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Tenets of Neoconservatism: Biological and Theological Versions of Life and Gender in Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church

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TENETS OF NEOCONSERVATISM: BIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VERSIONS OF LIFE AND GENDER IN LATVIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Abstract The paper examines the tenets of neoconservatism in current Christian discourse. The notion of life that evolves around biology and procreation is seen as a marker of conservative argumentation. As Jordanova (1995) has argued, a shift in the 'natural' association of children with their mothers instead of their fathers occurred in the18th century due to a shift in perspective in life sciences and technology. The new model of procreation involving both parents and a biological, rather than theological, understanding of the process supports arguments that justify not ordaining women and taking anti-LGBTQ+ positions while simultaneously deleting its historical ties to science and thus 'naturalizing' the work of God. This paper is based on 119 interviews with pastors and lay members of the church.

> In the clinic, I held him [my cat Samurai] in my lap, sick and barely alive. After a short time, I held him dead in my arms. To say that there was a big difference between 'barely alive' and 'dead' is an understatement. There was an abyss between the two. Something irreconcilable, irrevocable, insurmountable, and irreparable. Existentially felt, palpable with hands. On one side was life. On the other side, there were none. I read (..) comments on the YouTube channel that [Russian president] Putin is the kind of leader they would want for their nation because he stands for **natural values**. Really? He talks a lot about those. In the entire known universe, God chose our Earth and made it special among other heavenly bodies by endowing it with life. **Life is an indisputable, unquestionable value and a measure with which to weigh and evaluate when it is so difficult to understand who stands for what and why they do what they do**.
>
> Jānis Vanags, LELC archbishop, sermon on the 104th anniversary of the Latvian state on 18 November 2022 (with author's emphasis)

Introduction

This excerpt from Archbishop Vanags' sermon serves as an entry point in deciphering the mythologies held by (neo)conservatives. Additionally, the quote demonstrates that the same set of 'natural' values, based on Christian faith, can be used for opposite ends, and the life in its biological meaning becomes an arbiter between both. The archbishop makes an elaborate argument, saying that the 'biological life' as a God's gift makes the difference between the two alike 'naturals.' This argument is based upon several pairs of relations: God is the creator of

'life' and the world and then 'life' is paired with the realm of the 'natural' in its biological sense, which is an often-used connection to prove that something is true or 'innate' in our culture.[1] The third connection is made between 'life as God's creation' and its 'biological' twin as established by the natural science of the Enlightenment period. As Jordanova[2] writes, at that time, authority was transferred from theology to natural science, which used nature "as a material and intellectual resource" and allowed us to see nature as a human-shaped entity.

Seeing 'life' simultaneously as a God's creation and as one understood by biology simultaneously helps to transfer God's authority to the realm of science and to allow God to be "crossed out" as an active participant whose authority is now placed in science about God.[3] The relationship between God and both theological and biological versions of 'life' is therefore ambiguous. A biological version of life and death is evoked through the story about the cat, demonstrating the difference between both as an abyss and an irreconcilable opposite.[4] It is backed by God's authority who has invested in the act of creating life. Both the Archbishop and the Russian president use the authority of God to justify their claims to God's authority, and biology now becomes an arbiter to reveal truth.

When Strathern[5] discusses gender from a relational perspective, she invites us to see gender not as a unit or a principle that divides people into two categories but as a relation that models other relations in society. This allows gender to be used both as an instrument and a maker of the world. She threads through gender, exploring the relationships it models, and at some point, arrives at the creation of the 'nature' due to modelling work upon gender:

> The way in which biology is perceived, the way in which roles are perceived, help define the natures of males and females. We are dealing with constructs (myths) about constructs (gender). Yet they appear to be rooted in the actual world. Reality is touched at two points—in that the myths purport to be about natural attributes (sex) or observable behavior (roles) and in that they refer to existing human beings (men and women).[6]

For Strathern, "sexual mythologies of everyday life" represent three layers of perspectives: (1) what is being said about men and women, and how their relationship is

[1] Piere Bourdieu, *Masculine domination*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).
[2] Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine 1760–1820*, (Routledge, New York, Oxon, 2013), p. 91.
[3] Bruno, Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Harvard University Press, 1993), 32-35.
[4] Jordanova, op. cit., 78 notes that at the beginnings of natural science in the early 19th century there was a belief that life and death have reversable boundaries which led to development of revival techniques in medicine and, perhaps, is linked to salvational character of modern medicine. See Byron Good, "Medical anthropology and the problem of belief", in *Medicine, rationality and experience: an anthropological experience*, (Cambridge University Press), pp. 7-8).
[5] Marylin Strathern, *Before and After Gender. Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life*, ed. Sarah Franklin, (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016).
[6] Ibid., 286.

symbolized; (2) the description of behavior, action, social structure, etc.; and finally, the most intriguing of those, (3) how gender stands for other things and relations. Societies across the world and time establish different orders of the world, distinctive characteristics of women and men, and relationships between both. I am limiting myself here to exploring the mythologies of women's ordination in the current day Latvian Lutheran Evangelical Church, focusing on the gender modeling of the 'natural' based on interviews with pastors and lay persons.

While Bourdieu[7] has argued that the naturalization of gender helps to legitimize masculine domination and addresses it as a cognitive operation, Strathern[8] pushes "the question of women" further, arguing that the analytical problem with this 'question' lies in the characterization of gender not only as a model for women and their place in society but also as a model for other kinds of relations–those between autonomous individuals as well as more abstraction ones, such as the superiority of the public sphere over the domestic, and the very relationship of masculine domination and the tools used to denounce it.

