

ANN LOADES

Women in the Episcopate?

Ann Loades is a member of the Church of England's Working Party on 'Women in the Episcopate'. In this article she gives us an insight into the workings of this group and looks at some of the main issues at stake in this debate. She calls for serious new thinking about all orders of ordained ministry, including the permanent diaconate, and reminds us of the way women have traditionally been seen as 'at fault' in the Church. She also raises important questions about ecumenism and episcopacy and reflects on the need for process and transparency in episcopal appointments.

The Church of England's Working Party on 'Women in the Episcopate'

The Church of England has a 'working party' on 'women in the episcopate', and it needs to be stressed that it has a limited brief. It has been asked to address the issues that would need to be considered in any future debate on whether women should be bishops – and that is all. What can be learned from the discussion so far?

The working party (WP hereafter) includes a number of women, some of us determinedly 'lay'. This most emphatically does not mean opposed to the ordination of women to holy orders (including the episcopate). On the contrary, at least in my case. But remaining lay does give one a certain freedom in trying to counter some of the nonsense about women current in the Church of England (C of E) which some of the 'ordained' women on the working party have to suffer more directly than do the lay. One of these is currently the only female Dean of a Cathedral; one is an Archdeacon; one is the one-and-only female Principal of a theological college (a role once filled by Dr Ruth Etchells in another college); I have just retired from teaching theology in a university (to classes which include both Roman Catholic as well as C of E and Methodist candidates for the ordained ministry); and one is a permanent deacon who as it happens plays a major role in Anglican-Scandinavian church dialogue.

I would like to make a specific point about her position first, which is that in the struggle for the ordination of women to the priesthood, the permanent diaconate has been much neglected as a specific vocation in itself. If ecumenism is to be taken seriously, there may be much to be learned from churches where there is already a flourishing diaconate (for men as well as for women). We also need to keep an eye on the possibility that in the Orthodox family of churches the diaconate, once flourishing in the first millenium in the Byzantine world, may some

day be recovered. Be that as it may, it seems to me that there is a neglected responsibility here on the part of women ordained to the priesthood to sustain serious attention to vocation to the diaconate. I think it is difficult to think carefully and systematically about one manifestation of ordained ministry (episcopacy) without thinking about others, and, as I will make plain as I go along, that systematically thought through understanding does not exist, so far as I can tell. This lack of understanding is integrally connected to the C of E's quite lamentable lack of a Christian anthropology which unequivocally embraces and affirms the full human dignity and value of women – unfortunately an omission true of much of the Christian church.

Women's Voices

Still, it is something that there is such a group of women on the WP, for at least there is recognition that women's voices must be heard in the discussion. Not that we all agree with one another! That is also true of the visitors to the WP, including one woman bishop, and women opposed to the ordination of women. That difference between those for and against is still alive and well among the WP's male episcopal members. There is no point in disguising the fact that those opposed continue to have a weighty voice in discussion, though they come from different points on the C of E spectrum. I'd be surprised if they were of the same mind on much else. What is it about women which makes women the problem? Or should the question be, what is it about (at least some) men which makes women the problem? As we will see, it is in fact surprisingly difficult to identify and be articulate about this.

It is inevitable that the discussion should sometimes have been painful, not least when one theologian visiting the group seemed to be of the opinion that none of us women should have been doing the jobs we were doing because these jobs put us in positions where we have authority over males. This has driven me to reflect much on the fact that only in my own ecclesiastical communion, and strictly speaking not in my work context, has it ever been suggested to me that simply by virtue of my biological sexual differentiation from males, and irrespective of any other consideration, I should not have been a teacher of theology. (I am beyond worrying about how far this affected my working relationships in a university Department of Theology). This is of course a salutary experience, since it reminds me of what ordained women (and presumably too the many invaluable female Readers with which the C of E is blessed) have to put up with a lot of the time. This is not reminders of their competence or incompetence as such, according to some specifiable criteria, but a consistent sense of being 'at fault' if they are not manifestly subordinate to some male or other – any male, apparently. The same criticism, either latent or explicit, must apply to female DDOs, Chairs of Boards of Education/Social Responsibility or whatever. Once upon a time I used to think that if only the C of E had ever shifted itself to get women doing all sorts of things in the institution as a whole, then the debate about women's ordination need never have been so painful. I now see that the C of E could not possibly have moved in that way, given the predominance of the sense that women are always 'at fault'

unless they are subordinate to males. The issue of women's ordination simply has had to take the weight of the challenge to that view. Episcopacy is simply one more manifestation of the problem, which is that this being 'at fault' is deeply rooted in Christianity, and remains one of the points at which both Scripture and tradition must be criticised not just for being ambiguous, but for being most profoundly mistaken.

