



'The habit of freedom'

by Patricia Brennan

Patricia Brennan is a medical practitioner who has had an eclectic career ranging from a doctor with the Sudan Interior Mission to a Presenter in ABC Television. Over the years she has been 'a persistent disturber of the comfortably churchied'.¹ She is best known for her role as founding president of MOW—the Movement for the Ordination of Women. This paper is a revised version of the final Douglas Hobson Lecture which Dr Brennan delivered at St Mark's in July 1996.

The ordination of women and the repudiation of feminism

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN very fond of the poet Stevie Smith who was Anglican. Her poems are full of wit and obscurity and if there's anything that the 'Christianity-Made-Reasonable' approach to religion badly needs it is a good dose of obscurity. The following poem has strengthened my resolve in many a daunting moment.

Never again will I weep
And wring my hands
And beat my head against the wall
because
*me nolentam fata trahunt**
But
I will arise and
I will go unto my Father and I will say unto him
Father I have had enough.

(* no longer will I be dragged along by fate)

At the opening of Sydney's 44th Synod the President's address, though couched in genuine pastoral concern for women, carried a clear warning. If the synod should agree to ordain women: 'Some will feel deeply that the church has abandoned apostolic authority in favour of the dictates of society, influenced by the values of an inappropriate feminism.'² In the very same address, racism in the community was abhorred and the synod called upon 'to go beyond tolerance.' So what are the values of 'inappropriate feminism' that seek service in priestly orders? The Oxford dictionary states that feminism is 'the advocacy of women's rights and sexual equality.' Racism and misogyny are pretty much out of the same stable.

After 15 years of wrangling in synods, the silencing of some ordained women, and the exodus of many men and women from the Church, it is tempting to say 'Father I have had

enough', and to leave continuing reform to another generation who will have to rediscover the integrity of the feminism we allowed to lapse.

I have always been envious of Nicodemus, who had a chance to visit Jesus and ask a last minute question. If I could ask Doug Hobson a question tonight it would *not* be, 'What must I do to be saved?' In the aftermath of what feels like a mortal struggle with other Christians in the Anglican institution over women's ministry, I wouldn't even ask him, 'What must the Church do to be saved?' Rather it would be, 'What must I do to be saved from the Church?'

He is not here to answer such questions. But since he was an Anglican priest blessed with a troubled mind, he challenges me to do as he did. He challenges me to pay theological attention to what matters from one's own experience, to subject that experience to the scrutiny of what is basic to one's own religious beliefs, and to act in one's life accordingly.

Speaking personally

As one now on the margins of the Anglican Church in Sydney, I feel it is prophetically useful to review the aftermath of women's ordination and attempt to set the record straight about feminist theology.

The honest task of theology is to expose the principle that all belief systems, however established their doctrines, are in the first instance grounded in some individual's personal experience. When feminism formed the catch cry 'the personal is political', it could have been thinking about theologians whose authority is often bound up with underplaying the personal and laying claim to divine legitimation. To understand the remaining resistance to women priests in Australia's largest Anglican diocese requires not just a background in biblical interpretation, but a sympathetic understanding of the religious culture.

I know it first-hand. Although baptized a Sydney Anglican, my first years at school, until the age of seven, were spent at St Declan's Catholic School, Peshurst. There under the watchful image of Mary McKillop, I fought manfully against sin, the flesh and the devil with mixed results. I was, notwithstanding, confirmed into the mild Anglo-Catholicism of St John's Church of England, Peshurst. It wasn't until university that I witnessed the growth of a brand of Anglicanism in Sydney that sat comfortably with the Billy Graham Crusades of 1959. While the Crusades had all the religious electricity of a grand final, the substance of Graham's preaching was the time-honoured Old Testament call to repentance from sin, with just the faintest smell of burning sulphur. It merely served as a catalyst for the well-oiled diocesan machinery that was already in place. The seeking crowds who came forward with their timeless need and hope were disciplined and domesticated in what would become an increasingly conservative evangelical diocese.

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Theological dissent was treated with respect outwardly, but curbed behind closed diocesan doors when it came to clerical appointments, or the teaching faculty at Moore Theological College. We sang 'Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire' at the opening of synod, glancing discretely at the faces of the Standing Committee who had already decided most of the outcomes. This differs in no way from groups of any other theological persuasion whose adherents seek to promote what they see as the truth. Few find any appeal in Oscar Wilde's premise that the truth is its own best defence. An evangelical conservatism had increasingly prevailed in the training of men for ministry from the reign of Archbishop Mowll on. After the Graham Crusade, this spread into a broad lay base through the 60s, and it remains intact to this day.