Relations, even when modelled on the same ideas of gender and the 'natural,' are not constant. Strathern uses rich ethnographic examples from distinct cultures to demonstrate the variety of the modelling work of gender. Looking at the Euro-American culture, Jordanova[9] argues that a shift of associating children 'naturally' with their mothers instead of fathers occurred in the eighteenth century due to the shift in perspective in life sciences and technology. We could say that this shift signals the establishment of the relationship between two versions of 'life,' originating in life sciences and religion respectively, as outlined at the beginning of the paper. I further examine the consequences that this composite definition of life creates in contemporary conservative mythologies of gender, including justifications for why women can or cannot be pastors.

Women's ordination was officially reversed in 2016 when the synod of the Latvian Lutheran Evangelical Church voted in favor of the position of its archbishop, who had put women's ordination on hold in 1993 when he came to office. I am not interested here so much in its argumentation, which other papers in this volume address in depth, but rather use an anthropological approach to dissect it, threading through the relations modelled on the 'natural' and 'life,' extrapolated into the mythology against women's ordination. According to data, the

[7] Piere Bourdieu, *Masculine domination*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).
[8] Marylin Strathern, *Before and After Gender. Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life*, ed. Sarah Franklin, (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016).
[9] Ludmilla Jordanova, "Interrogating the Concept of Reproduction in the Eighteenth Century," in F. Ginsburg and R. Rapp, eds, *Conceiving the New Order*. *The Global Politics of Reproduction,* (University of California Press, 1995), 369-386.

refusal to ordain women is based on gender modeling of several kinds of relations of difference: (1) between two categories of persons: men and women; (2) sacraments and priesthood as a set of gendered objects and actions; and (3) the positioning of the sacral world above the secular world, which are discussed below.

The Method

The inspiration of using 'nature' and 'life as a starting point in my inquiry comes from the archbishop's sermon where the context of 'life' caught my attention. Why was it necessary to argue that the similar gendered values (relations) used both by the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, whose distinct positions of 'life' can be tested only with the aid of biology?

The material to be analyzed further comprises 120 interviews with the members of the Latvian Lutheran Evangelical Church (not all were conservative in their views, thought the church leadership takes a conservative position), 41 interviews with 44 women (of those, two double interviews), 78 interviews with men and one double interview with a couple. 58 interviews were conducted with pastors, evangelists, and deacons, only two of whom were both female and evangelists, and 62 interviews with 65 lay people: 42 women and 23 men. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded in Atlas.ti by a team consisting of anthropologists, theologians, and media scholars. This paper concerns itself only with codes dealing with the "life" and the "natural" and the "procreation" as one of the variables of both. These quotes most often discuss the difference between men and women and the question of ordaining women as one of the questions discussed in the interviews. The choice of framing this discussion as a matter of the 'natural' domain was made by the interviewees.

In the second stage of coding, the results were cross-checked using word search engine in Atlas.ti with two keywords, "life" and "natural," finding missed and eliminating "false" quotes. Although interview guidelines did not specifically prompt interviewees at the "natural," I found that the term was still often used by our multi-disciplinary research team as a "neutral" mode of inquiry, e.g.:

> Interviewer: Do you think it [a female serving as a pastor] is different? Is there a biological difference or what?
> Madara: Maybe a man's voice sounds more soothing, maybe. (Interview with Madara and Albīns)

Those quotes from when the "natural" relation was prompted by the interviewer, as in this example, were removed. Also, when looking through the assigned codes after the first joint

round of coding, the "natural" was often given even though the interviewee did not explicitly make one, e.g., when the interviewee mentioned God as a creator of the world, the code "nature" was assigned. This, perhaps, demonstrates that dual gender and nature mythologies are very much taken for granted and not differentiated. In cases where matters of the "natural family" model and "procreation" were mentioned, those resulted with a clear and accurate coding.

In the second stage of coding, some new quotes were added, introducing two additional codes: (1) "God's created" world or order, which was often used as an alternative to "natural" world (and previously was often read as the same as the biological "natural" by part of our research team) and (2) "culture," describing the mode of interpreting gender difference as a culturally or arbitrary established relation.

In total, 378 quotes exemplifying my interest were selected. The document-code co-occurrence table (see Table 1 below) shows that quotes using "nature" or "natural" appear in all categories of documents, although men evoke these categories more often than women. and pastors do it slightly more often than lay people. Procreation-related roles and "life" are more often cited by men and pastors than by lay people and women. Male pastors also seem to refer to God's created order much more often than women and lay people in general. At the same time, the biological connection interpreting life vs. death dominates in all texts, strengthening its sacral, Scripture-based interpretation.

Categories	Lay people (65)	Pastors (58)	Women (45)	Men (79)
"Nature", "natural"	40	42	23	59
God created	3	21	1	23
"Life"	7	28	7	28
Procreation, "natural" family	14	28	12	30
Gender difference as a cultural difference		3	1	2
	61	121	43	141

Table 1. Code-Document cross-table.

The Concept of Life

The interchangeability between life as a concept created by biological science in mid-nineteenth century Europe[10] and one preceding it is also made by the interviewees:

> Those who preach that marriage is being politicized, have themselves been born into a natural [family]. In that sense, I even call it [the family] natural, but I should have really said as a pastor that it simply is a Christian, a Biblical, and a God-ordained order. We have all come in [to this world] according to God's appointed order. (Pastor Olafs)

As Jordanova[11] notes, society and family "were predicated on natural sociability," cementing the co-existence of "the physiological, the social and the aesthetic aspects of human existence." Women appear as a "distinct class of persons" not because of their reproductive function but through their social destiny, which is now backed by "God's appointed order." Ferngren remarks that the conflict between religion and science in the Enlightenment age is exaggerated and both should be seen as complementary.[12] I want to emphasize that this congruence exists at a symbolic level in relation to women. When Jordanova claims[13] that women in the nineteenth century became defined by 'nature' and by masculine science, it is important to add that religion was another field where this change occurred.

