

Sisters of Christ

The Gender Constitution of Swedish Clergywomen

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This article discusses the gender constitution of Swedish clergywomen in their professional careers. Light is shed upon the strategies developed by the informants, how they cope with their situation both as women and clerics and their potential to develop a new professional clerical role. It is obvious that clergywomen are often given a warm reception by their parishioners, but not always by their male colleagues. Here we speak of a type of male homosociality that excludes women from the “top positions” in the Church of Sweden.

One interesting field for analysis of the process of gender constitution is spiritual counselling, where the axes of gender and positional power tend to reinforce each other when the minister is a man, while they deviate from each other when the minister is a woman.

Concerning the informants’ understanding of gender, it can be pointed out that essential and constructional understandings appear to co-exist. Activating different understandings of gender in different situations may be a type of survival strategy in a professional context, where the very existence of clergywomen is called into question.

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A person is not born a woman, she is made one, as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) puts it in her now classical statement. To make a somewhat daring comparison, a person is neither born a woman, nor a clergy(wo)man. In both cases she is made, or “created” and that creation is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it is constrained by distinct rules that are difficult to transgress. One significant example of these rules is the question of whether or not there should be clergywomen in the Church of Sweden. My informant, Minister Maria, says:

“How can I accept that they [those who are against women clergy] don’t accept me? Actually, I can’t. And what are the consequences of this? That they disappear, or that I do, or is there a third way? And the third way, is it compromising and is it genuine if we try to get on well together and yet don’t agree with each other? Are we honest then?”

What Maria describes here is a phenomenon that she and many of her female colleagues are familiar with: resistance from clergymen and other colleagues and her own ambivalent attitude towards this resistance. In short, is a clergywoman a contradiction in terms?

In this article I will discuss the relationship between gender constitution and the clerical profession. My point of departure is material consisting of interviews with clergywomen mainly carried out in the Archdiocese of Sweden.¹ Since the clergyman, historically and culturally, is associated with a certain kind of masculinity, what happens, could be asked, when the clergyman is actually a woman? How is she regarded and treated? Is she accepted by her colleagues and by parishioners? What kind of femininity does she constitute? Questions such as these will be discussed and the sources of my theoretical inspiration will be presented.

A Church of Fathers and Brothers?

The decision to allow women to be ordained in the Church of Sweden was, after several decades of debate, finally taken in 1958 and there have been clergywomen active in Sweden since 1960. Despite this fact, the debate continues and resistance to clergywomen has not been extinguished, although most people seem to have accepted them. There are currently two dioceses that are especially well known for their resistance: the Diocese of Gothenburg and the Diocese of Växjö. Although these antagonists do not constitute a majority of people of the church, their voices are often heard in the mass media and they have dominated internal debate.²

So, what kind of arguments do the anti-female clergy group put forward against clergywomen? First of all, there are the theological arguments which are said to emanate from the Bible – a matter of Christian faith, to put it another way. The antagonists interpret the Bible texts in such a way as to exclude women from the clerical calling: it is against God's intentions that women should be ministers. This, however, is clearly a matter of interpretation as theologians who are positive to clergywomen also use arguments from the Bible to support their standpoint.

Other arguments emanate from the history of church: ministers have been men for thousands of years and therefore, to some people, it seems "natural" that this process should continue. This is, in my terminology, an example of *the power of tradition*. By that I mean that the church, through its history, has constituted a male order of succession that connects the clerical calling with masculinity and domination. This male domination is not only obvious in relationship to female colleagues, but also in relationship to clergymen's wives and clerical families. In the name of the divinely sanctioned calling, the clergyman – more or less consciously or not – structures the life of his family (Meurling 1996).

This is the situation when women enter the church doorway as ministers: some people are positive to their appearance others are not. According to studies on women in professions dominated by men this is a common pattern.

Women in these types of workplaces often have difficulties in asserting their influence and in competing on equal terms with men, mainly because men's vital relationships at work are often characterized by homosociality. In short, women experience difficulties in making a career for themselves (cf. Lindgren 1996, Lundgren 1990, Wahl 1992).