The authority of this position comes from a theological mandate that was strongly Calvinist, where God is understood to relate to the world primarily by an exercise of will and power. God executes his plan for the world in a cosmic chain of command by deputising a male hierarchy to exercise control over the rest of us. Boom, Boom!³ The undeniable benefits of a call to personal holiness and commitment to Christian service are coupled with a quasi-literal view of Scripture. 'God's will' becomes accessible via self-evident propositions in scripture. These are usually mediated by an inner group of male teachers

and preachers at conferences and Bible studies. In this religious culture the Bible is treated 'like a giant ouija board around which the unacknowledged ego slides, purported to be moved by the hand of God—to provide guidance in all things.'⁴

While others in the 60s were uniformly directing their youthful zeal to sexual experimentation, drugs and Eastern mysticism, my Anglican peer group were radical in their commitment to delayed sexual gratification, Bible exegesis *sans* hermeneutics, and a close caring community of prayer and worship. I still have few regrets about those choices, but the advent of feminism was to cut deeply into the role of women in evangelical conservatism. Encountering feminism in the 70s was like waking up from a near fatal religious sleep.

When facing the purveyors of male headship, our protests fell on deaf ears with the character of a silent Munch scream.

In his book on interpretation called *Plurality and Ambiguity*, David Tracy lists five great 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that have been brought to bear on Western Christianity. They find classical expression in the work of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Darwin and feminism.⁵ Having adopted the going method of saying yes to God in my teenage years, my Anglican belief system survived a university education, life in teaching hospitals, marriage and a missionary career, despite the challenges of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Darwin. But the encounter with feminism was different. It was more than an intellectual challenge to the basic tenets of Christianity. It was hearing my own story from outside. The story the Church hadn't told me. That made all the difference.

The beginnings of MOW

It wasn't the expectation of 'fixing up' something as institutionally complex as the Church that got me into reform by the 1980s. Nor was it, at least initially, the desire to engage in a theological overhaul of the doctrine of God, the credibility of the Bible as a text, or the truth claims of Christianity as a revelatory religion. Along the way, of course, all these questions were thrown into relief in what became a thorough-going theological task.

In the first place it was something personal and visceral that gripped me. And it took the genius of a Virginia Woolf to express it. I hadn't read the following passage from *A Room of One's Own* until I was in my late thirties and a missionary doctor. Its implications for women and application to theology shocked me into a wakefulness that demanded action.

Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her . . . alas, she never wrote a word . . . My belief is that this poet

who never wrote a word and is buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and me and every other woman . . . If we live another century or so—and have five hundred a year and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think . . . if we face the fact that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body that she has so often laid down . . . I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile.⁶

My personal experience of limitation was rapidly transformed into an understanding of how this was achieved structurally in the Church, whether by maintaining the tradition of the male as an icon of Christ or applying the Bible verses on male headship. The talk of Christian mutual service and the complementarity of the natural roles for men and women had served as a smoke screen for the institutional domination of women by men. It seemed profoundly unchristian in the light of the exemplary statement by Jesus, 'I have not called you servants but friends' (John 15.15). Tongue in cheek, Kathryn Tanner says in *The Politics of God*:

Christians are to be each other's servants after all, and what this means is that those with power are to show care and concern for those who lack rights of self-determination, and those without power are to submit voluntarily and surrender themselves humbly before those with the God-given qualification to rule.⁷

The ordination of women itself was justified in some quarters by a repudiation of feminism in order to get it through.

When facing the purveyors of male headship, our protests fell on deaf ears with the character of a silent Munch scream. It wasn't just about exclusion from jobs in the sanctuary and the pulpit, or of being corralled into menial places of perpetually listening and complying. It was about killing the religious imagination of another generation of women. It was a group of servants taking union action to ensure that others who wanted to serve were locked out of the manor. It was teachers giving books, pencils and Greek lexicons to boys only.

For a female to mature was to be invited to grow into the 'full manhood of Christ'. Women were not encouraged to think logically or theologically, except as they were instructed to by men, and were sequestered within the Church, preferably as wives, to attend women's meetings along with the Sunday School. While a missionary doctor in Africa in my mid-

twenties, I had been struck by the infantilizing effect marriage had on previously independent young women. Their appeal as wives rested in being dependent, compliant and little girlish, while their deeds as missionaries were often heroic and self-determined. This ambivalence, often resulting in sickness that brought them to my surgery, was aggravated by the culture of obedience engendered in their husbands, themselves emasculated by a 'big brother' religion.

