



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN BUILDING BRIDGES OF
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MACEDONIA:
EDUCATION OF FEMALE THEOLOGIANS**

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Biography



Marija Girevska¹ is a translator and author. Following her MA and PhD in English, she obtained her second Master of Theology degree from St. Clement of Ohrid Faculty of Orthodox Theology, and St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje where she teaches Theology in English. Her publications include books on English Surrealism, Gothic Fiction and James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Bible, in addition to numerous articles on Joyce and theology. She was awarded the Golden Pen Award for her translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (2013). As a Joyce scholar, she has read at James Joyce symposia and lectured at the Trieste Joyce School. She completed the Study of the U.S. Institute for Scholars on American Religious Pluralism at Seattle University and Writing for Publication (Post-program) SUSI Scholars Follow-On at the Institute for Training and Development, USA. Her latest research focuses on the role of women theologians in religious communities and inter-faith dialogue.

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Abstract

Given that there are almost no data nor researches about the opportunities that theologians (female theologians) have today in their religious communities and spiritual institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia, for the purposes of this research study, the opinions and the views of more, above all, female representatives i.e. sources, were obtained from the interviews conducted on a representative sample of the five largest religious communities in accordance with the Constitution of RS Macedonia (Article 19): Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese, Catholic Church, Evangelical-Methodist Church, the Jewish religious community and the Islamic religious community. The research was conducted in the period from the beginning of June to the end of September 2022. Based on the research, the main challenges and opportunities for the active role of female theologians, employed in spiritual institutions, and the measures and recommendations for improving this situation are presented. The purpose of the research is to encourage interest in researching the position of female theologians in spiritual institutions in Macedonia.

Keywords: *women, female theologians, interreligious dialogue, religious education, Republic of North Macedonia*

Introduction

Belief system or religious pluralism represents the state of being where every individual in a religiously diverse society has the rights and freedoms to worship according to their conscience. However, the religious diversity, per se, does not represent a religious pluralism. Namely, diversity illustrates and refers to the different belief systems and traditions present in the society, nevertheless pluralism shows ways in which we can approach the differences, how to reflect on them, how to understand the otherness in deepening the interreligious dialogue (Cohen and Numbers, 2013).

The Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter: Macedonia) is nowadays a religiously diverse state: multiethnic, multicultural and multi-confessional. The religious diversity and pluralism are quite important principles of religious freedom. According to Art.22, paragraph 2 of the Law on Legal Status of the Churches, Religious Communities and Religious groups (*Official Gazette of RM*, no. 113/07) “[r]eligious educational institutions are equal to other educational institutions and their pupils and students enjoy the same rights and obligations”.

According to the RN Macedonia’s Constitution (Art.19) the freedom of worship is guaranteed to all citizens, freely and publicly, individually or in a community with others, to observe their faith. In addition to the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese are also mentioned the Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church, the Islamic Religious Community and the Jewish Religious Community² as other religious communities and churches with a large number of believers. Educational opportunities are crucial for personal and social development of women as well as for men and, at the same time, these play an important role in the spiritual sphere of various confessions and the core that unites them.

The contemporary movements focused on comprehensive, equal and humane development of women also require contemporary understanding of the issue about the role

² Religious communities, churches and religious groups "are separate from the state and are equal before the law" and "are free to establish religious schools and social and charitable institutions in a procedure provided for by law" (Article 19 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia). According to the Law on Legal Status of Churches, Religious Communities and Religious Groups ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" no. 113/07), religious discrimination is not allowed (Article 4, Paragraph 1) and the church, religious community and religious group are registered in the Unified Judicial Register of Churches, Religious Communities and Religious Groups (Article 9, Paragraph 1), but "[w]ith the law the freedom of expression of religion or belief may be limited if necessary, in the interest of public security, public order, health, morals or protection of the rights and freedoms of others" (Article 8).

and the place of women in religious communities. However, on the territory of the Balkans, the place and the role of woman in the religious community is often in close relation with the cultural customs and traditions and opportunities in the society (compare: Anić, 2019; Spahić-Šiljak, 2007) In reference to the gender equality analysis conducted by USAID in 2019, „[C]ultural norms and beliefs do not differ widely according to the geographical region, but they do vary by ethnicity and are more pronounced in rural areas” (Sproule and others, 2019, 5).

In the findings from the research conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, *Study on Women* (2020), it is stated that among the respondents of Macedonian ethnicity the more significant values are those related to independence and security, social life, career development/self-realization and hedonism. In contrast the respondents of Albanian ethnicity gave more prominence to the values related to religion and tradition, as well as political activity and civic activism. (16)

The findings from the *Study on Women* show that “religious life as a value is proportional to the age group” (*ibid*,17), whereas “[w]omen from rural areas, accept these demands/expectations to a greater extent, compared to women in urban areas” (*ibid*., 22). In terms of the Moslem female population, the USAID Gender Analysis recommendation is to “promote women-only spaces, especially in the communities with majority Moslem population, since the primary data collection revealed that Moslem women often feel comfortable when participating in women-only groups.” (Sproule and others, 2019, 15).

The data from our research study on the role and the education possibilities of female theologians, inter alia, indicate that, although there is a change in the cultural norms and beliefs, which is especially typical for the respondents with acquired higher education, the traditional gender roles division³ is still predominant. The change of cultural norms and beliefs in society directly affects not only the role, but also the opportunities and the prospects of female theologians and myrrh-bearers in religious communities, including their general human rights and freedoms.

³ According to a 2019 USAID study, “traditional gender norms are more prevalent among Roma and Albanian populations—especially in rural areas—making those groups particularly vulnerable” (Sproule et al., 2019, viii)

For the purpose of this research, the primary qualitative data have been obtained from the semi-structured face-to-face interviews with ten eminent female theologians (seven myrrh-bearers, two nuns, one female pastor) from Skopje, Rajchica, Bitola and Tetovo who are directly involved in the activities of the five largest churches and religious communities in Macedonia (the above-mentioned ones), as well as from my personal and professional experience as a female theologian, Professor at the Eastern-Orthodox Theological University (EOTU).