In this context the concept of *positional power* (Lundgren 1989) will be introduced. A person with a certain profession has this kind of power due to his or her knowledge and proficiency. According to this, both clergymen and clergywomen have positional power, but only men have what we can label here as masculine gender power.³ In my study of clergymen's wives it was obvious that the clerical calling was the hub of the clerical couple's gender contract⁴, and my analysis showed that the axes of masculine gender and positional power tended to reinforce each other, both in the professional role of the clergyman and in the clerical family (Meurling 1996). In this process of reinforcement, it could also be observed that the power of tradition played a central role. The power axes of gender, position and tradition all work in the same direction: to create the role of the clergyman as masculine. In the following I will discuss how tradition, gender and positional power relate to each other when the minister is a woman.

A Motherly Ministry?

So far, we have become acquainted with the debate and the situation of clergywomen. In the following the theoretical framework of my study, a theory of constitution of gender, will be briefly introduced. It could be said that the process of gender constitution is a life-long process of interaction where gender is evolved and confirmed in relation to several sets of norms. Gender norms prescribe how women and men are supposed to be, act, behave, look like etc. These sets of norms are relatively stable, but not static. Individuals do not merely reproduce gender norms, but transform them and produce new ones. In other words we are influenced by, but also influence, our gender culture (Lundgren 1995).

If we consider the constitution of gender as a



1. Open-air wedding ceremony in the 1990s. Photo: Erik Lundström.

life-long process where the individual is constantly following and/or violating gender norms, clergywomen can be regarded as “rule breakers” i.e. they transgress the cultural (and clerical) norms for female behaviour. Consequently they break the rules of tradition and create a new role for the minister and –eventually– a changed “femininity”. This is true on a cultural – or struktural – level, but how do individuals react in this situation? In the following, some of my informants will describe their experiences as clergywomen.

Most of my informants say that they have positive experience of the majority of their colleagues and parishioners.⁵ The latter group often wants clergywomen to conduct ceremonies like weddings, christenings and funerals, a fact that is interpreted in a positive manner by these informants. On the other hand, people sometimes attribute characteristics to clergywomen that my informants do not feel comfortable with. One of them, Daniela, describes it in this way:

“It’s so nice when we are baptising the children because we have a way with children we are told. But this is really nonsense and in one way just as humiliating as resistance, although they mean well by saying it. However this attitude turns out to be somewhat foolish as well.”

Charlotta, another informant, has similar experiences and she tells me that people often assure her that she is so “sweet”. “Sweet, what do you mean sweet? I’m a theologian!” says Charlotta with a laugh. Anyhow, just like Daniela she feels that it is the expression of a positive attitude, but utterances like this indicate that women working as ministers are expected to bring something “female” into the clerical profession. This “femininity” is, to a great degree, associated with motherliness and taking care of others, in other words with a traditional female role. Some informants in certain situations also emphasize this type of femininity by, for example, wearing clothes with a female touch or by behaving in a “caring” fashion.

This traditional role is expected and accept-

ed, but examples can also be found indicating that people regard clergywomen as “tough girls”, sexual objects or, alternatively, as asexual. These labels on the other hand, challenge the motherly image and put the clergywoman in an ambiguous position. If she is not a “mother”, she must be either a shrew or an object of male desire, or – perhaps worst of all – deprived of her gender status.

To give an example, Daniela tells me that several times after funerals she has received invitations and intimations of desire from men, something that she feels is connected with a certain attraction exerted by the combination of profession and gender. “Seducing a clergywoman is almost like seducing a nun!” she says. The idea behind such invitations seem, according to Daniela, to be that if a man succeeds in seducing a woman, who – metaphorically speaking – is married to God and who has a professional position, then he really must be a he-man. Even if the male dream of seduction never comes true, it still has a gender constitutional potential for the man as well as for the clergywoman. The concept reveals existing prejudices against women in certain positions and as a clergywoman it is necessary to fight against and overcome these prejudices. However there are also other implications to which I will return.

Spiritual Counselling – Where Sex and Gender Meet?

An interesting field for analysis of the process of gender constitution is the professional task of spiritual counselling. A sociological study (Lundgren 1989, 1994) points out that when the minister is a man and the confidant a woman, erotic tensions can arise. These situations can be handled in different ways. Some clergymen reject the idea of developing an erotic relationship, while others explained that they, in some situations, were positive to the erotisation of spiritual counselling. Female clerics reacted in quite a different way: they declared that there was no erotic potential in a meeting with a male confidant, not for themselves nor for the confidants, who regard them as motherly or “genderless” in this context. My own informants relate in almost the same way. Daniela says:

“Big men don’t cry easily in the presence of other men but they are, in fact, willingly to do so in the presence of a woman. I think that’s how it is, they can often allow themselves this release more easily where a woman minister is concerned.”