Olafs corrects himself, redirecting a biological connection he mentions first to one of divine origin, but this redirection marks not only a difference but also an analogy between both when using the 'natural' to strengthen the 'divine.' Authority, perhaps, is ascribed to both fields, but the 'natural' seems to be a more appealing concept compared to its theological twin. Reading the table above vertically, we see that half of the pastors and most of the lay interviewees choose to refer to 'nature' rather than 'God' when justifying their gendered symbolic order of the world. So, for example, pastor Boriss reduces the creation of humankind on biological differences in the male and female bodies:

> We are not created to say mom1 and mom2 or dad1 and dad2, as in today's world, but that's not how people were created. Then the organs that distinguish us should also be ignored—cut off or sewn on. It is so purely natural. From nature, it has gone that way. I believe that it is completely people's own attempt to build some kind of fairy tale. On the one hand, as if they want to make everything the same, on the other hand, to separate.

[10] Ludmilla Jordanova, "Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality," in C. McCormack, M. Strathern, *Nature, culture and gender*, (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 42-69, pp. 57.
[11] Ibid., 50.
[12] Gary B. Ferngren. "Science and religion," in T. W. Kneeland, ed., *The Routledge History of American Science*, (Routledge, New York, Oxon, 2023), 200-214.
[13] Jordanova, *op. cit.*, 42-69, pp. 57.

It is interesting that he propagates an essentially modern view on the body divided by gender difference. Before modernity, human anatomy was based on the Galenic[14] notion of a one-sex body, and the difference between men's and women's bodies was seen in the volume of heat, with women being a deviation from the norm and possessing less heat than men.[15] Stolberg[16] explores the role of early modern medicine as well as the sociopolitical context in Germany, when sexual dimorphism was adopted as a natural given and allowed to explain women with their ability to give birth, subsequently justifying the subordination of women and allocating them to the domestic sphere. Stolberg inquires into the origin of this difference and questions its results, claiming that first came the quest for finding the difference, understanding anatomy as the study of divine order,[17] allowing us to link the position of women to 'natural' will of God. He also notes that "Christian teleology and (among Protestants) the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers did not inevitably call for a model of complementarity or incommensurability rather than female inferiority."[18]

Similarly, Strathern[19] points at the possibilities of science to conceive persons differently–"instead (..) natural characteristics such as 'life,' 'an organization of parts' the latter quasi-theological or moral ones such as 'consciousness,'"[20] resulting in the current mode of perceiving relationships as external to persons. One can conceptualize a person through relations. She mentions an example of seventeenth century female painter-naturalist Merian, who depicts insects of Surinam not as individual organisms but as a life cycle (what we would now call environment), proposing a relational perspective on nature.

Life as a characteristic of a living organism serves as a powerful symbol that can be modeled by gender in multiple ways. Pastor Rodrigo explains that even though women are

[14] Galene was a Greek and Roman physician. See the discussion on his influence in Mediaeval medicine in Michael Stolberg, "A Woman Down to Her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries." "*Isis*", Vol. 94, No. 2, June 2003, 274-299.
[15] Londa Schiebinger. *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, (Boston: Beacon, 1993), Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1990).
[16] Stolberg, op.cit., 274–299.
[17] Ibid., 292.
[18] Ibid., 294.
[19] Marylin Strathern, "Afterword: Becoming Enlightened about Relations," in H. Wardle, N. Rapport, eds., *An Anthropology of the Enlightenment Moral Social Relations Then and Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 171-188.
[20] Ibid., 182.

'biologically' stronger since they live longer,[21] they should be spared of priesthood as it is life-threatening occupation.[22]

> The pastor is like a lightning rod in the middle. An instrument in God's hands. If the tool is weak, he can easily burn out. If the current is high, the sin is heavy, and it is possible that the pastor has the same temptation, then it is very difficult for him to eliminate it. And as a result, women are mentally stronger than men, also live longer, as we know. (..) However, it is not their job to deal with such a dirty task. Let us put it this way: the task is sacred, but life-threatening. Only from this point of view, I do not recommend women to take on such a task, but let's say, to teach—yes! Wonderful teachers.

When reading the passage from the interview, it seems to display contradictory logic unless interpreted through the concept of biological life: women can be mentally stronger and live longer as long as they do not serve as priests. It casts priesthood as a heroic activity, shortening the life spans of men as a group. The broad categorization of people who live longer (women) and those who do not (men) is also established and naturalized by longevity criteria.

Another context when speaking about life relates to procreation, and three arguments (and relations) are made in the interviews in this respect. The argument on 'life' in its biological context derives its authority from both God (as its creator) and biology (as a science). So, Valfrīds argues:

> (..) the thing with abortion is very difficult. You can say, okay, a woman has the right to her body, but well, well. There are a lot of women who had abortion years ago and have not got over it because it is part of you, it is your child. It is not like, sometimes they say, as simple as cutting out the appendix. (..) After all, we live in the 21st century with DNA analysis. When you know that what is conceived there is neither a puppy nor a kitten that can be simply drowned, it is a human child, who already has that DNA inside his cell from the first moment of conception (..). If we stop life here, okay, we are cutting the [life] line, [it is] a terrible barbarism, throwing babies in the trash. (..) If your parents had chosen that, we wouldn't be sitting here talking. Your husband would not have a wife. Because this decision [on abortion] affects reality, it is not one person's decision about their body; it is a decision that affects the whole environment.

The quote is rich in relations. The particularity of human life versus that of other animals is backed by analysis. Second, women (and not men) are seen as having a specific bodily connection to children as soon they are conceived. Both men and women (mentioned as gender neutral 'parents') are linked to children via choice, which is a different connection when

[21] All these symbols of strength and a greater balance of temperament of women compared to men are also present also in early modern writings of physicians when the two-sex model of human bodies was introduced (Stolberg, *op. cit.,* 274-299.)

