

Women in Christian History

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Women have been marginalized in Christianity as they have been in most cultures and societies of which we are aware. When one section of humanity has been given no power in ultimate decision making or allowed to participate in the most important liturgical aspects of a religion or system of belief, which has only male deities, it seems that marginalization is beyond dispute.

What I intend to look at is the extent to which this marginalization has occurred in various eras so that we can perhaps give an answer to the question “Can women really only be seen in Christian history as subservient followers?”

We will look at some of the celebrated women known to us, often from inadequate sources, remembering that the information we have of these women, certainly before the 19th century, has been retained because it suited the male religious view of the time. It must also be kept in mind that social class is of immense importance in any examination of men or women’s power in a society or religion.

The marginalization of women for much of the 2,000 years of Christianity seems to be a situation that modern research shows to be at odds with the teachings and actions of Jesus as reported in the gospels and extra canonical writings.

While it is currently seen by a majority of biblical scholars that the gospels went thru a multi-layered process by different authors and they are intended primarily to proclaim a message of redemption and not necessarily objective historical information about Jesus, it still seems as if Jesus held a different attitude to the insularity of Judaic thought and to the marginalized in that society which included women. An elaborate system of purity regulations had been established in the organization of the Jewish Temple which applied to daily life, particularly bodily contact thru food and sex. Probably the majority of Jews only partly observed these regulations but that only confirmed their status in the minds of the strict observers as members of the impure, to be both avoided and condemned. Firstly, these regulations marginalized women as a cause of pollution on a regular basis thru their sexual functions of menstruation and child birth. From the Mishnah (supposedly handed down orally from the time of Moses and the institution of the Torah or Law) woman is perceived as abnormal in a world where men are seen as normal. Secondly, apart from women these laws also marginalized the sick, the lame, the blind, the deformed, lepers and persons with various kinds of skin ailments and bodily fluxes. Such persons were seen to be in a continual state of impurity and these ailments were seen as a punishment for sin – their own or their parents. Finally the Law divided Jews from gentiles and pagans – the ultimate division between the holy and the unholy.

In the gospels many parables and stories affirm the positive response of Jesus to poor, marginalized women over against various religious and social authorities. For example his association with the haemorrhagic woman (Mk 5:25-34); the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11); the Syrophenician Woman (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:22-28); the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7-30) and his pronouncement against divorce

(Mk 10:5-12; Mt 5:31-2; Mt 19:3-9; Lk 16:8; Jn 7:53- 8:11). Further Luke tells us that many of his disciples were women (Lk 8:1-4) who followed him during his ministry – quite an unheard of situation for women in that time. Finally all of the Gospels point out that unlike most of his male followers, the women disciples remained faithful to him even after his death at Calvary (Mk 15:40-1; Mt 27:55-6; Lk 23:49; Jn 19:25). Further it is recorded that they were the first to learn of his resurrection and to see the risen Christ (Mt 28:9-10; Mk 16:9-10; Lk 24:10-11; Jn 20:16). Women were also present at Pentecost when the followers of Jesus believed they had received their identity and mission in the world.

Although widely debated, the authentic letters of Paul agreed to by a large scholarly consensus are seen to be Romans, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1&2 Corinthians, Philemon and perhaps Philippians. They are dated from the middle of the first century and are the earliest writings we possess of the early Jesus Movement. From these letters and the later epistles and from Acts it is apparent that women continued to play a prominent role in the Movement. As the Jesus Movement spread into important cities in the Diaspora, like Antioch and Alexandria, women played important roles as leaders of missionary teams, local leaders of house churches, teachers and prophets (Chloe (1Cor 1:11); Prisca, Junia, Julia and Nereus' sister (Rom 16: 3,7,15); Mary and Persis (Rom 16: 6,12); Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3); Apphia (Phil 2); Prisca (1Cor 16:19) Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16:15) and Nympha (Col 4:15); Phoebe (Rom 16:1) and women prophesying in 1 Cor 11). As well, women held offices and played significant roles in group worship. Further Paul spoke of the institution of groups of Widows and Virgins to perform charitable works.

To try and suggest that the early Movement was egalitarian however would be stretching the truth. A marginal Movement, it appeared to be happy to accept anybody it could get and use them in ways that did not happen in established Judaism. Certainly the differentiation of male and female roles in the early days was far more fluid than at any other time in Christian history.