This statement indicates that the clergywoman is regarded by the confidant as a kind of mother rather than a sexual object. In the sociological study mentioned above, the informants articulated the same kind of experiences (Lundgren 1994:104) and the conclusion of this study, that male gender domination and positional power tend to reinforce each other in spiritual counselling situations, appears to correspond fairly well with the results of my studies of the clerical culture.

In my study of clergymen’s wives it became obvious that the clergyman exerted a certain kind of attraction on some women, something that could be problematic for the clerical family. When the minister Richard, for example, declared several times late at night that he had to meet his confidants, suspicions started to grow. Even if the meetings were innocent, the main problem for his wife Margaret was that, due to his professional oath of silence, she could never demand to know what really happened. This is one example of how the axes of masculine gender and position of power tend to reinforce each other both in the professional role of the clergyman and within the clerical family (Meurling 1996).

When talking to clergywomen it is clear that the erotic dimension of spiritual counselling is almost absent, though some of my informants are aware of the phenomenon. “There is something in the air”, as Charlotta puts it. However, this “something” has to be handled in a professional manner and, according to the informants, erotisation of spiritual counselling is extremely unprofessional.

How can we, then, understand the relationships of gender, profession and erotisation? My own and other studies (Lundgren 1989, 1994) indicate that in a serious spiritual counselling situation where the male confidant might feel depressed, weak or powerless, conditions for erotisation of the relationship are almost non-existent. The clergywoman still retains her po-

sitional power, while the man feels as if he has lost his dominating potential. From this we can formulate the hypothesis that a clergywoman is sexually attractive when she is regarded as subordinated to men and motherly and/or asexual when she is not.

In other words, the kind of femininity the clergywoman is attributed depends on the situation. In Sunday School, at the hospital or when visiting the parishioners at home she may be attributed with motherliness. She is, in one way or another, assuming a more traditional female role. In other contexts she is regarded as sexually attractive, for instance when performing functions regarded as unwomanly. When performing a funeral ceremony she exercises positional power, but is still subordinated to the male gender domination. Some men find this exciting, others react the opposite way or are indifferent. In spiritual counselling situations the clergywoman can, as I have discussed above, be regarded as motherly and/or asexual. The axes of gender and power deviate from each other, not – as is the case of clergymen – reinforce each other.

Brothers of Christ – Men and Homosociality

What about relationships with male colleagues? Most of the informants say that the clergymen of the archdiocese normally cooperate well with their female colleagues, however sometimes they become aware of a brotherhood excluding clergywomen. This kind of brotherhood is sometimes explicit, as is the case with the anti-female clergy group, however, it is more often implicit and probably not intentional. The informants refer to it as a fellowship, where men in certain situations do not notice women, not because they want to discriminate against female colleagues, but without reflection just because it appears natural to them.

This phenomenon is an example of what in gender studies is called *male homosociality*, a concept related to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). The latter concept refers to a construction of masculinity, where cultural norms are in accordance with the institutional structures of power. Since women are

relatively subordinated to men (Haavind 1982), it appears natural to men to look for support and acknowledgement in their own group. The Swedish sociologist Gerd Lindgren describes homosociality as a norm system that guarantees men to appear as a kind of unit as concerns women. Men as individuals can constitute far more flexible relationships to women but these are “special cases” and do not influence men’s behaviour in a group situation. They do not primarily wish to suppress women, but rather hold a position in the hierarchy at work (Lindgren 1996). In the light of this discussion, the homosocial behaviour of clergymen can be interpreted as a kind of gender constitution. It may be stated that clergymen in their profession primarily constitute gender and professional identity in relationship to male colleagues and the (male) tradition of church while clergywomen, on the other hand, constitute gender and professional identity in relationship to male as well as female colleagues, other fellow workers and parishioners.