[22] This is a common argument in eighteenth-century medical philosophy, arguing that reproductive function subordinates women in intellectual and political spheres (Maurice Bloch and Jean Bloch, "Women and the dialectics of nature in eighteenth-century French thought. In C. McCormack, M. Strathern, *Nature, culture and gender*, (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 33).

compared to the 'bodily' relationship of the women, and this 'parental' link seems somehow weaker than 'bodily' one. Finally, 'life' is necessary for establishing a 'biological family'–once one could become a wife of her husband (again, a gendered category), a lifeline is perpetuated. The last sentence emphasizes the relationality of the world, but as we see, gender differentiates what relations can be made, categorizing the world into men and women by assigning them to different categories.

Pastors Sīmanis and Indulis recount some of the connections mentioned above but justify them only with Holy Scripture or God.

> Well, those contemporary [issues], against which the church always raises its voice and protests—abortion, euthanasia, all regarding life, the sanctity and inviolability of life—follow from the fact that life belongs to God. The issue of homosexual relations is different from the way society tries to interpret it. It clearly indicates that homosexuality is a sin, and here they try accusing the church... By the way, also in the case of not ordaining women, it is the same thing – [it is said] that the church somehow humiliates women or despises them, and the church humiliates homosexual people. Absolutely not, absolutely not, because the church treats every person with respect, but will always condemn actions that the Holy Scripture qualifies as a sin, or (…) not a good and right action, so the church is receptive to the idea that we can help homosexual people to understand their situation and [help them to] come back and change. (Pastor Indulis)

Pastor Indulis jumps from euthanasia and abortion to homosexuality and ordaining women, all of which he sees as similar 'sins' via prohibition in the Scripture. He still needs the concept of biological 'life' to double-secure the argument. What is done, the qualification of abortion or euthanasia as an interruption of 'life,' is extended to ordaining women and homosexuality by similitude—there is not direct link to human biological longevity anymore. One can assume that the pastor could see homosexual people as not being able to have children 'naturally' and perpetuate life, but this argument does not apply to women who serve as pastors because they cannot be pastors exactly because they can perpetuate life. Framing homosexuality as a sin through the Scripture is then attributed to ordaining women through the similitude of humiliation—both categories (homosexuality and female priesthood) are 'wrongly' feeling humiliated when the church 'rightly' insists on the Scripture in their exclusion. Here we must come back to the beginning of the passage, as the chain of connections has been long, and remember that it starts with an example of taking away 'life,' the same argument discussed at the opening of the paper. Despite the absence of rational logic in presenting this chain of events, the trail is not accidental but reveals the symbolic trail of the construction of world.

Pastor Indars draws the same line of connection between biological death and ordaining women, but in his case, it is more direct. He goes as far as telling the story of the former Lutheran archbishop Kārlis Gailītis, who allegedly openly shouted in the Church synod that he

had ordained women and would continue doing it, and. soon afterwards. died in a car crash. These events are followed by the election of the new archbishop who opposes ordaining women, 'life' becoming an arbiter in this theological discussion.

Lay interview quotes (7 in total) in this section of the paper come from three interviews, and one of them just quotes a pastor. Vēsma, a Lutheran woman, describes a discussion thread in her social network that touches upon the right to not have children and supports same-sex families. She proudly recounts an intervention by a Lutheran pastor, inserting the following comment in the discussion: "If your parents would have pondered [of not having children], it would be gravely quiet here [in the social network]." Vēsma claims that it silenced all opponents and forced her to break into tears.

Only one lay Lutheran woman uses the concept of life differently than the rest of the interviewed. She attributes 'life' to liveliness as an inner property, but not a process in an organism, having a different take on what pastor Indars interprets as 'divine providence' above:

> Next, he [the archbishop] came with this terrible, in my opinion, ban on ordaining women. And those poor women who were pastors [at that time]. How would they have felt [about it]? And then the wetting out of the pastors. So thorough. All the lively pastors that were so organic, natural, free, and normal [in their service had to go]. No opportunities for them now [serving in the church]. (Teika)

For Teika, a reverse order of relation is used—the 'natural and the 'normal' depends on the spiritual quality, allowing emphasis to be placed on the spiritual realm as the cause of the chain of events. Several pastors make a similar connection linking the 'life' to the Word of God or following teaching rather than biology. Pastor Sīmanis likens the 'life' to Scripture via food consumption:

> We talk about healthy food, so he talks about healthy teaching, and after a while you will understand what is healthy, what is life-giving, what is really what has always been what people have been willing to live and die. Because in all of this, you must come to the point that this is a matter of life and death, your faith is so deep that it is not about any opinions.

In his version, biological life and death depend upon faith and the Church's teaching, thus underlining its authority and irreconcilability. This version of 'life' seems to lead to different consequences and the 'life' is located not in an individual organism but in God and his ultimate agency. I underline this to note that the same symbols can be used in different ways, thus making different connections and statements. Gender here works as an ambivalent instrument, allowing for variable outcomes.

Male—Female Difference

Here, I elaborate on gender as a differentiating tool in more detail. Most of interviewees mentioned that the gender difference originates from the fact that women beget life and men do not. As we have seen, the superiority of life over death originates from the fact that God created it as a supreme authority. The differentiation between creation and production as expressed in the Nicaean Creed uses both modes in describing Christ: "begotten, not made," which further creates distinction between act of nature and that of God.[23] Women beget life, but this act lacks the superior qualification of God creating life and limits women in relation to men. Brigita and Eleonora recount:

> A woman… She has a mission that a man can only dream of. To give life. A woman can create life, that is something. I, for example, do not have this blessing. (..) And I think there are so many ways a woman can serve, in all kinds of ways. So why at any cost... do you need exactly that [being ordained as priests]? Yes, to break in. And [break in] not only in the church but in many other areas. At all costs, it is necessary to break into the fields of men [stressing these words]. I understand, so why not. You can have a career and... if it works out and you have the talent for it, you can, but in the church, you can find so many responsibilities, all kinds of charity work, Sunday school, and care for the elderly.