Perspectives from Other Traditions

We can be grateful for 'observers' to the WP, however. One, from the Methodist Church (with the same Scriptures) is unequivocally committed to the position that those offices which are open to men are open to women (from which nothing follows as to actual numbers in particular positions etc.) If that position cannot be maintained in the C of E, developing relationships between the two denominations will once more come to a sticky end. His presence reminds me, yet again, of how grateful I remain to have been taught New Testament by some of the greatest exegetes of the twentieth century: C.K.Barrett (Methodist) and C.E.B.Cranfield (Presbyterian); and to have had as my personal academic tutor W.A.Whitehouse (Congregationalist). None of these, so far as I recall, taught that such texts as 1 Cor. 11 or 1 Tim. 2.12 could be finally definitive of how women were to find their roles in the church. Indeed, I imbibed from them the point that apostolicity has to do with witnessing to the resurrection and preaching it: see Martha in John 11 and Mary of Magdala in John 20. The fact that some women saints have been deemed to be 'isapostolos' (equal to the apostles), and, in the case of Mary of Magdala, a notable preacher in the western church, has not of course in the past been allowed to do much to dislodge the traditional Christian understanding that women as women are inferior to men. It is 'equal but different' which is the innovative claim, and Gal. 3.28 can easily be employed to support it, which takes us nowhere. At least some Methodists have re-thought the implications of baptism so far as women are concerned, so, yet again, we need to ask which ecumenical partners really matter to us here, and what can be learned from them.

The WP also has a Roman Catholic observer, who is well aware of the continuing debate in the Roman Catholic Church, papal prohibition of discussion notwithstanding. (N.B. None of my opinions here are attributable to him). So far as I can see, there are now too many places where most of his church's pastoral work is being done by women and not just by formidably well equipped members of religious orders. All over the world single and married women are key players in their parishes, which is inevitable given an ageing priesthood and a desperate shortage of seminarians in some countries. There is an unmistakable and unacceptable wedge being driven between pastoral and sacramental ministry which surely cannot be sustained indefinitely – and one remedy is surely at hand, which is the ordination of women. Yet John Wijngaards (former Vicar General of the Mill Hill Missionaries) is only one of those who has come to the recognition that the reasons for barring women from ordination cannot be substantiated. In his view – herein differing from some members of the C of E – Scripture leaves the question wide open; and tradition excluded them because of social conditions and various

prejudices (as Bishop Stephen Sykes has argued in respect of Hooker). Wijngaards and others know perfectly well that arguments against the ordination of women by such twentieth-century theologians as Hans Urs Von Balthasar are innovative, because the old ones simply cannot be sustained. Catholic Anglicans are in for a big surprise if they ever read some contemporary argument for the ordination of women, Tina Beattie's for instance. She wants to reaffirm 'a sense of the innovative vision of the Christian faith and the reconciling power of the incarnation', which is impeccably orthodox. Her second move is to attempt to accommodate sexual difference within a vision of redemption which has particular significance for women. She rightly says that the crucial problem is the place of the female body and female personhood in the Christian story of salvation, and develops a specifically 'Marian' trajectory for a range of different potentialities for women in Christianity (including ordination).¹

Anathema to some Protestants, undoubtedly, but my point here is that just as it simply is not the case that everyone thinks that appeal to certain Scriptures (as if there were not endless debate about their translation/interpretation and relevance) settles the question about the place of women in the church, nor is it the case that tradition may not yield new possibilities. It is of course true that some of these will be innovative, but there are many examples of innovation in Christian history and doctrine, not least in biblical Protestantism.