Ironically the Sydney Diocese, that was concerned about the clericalism of robes and emphasized strong lay leadership (including more recently lay presidency at the Eucharist), turned out to be the one that stood alone in its degree of resistance to women becoming priests. And all the while, of course, the debate itself was led by male clergy. Thus it is not surprising that, while other dioceses were working within their own confines to bring about change to women's ministry, the launching of a national ordination movement to address the national Church took the desperation of a Sydney group. The national Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) was founded in Sydney, of all years, in 1984. It comes as no surprise that a challenge to people who have power over others causes trouble. But for a group of women and men publicly to call upon the Church hierarchy and congregations to account for their exclusion of women from holy orders was perceived as an act of hostility against the Church. Such prophetic authority by women was inimical to headship. By definition women could not exercise teaching authority in the Church except as mouthpieces for their husbands or their rectors.

The repudiation of feminism

But there are more serious issues at stake than the stagnation and frustration surrounding the debate in a diocese like Sydney. The point is this. The priesting of women elsewhere in the Australian Anglican Church has been used to foreclose on the debate. Discussion of gender has dropped prematurely out of serious Anglican discourse. Indeed the ordination of women itself was justified in some quarters by a repudiation of feminism in order to get it through.

That which we most feared has come upon us—women priests in a Church that still touts a male god and largely masculine terminology for the people of God. The spectre of John Knox, with his ugly aphorism 'that monstrous regime of women', lurks in the ecclesiastical corridors of power. Whereas misogyny was once reflected in the exclusion of women from the priesthood, it is now manifest in the wedge being driven between the priesting of women and the feminist reform that fuelled the change. Everywhere women have been priested, the Church hierarchy have moved in to comfort the opponents whose beliefs remain misogynist. At the same time, the ordination of women has been re-labelled as something that men brought about in God's good time. This repudiation of feminism has had serious ethical and pastoral effects:

1. It has enabled the Church to deny MOW's role in women's ordination.

The vital reform that MOW articulated as a hands-on theological enterprise by Anglican women and men has been largely discredited and demeaned officially. By the time women could be ordained deacons and then priests, the whole issue of women's ordination returned to men's domain. Ordination services used non-inclusive language, women were not allowed to carry the banners of the 20-year struggle that had consumed their very lives, and some bishops even instructed organizers that MOW members were not to be given tickets to seats in the cathedrals. As the Rev Dr Sue Hiatt asserted in *Women and Leadership in The Church*.

This great triumph for feminism, the ordination of women, has almost universally been won at the expense of feminism. In those provinces where feminists worked to bring about change, at almost the moment it came in, the feminists who promoted it were sidelined and dismissed.⁸

The task of prophecy has always been to apply the acid test of radical righteousness to the religious institution's self interest. The Church needs a continual process of criticism from within and without as testimony to God's transcendence and to human failings. Throughout history the Church has all too often supported established political and social relations that oppress, exercised willing complicity in social injustice, and 'employed beliefs about God that hamper development of those attitudes necessary for outrage against injustice and the sustained effort necessary to remedy it.'⁹

The unforgivable sin in Anglican circles is anger, let alone visceral outrage. MOW gained a reputation for being full of angry women (forget the outraged men). For Anglicans—particularly women—there can be none of the 'breaking in pieces like a potters vessel' approach. Rather justice must be seen to flow in a seemly manner from a china teapot, preferably with the curate's wife handing out sandwiches in the rose garden.

2. It separated women from their own story of emancipation and from each other.

Wherever the feminist critique is declared secular, once again Christian women are separated from their own story of emancipation and forced to disown it.

MOW had its birth in a dilemma of such divisiveness. Some women argued that we would only win the debate in Sydney by arguing on the basis of the Sydney view of the Bible and calling ourselves Movement for the Ministry of Women. We were encouraged to distance ourselves from feminism and to disown our foremothers as women had before us.