As Jordanova claims, creation and production were significant discriminating and linking symbols in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century natural philosophy, evoking "authority, order and hierarchy; they spoke about origins, sequences and the historical underpinning of rulership; they described actions and processes as apparently diverse as work, reproduction, authorship and divine intervention."[24] This is the time when gender and sexuality are linked with the 'natural,' striving to explain the origins of male-female difference, which is a political act.[25]

Interview data presents an example of gender as "one of the principal cultural forms of activating social agency."[26] One of the interviewees says that she has not had "that blessing" of giving life, yet identifies with the category of women who, in principle, are defined by 'giving life.' It is not her ability to give life, but the order imposed by gender category that qualifies her outside the 'fields of men.'

[23] Ludmilla Jordanova, Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine 1760–1820, (Routledge, New York, Oxon, 2013), pp. 41-63.
[24] Ibid., 49.
[25] Lumilla Jordanova *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science. Between the 18th Century and 20th Century*, (Prentice Hall Europe, 1989), p. 51.
[26] Sarah Franklin. "Editor's introduction "The Riddle of Gender"". In Sarah Franklin, ed., *Before and After Gender. Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life*, (Hau Books, Chicago), pp XIII-VIIV, p. XVII.

The gendered difference in interviews is advocated via two Biblical stories—the creation of Eve from Adam's rib and man's falling into sin:

> My starting point is the scriptures when a man and a woman fell into sin. Then, he said to the man: you will have to work in the sweat on your face. And the wife was told: you will have to give birth in pain. By the way, the name Eve means the living one, the giver of life. (Pastor Olafs)

The myth establishes not only two categories of persons – 'male' and 'female' -- but also a particular sexual distribution of labor. Giving birth is the most used discriminator of gender, as hard work is not an exclusive property of manliness, and interviewees sometimes stress that women are stronger than men and do most of the hard work. This discrimination derives not only from the Biblical story but also from the physiological ability to give birth—men do not give birth. It does not matter that not all women give or can give birth:

> A woman is often wiser because she is alive. She has the responsibility of continuing life, and one can wish, but no man will ever be able to give birth. If he gave birth, he would be a woman and not a man. This is the biological difference that all those defenders of equality, of tolerance, and of the Istanbul Convention—they can jump out of their pants as much as they want, but nothing can change this difference. (..) God himself has said that they [men and women] are two halves of one whole. We cannot find any discrimination in the Bible that a woman would be [seen as] a second-class creature. Different, different, but not less valuable than a man. (Pastor Tālis)

Birth is an ultimate watershed between males and females and serves as a basic form of organizing the myth of difference. This myth is expressed both in the form of stereotypes and descriptors of behavior:

> And you realize that one cannot be a leader since it requires time to always stay at a certain level. (..) A woman gives birth to children and then she has no time at all [for this]. (Vitauts)

Here we see that other differences are not that significant; women can be leaders but do not have time to achieve the position. Pastor Tālis ponders on genetic differences between genders, concluding that women are genetically stronger as the rib taken out of Adam's chest resulted in men having "fewer genes" and therefore subjecting them to more inherited illness and weakness:

> A woman is a complete creation. That's the rib [taken out from Adam]. That's why I laugh, not that men are the strong sex and women are the weak one, but vice versa. Biologically, a man is weaker than a woman, although he may have more muscle power.

The gender difference here is ambivalent, and the ambivalence in interviews is underlined by accompanying laughter, as the function of giving life may also mean that women are 'weaker' and in need of masculine protection. Both versions of women being stronger and

weaker compared to men nevertheless seem to lead to the same consequences of sexual division of labor, serving primarily as a differentiating and not a qualifying criterion:

> God has established that a woman is the weaker sex, so God' word speaks. God wanted to give birth to children through a woman. (..) God has put this tenderness in a woman and a man will never be able to take on this responsibility that God has put in a woman. Also to give birth to children. In any case, a woman spends at least nine months longer with a child than a man. That's like a minimum. And even after that... It cannot be the case, let us say, that a woman is given the same [means of] expression as a man. This is not the case. And it is precisely in our time and the time before that the emphasis is placed on the fact that a woman should be... I would not even say equal to a man, but I would even say superior to a man. The way I see it, the tendency is now for a woman to prove that she can do what men have done historically, with a higher quality, better, and so on. (Pastor Toms)

Pastor Toms is making explicit what others are vague about–the hierarchy that the sexual division of labor establishes. He is concerned with the threatened superiority of men, honestly placing women's 'responsibilities' beyond those of men.

Reference to nature-culture and male-female categories and their contribution to the subjugation of women in public life has been an old debate in anthropology,[27] and it has revealed power mechanisms in current Euro-American intellectual traditions that are not universal everywhere. This intellectual tradition uses scientific constructions of sexuality as universal, resulting in an ambivalent but robust definition of all women, depending on which side of 'nature' one is using.[28]

'Natural' Family, Mothers, and Fathers

The 'natural' difference of women from men via their ability to give birth is transferred to areas of family, workplace, and the church, although the family is the primary area establishing this difference. Thus, Justs sees the relationship between husband and wife as gendered because the husband is the head of the family. When a gendered hierarchy is established, the family acquires its 'naturalness.' Justs understands the 'natural' as a default relationship that goes without saying or effort but still requires effort to establish and maintain:

> I feel really good when I am allowed to say the final word on what we are going to do [in the family]. I feel so cool, oh, I feel so praised.
> -Because in some decisions do you have the final word?
> Yes, yes, and then it seems to me that the natural thing comes, therefore, I have even greater... one could not say, even greater love, but I want to show that love to my wife

[27] C. McCormak, M. Strathern, eds., *Nature, culture and gender*, (Cambridge University Press, 1980).
[28] Jordanova, "Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality," pp. 42-69.

> even more, [then] it is even easier for my wife to delegate me the choice and restrain from making decisions herself.

