UNHOLY Opposition

The revolt of women in the Church used to be a scandal. Now, it's become part of the episcopal road-show. But in the process a new way of looking at Christianity, hierarchy and dogma has emerged. Patricia Brennan reflects on this revolution.

It is difficult to believe that the first wave of feminism is twenty years old. Its emphasis on child-bearing as the sole cause of women's oppression has proven too simplistic in the more thorough feminist analysis of the 'eighties.

The anti-male and anti-childbearing rhetoric of the 'seventies had a very particular effect on the debate over women's role in the Church. Its seeming advocacy that the liberation of women required their rejection of the most basic nurturant relationships was seen as essentially unchristian and this enabled the conservative forces in the church to stifle consciousness raising before it had begun.

It left women who were Christian and feminist in a difficult position since failure to move the debate into areas of substance left them outside a women's movement which had little interest in religion and in a church that felt self-righteously removed from a movement that was essentially secular.

Feminist theologians have since then made a major contribution to the debate. The work of people like Mary Daly exposed the profound contribution of patriarchal religion to misogyny. Other feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Reuther and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza support her feminist critique but disagree with her view that Christianity is unredeemably patriarchal. Their work points to a counterculture within the tradition itself that critiqued patriarchy and was a forerunner to the current reforms.

Change in the status of women is tied up with their location as mothers and sexual partners, and it is not surprising that the church acted swiftly in its condemnation of any attempt by women to change their power relative to men. After all, the church has given divine legitimation to woman's secondary role in creation. One of the bible's first injunctions to woman was that her desire should be towards her husband and that she would bring forth her children in sorrow.

This was brought home to me recently when I was helping a friend inspect a house for sale. What was memorable about the house was its holy pictures, concentrated in large numbers in the bedroom, as is their wont. A pallid Mother of God gazed down on an apricot satin queen-sized bed, from a strategic location above the matching heart-shaped pillows. Here was the unmistakable art of the religious female, the domestic keeper of the faith.
The bedroom is the locus classicus for the female's role in orthodox Christianity. Prepared as she is for the role of an attenuated femme fatale through holy matrimony, she makes her bed beneath the ideal of a virginal mother; the former role hard to attain, the latter state impossible.

How does one set about reforming Christianity when the majority of its adherents have been prepared to accept this as normal?

Each particular historically-induced faction of the Church has given its own expression to women's location under the patriarchs. Generally speaking, being religious, for women, has meant being obedient to the religious presuppositions of men. One only discovers this by a closer look at the records.

By the third century, when the Church Fathers had begun to formulate the basics of the faith and the early
church councils to debate them, women were already being defined as deficient human beings. Mind you, on a hierarchical scale ending at God the Father, blacks, homosexuals and working-class laymen have done only slightly better.

By the tenth century, celibacy as a holy way of life was in full swing, and there was the choice for women either to marry the Church and have neither intercourse nor children, or to marry a man and, as Zorba the Greek said, take on the whole catastrophe.

The closure of nunneries during the Reformation meant that women under a new Protestant patriarchy had no longer any official means of fulfilling a vocation independent of the immediate control of men. And from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, little shone through the darkness for women.

It seems all too obvious in retrospect that women needed contraception before they could get their hands on the light switch - which meant gaining access to education.

In the 1890s and again in the 1960s when feminist consciousness touched into the Church, it became obvious as women researched their own buried histories, that Catholic religious had a degree of intellectual and theological autonomy undreamed of by their Protestant sisters, albeit at the price of their sexuality.

Of course it was largely unrealised in the lives of most nuns who suffered under a device common to those ideologies, religious or otherwise, which make a virtue of obedience. But at least they had some models that they could choose to follow.

One such was Teresa of Avila, a Catholic abbess in the sixteenth century, who earned a place in the annals of feminism by her independence and passion for reform. The papal nuncio of her area described her as "a disobedient, contumacious woman who promulgates pernicious doctrine under the pretence of devotion; leaves her cloister against the orders of her superiors and the duress of the Council of Trent; is ambitious and teaches theology as though she were a doctor of the Church, in contempt of the teachings of St Paul who commanded women not to teach" - a reference any modern feminist would be proud to earn!

As a missionary doctor in Africa in the early 'seventies, remote from my own culture, my latent feminism embarked on a collision course with the mission's conservative theology on women.

Women themselves comprised two-thirds of missionary "manpower", but had no say in administration. I became painfully aware that there were no Teresas of Avila in our hall of fame.

Now, twenty years later, where are Australian women in the feminist invasion of the Church that is keeping twentieth century bishops awake at night? Some would say that, compared with our European and American sisters, we've hardly begun.

In 1972, Anna Ross, in her Essays on Sexual Equality, said that all causes, social and biological, combine to make it unlikely that women will ever collectively rebel against men. Despite significant inroads, when it comes to the Australian Church, her thesis still stands. Yet paradoxically the Church has always been a place where aspiration to spiritual ideals has called individuals to unholy opposition to the dominant ideas again and again.

There are three reform groups that have sprung up on the edges of the Church in the last decade and they recently combined in a Feminist Theology conference: the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW - largely Anglican), Women and the Australian Church (WATAC - largely Catholic), and Women-Church (feminists who have an interest in spirituality but have no necessary association with the Church). All three groups had formative earlier association with the feminist reformers of the Australian Council of Churches Women's Commission of the early 'seventies.