The research study used literature with secondary data (literature review: USAID's 2019 gender analyses of gender mainstreaming attitudes and practices, *Study on Women* from 2020 by Friedrich Ebert Foundation, data from State Statistical Institute, the Self-Evaluation Report of UKIM and the web sites of the religious community). The research was conducted in two phases: the first phase covered the period between June and the end of September during which material from the semi-structured interview was collected, where 10 open-end questions were posed (sub-questions) for the following thematic chapters: demographic questions, religion, education and employment, possibilities, participation and perspectives of the women from the religious communities. The second phase ended as of December of the same year and entailed processing and analysis of the collected data.

The constraints of the research in general terms were: insufficient data on the position of educated women theologians in the country, which could affect the analysis of these data; and the field work was limited due to the time span for the work (summer holiday period). The goal of this research study is to encourage an interest in researching the position and the opportunities for female theologians in spiritual institutions in Macedonia.

Opportunities for Women in Religious Communities in Macedonia

In the past decade, gender equality has been talked about more loudly in Macedonia: about equal participation of women in political and public life and in all spheres of society. Hence, the necessity to discuss the role and opportunities for women theologians in our religious communities and their participation in interreligious dialogue was born. Many of our interlocutors confirmed the following conclusion: no religion makes a distinction between

women and men in the basic rights and duties of believers. The problem lies in the established practice of the work and organization of religious communities.

The participation of women in interreligious dialogue resembles climbing a steep mountain, not only in Macedonia, but also in other more developed countries (compare: Cornille and Maxey, 2013). The voice of female theologians, myrrh-bearers and the nuns are absent in the interreligious dialogue. Both men and women are faced with diverse challenges which are directly linked to the most basic level activities in the local community, as well as on an academic studies level and in interreligious activities. The interreligious dialogue is the roadmap that men and women should follow together. Practice shows that women are most active on this basic local community level, however they are almost voiceless in public debates.

The findings of this short research study are aimed at encouraging the religious communities to perceive the disadvantages and the challenges that women theologians are faced with their economic and academic participation and opportunities⁴, as well as to explore the potential they possess for their own development, including the development of the religious communities and of the interreligious dialogue. This paper emphasizes the need to ensure promoting opportunities and a good working environment where female theologians can participate in the key decision-making processes in the religious community and take an active role in interreligious dialogue.

In the Eastern-Orthodox Church tradition in our areas, the dignity and role of the woman in the spiritual realm were always tailored by the example of the mother of God, to whom the Church in The Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (431) gave the epithet Virgin Mary (in Greek: *Θεοτόκος*). Virgin Mary has great meaning and an important place in the Church, exactly because she was the person expected by all generations and she gave human-like nature to Him and the Logos of God, gave birth to God as human. Thus, the personality of the Virgin Mary is closely related to the Personality of Christ.

⁴ In the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report*, the country [Macedonia] ranks well above average in educational achievements, health and survival, and political empowerment, while below average in economic participation and opportunity" (Sproule et al., 2019, vii).

The significance of Virgin Mary is not owing to its benefactors, but first and foremost to the offspring in her womb. Due to this, the Theotology (the teachings on Virgin Mary) are often linked to Christology.

The complementary relationship between women and men has its roots in the Epistle to the Corinthians where Apostle Paul explains that the Holy Spirit bestows different gifts to everyone, thus, so as the parts of the body equally care for each other, so the gifts work together for mutual good (1. Cor. 12) The Catholic Church also fosters the complementary approach, the same as the Eastern-Orthodox Church. Women and men have separate, complementary, yet equal roles in marriage, family life and in the Church. The Pope John Paul II was the first to speak on this topic between 1979 and 1984 and later published his sermons in the *Theology of the Body*, elaborating that the manliness of Adam and the femininity of Eve are reciprocally complementary to each other: “[husband and wife] become gifts to one another though their manliness and femininity” (Insegnamenti, 3, no. 1 [1980]: 11–15, par. 2). Pope Francis adding to these words would say: “To think about the complementariness is nothing less than to think about the dynamic harmonies that lie in the core of Creation (...) This is not only good, but also beautiful” (Francis, 2015, 2-3).

The Evangelic-Methodist Church advocates the egalitarian view in terms of the role and place of women and men in the Church. Their role and place are not determined by gender, nonetheless, they are determined by their gift or abilities. This shift in the paradigm enables this religious community to have female pastors, thus confronting the privileged position of one of the genders. Women and men “are equally redeemed, equally filled with the Holy Spirit and equally sent out (on a mission), this does not necessarily mean there are no differences between men and women (...) but rather that both of them make up God, by the fact that they are responsible administrators of Creation and mutual servants to each other” (Van Leeuwen, 1991, 36; compare Volf, 1996).

As for the normative teachings of the Islam, according to Ziljka Spahik -Shiljak “[t]raditional hierarchical messages that emphasize the complementary gender relations

continue to dominate, despite the messages in the Koran which are egalitarian and give room for partnership between women and men⁵.

Unlike Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism expresses commitment to the egalitarian principles. According to Silvia Barak Fishman, as a result of efforts for equal civil rights in the last century, the egalitarianism gained major significance: “egalitarianism is a sacred principle and for some, it has a higher spiritual meaning and power compared to the Rabbi’s law” (Barack Fishman 1999, 165) Believers of the Reform and Traditional Judaism insist on the fact that they promote the Jewish religion much more, due to the full participation of women, ensuring that more people have access to a consecrated life. (Rubel, 2010).

Position of Women in Religious Educational Institutions

The movement for political and social emancipation and the fight against discrimination of women in the society and in the family nowadays, and the discussions and the action undertaken in terms of woman’s dignity have triggered the churches and the religious communities to discuss, once again, about the role and the beneficial presence of women in the church (religious) life.