Returning to the interviews, questions could be asked concerning the type of expectations clergymen have in regard to clergywomen. Since clergymen have not been interviewed, I cannot answer this question properly, but according to the informants some of their male colleagues seem to regard clergywomen as well suited for caring tasks. Sometimes they also, in a fatherly way, offer the women their protection because they are aware of attacks from the anti-female clergy group. This comprehension corresponds to the traditional gender roles: men are the strong protectors of women – women are frail, having a capacity for caring for others.

The anti-female clergy group – and they exist, even if they normally try to maintain a low profile in the archdiocese – use different strategies when meeting their female colleagues. Some of them try to compromise and to cooperate, while others are antagonistic and ignorant. Some of the informants feel that the resistance towards clergywomen exists to a much larger extent than we normally think and they experience the hidden antagonism as much worse than the obvious type.

A female vicar, Anna, provides us with an illustrative example of this, when she tells me



2. The clergywoman, here dressed for the wedding party, helps the bride with the train of her wedding dress. August 1991.

Photo: Birgitta Meurling.

about an unpleasant experience she had when she was inducted as a vicar. The anti-female clergy group in the parish were, so to say, “prevented from coming” to church but after the ceremony they were waiting for her in the vicarage eager to participate in the reception that followed. Anna says that she is willing to accept the opinion of this group but why did they go to the reception afterwards? This was, in her opinion, a manifestation of bad taste as well as a way of showing that she was excluded from the fellowship of clergymen. As a result she felt both angry and uncertain.

To conclude this discussion, women ministers are sometimes regarded as unwomanly both by their defenders and their antagonists. They can even be accused of hating men. When examining my material as a whole, the following stereotypes of clergywomen emerge: the mother, the frail woman, the “tough girl”, the

sexual object, the shrew and the non-minister. This is what can be called a sort of ascribed femininity (Lundgren 1990). These stereotypes seem both to emanate from the expectations placed on female clergy and from the actual behaviour of these women. Many female clerics carry out, for example, caring tasks and behave in a way that is regarded as “motherly”, thereby adding fuel to the motherliness stereotype. This is interesting because the clerical profession itself contains elements of caring, which means that male ministers in several situations are also occupied with caring tasks. As they are hardly ever regarded as motherly, it could be asked if they are “fatherly” instead or do they become less masculine in these contexts? I will return to this question later.

Why and When are Clergymen Masculine/Feminine?

At first glance and in certain contexts the clerical profession can be assumed to be a very masculine one⁶, although, there are both feminine and masculine characteristics inherent in clerical work. In some situations the masculinity of the clergymen seem to be reinforced, in others weakened or neutralised. In order to discuss this phenomenon, I would like to introduce a new term: *the gap*⁷ (Åse 2000), which either points out the discrepancy in the significance of being a woman and the meaning of being a clergyman⁸ or the discrepancy in the significance of being a man/clergyman and performing tasks associated with women.

To give an example: when a clearly superior man carries out tasks that are coded as feminine, it could be said that a gap arises between his masculinity and the supposed feminine task. In some situations, as is the case with spiritual counselling, his masculinity paradoxically seems to be confirmed i.e. a man who condescends to this type of caring and listening task despite his gendered and professional supremacy, is easily regarded as a very stable and masculine man. Just because he is associated with a historically and traditionally masculine profession, his masculinity does not “suffer” from this behaviour, on the contrary, his masculinity as well as his professional position are confirmed. As we

have seen, this phenomenon could even reinforce his sexual attraction in spiritual counseling situations.

What then happens to clergywomen? Do they confirm gender and professional status by carrying out their duties? According to my material, this does not seem to be the case. Preaching in a peremptory tone or to chairing the parochial church council with authority could exemplify such situations, but my material does not indicate that these tasks could function as a “spice” for femininity.⁹ It actually works the opposite way: in these situations a clergywoman runs the risk of being regarded negatively, either as a shrew or as a neutered human being.

The Attraction of the Symbolic Body

Nevertheless, in my material there is one noteworthy exception: Daniela’s experiences of invitations after funerals. In this case we can assume that some men find a woman attractive when performing a supposedly male task and we can say that the gap works in another direction: here the “male” task appears to reinforce femininity. Why is that?