The attitude of Paul to women appears to be contradictory. On the one hand we have his famous statement on the equality of all peoples in Galatians 3:27-28 which is in line with the first creation story in Genesis (1:26-27) in which men and women are created in God's image.

Galatians: - 'As many of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.

On the other hand, we have his strict prohibition on women's role in speaking in 1 Tim 2:11-15 - 'Let a woman learn in silence and all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men, she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first then Eve – and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor' (Gen 3).

This passage ignores the first creation story in Genesis which sees male and female created equally in the image of God. The second Genesis account has been used with Timothy for the best part of 2,000 years to support the subjugation, the inferiority and the greater sinfulness and licentiousness of women. However, most main stream scholars now see the Pastorals (Timothy 1& 2 and Titus) as having been written well after Paul's death. So perhaps Paul has been the subject of a bad press! Nevertheless the

passage from 1 Cor 11 3-13, a genuine letter of Paul, affirms the male as the image and glory of God and women as the glory of man, and thus women are to remain veiled when worshipping unlike men. This also seems to contradict Paul's Galatians statement on equality. But it is argued by scholars that when Paul comments on women in general and makes statements about their place in congregations, the special circumstances he is addressing must be taken into account and there certainly were special circumstances in Corinth. They cannot be seen as a proscription for all women in all places, for all time. Overall Paul states that men and women are equal in status in the family and in the eyes of God. While women undoubtedly remained subordinate and inferior in his thought they were given unheard of responsibilities in comparison to women in Judaism who until this era had no function in religion. However what had been achieved in a new role for women was soon ripped apart to such an extent that women disappear almost entirely from the leadership of the Church. This was in line with the disappearance of any non-clerical power in the branch of Christianity that was to become Orthodoxy— Pauline Christianity.

Humans love to institutionalize and when it became apparent that Jesus was not going to return in the near future and with the spread of the Jesus Movement into the Roman Empire and the distancing from its roots in Judaism, the communities began organizing themselves in a more structured, hierarchical way. The result was the introduction of the system of bishops, deacons and presbyters. From Paul's time women deacons were ordained and played leadership roles in which they were responsible only to the bishop. At this stage a great diversity of thought existed in the church and leadership roles and church structures differed from region to region and over time women deacons became permitted only to minister to women. They continued to be appointed into the Order of Widows and consecrated into the Order of Virgins. In the early 3rd century in the Syrian Book of procedure- the Didascalia Apostolorum or the Teaching of the Apostles, it appears that women deacons had parallel roles in orthodox ministry. Bishops were seen as fathers to be treated like God; male deacons stood in the place of Jesus and were superior to presbyters, while female deacons stood in the place of the Holy Spirit and presbyters or priests represented the Apostles. In the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (170-235) the ordination of female deacons was the same as for males.

By the middle of the 2nd century Christianity had emerged as a new and independent entity from Judaism. This became the great age of Christian thinkers trying to define exactly what Christianity stood for. This was particularly seen in the question of the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God. The great fight in the first three centuries was with other competing doctrines particularly the various expressions of Gnostic Christianity which in many areas, particularly Egypt, was normative Christianity.

Gnosticism is a mysterious philosophical and religious movement which started in pre-Christian times. The term is derived from the Greek word for knowledge – Gnosis. Gnostics claim to have secret knowledge about God, humanity and the rest of the universe of which most people are unaware. It is based on a radical dualism and consists of many syncretistic beliefs which combine elements taken from Asian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Syrian pagan religions as well as from Astrology, Judaism and Christianity (it is also a part of New Age religion today). In its differing forms it became one of the major Christian belief systems from the 1st century. A remarkable find of a library of papyrus manuscripts at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1947 opened a whole new perspective on Gnosticism because the only knowledge we really had of it was limited and from the fulminating of the early Fathers against it.

The Gnostic gospels unlike those in the NT are not gospels of the cross. They see Jesus first and foremost as a source of wisdom, not the crucified saviour. People come to salvation not thru faith but thru insight, although Jesus is still seen as a divine redeemer. But this is thru gnosis which he imparts from the supremely good God so that humans can remember that they are children of the Divine and have the light of God within – to know oneself is to know God. The Gnostics believed that matter was evil and that humanity was an alien dweller in an essentially evil world and the main aim for humans was to free the spirit within, which is essentially good, and restore it with God.