In the recent history of the Eastern-Orthodox Church (MEOC-OA) and the Islam Religious Community (IRC), as communities with the largest number of believers compared to the other religious communities in the country, there is an increased interest among women and girls to study theological sciences. Taking into consideration that since the independence of Macedonia (1991) until today it is possible to register several religious communities in the state⁶, while ensuring equal education opportunities for both women and men and especially notable is the increasing number of female students and female professors of Theological Sciences at the Eastern-Orthodox theological Faculty (EOTF) and at the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIN) the only higher educational theological institutions in the country. At the

⁵ In Bona Fide: <https://www.inbonafide.org/2020/09/27/zilka-spahic-siljak-tradicijske-hijerarhijske-poruke-koje-isticu-komplementarne-rodne-odnose-ostaju-dominantne-unatoc-porukama-kurana-koje-su-egalitarne-i-koje-daju-prostora-za-partnersko-djelovanje/> (See more in Spahić-Šiljak, 2007 and 2020).

⁶ According to the Commission for Religious Communities and Religious Groups (CRCRG), so far 20 churches, 10 religious communities and 13 religious groups have been registered in the country. (<https://www.kovz.gov.mk/pocetna/pregled.nsp>).

beginning of the new century, that means living in a free and independent state, and women have gradually established themselves in the higher spheres of spiritual life in Macedonia.

Despite the fact that women continue to play a significant role in the spiritual life of their Church (religious community) and will relentlessly perform their charitable activities, our research shows that nowadays women are also theologians; they are actively involved in the publishing activities of their Church (religious community), in the administration of the archdiocese and of the dioceses, in the nunneries, in teaching the subject "Ethics in Religions" in state primary schools and religious education (religious teachings) in the temples (churches, synagogues and mosques), in the pastoral life and in the work of Caritas, in the theological faculties as professors and teachers and/or manager in the *madrakah* (secondary theological school).

As a result of this development of opportunities and perspectives for female theologians in Macedonia, there is another language barrier that appears in front of us. In the word stock of the official Contemporary Macedonian Language two nouns have been registered: *theology* and *theologian* (of Latin origin) as opposed to (*bogoslovie* and *bogoslov*) (from Church Slavic origin). Although *theology* (*bogoslovie sr.r.*) is a female gender noun, it appears that in Macedonian language there are no traces from the denomination for female gender from the derivative nouns *theologian* and *bogoslov* - one whose occupation is theology.

As more and more women are getting actively involved in the life of religious communities on job positions that in the past were predominantly performed by men, it is essential to renew the word stock and to coin new compound words in our language: female theologian (following the word formation principle of the nouns *monk* and *monkess*) and *female theologian* (according to the noun *professor* and the derivative *professor-ka*). This small language experiment indicates the necessity of debate in public life in our society in the area of theological sciences. The motivation to write on the given topic was born exactly from the lack of research conducted on female theologians in Macedonia. We believe that this research study will fill in the empty space in the field of theological sciences, to write about the role of women in the context of religious communities from a female perspective: to retell her story, her history, i. e. *herstory*.

The role of women and their direct inclusion in the work of the theological educational institutions and religious communities throughout the country carries an immense responsibility as well as an incentive and motivation for younger generations of women to be encouraged to enroll in theological studies and to actively participate in religious life, as well in interreligious dialogue in their local communities and in Macedonian society at large⁷.

The Rise of Women Through the Prism of the New History of the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese

In the recent history of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese (MOC-OA), five extremely important events can be noted: the revitalization of the MOC-OA and the establishment of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Theology in Skopje (1967), the founding of the Eastern-Orthodox Theological Faculty “Saint Clement of Ohrid” (1977), the complete translation of the Bible into Macedonian language (1990) and the process of recognizing its autocephaly (2022).

The decision of the Holy Synod of the MOC-OA to establish the Eastern-Orthodox Theological Faculty (EOTF) in Skopje is important from several aspects: it enables Eastern-Orthodox believers in Macedonia to study Eastern-Orthodox theology in their own homeland, and for MOC-OA as an institution, an opportunity to open the doors of its temple of theological sciences for the first time, not only to male students and theologians, but also to female students, future female theologians, versus the Theology, which is a five-year secondary boarding school exclusively for boys.

The statute and acts of the faculty were adopted, not only according to the Constitution of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church, but also according to the regulations and provisions of the Law on Higher Education following the example of the oldest state faculty in Macedonia, the Faculty of Philosophy (1920). In the first generation of EOTF graduates, out of nine candidates in total, including Aco Girevski (Archpriest-Stavrofor and Dean of OTF,

⁷ According to the Progress Report of the European Commission on the Republic of North Macedonia for 2022, "The Commission for Religious Communities and Religious Groups (CRCRG) is encouraged to organize interreligious dialogue and improve cooperation between religious groups" (*Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia 2022 Report*, 27). Following the recommendations of the European Commission, CRCRG is already announcing its program for next year. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent their program will respect the principles of gender equality.

2008-2016), Nikola Popovski (Metropolitan Kirill) and Gavril Parnadzhiev (Bishop Gavril), a name of a woman can be noted - Mira Taseska. In 1983, the faculty organized a solemn spiritual academy and the first diplomas were awarded. In 1992, on the 15th anniversary, the faculty was visited by very important guests from the then joint state of Yugoslavia: the Deans of the Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade theological faculties. During the following years, the faculty continued to develop close cooperation with several European educational institutions, national libraries and theologians from the region, such as the Jesuit priest prof. Dr. Predrag Belic from Zagreb and prof. Vladeta Jerotic, Ph.D. from Belgrade, and at one time Tzadik Danon, rabbi from Belgrade (1979/80) taught the Old Hebrew language. During the first fifteen years, 566 students were educated at the faculty, both for clerical and teaching service, of which an insignificant percentage were women. However, in the academic year 1996/97, on the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the faculty, a total of 175 full-time students were enrolled, of which 64 were female (36.5%), that is, out of the total number of enrolled students (248) 79 were female (31.8%). (Girevski, OTF Report, 1997).