In any event, why make common cause with the present position of the Roman Catholic church on the ordination of women? Do members of the C of E seriously think that this is a key point for the recognition of Anglican orders, as compared with other difficulties? Are members of the C of E likely to embrace transubstantiation of the eucharistic elements in the mass? Petrine primacy? Compulsory celibacy for all clergy (not just those who are not heterosexual)? This is an interesting prospect for bishops in the C of E, since the Orthodox also expect celibacy of their bishops. Are all those against the ordination of women about to embrace papal infallibility, and hence the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception or of the Assumption? These two dogmas are of course especially interesting and important since they have to do with a particular woman's bodiliness being held at the centre of divine and sacred life, and her alliance with the 'Eves' of this world, those mothers of all living. Members of the C of E would do well also to think hard about the possible implications of Acts 1.14 and Mary's presence at Pentecost, as I have argued elsewhere.²

The basic point returns again and again: when there is so much difference on so much else, what is at stake when the topic is the ordination of women? And do we get any clearer when we turn to the specific matter of episcopacy/oversight?

Ordination, Oversight and the Transmission of Grace

Just how 'oversight' functions necessarily varies in time, space and circumstance. Much is made of 'continuity' in performing the functions of preaching, ruling and ordaining, the transmission of grace, and the expression, focussing or promoting of unity. Women, manifestly can and do preach, though some think they should

1 Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation*, Continuum, London 2002.

2 Ann Loades, 'The Position of the Anglican Communion regarding the Trinity and Mary', *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001), pp363-74.

not; they are perfectly capable of 'ruling', though again, some think they should not. Are their gifts then deemed to be perversions of being female, or given to them only that they should never be exercised? Ordination and the transmission of grace are clearly key problem areas. For instance, the Athens meeting of the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission in 1978 rightly stressed that apostolic succession signifies continuity in apostolic faith and spiritual life, and the claim was made that by ordaining women Anglicans would sever themselves from this continuity. Just what can be made of this? I rather thought that divine grace ran sovereign and free as it were. Does it (sort of) slither off women at certain points, or is it blocked off by them? Not (allegedly) if they are baptised, confirmed, forgiven, exchange vows with a male in marriage, receive communion, or chrism or a blessing. So what is supposed not to happen if they are ordained or ordain, confirm, pronounce divine forgiveness, celebrate communion, chrism someone or bless them? And as for unity (one of the 'marks' of the Church), as John Webster has recently argued, episcopacy is 'an office of deference to the life-giving power of Christ' in the formation of the Church, and it is to Christ and the gifts of the Spirit that a bishop testifies.³ An appropriate form of 'oversight' in the Church of our time might, on this view, positively require women to make such testimony, as bishops. What could render them incapable of so doing?

It is also worth noting that whilst specific responsibility for the formulation of C of E doctrine is given to the House of Bishops, for many years now some members of the Doctrine Commission have been lay, quite appropriately, given the number of distinguished lay theologians in the C of E, some of them female. How would this responsibility be jeopardised if some bishops were female? The same question must be asked of all the functions required of a bishop. These stretch from the authorisation of services through granting a faculty or licence for alterations, additions, removals and repairs/consecrating new churches, etc. etc., to instituting to vacant benefices, holding visitations, and presiding at diocesan synod. A bishop's task as a missionary can be very widely construed, and nowadays may well include 'inter-faith' issues in which few are expert; and a bishop seems to need highly developed inter-personal skills to foster collegiality and community. Given the C of E's myopia about its growth-points (cathedrals) and the ministry of the teams found there which may foster precisely such skills, it is only to be expected that whereas many a document will utter the shibboleth about a cathedral being a place where a bishop has a 'seat', precious little, if anything, is ever said about cathedral chapters being both a resource for a bishop, and one of the places where a bishop might come both to listen and to learn and be supported and critiqued. Be that as it may, what may be learned about different ways of delegating some episcopal functions and the practice of collegiality and community from the presence of women in and around cathedrals as well as dioceses? What, conceivably, could in principle be the argument for saying that their gifts and graces are irrelevant to considering them in positions of 'oversight'?