The fight against heresy was led in the second and third centuries by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyon (d 202) who laid the basis for the NT canon and worked out a rule of faith that was to become the one standard throughout the whole of Christian Orthodoxy. He and others like Clement of Alexandria (150-215), Tertullian (160-225) and Origen (185-254) fought hard to wipe out these sects many of which gave leadership roles to women.

Several of these proponents of orthodoxy had a deficient view of sexuality coupled with an exaltation of celibacy and singleness – an outlook which was to grow in the Church. Sexual intercourse became seen as tainted if not fully sinful and so women became defined by their sexuality and a source of sin for men. Tertullian for example had a very negative view of women and sexuality. He held Eve responsible for original sin and identified all women with her. He then went on to blame women for the crucifixion of Jesus because of the need for the redemption of humanity. Paradoxically he was also a supporter of marriage. He wrote,

‘You are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of the forbidden fruit. You are the deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image – man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die’.

Despite this attitude Tertullian joined Montanism, a non-Gnostic heretical sect, which was extremely ascetic and was mainly composed of women who sought martyrdom and were given clerical offices – they were teachers, healers, exorcise and baptized. Like the early Syriac Christians they held that the Holy Spirit was feminine. The most famous female martyrs of the late 2nd and 3rd centuries – Blandina, Perpetua and Felicitas whose terrible suffering under the Roman persecutions has come down to us were all probably Montanists. The effort to control Montanism is seen to play a conclusive role in banning the ministry of women from Orthodoxy.

MARY MAGDALENE

There is a rich tradition, which depicts Mary as a leading disciple and in which legend greatly embellishes her life. Recently there has been a great reclaiming of Mary as a patron of women’s preaching and ministry. Mary Magdalene appears in the NT as one of the close followers of Jesus who has been cured of seven demons, a concept usually associated with healing from illness not just forgiveness of sin. New Testament scholarship has shown that the popular image of Mary as the repentant weeping sinner wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair is possibly false. There are four stories of the anointing of Jesus by a woman in the NT, none identified as Mary Magdalene. In the earliest versions Mark, followed by Matthew has

an unnamed woman anoint Jesus' head as a sign of his impending death. John names the woman as Mary of Bethany and has her anoint Jesus' feet. In Luke the story is changed and the anointing takes place earlier in Jesus' life, the woman being an unnamed repentant sinner who weeps and dries Jesus' feet with her hair and is forgiven. In 591 Pope Gregory the Great identified Mary as a repentant prostitute whose sinfulness he contrasted with that of the Virgin Mary. While some contemporary Christian women have assumed that the defaming of Mary was an orthodox attempt to counteract her high profile in Gnostic Christianity there is no evidence for this. What seems to have happened is that he confused the sinful woman of Lk 7 with Mary Magdalene and once this erroneous identification was made she could be associated with every unnamed sinful woman in the gospels. This misidentification led to her being made the patron of prostitutes and the establishment in medieval Europe of Magdalene houses for the reformation of fallen women.

Whether or not she was a prostitute Mary became the leader of a group of women disciples at the cross and at Jesus' burial. Mary stands in the Gospels as the first witness of the resurrection, after the male followers of Jesus have fled, and the one who testifies of the risen lord to the male disciples. (Interestingly this is not attested to by Paul in his letters). As a result of the Gospel stories Mary was seen as a leading disciple of Jesus - the 'apostle to the apostles' – and later the image of the Church.

Several Gnostic gospels found in the 19th century and others found at Nag Hammadi in the 20th century see Mary as a disciple who has a special relationship with Jesus and a deeper understanding of his teachings and thus a deeper spiritual comprehension than the male disciples. These texts are the Dialogue of the Saviour, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of Philip and the Pistis Sophia and here she is often portrayed in dialogue with Jesus and his disciples both before and after the resurrection.

She is however most prominent in the early 2nd century Gospel of Mary which more than any other early Christian Text presents an unflinchingly favorable portrait of Mary as a woman leader amongst the disciples - indeed she models the ideal disciple- she steps into the role of the Saviour at his departure and comforts and instructs the other disciples. Further she imparts to them secret teaching she alone received from Jesus. While her teachings do not go unchallenged, in the end the Gospel of Mary affirms their truth as well as her authority to teach the male disciples. She is portrayed as a prophetic visionary and a leader among the disciples.