This year, the Faculty of Theology in Skopje celebrates its 45th anniversary of its foundation and it can proudly speak of its undergraduate, post graduate and doctoral studies and its status as an associate member of the oldest University in Macedonia “St. Cyril and Methodius” (1949), its international cooperation with other theological faculties in Europe and in the region as well as with its revitalized highly qualified staff. Following the example of other theological faculties in the neighboring countries, there was a breakpoint for an equal gender representation of female theologians which for the time being and in the near future remains to be one of the biggest challenges for this high educational institution.

The most important reforms of the EOTF related to this issue took place between 2008 and 2015⁸, when 8 eight assistants were employed for the first time, which enabled two women

⁸ It refers to the term of the Dean, Archpriest-Stavrofor Professor Dr. Aco Girevski (2008-2016). Namely, during that period, the faculty became an associate member of the oldest state university UKIM (2009) and ECTS was implemented according to the guidelines of UKIM and the Bologna Declaration (Self-Evaluation Report, 2013, 5); in 2013 international cooperation was established with four theological universities in Romania and with the Moscow Theological Academy, with St. Petersburg Academy in 2014 and with the Pontifical University Urbaniana in Rome (Italy) in 2015 (6; cf. Self-Evaluation Report, 2021, 11). According to the Self-Evaluation Report of the EOTF (2021), the faculty offers classes in five curricula: Orthodox theology (first cycle, 1977), second cycle of one-year studies (2015), second cycle of two-year studies (2015) (Girevski, 2015, 233- 235), and from 2018 there is also a third cycle of doctoral studies and specialized studies in the methodology of religious curriculum (2020).

to be promoted and acquire scientific-educational titles and are currently professors at the same faculty: Marija Girevska, Ph.D. and Aneta Jovkovska, Ph.D

What raises concern is that in the last two decades, the faculty has noted a significant decline in the interest in studying among the female population. The general opinion is that this may be because expectations that the state would introduce theological education in the elementary and in secondary schools were not realized, instead of which “Ethics in Religions” was maintained as a teaching subject⁹.” Nevertheless, additional research is required on this issue in order get a complete picture of the contributing factors of this outcome. Namely, from the interview conducted with the nun Efimija Zajkovska, pedagogue¹⁰, Eastern-Orthodox female theologian and social worker, M.A. student at the Theological Faculty “Saint Clement of Ohrid” (UKIM), we can draw the conclusion that “social security is essential[...] including the strengthening of the position of female theologians in the society and by doing so it shall ensure secure job positions, compatible with the theological education obtained, that in turn can generate secure financial benefits, including opening of new government positions that could reflect the existence of some new theological study programs¹¹”.

In terms of upgrading and modernizing the curriculum in the undergraduate studies at the Eastern-Orthodox Theological Faculty and in order to ensure an expression of creativity and intellectual potential which women possess, the nun emphasized that it is essential to offer “study curriculums covering various catechetical, social and cultural rather than liturgical disciplines”...she gently adds “...,[e]very one is called forth to be accountable and justify the enormous and generous gift that he/she was bestowed with from God – to faithfully stand witness of Him, no matter where he is, whereas for the women, nuns and myrrh-bearers should bear the gifts of “changing the quality of life in the society in a positive direction through their one-of-a-kind inner emotional world.“ And the Holy Scripture testifies to us about brave

⁹ Unlike the nineties of the last century, when more girls studied at EOTF (after the independence of Macedonia and its separation from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Orthodox believers showed a strong interest in theological sciences at EOTF) because “it was expected that religious education was to be introduced in primary schools, so that girls can be engaged in education after finishing college” (interview with Gjoko Gjorgjevski, Dean of EOTF: Cvetkovska, A. Interview for MIA, 3.12.2022).

¹⁰ Macedonian language does not allow for feminine word formation pertaining to several professions and titles, such as pedagogue, magistrand, doctorand, , etc. Hence, such titles have been used interdependently, for both women and men.

¹¹ All quotations in the following text, unless otherwise indicated, refer to the interview with nun Efimija Zajkovska from the women's monastery "St. George the Victorious" in Rajchica during August and September 2022 for the purposes of this research.

women, including the judge and prophetess Deborah, who led Barak and the sons of Israel to Kadesh "for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judg 4:9; cf. 5:7) ; the empress Esther who stood up for her people; the prophetess Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, who helped save Moses as a baby and led the rest of the women playing drums and dancing (Exodus 15:21); Abigail whose voice King David obeyed (1 Kings 25:35); Martha and Mary who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11:17-24), and Mary Magdalene to whom the resurrected Christ appeared first (Jn 20:11-16).

Here we have the deaconess Phoebe "a servant of the church in Cenchreae: that you may welcome her Lord in a way worthy of saints", the Ap. Paul (Rom 16:1-2) and many other women of the New Testament of whom the early Christian Church has a record that church role was not limited to men only.

As far as the opportunities for female theologians in other cities in the interior are concerned, apart from administrative activities, since 2009 "The Ethics of Religion" has been introduced in the school curriculum for the 6th grade in the elementary schools. However, without the support from the bishop or the metropolitan of the respective diocese, the female theologians are faced with unequal representation on the labor market. From our discussions with the Eastern-Orthodox female theologians a conclusion was drawn that women with a theological background can hardly perform single activity, in certain cases this teaching activity is unsustainable for them, moreover their job position in the schools has been jeopardized unlike their male colleagues' theologians, who under the strong support from the diocese perform up to three other activities in parallel, starting from school teachers, accountants up to deacons.

Female theologians nowadays are apprehensive about the future of their job positions, since reforms have been announced in the elementary schools to ban this subject for the 6th grade students in the elementary schools for the forthcoming school year. It is more than necessary to create mechanisms to support female theologians in their career development and in the work process.