One conceivable explanation might be found in the discussion about *the symbolic body*, a body that is described by the sociologists Eva Lundgren and Ann Kroon (1996) as an analytical concept, that holds the body and the symbols of the body together.¹⁰ The authors exemplifies with studies from the field of sports that women today, in order to be regarded as “real” women inside, have to represent themselves as female on the outside by the use of clothing, hairdressing and make-up etc. This kind of femininity is associated with a small and slender body, an ideal of quite a recent date. The small female body should be interpreted in relation to the symbolic, big and muscular male body which is powerful. Today, when women of the Western world in many ways have experienced a social revolution, they are paradoxically represented as physically smaller. Lundgren and Kroon ask the question whether this physical symbolism of subordination – the small woman and the big man – is an expression of a patriarchal compromise: the increased power of women is compensated for by a physical sym-

bolism of smallness (Lundgren & Kroon 1996:91–99). In other words, if a patriarchal society is to accept more powerful women, these women have to signal subordination here in the shape of physical smallness.

Returning to Daniela’s experiences, we can assume that a young, good-looking woman performing a supposedly masculine, professional task such as a funeral, exerts a certain kind of attraction to some men. Certainly there is a gap between her female appearance and the task she is performing, but her so-called femininity functions as an extenuating circumstance: her professional role is supposed to be masculine but she is obviously an attractive woman. Her professional power is, by this means, balanced by her female appearance that signals subordination and it might be this symbolic body that exerts the attraction (cf. Lundgren & Kroon 1996, Åse 2000).

Gender in the Sewing Circle

There are, however, certain situations where the clergywoman does not have to convince people that she is a “real” woman. When the clergywoman performs traditionally coded female tasks she may confirm her femininity, but hardly her professional position.

One example of this that crosses my mind concerns ministers participating in the meetings of sewing circles in the parish.¹¹ When clergywomen were a novelty in Sweden, many women active in sewing circles complained that they would miss the male minister at their meetings. This attitude had nothing to do with religious or theological doubts, it was rather a matter of male presence. These ladies very much appreciated having a man of a certain position among them and even if a woman had exactly the same position, she had the “wrong” gender status in this context. Also here the gap is activated: a woman participating in a sewing circle meeting is supposed to do so as a layperson, as a woman, not as a professional cleric. Her professional role fades and she is degraded to almost any woman. Her male colleague, on the contrary, is admired both as a man and a clergyman. As in the case of spiritual counseling, we can see here how the axes of gender



3. Modest and feminine? The clergywoman officiating (detail). Around 1995. Photo: Hasse Svensson.

dominance and positional power tend to reinforce each other at the sewing circle meeting when the cleric is male, while when the cleric is female they deviate.

As discussed above, the gender dimension is apparent in some situations of the clergy's work, but are there situations when gender is not in focus? I would like to assert that there are no gender neutral situations in a minister's work however some contexts appear to be more "genderless" than others. It can, for instance, be assumed that office work today is not as loaded with gender concepts as spiritual counselling situations. There might also be other situations, but they are surprisingly absent in the interviews.

The Gender(ed) Process and the Clerical Calling

In this article I have discussed the relationship between clergywomen's gender constitution and their clerical profession. To understand the way these women constitute gender we must bear in mind the context within which they are working. As already mentioned, the clerical gender grammar is a traditional one with a long history, where men have preferential right of interpretation and women are "the others". This is true on a discursive level. On the level of praxis the picture is somewhat different and more complicated. Here we find clergywomen who describe discrimination and male homosociality as well as kind people and honest colleagues. In other words, their good and bad experiences are intertwined and we must be careful when analysing their statements. Despite their intentions (to paint in dark colours, to smooth over, to describe their experience "like it was"), their stories must be interpreted as the subjective truth of the individual's life (Fahlgren 1992).

Starting with a discussion of the informants' understanding of gender, it can be pointed out that essential and constructional understandings appear to co-exist. In some contexts the informants articulate an essential understanding of gender, in others a constructional one. This ambivalence is quite a common trait when interviewing people and generally and briefly formulated this could be regarded as a result of personal experiences and the messages full of contradictions that circulate around us all. Activating different understandings of gender in different situations may also be a type of surviv-

al strategy in a professional context, where the very existence of clergywomen is called into question.¹²

When summarizing the content of the interviews, it becomes clear that the informants describe good as well as bad experiences, that some of them are more critical towards the Church of Sweden than others and that most of them want to bring something “new” into the Church, something that in one way or another is linked to gender. The question is what kind of innovations these clergywomen have in mind. An obvious aspect is, of course, the fact that they are women in a profession previously dominated by men, another is that some of them mean to bring new qualities, essential or acquired, into their workplace. Due to the former interpretation where differences between women and men were regarded as inherent, the mere existence of clergywomen in church and parish work might be refreshing, while the latter interpretation implicates culturally and socially acquired differences.