A knowledge of history would have told us that ordination movements from the 19th century on had always had an uneasy relationship with feminism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was, on the one hand, thrown out of the suffrage movement in the mid

1800s because of her outspokenness on the religious origins of misogyny and, on the other, sidelined by women in the Church because of her participation in suffrage. Ironically her most lasting contribution was in the *Women's Bible*, which was lost on three generations of church women. The work was a scholarly exposé of the patriarchal bias of the Biblical narrative and its translations. It was an early attempt to retrieve the text from such bias, and it acted as a challenge to the Church as well as to the secularity of the feminist movement.

At the height of the challenges of suffrage in 1892 the Women's Auxiliary of the Episcopal Church put out the following statement in opposition to the unseemliness of suffragists:

Justice must be seen to flow in a seemly manner from a china teapot, preferably with the curate's wife handing out sandwiches in the rose garden.

The Women's Auxiliary has adapted itself with the quickness of perception and delicacy of touch which categorizes the sex it represents. We think of it as highly important. But the Women's Auxiliary should continue to do that which its name indicates and which it has been in the past, distinctly *auxiliary* [my emphasis]. We think it of high importance that . . . the Board and the Women's Auxiliary should realize in their common work that which is the true idea of the essential relation of the sexes. Should this [auxiliary relationship] be changed, we think the change would involve the loss of elements of beauty, grace and strength, which are quite peculiar to women, and this loss would be incalculable.¹⁰

In the midst of the suffrage debates in Australia and UK, Mother's Union was similarly notorious for its concern with the spiritual task of making girls into ladies and opposing suffrage. Supplicants to men placed in religious charge of their well-being, they were at the same time the moral matriarchs who ran the home and often the local church. Advocates for individual women and children, brutalized by individual sin (which Mother's Union certainly didn't neglect), they were silent about the sexist/racist/classist system that the Church's teachings underpinned. So much charity carried out by women's organizations was schizoid, caring for battered and sexually abused women and children in the courts, while acquiescing to an order of gender in creation that debased women and children. Their well-meaning progeny are perhaps the clergy wives who currently lead the resistance to women being priests on the grounds that it is unbiblical.

3. It led to many women and men leaving the Anglican Church.

Kathryn Tanner in her book *The Politics of God* documents three attitudes with which Christian beliefs about God and the world have been associated historically—quiescence before conditions that cry out for change, support for established political and social relations, and willing complicity in social injustice.

One might not like the genuinely disturbing political associations of Christianity that history so amply exhibits . . . One simply finds oneself believing as one does, despite the horrible history of actions perpetrated in the name of those beliefs, and one is pushed thereby to hope that such a history is not their necessary effect.¹¹

Voltaire is not alone in his concern that Christian history is all too often a catalogue of crimes against humanity. But what if these crimes are current history? It is then not quite so easy to rationalise that they are not a 'necessary effect' of certain beliefs. The last ten years has seen a quiet exodus from the Church of men and women who are not so convinced.

The connection between certain religious beliefs, attitudes and actions has done more to discredit the credibility of Christianity than any intellectual problems in faith itself. The Church has more often justified the *status quo*, lifting up those with material and social advantage while taking away the dignity and sense of self that fuels resistance amongst the poor. Witness the separation of aboriginal children in this country from their parents.

Feminists argue that Christian theology as a manifestation of our culture is riddled with what historian Gerda Lerner calls 'a conceptual error of vast proportion'.¹² So when feminism—which describes any movement that seeks a change for the better for women—is thrown out of the Church, people of conscience will sometimes feel compelled to follow.

4. It enabled the Church to turn a blind eye on sexual assault.

The repudiation of feminism has allowed the Church to distance itself once again from the serious business of alienation between the sexes, whether expressed in domestic violence or sexual assault. This is especially true where the Church has been a safe haven for the professional abuse of women and children in the guise of ministry.

It is not the reputation of the Church that should be our main concern but those 'little ones' who suffer. The demarcation of the feminist critique as secular has allowed the Church to abdicate its moral leadership in society at a time when the public is still inclined to consider reports by women and children of sexual abuse a form of hysteria.

When I started working as a doctor in the area of child sexual assault several years ago I disliked the poster hanging in the clinic. It was about incest, had children on it, and simply said, 'Yell and tell'. The initiative and responsibility for dealing with

the sexual assault of children is put back onto the tiniest shoulders in society. Eighty percent of abusers are well-known to children, and children practically never tell. Often the sense of secrecy is instilled in them. In a majority of cases they are dependent on their abusers. They cannot witness in court easily, and when they do, they are cross examined by some of the cleverest QCs defending their adult abusers.