Eastern-Orthodox women can perform a series of services in the Church in the field of liturgical, pastoral, catechetical, teaching, missionary and social activities. Female monasticism deserves special attention because of its contribution to the advancement of women in the

Church. Discrimination and submissiveness of women are contrary to the Eastern-Orthodox Christian tradition. (Gal. 3:28). Since the New Testament the woman was called forth to take the principal role in the history of the Redemption and in the life of the Church. Women have different services, charismas and roles in the Church since the very beginning. For example: the gift (charisma) of prophecy (1 Cor. 11:5); duty to pray, (Acts 1:14, 12:12; 1 Tim. 5:5); teaching (Tit 2:3-5); organizing worship at home - the home church (1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15); preaching the Gospel and teaching (Rom 16:3; Acts 18:24-26; Phil 4:3). Two categories of services that are mentioned separately are the deaconess (Phoebe, Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:11) and the widow, which have a precisely defined role (1 Tim. 5:9-12) and for those services there are certain conditions that are required (1 Tim 3:1-13; 5:9-10) (cf. Brija, 1999: 168-70).

Traditionally, in the Eastern-Orthodox religion there are series of tasks which are assigned to women as participants in the parish (or church institution): upbringing and Christian education, starting from the church-parish schools up to high level theological education in the theological schools and faculties, pastoral counselling of married couples, families, preparation for marriage, preparation for baptism, care-giving to people suffering misfortune, church administration, participation in the legal bodies and boards – of the parishes, epistles and arch epistle, Christian mercifulness and social services, including care about the elderly, work in the hospitals, as well as helping the poor and the abandoned, managing the choir during sermons; reading the Apostle during the Liturgy; singing in the choir, singing and reading behind the choir-office, iconography; working with the youth; participation in church delegations during ceremonies, scientific work and care about the churches' publishing activities.

In some local churches women have already opportunities to work in the area of digitalization or in Public Relations departments, performing an important role that the media play in creating public opinion nowadays.

In the context of the commitment to gender equality, it is necessary to reconsider the tradition of the patriarchal society, which in itself requires bolder steps. In that sense, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew took a historic step when he decided to include two women among his six advisers, who advised him at the Pan-Orthodox Council held in Crete in 2016. These were Theoxenia, the abbess of the Chrysopigi Monastery in Crete and Elizabeth Prodromou, professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Conflict Resolution and Negotiations) at Tufts University in Boston, former vice-president of the US Commission on

International Religious Freedom. The third woman-delegate, Sister Rakela from the "Myronosici" (Myrrh-Bearers) monastery in Durres was invited by Archbishop Anastasij from Albania.

Prodromou, on behalf of her participation in the delegation of the Pan-Orthodox Patriarch in one of her interviews says: our group intervention required a Council that can recognize the fullness of the church body, including the priests and myrrh-bearers who shall certainly include women as well¹². She further clarifies that by including women, the Patriarch sends out an important message about the role and perspective of women in the life of the Church, a message that everybody must hear, adding:

The fact that there are women here, speaks of the visionary leadership of His Holiness...I would bet that his position was not easily accepted by some; after all, please consider that we are only three women out of all the delegations. He is a leader that shows his dedication for recovering, maintaining and reviving the fullness of the Church body – or to put it simply, he practices what he preaches. (ibid.).

This Council sent out a message of hope that Councils on all levels of the Church must include myrrh-bearers and, by doing that, to include women as well. According to the first among equals, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, we can and must set an example as a local church, without fear and without any hesitation, as emphasized by Prodromou, since it is of critical importance for the present moment as well as for the future vitality of all of us as a Church.

Opportunities for Women in the Catholic Church in Macedonia

“Religious teachers in the Catholic Church in Macedonia are assigned the sacred duty mandated by the church authorities to teach young people and children about mutual understanding, tolerance and love”, announced the Bishop of Skopje, Monsignor Dr. Kiro Stojanov on the interreligious conference held in 2002. (Stojanov, 2004;115).

¹² Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (2016) <https://blogs.goarch.org/blog/-/blogs/precedent-setting-participation-by-women-at-the-hgc>

In the spirit of these words of coexistence and dialogue the Catholic Church has evolved in this area throughout the centuries. The first recognized data point to the second century when the archdiocese was formed in what was then Skupi, which means that Skopje parish has been founded there and then. Today, the Catholic Church is the third largest religious community. It includes Christian believers of both rites – Eastern (Byzantine or Macedonian) and Western (Latin or Roman) (Stojanov, 2018). Although smaller than the Eastern-Orthodox or the Islamic Religious Community, the Catholic Church has a rich and well-established religious life, and the new Cathedral “Sacred Heart of Jesus” is located in the central area of the city of Skopje. “The first Catholic church in Skopje was mentioned in a document from 20th July 1550”, where names of famous Catholic traders were disclosed, mainly coming from Dubrovnik¹³.”

In 1902 the bishop’s residence was constructed at the current location of the Memorial House “Mother Theresa”, including a cathedral dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. During the World War II, the residence of the bishop was demolished and during the Skopje earthquake in 1963, the cathedral was severely damaged, only to be restored in 1983 into new pastoral venue.

Within the Cathedral Parish “Sacred Heart of Jesus” in Skopje there are four monastic communities in place: Eucharistic Sisters, Smiling Sisters (Usmilenki), Missionaries of Love and the Focolare Movement. What is authentic for this area is the order of the Eucharistic Sisters, which was created precisely on the territory of Macedonia that was, in 1889, in Thessaloniki and in 1973 in Skopje. Their main charisma is the Christian upbringing of children and young people, assistance in parish pastoral care and in the work of Caritas. In the parish of Skopje there are also three sisters of mercy from the order "Daughters of Christian Love" (Usmilenki), who are actively involved in parish catechesis and care for the poor.

