

# Editorial

Few things in life are more difficult than trying to understand and sympathize with points of view which are fundamentally different from our own. Whether a glass of water is half-full or half-empty may make little difference in practice, but trying to reconcile those who take opposite sides in such a debate is usually impossible, because their presuppositions are diametrically opposed. The only way to achieve agreement between them is to persuade one side to abandon its position or else to find a higher plane of vision which can produce a united approach without compromising or humiliating either side. In scientific matters, such a solution may be possible in some cases. For example, the debate over whether light consists of waves or particles may eventually be resolved by finding a third way, which incorporates elements of both theories without subscribing exclusively to either. In theology, such transcendental methods have actually been tried in ecumenical dialogues, though very often the main result has been to create a new divide between those who follow this revamped line of thought and those who are 'traditionalists', sticking to their own church's original doctrines.

A recent book edited by Monica Furlong has forced us into further reflection on this theme, by reopening the issue of the ordination of women within the Church of England, and by implication, within the Anglican Communion as a whole. This is *Act of Synod – act of folly?* (SCM: London 1998), a short collection of essays whose authors argue forcefully that permitting a parallel hierarchy and ministry for those opposed to the ordination of women effectively canonizes schism within the church, discriminates against women, and makes a nonsense of the church's declared aim of serving the nation. Within their own constituency, they are not extremists, but all of them believe that the only way forward for the Church of England is to abolish provincial episcopal visitors, to knock the idea of a third, non-geographical province on the head, and to tell those opposed to women's ministry to be quiet or to get out of a church which does not agree with them. They are convinced that the 1992 vote in General Synod was taken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and see no need to wait for any process of 'reception' by which the rightness of that decision might be tested. They may differ somewhat in their approach to those with whom they disagree, but the common ground among them is a total lack of understanding of what motivates their opponents. For them, it is all a question of how far one can tolerate error in a spirit of Christian charity – the possibility that their opponents might be right is simply not entertained.

Whatever view one has on the question of women's ordination, it has to

be admitted that those who have debated the subject have seldom if ever shown much openness to the possibility that they themselves may be wrong. Those opposed to such ordinations base their case on Scripture, which gives no support to the idea, and to the church's tradition, which is equally unpromising. Those in favour concentrate on the vote in Synod and their perception that public opinion generally supports their case. When confronted with their opponents' arguments, each side does its best to relativize them without really engaging with their underlying presuppositions. Those against women's ordination complain about the *Zeitgeist* and warn against the danger of pandering to fashion, whilst those in favour reinterpret Scripture according to some form of the 'new hermeneutic' and dismiss the church's tradition as misguided premodernism. It is pointless to inject the notion of divine revelation into this debate, since each side believes that it knows what that is. Either God has spoken once and for all in Holy Scripture, which must be obeyed, or God continues to speak through his people, and may therefore 'expand' the vision given to earlier generations by adding new (and perhaps even apparently contradictory) insights as time goes on.

The trouble is that, on their own assumptions, both sides are right, and in other circumstances might even be prepared to concede something of their opponents' position. For example, not many supporters of women's ordination would agree that General Synod would be guided by the Spirit to vote against the divinity of Christ, because such a decision would so obviously contradict both Scripture and tradition, although an elected assembly could certainly do so if it wished. Similarly, few of those who are against women's ordination would want to deny that God speaks to people today and that if it is to have any meaning for us now we have to interpret his Word in ways which fit our circumstances. But if the divide between the two sides is not as great as some might imagine, why is it impossible for them to come to some kind of agreement over this particular issue?

The reason for the *impasse* is that the question of women's ordination hangs on whether it is a matter of divine law, and therefore unchangeable (like the divinity of Christ), or whether it is a matter which God has left to human judgment, which may alter according to circumstances. Those in the Church of England who continue to object to women's ordination do so because they believe that it is contrary to the law of God, and their refusal to accept the ministry of ordained women is rooted in their concept of obedience to that law. Deciding whether the church can find room for such people is difficult, but the nearest analogy to this dilemma is not with the desirability or otherwise of tolerating racists in a democratic society (a parallel which is mentioned more than once in this book). Rather it is with the limits of a state's ability to tolerate conscientious objection within it – refusal to do military service being acceptable, perhaps, but not refusal to

pay taxes. Where on this spectrum does women's ordination belong? Several contributors to this volume insist that consciences must be respected, that they have no desire to drive the opposition out, and so on. But the underlying logic of their case tells a different story, as those who would be most directly affected if their proposals were to be carried out sense immediately when they read the book.

The authors generally portray their opponents as uncharitable misogynists to whom the church's establishment has cravenly pandered, and regard such magnanimity as misplaced. In their view, these misogynists would not hesitate to get rid of female clergy if ever the wind were to change in their favour, and therefore tolerating them is a (potentially suicidal) mistake. In fact, of course, the male-only brigade is not trying to expel female clergy from the church, but rather to secure their own future in the only way which they regard as viable – which is by creating a third, non-geographical province in which their views would be the norm. The authors of this volume regard this as schism, failing to see that it might be the best chance of avoiding clashes when the underlying conflict cannot be resolved. Keeping incompatible people apart is less than ideal, certainly, but it is often the lesser of two evils, and until such time as passions cool (or change), it may be the wisest way forward.

For what it is worth, and speaking as a declared opponent of women's ordination, I would say that I believe that the restoration of biblical order in the church should come about by a movement of the Holy Spirit so deep that the women themselves will come to see that the wrong road has been taken, and that they will voluntarily resign in order to be more deeply obedient to the Word of God. I know that a woman who feels hurt by what she perceives as typical male hostility towards her will never be open to such a possibility – the hurt has to be overcome first. That in itself rules out the kind of behaviour which the authors of this book seem to fear from opponents of women's ordination. Perhaps the hurt such women feel can only be overcome by giving them what they want, and letting them find out by experience that the gift is less than they had imagined. It may even happen that they will eventually surrender their orders with relief at finally being liberated from the chains of an illusion. In the meantime, it is essential for traditionalists to demonstrate that theirs is the better way, by living it out in the Spirit, and in a context where they do not always have to fight for their position. Hence the need for a third province, in which they can concentrate on putting orthodoxy into practice rather than constantly having to fight for it in a hostile environment. The authors of this book will not happily accept such a solution, but from their point of view it can always be argued, as Gamaliel put it to the Sanhedrin – if this thing is not of God, it will die of its own accord, but if it is, no power on earth will be able to stop it.

## Churchman

That being said, the authors of this book and those who think like them may well ask their opponents to come up with a viable alternative for women's ministry. It has to be admitted that most of the nay-sayers have been just that. They have no positive vision of what women's ministry should be like, and have done nothing to foster a credible and attractive form of it which might appeal to women seeking an avenue of service within the church. The authors of *Act of Synod – act of folly?* might do better to concede a third province, on condition that it develops a respectable form of women's ministry to which the whole church can subscribe. That really would be a way forward in this debate, and might even take some of the acrimony out of the discussion. It would also put the opponents of women's ministry on the spot in a way which might get them moving in a positive direction, to the general benefit of us all.

GERALD BRAY