There is a certain ambivalence about Justs as the head of the family, as his wife gives him clearance and praises him for making those decisions, so this role is simultaneously 'naturally' made and 'given.'[29]

Birth and motherhood remain strong points of reference in spheres outside the family when compared to the attributes of 'maleness,' which according to the interviews seem to be constantly endangered and questioned. Fatherhood contains more elements of choice and outside recognition, rather, is biologically ascribed and linked to the personal autonomy and individuality of a man. The Enlightenment myth of a 'man–hunter'[30] reinforces the myth of the 'natural' family. A man 'needs' enactment:

> You see, and that is why society needs not men and women, but mothers and fathers. We lack them. Therefore we are so hurt. Because a man expects acceptance from his father. That is the purpose of initiation, that you are ready, you have grown, and you have become a man. Once those processes were very normal. Hunt the boar, defend your family, feed it, and stand up for it. You could see your meaning and mission in society. Now even the money is in [the bank account], not in tangible form. (Pastor Druvis)

This myth reanimates not only the division of labor between men and women but also establishes relationships between men. As pastor Druvis claims, fatherhood is the backbone of the 'natural' family, but this model of family is endangered with men 'losing' their 'natural' role both in their relationship with women and the male fraternity. Motherhood seems to come more 'naturally' compared to fatherhood and is primarily used in defining what women are, a sexual division of labor in the family and by extension in the church:

> Well, let's say, if I must talk about that division, then I list the physical things here, but the other thing, which seems to me to be so naturally given, is that a woman has that special sense to feel that someone needs help, that someone needs her to take care of. (..) I think that men have less of that... At home too, I judge it from my husband. The mother has a different intuition to feel that the child has something, that he is different than usual. No man cannot notice it, he does not perceive it that way. I think that in the church, I see women more in *diaconia.* (Dana)

[29] The identification of the family with 'nature' starts in the middle of 19th and linked to interest in taxonomy; the family becomes a basic 'natural' unit of the human organization and mother-child bond as the most 'natural' relationship among humans (Jordanova, *Nature Displayed. Gender, Science and Medicine 1760–1820*, p. 210.

[30] Abigail Anderson, Sophia Chilczuk, Kaylie Nelson, Roxanne Ruther, Cara Wall-Scheffler. "The Myth of Man the Hunter: Women's contribution to the hunt across ethnographic contexts". *PLoS ONE,* 2023, 18(6): e0287101. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287101

In general, women are considered better teachers, extending their nurturing role from the family to the church. At the same time, some interviews lament the lack of men in teaching positions, claiming that children would like to listen to male teachers more. The myth divides 'church teaching' into two parts—one addressed to the children and one to the whole congregation. Women are 'naturally' suited for the first and not the second. Pastor Indars reflects on his initial experience at Sunday school as 'terribly difficult' until he gets used to it and practices it 'naturally':

> Now, the pastor can address the children in Sunday schools. I have taught them too, which is terribly difficult for me. Now ... perhaps, you heard me now [talking in the Sunday school], it is just natural. But at first, I thought, well, what would I say to those young people. You must remember what you were [at that age]. (...) There is no need to complicate anything. They are mature humans like anyone else. And the role of a woman in the church, I would say, of course, a woman would always wash the church floor better and neater, and the men would do it worse.

As we see from this lesson, men can learn to teach the children and become 'naturals,' but this ability to learn does not apply to such an activity as scrubbing floors. The 'superiority' of women in domestic activities like scrubbing floors subordinates this kind of labor to the kind of labor men perform. One of the churches posted an advertisement for hiring volunteers to scrub the church floors, offering "simultaneous opportunity to express one's needs and sighs of the heart in a silent prayer to God." While the advertisement itself was presented in a gender-neutral form, supplemented by a picture of a broom and a bucket, the reference persons were both females. The unsaid context of the advertised "silent prayer" opportunity in the job signals that it is perhaps primarily addressed to women.

It is amazing what kinds of different examples of labor division interviewees pin on male-female biological difference, all justified by male inability to give birth:

> As a man, can I also give birth? I cannot. God did not give it to me. These are primitive things that are self-explanatory. A commandment that is written in my heart—I think that things that a man should do are written in there. For example, my wife will not carry the firewood; I would [do it]. It's not like it's written, but it is so… (Ēriks)

It seems so 'natural' that Ēriks suggests that the job of carrying firewood originates in the Scripture. The same chain of connections allows to lead to male exclusive priesthood:

> God has arranged it so that the pastor's position is for the man, and the woman is the mother. She has an even bigger task. She must give birth; God's children must be brought into the world. It's even more! A man can't do that. (Edgars)

The Ēriks' slippage to men and firewood exposes that the division of labor does not need grounding in the Scripture, as it is based on the fact that women beget children. It is interesting that in standing for an exclusive male priesthood, fatherhood is not used as an argument. Thus, women are established not only as a category that is opposed to men by their innate features but also serve as a medium that establishes what men are and what labor is assigned to men. This parallels the observation Strathern makes concerning housewives in England: women are "a message being expressed through a medium which returns to the sender a rather special delineation of what he wanted to say."[31] In other words, linking women to birth is not about women only; women here are used as "message" or a medium when defining priesthood and other exclusive male tasks in the areas of family, labor and religious life.

Menstruation

Another ambivalent symbol in addition to childbirth used to single women out as a category is menstruation. This symbol is used both in the Biblical context of pollution and in female physiology. Menstruation is mentioned in the interviews by male pastors only, and usually vague terms describe it:

> Just a practical example: when a woman enters the altar, there is also a question about [her] chastity. They [women] say, I have my period, and I am approaching the altar now. (..) Well, you enter, but according to the old..., looking biblically, you could not enter the Holy Place when you were unclean. She says: "If you start thinking like that, you cannot do it every Sunday, because it is a cycle." You cannot appear before God like that, you understand that you have those times. (...) Maybe there are all kinds of menopause and some other things, but with such an understanding, with such an approach… Purely biological. Purely physiological, you know. (Pastor Rinalds)

The menstrual cycle is further connected to emotional instability of women, caused by the 'hormones' and or 'cycle' which men as a group do not have:

> Then there is the practical [aspect], you can change that as you want—a woman and a man are different, in terms of how they approach things, how they structure, how they survive. I will say it harshly now—how they survive the month, purely physically, with all the cycles and everything related to hormones and emotions. (Pastor Austrums)

Three interviewees explicitly referred to the menstrual cycle to explain women's differences and referred to this factor in prohibiting their ordination.

