illuminate the perpetration of theologically expressed symbolic violence. And bringing symbolic violence into the light is key to dismantling of oppressive systems.

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