In the meantime, statistics are emerging that reveal a strange anomaly in domestic violence. Since women have been able to escape from situations of physical abuse, ironically the homicide rate of husbands killing wives in the United States has doubled. It suggests that the resistance engendered by feminism accentuates misogyny. All this points to the fact that addressing one side of sexism by attending only to its female victims is itself a result of misogyny.

This brings me to the last problem that arose from prematurely closing the debate.

5. It failed to pay attention to the effect of patriarchy on men.

The backlash against feminism is not some sort of abstract emotion where a public relations exercise is lagging. It comes from an aborted reform that emphasized only one side of the sexist equation. The other side is that for every victim there is a damaged and damaging perpetrator, 80% to 90% of whom are male.

So when feminism . . . is thrown out of the Church, people of conscience will sometimes feel compelled to follow.

One of the distortions of patriarchy is that it puts the female in the witness stand, subjects the female body to the extended stare, and only talks about the problem of *women's* ministry. Yet men have also been badly affected by patriarchy. In his book *The End of Manhood: A Book for Men of Conscience*, John Stoltenberg develops the thesis that the socialization of the male to manhood, especially in the area of sexuality, usually involves giving up selfhood. 'Without pornography, there could be no manhood—and humans would desire to embrace sexual selfhood instead.'¹³ Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, is one of the most widely read books on women's moral development, with its emphasis on an 'ethic of care'. She generally agrees with Stoltenberg.¹⁴ In contrast with the biologically based view that boys mature more slowly than girls, Gilligan believes that girls are given greater freedom in terms of their voice and their variety of expressions than boys, until they reach the time when they are sexually significant. Then society steps in with a full-on agenda for their 'feminisation'. Gilligan argues that boys have their voices taken away

at about the age of two or three. The price of being male is more socially significant much earlier, and this underlies the delayed emotional maturation of males and feeds their socialization into pornography and violence.

When plastic surgery began to offer women the opportunity to reshape their bodies, as a doctor assisting in operating theatres, I had difficulty imagining how silicon could be convincingly erotic. I had overlooked the role of pornography in male sexual conditioning. The female body was already objectified into body parts. In pornography the disjunction from the person enhances gratification. Horribly this transposes across to violence.

Men and violence

Last year I went to study theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While there an opportunity arose for me to spend some time in southern California. Turning my back temporarily on theology, I rolled up my sleeves in a mobile clinic in an oppressed part of Los Angeles and helped examine a nine month old Latino boy. He had suffered three broken ribs, extensive bruising, and multiple human bites. He had been 'looked after overnight' by his mother's boyfriend and cried too much. Next I examined a thirteen year old girl who had been gang-raped by five boys. What made me sad was to read their names—names like Baby Face, Chunky, Little Jim, and so on. I pictured the police cars cruising out into the ghettos to haul in a gang of children. Not one of them would have been game to attack anyone alone. If it weren't for the fact that they were in a gang, that violence was their badge of honour, and a girl's body was easy game for cutting their gang insignia onto, nothing would have happened.

It is not the reputation of the Church that should be our main concern but those 'little ones' who suffer.

The experience of working in the area of sexual assault constantly confronts me with the social vindictiveness against such male crimes. 'They should be tortured, then castrated, then hung slowly.' The nearest to an explanation for such behaviour is that it is evil. But this is really no explanation. It becomes apparent that evil is a greater mystery than good. Dostoevsky put it this way: 'One may say anything about the history of the world, anything that might enter the disordered imagination. The only thing one can't say, is that it is rational'.¹⁵

But the heart has reasons of which the mind knows nothing. While working in Los Angeles, I read a book called *Violence* by James Gilligan. He is a psychiatrist who works with violent men and for 30 years has spent his time in maximum security

prisons and mental hospitals for the criminally insane. With close-up experience of some of the most dangerous criminals, Gilligan concludes that violence is predominantly the outcome of people, particularly males, being socialized in a culture of shame. His work with these men led him to believe that shame underlies violence, particularly violence association with sexual organs and sexual acts. Rights of domination and emasculation are common in the animal kingdom, but only humans have added to it the dimension of shame.¹⁶

Often human choice is utterly and stubbornly opposed to reason. It seems apparent that the priority which human beings give to honour and self-respect eclipses that of physical comfort and even survival. Self-respect is not only humanity's most unique and central attribute, but it is also our most dangerous. Our need for self-respect and thus our propensity for being shamed and for shaming others undergirds a great deal of history's violence.