[31] Marylin Strathern, *Before and After Gender. Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life*, ed. Sarah Franklin, (Hau Books, Chicago, 2016), p. 65.

Ambivalence of Gendered Division of Labor and Directionality of Gender

The 'biologically' determined gender difference is often inconsistent and contradictory. Strathern argues:

> To identify something as a symbol entails a notion of direction, that a symbol is something which "stands for" something else. Now as far as natural properties (A) are concerned, such as anatomy or the behavior of chemical substances, the item chosen as a symbol is in itself not altered by its being used in this way in people's minds. The composition of gold is not affected because people worship it. But when we talk about something that is already in people's minds, such as the way they perceive facts (B) or classify social behavior (C), then using these things as symbols becomes another dimension of the things themselves. Such a feedback process obscures the identification of a single direction.[32]

In the case of Lutheran church, the anatomical and physiological differences of women remain the same, but, when the symbols of birth and menstruation are used to established other connections, those are referred to something else, concealing the 'directionality' of gender tools and enabling logically inconsistent symbolization. So, pastor Valfrīds draws a vivid picture of why women are good secretaries:

> Well, I cannot iron and cook at the same time, and one of those two things would fail. And women, they can somehow. She takes care of the child with one hand, and with the other she is ironing, but with her shoulder she is holding the phone and, somehow, those women can do it. Therefore, they serve as secretaries. For example, our bishop's secretary left for maternity leave, and the dean was entrusted with the secretary's duties until a new secretary was found. It was misery and sorrow. You could not get any papers there. We had to wait there for months; the bishop had already signed the paper, but it got stuck somewhere with the dean and everything was a complete mess in the bishop's office. The next girl came, and within a month everything was fine. (…) It is mind-boggling how she took care of her husband and children, and the bishop, and the entire bishopric. It's a job a man shouldn't be doing because he just can't handle it.

The direction of the hierarchies in the example is 'confusing' as women are depicted as superheroes dealing with their duties, but the dean is a position higher in the hierarchy, symbolized also by his inability to do 'simpler' paperwork or the pastor's inability to multitask.

The diverse choice of examples and references around gender creates a context of absurdity. Pastor Valfrīds continues his story about secretaries with an example of why women are worse pilots, but Kristaps fantasizes about why women cannot be firefighters or soldiers:

> There are specific gifts for women and specific gifts for men. (..) This is also shown by the fact that she is the only woman who now works in the fire department. Like it or not, she cannot do it… Of course, there are some women who are stronger than men,

[32] Ibid., 25.

> but she cannot… At times she [a women] refuses to do something for the fear of breaking her nails, it is absolutely unimaginable… She can leave her rifle on the front line and say: "I feel cold, I will go to warm myself in the car".

This gender difference thus also amounts to different properties of faith between men and women. Women are believed to be more susceptible to God and His word, which is why women make up most of the congregation.[33] Men, as it is believed, are "more practically oriented" and "need challenges which the church does not offer" (Kristians). Several pastors elaborated on the creation of all male task groups that allow men to bond and satisfy their 'practical needs' and eagerly engage in physical work:

> If we talk all the time only about love and paint it pink [laughs], then men will not be there for long. For men, love is manifested in a slightly different way: through sacrifice, devotion, service, and action. Next week, we have planned a *talka* [joint-work session], we will drive tractors, and the men are ready for action. It is often the case in the church that men do not come to the service, but they participate in the life of the church through work, action, camps, and so on. Therefore, I say that there is that difference—where women start to serve, men do not stay there for long. (Pastor Austrums)

Compared to the regular women's labor in church, men's duties are occasional, grand, based on collective effort, and superior to the everyday work women do. The family roles that are used to establish hierarchy in male-female relationship become dangerous when used improperly:

> And the fact that a woman is a mother, when she has those maternal instincts inside, and sometimes, unfortunately, they usurp their motherhood to some weaker men as well [laughter can be felt in the voice]. Instead of being wives or girlfriends, they turn to be mothers. (Pastor Valfrīds)

Women's motherhood can also be seen as dangerous when transgressing its gendered borders. The breach of hierarchical relationships between men and women is underlined by the laughter of the interviewee when discussing the matter. Why women are not ordained as priests or to lead businesses is explained by the same border:

> - But if a woman wants that kind of life [be in the leading position]?
> Well, then ... then yes. [laughs] Then there's nothing to do, but it is the same again ... how could you compare... If a person, for example, wants to hit himself in the leg with a board, he can do it. It won't end there, but somehow it will come back. (Justs)

[33] This argument also dates back to the Enlightenment where women's exclusion from the political sphere was grounded by their emotionality, prejudice, and superstition (Maurice Bloch and Jean Bloch, "Women and the dialectics of nature in eighteenth-century French thought". In C. McCormack, M. Strathern, *Nature, culture and gender.* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 34.

Justs justifies the absurdity of blurring gender difference with the already discussed "natural arrangement of God, because God knows what is best for people themselves." Later in the interview, he explicitly stated that women are not meant to be heads of the family and businesses as it creates conflicts with men.

Women less often elaborate on gender differences in interviews. Rita mentions emotionality of women as the reason why women should not serve as pastors:

> A very natural difference. Because we, girls, have emotions. But God's word must be brought so clearly that there can be neither tears nor... Not because there cannot be crying, but we cry throughout the service, we cry on our own. (Rita)

Returning to the directionally of the use of gender as a tool, its inconsistency both in terms of application and context, it produces a limited ambivalence in different forms of narrative--'wrong' connections serve as examples of intended reversals of the order and object of laughing or grinning—all those are important symbolic tools in gendering the world.