In the parish, the sisters Missionaries of Love, an order founded by Skopje-born Holy Mother Theresa mainly care for upbringing of children, catechesis and especially care for the poor, by bringing them food. The first communities of the Focolare Movement in Macedonia date from the 80’s in the past century, whereas in 2007 the women’s focolar was formed. Today there are four focolars (layman) who care for the upbringing of young pre-school

¹³ The Catholic Church in Skopje through the Ages. (2022, 15 јули). *Kovz.gov.mk*.
<https://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-katolickata-crkva-vo-skopje-niz-vremeto.nspix>

children, promote a culture of dialogue and coexistence, parish catechesis and other parish activities.

The State Secretary of the Pope, the Cardinal Pietro Parolin, speaking at a two-day conference of UNESCO at its head office in Paris, organized by *Caritas International* on the topic of women's leadership, "The Full Face of Humanity: Women in Leadership for a Just Society"¹⁴ emphasized: "[S]tates should have the courage to invest in equal rights education, which are still broken too often", adding that women's leadership in all areas of social life can arise only from qualitative and inclusive education" (Vatican News; sp. Katolici.mk, 2022).

Pope Francis on 6 November 2022 stated that the women who were appointed by him at the Dicastery for Bishops¹⁵ in July, after appointing a woman on a high position for the first time in Vatican, in January 2020 by appointing Francesca Giovanni, the first woman Vice-Secretary of the State Secretariate for PR with the states, have proven to be better managers than men and that there is an excessive male chauvinism in the Roman Catholic Church and in the society at large, emphasizing that "[t]his chauvinism is lethal for the humanity" (Pullella, 2022).

"We must tell the truth. The fight for women's rights is an ongoing fight." he added in his interview for Reuters, "[s]ociety that is unable (to allow women to take on an important role) is not moving ahead". He advised that "we [m]ust continue to fight for it, since women are a gift. God did not create men first, and then gave him a puppet to play with. He created both equal, the man and the woman" (*the same*).

During the discussions with the female theologians from the Catholic church, it was clarified that following the example of the Pope there are efforts made "to overcome the traditionalist barrier about the role of women in the life of the church", in terms of "refreshing church life and the viewpoint on religion"¹⁶. If you attend a Holy mass in the Catholic cathedral in Skopje, it is common to see women (myrrh-bearers and nuns) repeatedly reading the Apostle. Apart from Cathedral's Parish and the Cathedral's Parish Vicar, the pastoral personnel are comprised of women. Despite the fact that there is no educational institution on Roman

¹⁴ The original title in English reads: *The Full Face of Humanity: Women in Leadership for a Just Society* (October 27-18, 2022).

¹⁵ The Dicastery is a Vatican body that assists the Pope in appointing bishops.

¹⁶ Interview for the needs of this research with Ena Abjanic Chausidis, MA (September 2022).

Catholic theology in the country, following the example of the Zagreb Theological Faculty or Seminary, the Catholic church in Skopje has a long-lasting tradition of teaching religious education to youngsters and children (boys and girls) at its temples whereas its cooperation and mutual respect with the Eastern-Orthodox Theological Faculty can be affirmed by the lectures of several visiting professor (Catholic) theologians.

Position of Women in the Jewish Religious Community

The Jewish Community in Macedonia (ECRM) is an inseparable part of the cultural diversity and religious pluralism in this area, while the Memorial Center of the Holocaust is a witness of the tragic destiny of the citizens of the former Jewish neighborhood at the entrance of Skopje's Old Bazaar. The oldest synagogue outside of Israel's borders was found on the archeological site Stobi, 80km away from Skopje. In fact, it is a case of two synagogues out of which the elder, Synagogue I, dates from the 2nd c. AD, whereas the more recent, Synagogue II was erected at the end of the 3rd c. AD and in the beginning of the 4th c. AD (*Stobi*, 2010). From the inscription on the former Skopje synagogue "Bet Acheron" (1366), it is known that the Jewish neighborhood in Skopje was established in the Middle Ages. With the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal from 1492 to 1496, the number of Skopje's Jewish community increased, in which the Jews who settled here spoke Ladino or Judeo-Spanish. "After the World War I, the Jewish communities in Dojran, Strumica, Prilep, Veles, Udovo, Gevgelija and in Kumanovo were completely destroyed and members of other communities emigrated en masse to Thessaloniki¹⁷".

After the end of the war (1944), the surviving Jews continued the long tradition of Jewish municipalities throughout the country and restored the Jewish Municipality in Skopje. After the independence of the state (1991), the Jewish community was separated from the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and continued to work independently. Nowadays, it is the only Jewish Community in North Macedonia with approximately 200 members, out of which the majority are Sephardi¹⁸.

¹⁷ History of the Jews in Macedonia. <https://www.ezrm.org.mk/istorija-na-evreite-vo-mk>

¹⁸ History of ECRM; <https://www.ezrm.org.mk/istorija-na-ezrm/>

The synagogue “Bet Jacob” consecrated in 2000 inside the building of the Jewish community and decorated according to the customs and traditions of the Sephardic Jews, successor of the former synagogue "Bet Jacob" from 1674, in whose yard the “Talmud Tora” School was located, has contributed to a large extent for the revival of religious practices in the community: a temple in which Jewish customs and traditions are practiced and prayers are being read.

Several sections for preservation and promotion of the Jewish culture and tradition were established within JCRM: a library, a children’s corner “King David”, a teenage section and a Youth Club.

“Avanahu” (*us* in Hebrew), with members aging between 19 and 30 years old, “The Middle-Age Club” and “The Women’s Club “Isha” (*woman* in Hebrew) in which women take part in various humanitarian acts and activities that help maintain the Jewish tradition and culture, thus ensuring an affirmation of the community. The Memorial Center of the Holocaust of the Jews from Macedonia (2002), built in the former Jewish neighborhood in Skopje (which was situated on the left bank of the river Vardar, between the Stone Bridge and Kale Fortress, which was completely destroyed during the earthquake in 1963), with its permanent exhibition reflects an eternal respect for its deported fellow citizens from Bitola and Stip¹⁹: “7144 Jews were taken to Treblinka and never came back and for a year or longer nobody knew anything about their destiny” (Holocaust Fund, 2022).