Gilligan proposes that the hierarchy of 'power over' in prisons is predicated on shame and is passed down the line as an ultimate basis for order. The guards release the young and the weak to the hands of the prison bosses and turn a blind eye on anything that happens in exchange for a degree of compliance within the prison system.

Domestic violence in the house of God

The Anglican Church may seem a long way from a maximum security prison, but society's prisons serve as a key to understanding society as a whole. It is not inconsistent that the Sydney Diocese cut down on the number of clergy in synod by excluding chaplains from prisons, hospitals and schools—just the clergy who are likely to know far more about the effects of authoritarian religion than most others. We can use the prison system as a magnifying glass through which to examine what is otherwise less discernible in our culture. I mean the underlining patterns of motivation, different types of symbolism and the social structures which determine the life of our whole community.

Looking through such a magnifying glass some may understand the shame we felt in 1991 when, after 14 years of humiliating public debate, the national church made a deal over its women. The General Synod said to the Sydney Diocese: 'Let the rest of us ordain our women in exchange for releasing you to do whatever you like with yours.' And the deal was done. It evoked in me the same feeling as the sinister passage from Judges 19 where the Ephraimite offered his virgin daughter and a concubine to the men of the city who were demanding sex with his male house guest, saying 'You can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, do no such shameful thing' (Judges 19.24).

We were sent back to the 'domestic violence' we had fled. Our synod called for a moratorium on the debate for three years. We watched the slow and steady promotion of the women who were loyal to the diocese. We noted the Nicolios report on the serious state of women's ministry get promoted

around the diocese. Fifteen years earlier, while serving on the ordination committee, I had documented the same findings in a survey of deaconesses, women theological students and clergy wives, which was ignored.¹⁷ We watched those who followed after, drinking wine from the skulls of their predecessors, while they blamed them for setting back the cause. Any wonder we felt shame? Any wonder we left home?

Speaking theologically . . .

My entry to reform was not via a theological college but from the emergency rooms of cities around the world and mission hospitals in Africa. I had no problem linking headship with a culture of domination and submission and the shame it breeds. I agree with the conclusion of James Gilligan:

If humanity is to evolve beyond the propensity towards violence that now threatens our very survival as a species, then it can only do so by recognizing the extent to which the patriarchal code of honour and shame generates and obligates male violence. If we wish to bring this violence under control we need to begin by reconstituting what we mean by masculinity and femininity.¹⁸

I find it very easy in theology to feel quite comfortable about where God isn't.

I return to my original point that the concerns of feminism confronted Christian orthodoxy and found it wanting. One doesn't have to go outside fundamental Christian beliefs to provide a critique for the churches' traditional sexism. If we couple the basic belief that God is transcendent and providential with a healthy respect for human failings¹⁹ then we are all open to modifying our views. We can live in hope that Christians of good conscience will bring their attitudes and actions into line with the basic Christian ethic of treating others as you would like to be treated.

The role of scripture remains a sticking point. The essential problem at the heart of a fundamentalist use of scripture is that it is intellectually dishonest by denying its own hermeneutic. Even if God chose to deliver words in some conduit through a non-participatory human agent, the reader brings a certain body of knowledge to the text. In a lecture to the Society of Friends, Doug Hobson once targeted propositional revelation which is the main approach of evangelical conservatives and official Roman Catholicism. He described how, under the pressure of more radical biblical criticism, they have shifted their ground from a mechanical view and he predicted: 'They will shift their view further when the trail has been blazed.'²⁰

Fundamentalist religion and secular atheism would seem to be poles apart. But it is only a superficial separation when it

comes to their basic hermeneutic. In the attack on the intellectual liberty of theology and its public character atheists and fundamentalists have forged an unhealthy alliance. David Tracy claims that both atheistic critiques of religion and the kind of rationalist methods used by the Christianity-Made-Reasonable approach to the Bible, share in common the Cartesian certainty of the Enlightenment.

They are, one and all, reverse sides of the same effaced coin of certainty, mastery and control. The certainty of contemporary positivist and empiricist critiques of religion is well matched by the literalism and fundamentalist dogmatists in all traditions.²¹

Where is God in all of this?

The relationship between belief in God and its connection with our profound social concerns about meaning and ethics raises the question: Where is such a God?