The Gospel of Mary argues that leadership should be based on spiritual maturity regardless of gender. This work gives us an alternate voice to the dominant one in canonized works such as 1 Tim which tries to silence women and insist their salvation lies in child bearing. While some of the early Church Fathers knew that the Gnostics claimed Mary as a leader this did not cause them to disregard her. Rather they too shared the idea of Mary as a leading disciple. The 2nd century church father Hippolytus sees Mary and the other women disciples as symbolizing the new Eve, the faithful woman who reverses the sin of the first Eve. They represent her as the Bride of Christ, the Church, a role given by other Church fathers to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This high regard continued for Mary Magdalene in the 4th and 5th centuries amongst the Latin fathers like Ambrose and Augustine.

Many legends became associated with Mary thru the years. One from the Eastern Church saw that Mary was a prostitute because of her frustrated love for John the theologian. According to this story she reformed when she came to love Jesus as much as John did. Another Eastern tradition sees that she joined Jesus' mother and John in Ephesus to become martyrs or that she retired to the desert and became a role model for women's hermetic life.

Western Christians give Mary further adventures – French medieval tradition believed that Mary fled from Palestine to France with her brother Lazarus and sister Martha (conflating her with Mary of Bethany) where Lazarus became the first bishop of Marseilles; Martha overcame a dragon that was ravaging the area and Mary converted the king and Queen of Southern Gaul and thereby became the apostle to the Franks. A widespread cult of Mary arose in medieval France and she was exalted as a preacher whose evangelizing career was foundational to the faith of the Western Church. In the last two hundred years and particularly since the Gnostic gospels were discovered there have been consistent claims in numerous works which see that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus who did not die on the cross and with whom she had several children.

By the 3rd century Christianity was one of the major religions of the Roman Empire – the main Christian centres were the Latin speaking centres of Rome and Carthage and the Greek speaking centres of Alexandria and Ephesus. Rome continued to remain comparatively obscure but within 100 years it attained the dominance that characterized it for centuries.

The role of women remained diverse from place to place, but the options of teaching, preaching, and liturgical roles slowly began to be removed. From the time of Paul there had been Orders of Virgins and Widows and women had been deacons. A gradual removal of status for women deacons to deaconesses occurred so that they were given a far less important role with the eventual removal of clerical status. Deaconesses could minister only to women and were allowed only to give instruction to adolescents and children as opposed to the official task of teaching and baptism they had once performed – they were relegated only to assisting the male clergy in baptism. The Order of Virgins could engage in some instruction within their own communities but by the 4th century this order had merged with the Order of Widows in similar communal institutions that had been instituted for monks. In time the deaconesses also merged into the monastic communities, which often they led. This eventually reinforced the aesthetic emphasis which grew that celibacy was the ideal state and the Virgin Mary, designated as the Mother of God, as the ideal woman. By the 11th century deaconesses had disappeared from the Western Church.

We first learnt of the Order of Widows in 1 Tim and they obviously went about their work in the Christian communities but from the extent of the texts about what they were not allowed to do they were probably usurping the role the male leaders felt was their own. The most frequent admonition to the widows was to stay at home, pray at home and act like the altar of God. What Widows seemed to want to do more than anything else was to teach. The Church Father Origen gives one of the clearest denunciations of this role:-

'It is improper for a woman to speak in the assembly no matter what she says; even if she says admirable things that is of little consequence since they come from the mouth of a woman'.

As the rights and duties of the male clergy became more clearly elaborated it is clear that no encroachment on these rights was to be tolerated. The removal of the last official teaching role in the Church saw teaching now take on the form of dogma couched in allegorical biblical language and in the theological language formulated by Tertullian, Clement and Origen.

It needs to be emphasized that the elimination of women from official roles of institutional leadership did not eliminate women's presence and importance to Christianity although it certainly seriously damaged their capacity to fully contribute. From here on the voices of half of Christianity are silent. Almost everything we hear about the voices of women is negative. The equation of women with Eve and therefore with sin is partially responsible for this. But also the growing evidence of hostility to the body serves to equate women with carnality. This attitude can be concealed to a point behind the Church's teaching of the spiritual equality of the sexes but there was no attempt to translate this equality into any kind of structural form. In fact the opposite happened and the roles and status of women seen in the NT literature was forgotten. Therefore what began as a movement that at least offered dignity and a role for women ended up as an organization that was almost totally male-orientated.