In Macedonia traditional Sephardi Judaism is practiced. Although it is permitted to ordain women rabbis, in our country no one has expressed an interest in it so far. The Jewish Community includes both women and men. Women with Jewish descent are actively involved in all procedures of the highest bodies within the Jewish Community Institution, starting from presidential membership, to sitting members in some sectors and committees.

From its renewal until now, there are two female presidents listed in the history of JCRM, Bjanka Helman – Subotik (2009-2013) and Dr. Berta Romano-Nikolik (2104- 2022), who shall be remembered by their continuous contribution in the preservation of the tradition and culture of the Jews in Macedonia, as well as in preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

¹⁹ Memorial Center <https://holocaustfund.org.mk>.

The synagogue “Bet Jacob” and the “Memorial Center of the Holocaust” are the only two institutions where the Jews can observe their faith and tradition. Unfortunately, there are no educational institutions teaching Judaism in the country. There are no regular Shabbat services performed in the synagogue, however there are continuous services held during the important holidays, when the services are performed most often by rabbis from the neighboring countries or from the USA.

Women in the Islamic Religious Community

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) maintains a century long tradition in the region as a legacy from the Ottoman Empire. “Isa Beg Madrasah” is the only secondary Islamic school of IRC, the dignified heir of the century’s long tradition of the first madrasah established on the Balkans, in the heart of Skopje Old Bazaar, the madrasah of Gazi Isa Beg (1445), the third administrator of Skopje, founder of the city of Sarajevo and the Conqueror of Constantinople. After his death, the mosque Isa-Beg in Skopje was constructed 1475/6 as his nuncupative will and it is the only mosque in the city with two towers (Kocevski, 2020). In the complex of the mosque and madrasah, there was a library with more than 320 written books, which includes this literary fund among the largest libraries of the 15th century. In the recent history of the Isa-Beg’s Madrasah, the year 1936 is especially notable when the school was reactivated and acquired the status of secondary education school for ordaining imams, mual-limas, and other religious servants. Mainly religious subjects were studied in the madrasah, but also several languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, French and Bosnian and of course, the subjects of general and national history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, logic, psychology and pedagogy.

In the course of seven decades, the madrasah enrolled exclusively male students on regular basis, while ensuring opportunity for female students to study part-time. In the academic years 2003/2004 special women’s branches were open within the Isa-Beg madrasah, enabling girls to regularly attend the lectures. Today there are still 4 branches in the madrasah in existence: in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar and Stip.

Nostrification, or in other words, non-recognition of the diplomas of the knowledge acquired in the madrasah still remains a burning issue for the state (although according to the Law on Legal Status of Churches, Religious Communities and Religious Groups, this question seems unresolved). The non-recognition of the diplomas from the secondary faith schools in the state causes headaches for entire generations of students and their parents²⁰.

This unresolved issue creates a paradox in itself in the area of education in Macedonia: the state recognizes and nostrifies the diplomas of higher education religious institutions, however not the diplomas from the secondary faith schools. An example of this in the last decade is that the secondary faith school of IRC (Madrasah) has noticed an increase in the enrolled students, especially female students. According to the State Statistical Office in the last academic year, on the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Kondovo (FIN, 1997), Skopje area, 276 students were enrolled, out of which 148 females, i.e., 53% of the total number of students enrolled. A total of 29 religious and general subjects are taught in the madrasah. The attractiveness of the curricula in the madrasa lies in the combined education: in addition to the theological subjects, the teaching includes general subjects that are represented in the state high school education.

The general impression is that there is a significant interest among girls to study their faith, although in more conservative environments, and the madrasah remains the only choice for secondary education among the female population. Apart from studying the faith and the subjects in the area of ethics, as a primary motivation, part of our respondents, former madrasah students, as a secondary motivation have indicated the fact that the madrasah is [the] only educational institution in RN Macedonia [which] does not allow mixing of male and female students”, since they consider it “beneficial” for the development years of “a teenage girl” (Mejra Hodza)²¹.

Another interlocutor, Ruhije Mici, mual-lime (religious education teacher at IRC), an activist and humanitarian, mentioned in the discussion: “the madrasah is one of the more demanding schools [...] it requires discipline, persistence and responsibility”. The students that

²⁰ Due to the non-recognition of Islamic high school diplomas, parents often decide to send their children (daughters and sons) to madrasahs in neighboring countries, mostly in Tirana (Albania) and Novi Pazar (Serbia).

²¹ All quotations in the following text, unless otherwise indicated, refer to interviews with former madrasah students Mejra Hoxha and mual-lime Rukiye Mitzi during September 2022 for the purposes of this research.

come from other ethnic affiliations are faced with the challenge of studying in the Albanian language, which is the predominant teaching language in the madrasah. Mandatory precondition for attending the lectures in the madrasah or at the college is wearing Islamic clothing (Hijab). Hasan Jashari wrote in the distant 2006 that “by accepting the Islamic clothing, women, in fact, are modelling the public space for themselves.” (*Nova Makedonija*, 9th November, p.11).

Upon completion of the secondary four-year education in the madrasah, the graduated female madrasah students have the opportunity to continue their education at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Skopje, with a special permission from the Bureau for Educational Development to continue their studies in the faculties in the state, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, or in the Arab countries. Some of them get employed in the administrative departments of the Ministries, part of them as teachers in the female branches of the madrasah, some are hafiz (women who know the verses from the Koran by heart, prayers of Mevludi, Khatami), some teach religious instruction or in the mosque schools (primary schools). The teaching staff of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences is comprised exclusively of men, with the exception of one woman in the administrative service.