MOW has had most press in its public pursuit of the ordination of women in the Anglican Church, and its choice to concentrate on the issue of ordination has forced the Church to be accountable in public. However, it also leaves it open to the risk of being co-opted as more of its members actually enter holy orders, and is thus hoist with its own petard. It remains to be seen whether it cultivates a kind of feminine clericalism that joins the men rather than sustaining a widespread reform of the patriarchal language and structures. It is a national organisation open to men as well as women, and produces a quarterly magazine.

WATAC, initiated by the Religious Superiors of the Catholic Church in Australia, has successfully engaged the support of women, religious and lay alike, in raising consciousness to the secondary location of women in the Church's teaching and practice. Its mandate has been to educate at a grassroots level with low visibility, a profile that suits the patriarchal Catholic bishops.

It will be interesting to see in what direction Catholic women will move in the interests of structural reform.
Women-Church takes its name from a similar collective in the United States, and was born of the theology of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther.

The name was not coined as a church for women, but is a linguistic device to remind women that the word 'church' has not generally involved the feminine. Centred in Sydney, the main emphasis is on the support of women who are committed to a feminist spirituality at monthly meetings and by the production of a quarterly magazine. They are consciously collective in their ethos, and have been para-institutional in style rather than directly taking on Church structures.

All three organisations have common members, and the teething problems common to reform.

Sensitive to rule by men, there is often an anxiety in identifying leadership from their own ranks. Effective reform needs to hold in tension the charismatic initiative of the woman or man of vision, and the democratic principle of group decision making. Often there has been a failure to stay on the front foot in strategy. I have been closely involved in MOW public action during the last five years, and am aware that, more than ever, imaginative ways have to be found of keeping the need for change before the Church. The print media is overloaded with the cliched demonstrations of protesting women. What was once a provocative encounter with bishops on the streets of Sydney at the time of synods has now become a bit part in the episcopal road show. They miss us if we are not there to guarantee them an otherwise unlikely place on the evening news. What they have failed to grasp is where women have gone. While the institution of the Anglican Church in this country has gingerly admitted about a hundred female deacons to its ranks, and the Catholic Church is full of nervous and painfully uninformed bishops trying to hold what they see as secular feminism at bay, women's experience of tackling the Church has created a generation of new theologians who are writing and thinking.

Just as when the Uniting Church ordained its women in 1976, not only was status given to a ministry that already existed, but a small yet significant number of women began to articulate a critique of Australian Christianity that has heralded a new role for women, whether the men in the Church want them to do it or not ...

There has been much talk of what is relative and what is absolute in Christian teaching, and whether the entry of women into the sanctuary is tampering in an irremedial fashion with the timeless truths of the Faith. The easy answer to that is 'yes', at least one would hope so.

Women's real experience of living under doctrines that limit them has led to the discovery that the author and finisher of their faith was not only Jesus. Historical criticism has opened up the reality that Christianity is located solidly in history, word by word, event by event, Church council by Church council. As such, it is not only open to reform, but is in an ongoing process of formation. To some, this relativising of faith spells its own end. And it does so for a certain kind of faith. For those unable to bear such an end, a variety of friendly fundamentalist churches wait with open doors to welcome the pilgrims on an intellectually painless journey to the kingdom of heaven. But for others, there is no such painless journey. If to be religious is to take the serious questions most seriously, then the limitations to our own understanding become obvious. That the maturation of women has posed such a challenge to Christian doctrine is a measure of its limitations. That the same doctrine assumed the maturity of men just confirms its chauvinism. The fact that it is still there to be challenged is, to some minds, testimony to its authenticity.

Along with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is centrally scriptural and, as such, language is the pivotal point of understanding, especially language about God which has a strong hold on the psyche of the believer. The greatest outcry against Christian feminists has been triggered by their moves to change patriarchal language. We've had lots of laughs on the way at the ridiculous ends that language as ideology serves. Like the hatted and gloved lady who rose to her feet at a public meeting to decry the extremes of feminist language, and said she regarded it as the greatest privilege to be called a son of God. Or the opening prayer of the Anglican Young Wives group that read, "Lord, strengthen me in the inner man".

Whatever the cause, recent national statistics show that young adult women are increasingly absent from the Church. What the census can't show is that church attendance need not reflect interest in a spiritual dimension to life; nor predict the capacity of people's belief systems to evolve in surprising directions. The debate over women's ordination has shown there is far more scepticism in this country over the credibility of the Church than Christianity as such, and a lively curiosity in those dissident Christians who won't abandon the Church.

Feminist consciousness even articulated at its most cliched level, has had its impact on what it means to be an Australian. At its best it is surfacing in the Australian novels of the Kate Grenvilles and the Helen Garners. The Australian feminist theologians articulate what it means to be female, religious and Australian, there will be a change in the way theology is done and the way the Church views motherhood and female sexuality.

In the meantime, the debate about women's ministry grinds on in a context where, in the USA alone, there are now over 2,000 women priests and two elected women bishops in the Episcopal Church, and New Zealand has its first woman bishop about to be consecrated. However long it takes, Australia will see women priests in not only the Anglican but, short of a major lay reformation that throws out clerics altogether, in the Catholic Church as well.

Maybe, as a song my father used to sing says, "You won't be 'ere and I won't be 'ere, but somebody else will be wheeling the cart, and the world will still go on". And I've a hunch that for the best reasons as well as the worst, so will the Church.

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