Interpretation of Cultural Change

Gender roles and division of labor are changing, and this change is reflected in the interviews. Interview material demonstrates several interpretations of gender relations, ranging from ridicule to a sense of endangerment. For example, pastor Marius has started wearing a beard in protest to blur gender difference in the society and to manifest his virility. Pastor Austrums goes further, linking the change in established gender roles to the work of the evil spirit and directing Christians to fight against it:

> We live in times where the feminine and the masculine are devalued. I am speaking in a spiritual sense now. It is a bit of a trick of the devil, isn't it? If you want to remove values, to mingle things on which people, society, or a nation stand. These are some of the most fundamental things that have been placed by God. Do we want to play with them now? We are at a point where we had not been in the history of the world before. We have played with different things before, but these are fundamental things.

Only four interviewees, all pastors and evangelists, one of them a woman, speak of gender difference as at least partly culturally made. For pastor Indars, gendered cultural content is limited to certain features of men as a category:

> We never see the father cry. It is natural that [they do not]. It is a stupid stereotype. Men must learn to cry and show emotion. They show it, unfortunately, in binge drinking. My father also drank now and then.

Pastor Ārvaldis elaborates on the consequences of crudely applying gender stereotypes: "You can also break people there, if one approaches it like chopping with an axe." Mariuss also

makes a similar critique, seeing a biological categorizing of genders as problematic and pointing out that there are too many differences inside the categories to attribute those to all men and all women. At the same time, he insists on gender differences in Church and roots it in Scripture:

> "Sometimes it is said that women are emotional, they cannot lead, they cannot be a shepherd." This is a secondary issue because some women may not be emotional. Some men are emotional, too. You cannot 100% conclude that one gender has this and the other has that character. It is very subjective. But as for roles in the church, it is more a story not of psychology, not of philosophical possibility, but of theology; how to treat the Holy Scriptures, how to treat the will of God. (Mariuss)

Pastor Centis uses "patriarchal culture" in the context of the older Biblical times that have passed. Ārvaldis attributes it to contemporary times, saying that there is a greater involvement of women in managing the congregation compared to the past:

> It was simply a patriarchal culture. It was not practical. Now it has no basis at all. There is no longer a cultural cover in all of this. Women can be churchwardens nowadays. It is just that it is still hard to see, but purely according to the [church] teaching, I do not know where the problem would be.

Female evangelist Ella is speaking about relationships in her congregation as belonging to culture and thus arbitrary:

> It depends very much on the pastor in the church and the kind of atmosphere and attitude the pastor creates. When I was growing up and being in the church, it was quite natural. I remember one of Vaira Bitēna's [female pastor] sermons when I was very young—under ten. It was natural for a woman to be in the church. When the attitude changed, I was in a church where the pastor was as open as allowed. It also shaped the attitude of the congregation. But, of course, there are different people in any congregation; they come from diverse backgrounds and have different views on the role of women in general. Not only in the church but also in the family and society. It depends on the generation.

At the same time, Ella uses the 'natural' as a symbol, but for her it also includes female priesthood. Moreover, she imagines the 'natural' as a created symbol, expressed through the 'attitudes' and 'atmosphere' in the church. Ella presents not a biologically but a socially constructed 'nature,' which then leaves the reader to imagine priesthood as gender neutral.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have followed the relation gender produces in the Latvian Lutheran Evangelical Church. A closer examination of debate on ordaining women reveals its situatedness in modern epoch where the concept of life and its biological reproduction plays a

central role, regulating not only relationships among men and women but also gendering labor hierarchies and justifying power relations. Surprisingly, there is little room for 'culture' or a sociological perspective when speaking about men and women. Natural science and theology support each other as areas of knowledge, both establishing the same gender differences and relating to the areas of family, society, workplace, and church. While science has moved on in areas of nature, culture, and gender, its eighteenth-nineteenth century ideas still circulate in a conservative environment of the Church, providing tools for symbolizing the world.

The question of women's ordination cannot be solved in theological debate as it involves wider systems of symbols where, as I showed, gender plays an important role in organizing the world. Not only gender hierarchies but very understanding of life itself as evolving around birth and death makes women into messengers of this order. Men are pastors not only because of the scripture but also because they do not give birth to children. The inconsistencies and back-and-forth working of gendered relations does not weaken the mythology but rather strengthens it, better concealing its work and arriving at particular results—positioning men and women differently and ascribing a hierarchy to the positions they occupy.

Gender mythologies are changing, and the church puts a lot of effort into keeping those changes at bay. Herein lies one more impact of the mythologies: by sealing the mythology, its symbols, and relations as atemporal, one endows them with alleged truth and objectivity. Conservatism, among other things, is a power struggle where its mythology is directed at keeping change at bay. Viewing historically, conservatism itself has been about change and presents a temporal mythology established in the age of the Enlightenment, inheriting its tools to shape the world order.

Finally, a remark on anthropological perspective used in the paper. Anthropology can provide a critical description of the 'other' but due to its methodological relativism cannot claim moral superiority of that or another perspective. Despite these limitations, an observation can be made. All Lutheran churches refer to the scripture to ground their position on ordination of women, what seems to differentiate their claims and practice of women's ordination is when it is placed within wider gender symbolism. As the conservatives see their political position as 'natural', gender as a system of symbols and power mechanism is placed outside the debate.

There is hope for change. One can see potential change offing among the conservatives: women less eagerly than men and lay people less eagerly as pastors engage in recounting this mythology. This may well be explained with their hierarchical position in the church, but alternative and critical routes of explaining relationships in the church are emerging, using

‘culture’ as their cause. Those problematize the order established by the Enlightenment time union between theology and biology, and men and women.