Our interlocutors – professors and former students in the madrasah - pointed out several challenges that they are faced with in their work: so far there are no female theologians employed on the managerial positions, in the administrative bodies of IRC, nor in the administrative service of the religious community and there weren't any in the past. One of the reasons for this, as it was stated, was the lack of separate rooms for women. Women have the right to take part in the election process of the Assembly of IRC; they have the right to vote and propose members of the Assembly and the Congregational Board.

However, what is missing in our area are studies that would provide comprehensive information on which are the factors that affect the role and the prospects of female theologians, which would provide data for making stable policies that could identify the needs of these women. Within the institutions of the IRC there is comprehensive research that would provide relevant data about the role, opportunities and perspectives of female theologians in the country. The mosques in Macedonia are traditional, unlike the example of the first mosque “Mariam” led by a female-imam in Denmark, the Moslem woman Sherin Khankan who perceives the reforms in Islam, not as something new, but as an integral part of its teachings,

in terms of questioning the patriarchal management structures of religious worship and education and the patriarchal interpretations of the Koran (Sherwood, 2016).

Position Women in Evangelic-Methodist Church

The Evangelic- Methodist Church (EMC)²² has been present in Macedonia for over 150 years, since the period of the Ottoman Empire and its structure is comprised of twelve evangelic-protestant churches with less than 7,000 believers (Cacanoska, 2018). The new church was consecrated on October 15, 1989. In 2000, a Social Center was built, which was named "Miss Stone Center" in honor of the missionary Miss Ellen Stone.

According to the data from the research study on Protestantism in Macedonia conducted by Ruzica Cacanoska, except for the United Methodist Church, 80% of the believers have protestant background, “the majority of the believers from the evangelic-protestant religious groups have Eastern-Orthodox background (30% -95%) while the number of believers from the Muslim tradition is significantly lower” (Cacanoska 2018, 21.)

The data available on the web page of the EMC indicate that all bodies and conferences in the Evangelic-Methodist Church, from local communities up to the highest global level i.e., the General Conference, are elected in a democratic manner. All services are equally open to women and men. All decisions are made jointly by layman and pastors. They have elected bishops who have competences over certain regions and are responsible for conducting the Annual Conferences.

ECM has made an enormous contribution to the emancipation of women in Macedonia much earlier than the emergence of feminism in the world, as noted in the history of EMC, emphasizing the phenomenon within its schools within the church “where the girls were taught to read and write, [and then] they continued their education at the high school in Bitola.²³”. Undoubtedly, even nowadays, women play an important role in the church. The most frequent charismas are: visits to the sick, elderly and weak persons, helping one another, making handicrafts for sale, thus helping their own community. They organize workshops for health care, led by a medical doctor specialist. Moreover, every second year they organize a so-called

²² Evangelic-Methodist Church (EMC) is part of the United Methodist Church.

²³ Women. <http://emc.mk/zeni/>

women's seminar, where they discuss topics related to life, seen from two perspectives, the Biblical and the psychological one.

The participants are nationals of our country and the neighboring countries. Women are from different age groups, which has proved to be a huge advantage, especially for the exchange of experiences and knowledge. Women from EMC from Macedonia are members of the World Prayers Day. For 15 years on end, they publish the women's magazine "Charisma" dedicated to the needs of women. In the press release they relate that "[s]ex does not play any role in the preaching service. Every woman can be a priest and can serve the word of God²⁴".

Our interlocutors in this research, inter alia, were the female theologian Nada Milkova, MSc, pastor and co-founder of the Balkan institute of Faith and Culture (BIFC, 2011) in Skopje and her husband, pastor and writer Kosta Milkov, Ph.D, President of BIFC. These two theologians via their own example of ecumenical cooperation and interreligious dialogue are one of the most important drivers and collaborators of the cultural life in the city.

Their publishing house and Art Gallery "Metanoja" is one of the most vital nuclei in the heart of Skopje. The summer academy "Theology and Life" and the project "Oxford Connections²⁵", as well as the innumerable lectures and courses organized within the Balkan Institute of Faith and Culture have made an enormous contribution in enriching the translation of theological literature into the Macedonian language, in promoting and supporting young artists and writers, visits of renowned domestic and foreign male theologians/female theologians, as well as young scientists in the direction of building bridges of interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion

The research study tends to analyze the position and the opportunities of female theologians in the largest religious communities in Macedonia. It demonstrated that opportunities for female theologians are closely connected to the study of faith and tradition and correspondingly of the cultural habits and beliefs in the society. Women have certain

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The English titles of these two programs are: *Theology for Life and Oxford Connections*.

opportunities to act and to be promoted within their religious communities in Macedonia (mostly led by men), to undertake responsible roles, especially in the educational process and in charitable activities, but also to testify to their faith with their personal example.

In terms of the educational opportunities for girls and women to study theological sciences, there are only three institutions in Macedonia out of which two are high educational institutions (The Eastern-Orthodox Theological Faculty and the Faculty for Islamic Sciences), including one secondary faith school (women's classes in the madrasah²⁶) Neither women nor men who want to study Catholic theology or Judaism, have access to an official theological education within their religious community, since there are no adequate institutions in the state. This should be a subject of an in-depth analysis on the part of the theological schools, as well as specialized researchers.

Aiming at domesticating the word “female theologians” in our language and its more acceptable use in the society and because of the vital necessity for more equal representation and involvement of women in public and church life, it is essential to encourage and leave some room for educated female theologians, in public space and in public debate, while ensuring opportunities for their promotion in the higher educational theological institutions. Women must be included as part of the community or, as the Eastern-Orthodox Church teachings relate, as part of the fullness of the Church body, as an individual who has her own intellectual perception of theology, who has her own calling and role in the world.

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²⁶ The opening of women's classes in the madrasah is another indication of the growing interest among women to study Islamic sciences.

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