The “constructivists” among my informants assert that pluralism is a good thing in an organization, where the employees are working with all kinds of people with all kinds of experiences and problems. In order to handle the varying demands of the parishioners, it must be an advantage if people working in the church have different backgrounds. A clergy exclusively consisting of men is therefore a disadvantage according to these informants who want pluralism as regards age, social and ethnic background as well as gender.

In any analysis the individual level must be separated from the structural (or cultural) one, even if there is a tension and an interchange between them. On the structural level, and in contrast to their male colleagues, clergywomen do not possess gender dominance or the support of the power of tradition, but they certainly are in possession of positional power. They are thereby transgressing one vital gender boundary, but are there additional transgressions?

There are clergywomen who really break the rules of femininity and clerical behaviour: the lesbians, the “roller-skating” ministers and the unmarried ones with a double bed in their bedrooms etc. My informants, however, do not be-

long to these radical groups and their construction of gender and professional role can rather be described as a kind of balancing act, where they bring their behaviour and appearance into line with the actual situation. On Sunday School speech day, a supposedly motherly appearance can be completed by a flowery dress while a discreet suit and formal language may be preferable at the meeting of the Parish Council. But variations can also collide thereby causing confusion, as when the “flowery clergywoman” happens to be a tough negotiator and not the feminine woman she appeared to be. There is, so to say, a gap between her expected gender role and her actual, professional behaviour.

The clergywomen I have met are attempting to create a “new” professional role and the question is whether they are going to succeed. Are they already transforming gender and the clerical calling? When describing their work in the parish at first glance things seem quite traditional but probably the concept of gender and the clerical calling will change gradually. On the one hand, more and more women are choosing the clerical profession and the clerical calling does not seem to occupy the same central position in their process of gender constitution as is the case with their male colleagues (Meurling 1996). On the other hand, the clergywomen use both subtle and offensive strategies – such as actions, words, clothing, make-up and jewellery – in the debate concerning female clergy thereby slowly changing the expectations and the professional role of the cleric. The fact that Church of Sweden clergy have included both men and women for the last forty years also works in this direction.

Notes

1. Interviews with Anna, Daniela, Charlotta, Maria and other clergywomen, born between 1939 and 1969.
2. The directors of church are aware of this problem and today there is work going on concerning the “equality plan” of the Church of Sweden.
3. For a further discussion, see Lundgren 1995 and Meurling 1996.
4. A couple’s gender contract can briefly be described as a kind of agreement concerning what is regarded as feminine and masculine, the man’s tasks and the woman’s. The contract can be

discussed and modified, but often it is regarded as something self-evident. Cf. Hirdman 1988.

5. This is in fact not astonishing, while the archdiocese is known to be a diocese with an officially positive attitude to female clergymen.
6. Compared to, for instance, a manual worker the clergyman might not appear as very masculine, so one could say that the content of masculinity is contextual (cf. Eldh 1993).
7. This term is in Swedish used in spoken language and may not be so well suited for a cultural analysis. I use it, anyway, according to my references to Cecilia Åse (2000), who has coined the term.
8. Some of the clergymen's wives regarded the clergywoman as neither a "real" clergyman, nor a "real" woman (Meurling 1996), which is a very obvious way of articulating the gap.
9. There are of course exceptions (cf. Lundgren 1994), which might indicate a change, but that tendency is not apparent in my material.
10. An illustrative example is the physical sign beard, which cannot – if it should be comprehensible – be disconnected from the sign it represents, that is man (Lundgren & Kroon 1996).
11. The following example is based on my experiences as a child, growing up in a clerical family in the 1960s and 70s, and is therefore not up to date. Probably the attitudes have changed, but even so I use this as an illustrative example of the logic of the gap.
12. For a further discussion, see Meurling 1996.

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