Jürgen Moltmann answers 'Not in our religion.' That's a relief! 'God is not in our culture. God is not even in our Church', says Moltmann. 'God is in God's own presence, which is God's kingdom.'²²

I find it very easy in theology to feel quite comfortable about where God *isn't*. The real challenge is that God is abroad inspiring actions that are consistent with God's character which is, by every record, to work on behalf of the spiritually and physically dispossessed. Therefore the study of God who is not in our religion and not in our Church and not in our culture must be grounded in the basics and open to everything that can address it.

'We aren't theologians because we are particularly religious. We are theologians because in the face of the world we miss God.'

Theology is public, critical and prophetic. And such public theology needs institutional liberty in relationship to the Church and a place in the open hearts of scholarship and the sciences. Theology therefore is more and different from religious ideology. Theology is also more than and different from a function of the Church.²³

In the latter stages of reform an anomaly appeared among the leaders of MOW. This core group of activists divided into those who became priests and those who chose not to attend church, fuelling the impression that the latter were secular. On the contrary, I believe our response to injustice was theological in the first instance and in the last. We took up a task of subjecting the text and the claims of our own religious tradition

to every hermeneutic—the hermeneutic of critique, of retrieval and of suspicion. I believe some chose to do that within the local church while the rest continued in the original prophetic job of worrying about God. As Moltmann says, 'We aren't theologians because we are particularly religious. We are theologians because in the face of the world we miss God.' Like the accusations Job threw at God, or Christ's desperate question from the cross, in the face of religious authorities, we miss God!

In the end, because theology is about a God who cannot be seen and a text which can, there is a tension set up between risk and certainty, faith and critique, hope and scepticism. To believe that the text carries a truth that reveals the Ultimate Other is to engage in risk every time it is subjected to interpretation. While we search for better evidence we also say, 'I believe. Help my unbelief.'

Doug Hobson was a priest who struggled hard with questions of this kind. In one of his last sermons about the Church, he said

I fear that in the next 50 years we may have more darkness than light on our problems. More confusion than order. But the voice of Jesus will come through, don't be taken in by appearances, don't desert, and don't wobble because of the difficulties. When it all feels a waste, get on with the job of sowing the seed.²⁴

All that remains to be asked is 'What is the seed, and do we believe it is worth sowing?'

References

- 1 The quotation comes from the preface by Janet Scarf in (ed) Marie Louise Uhr, *Changing Women, Changing Church*, Millennium Books, 1992, p 2.
- 2 Harry Goodhew, 'Archbishop Hits Out . . .' SMH, Tuesday, October 29, 1996, p 4.
- 3 Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God*, Fortress Press, 1992, p ix.
- 4 Garrett Kelzer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, Harper, 1993.
- 5 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, Harper and Row, 1987.
- 6 From Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, quoted in *Woman Hating*, Anthea Dworkin, E. P. Dutton, 1974, facing page.
- 7 Tanner, *The Politics of God*, p 140.
- 8 Jane Wiessinger (ed), *Women in Leadership in the Church*, University of Southern California, 1996, p 223. The Rev Dr Sue Hiatt was known as the Bishop of the Philadelphia 11 who, including Australia's Rev Alison Cheek, initiated their own irregular ordinations in 1974 in the USA.
- 9 Tanner, *The Politics of God*, p 2.
- 10 The Board of Mission Report to the General Convention quoted in Margaret Sherman, *True to their Heritage: a Brief History of the Women's Auxiliary*, National Council of the Episcopal Church, 1959, pp 7-8.
- 11 Tanner, *The Politics of God*, p ix.
- 12 Ann Loades (ed), *Feminist Theology*, SPCK, 1990, p 1.
- 13 John Stoltenberg, *The End of Manhood: A Book for Men of Conscience*, Penguin, 1993, p 300.
- 14 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- 15 Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'Notes from Underground' in *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, Dial Press, 1968, p 112.
- 16 James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*, Putnam, 1992, p 110.
- 17 Mavis Rose, *Freedom from Sanctified Sexism*, Allira, 1996, pp 171-172.
- 18 Gilligan, *Violence*, p 267.
- 19 Tanner, *The Politics of God*, p 4.
- 20 Douglas Hobson, *A Selection of Sermons and Addresses by Douglas Hobson (1918-1968)*, (ed) David Garnsey, Camworth 1986, p 65.
- 21 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p 101.
- 22 Jürgen Moltmann in a lecture given out at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Hobson, *A Selection of Sermons*, p 96.