3 John Webster, 'The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001), pp69-81.

This takes us to the relevance of actual lived experience for considering that women might be bishops. Whereas argument against the ordination of women continues to divide along certain lines within the C of E, there has been a real shift in that the arguments for their ordination do not so divide. This is for the simple reason that whilst the C of E is remarkably indifferent to its own history of the part women have played in its life, the experience of the ministry of ordained women has created a genuinely new context in which to think again about them. Other, familiar examples of re-thinking can be found, as when (very early on) the church had to think about the status of Gentiles and (shamefully late) the possession of slaves. If it is to be argued that the implication of Scripture is the essential dignity and complementarity of the whole of humanity before God, restored and transformed by Christ and the gifts and graces of the Spirit, what are the implications for our present issue? Continuity alone does not establish direction, as the above examples show. Needed, rather, is a profound struggle with a particular question, and now the question is whether the church has what might be called a post-Chalcedonian Christian anthropology which neither denigrates women, however subtly, nor makes nonsense of the fundamental claim of salvation that 'the unassumed is the unhealed' which is arguably one of the consequences of the refusal to ordain women as bishops, as some (determinedly lay) women have pointed out. Since 'reception' is now transposed from 1980s ecumenical dialogue to C of E theological thinking about the ordination of women,⁴ it provides an opportunity, which may well be missed, to secure a renewed anthropology. This task requires sustained attention to the human sciences as well as to Scripture and tradition if it is to be adequate for our human self-understanding as baptised creatures with varied vocations.

The problem, however, is not just that when one can no longer argue for the view of females held in the past (and by some on 'scriptural' grounds even today)-the view which might be summed up as 'intermittently bleeding half-wits' at its worst, with all the implications of 'taint' as well as inadequacy which trail in its wake – opponents of women's ordination as bishops have no ground to stand on which can be publicly articulated in an intelligible form. The problem is also with the identification of what might be called the graces of oversight itself. As a member of the WP I have been wholly unable to ascertain what skills and competences are required of those who hold senior offices in the C of E. There is no identification of such skills and competences, and not a shred of information about how these are acquired or evaluated. This is hardly surprising when there is no life-long programme of post-ordination theological learning in place for the ordained, let alone a programme of what might be called professional development. In other words there is no agreed way of identifying and fostering candidates for promotion to positions of 'oversight'. Every institution needs people who can exercise responsibility constructively at various levels, and it cannot be exercised by any one person, but in the C of E there seems to be no way of identifying criteria used for what is in effect promotion, and no way of evaluating the consistency of this from one diocese to another. So far as I know, incoherence, ambiguity,

4 Peter Toon, *Reforming Forwards: The Doctrine of Reception and the Consecration of Women as Bishops*, Latimer Trust, London 2004.

ineffectiveness and obscurity and a general lack of transparency, are not marks of the the transformative and life-giving presence of the divine. Nor am I remotely reassured by the recent review of how diocesan bishops are chosen⁵ when I compare it with, for example, the public statements of the Civil Service concerning what they are looking at when identifying young administrators who will be promoted in the future, or with the criteria and procedures for the promotion of teachers to Headships.

It is arguable that the C of E's inattention to these matters (for which the House of Bishops bears much responsibility) not merely fails to nurture human persons, male and female alike, in the church, but also, in this failure, abuses many of the talented. And I think that the failure is intrinsically and not accidentally connected to my fundamental concern which is that at every level there remain unexamined, uncriticised, unevaluated paradigms for what it is to be male/masculine and therefore normatively human.⁶ These paradigms function so as to marginalise and disempower some men and sustain the subtle or not-so-subtle denigration of women, even on the part of those who in principle are in favour of their ordination. Until these matters are examined, I cannot see how we can arrive at a new understanding of oversight which will enable us to negotiate the impasse in which the C of E finds itself over the presence of women within its structures. The impact of the decision of the Scottish Episcopal Church's General Synod in 2003 to admit women to the episcopate will be of particular interest, as, when and if it happens. In that event, we might even have a 'cost of conscience' emigration from England to north of the border. Or over to the Church in Ireland?

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5 *Working with the Spirit: Choosing Diocesan Bishops*, Church House Publishing, London 2001.

6 Some interesting questions about 'headship' are likely to surface in respect of articulate and celibate women in the C of E, who may

have to turn to Roman Catholic writers for some of their resources, such as Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure. Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context*, Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah NJ 2000.