Hence later theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas could wonder why God had created women at all. Augustine has been overwhelmingly influential in Christianity, perhaps the most influential theologian after Paul. Apart from his theological pronouncements it was formulation of the concept of the Just War and his model of torture as a militant bishop and persecutor of heretics that was later copied. Augustine saw all sexual intercourse as sinful and responsible for the transmission of original sin. His belief was that lust was the major sin and enemy of men and this attitude came to dominate Western Christianity, even though there were other theologians who saw that other and more dangerous sins were pride, anger, greed and resentment.

So with the continual emphasis on celibacy from the 4th century the only women to play any influential part in mainstream Christianity until the 19th century were virgins and celibates. In opting for celibacy women did stand a chance to organize their own religious lives but this accent on asceticism condemned all other women to an ignominious second choice in marriage. Nevertheless women did not leave the Church and indeed as we have seen in our own time were responsible for most of the charitable work that Christianity extended to its followers and others in distress. Christians ran a miniature welfare state in the Empire. The Emperor Julian commented on the Christian women who were workers in charitable endeavours. These unsung, unknown thousands of women quietly continued to live the Christian life, bringing up their children to do likewise. The problem is that history until recently has never seen these activities as worthy of much attention.

Early in the 4th century the Emperor Constantine in the Edict of Milan, made Christianity a legitimate religion of the Roman Empire; by the turn of the century it had become the mandated religion. As one of the most decisive events in world history, this apparently amazing phenomenon came about because of the events at the Milvian Bridge when Constantine had a vision that he associated with Christianity and

which he believed led to the defeat of the usurper Maxentius. No single event since the crucifixion of Jesus was as influential for Christianity as the apparent conversion of Constantine. The triumph of Christianity is a remarkable phenomenon – in three centuries a group that originated in the backwaters of the Roman Empire took over the Empire as the official religion – in fact the only religion tolerated by the end of the 4th century. Jesus the leader of this group, who was crucified as a public criminal by the Romans wound up as the God of the new Christian Roman Empire. Constantine became the embodiment of the righteous king. Once he consolidated his position by conquering not only the West but the East as well – where there were more Christians, he was in a position of having a theology of government he could use to consolidate his own power. One of the first things Constantine did was to start persecuting other non – orthodox Christians and Jews. As the source of authority Constantine initiated the councils that decided what a true Christian believed in Christology, Trinitarian theology and church organization. He instituted a new Eastern capitol of Constantinople, the patriarch of which became one of the five patriarchates in Christianity and which became the capitol of the Byzantine Empire of the Eastern Christians.

In 325 Constantine called a council of the church to meet at Nicaea to specifically target the non-orthodox teachings of Arius. The basis of Arianism was that there was a time when Christ did not exist. That is, he was not equal to the Father. One of the great problems with the Christological and Trinitarian controversies, which arose, came from the moving from Greek to Latin and vice versa. The Greeks further considered the Latins as amateurs in theology and in general as barbarous and ill-educated people. By the middle of the 4th century most of the Eastern church was Arian in outlook and the resolution of the nature of Christ at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was supposed to end the controversy – instead it enormously strengthened the controversy between East and West and further helped the conversion of many, many Christians conquered by Islam several hundred years later, to whom the simple monotheism of Mohammed appealed.

As Christianity became the universal religion, inertia and laxity seemed to take hold of many as power and wealth penetrated the Christian world. From the late 3rd century, men and women had been flocking to the deserts in an unprecedented retreat from the world to live an ascetic life of spiritual freedom. The monastic tradition came to dominate the 4th century both in its rural and urban expressions. Monasticism was partly a continuation of gospel traditions but was also a protest at the corruption of the teachings of Jesus and the rise of clericalism – all of which was exacerbated by the theocracy which now emerged in the Roman Empire.

The early order of Virgins we have already met and these were composed of women who lived quietly and modestly in their own homes and met in groups leading a life of prayer but under no special rule and not in community. The first communities for women in the Western church appeared in Rome and Milan towards the end of the 4th century. This seems to have happened spontaneously with groups of women gathering around several extremely wealthy noble widows the first of whom were **Marcella** and **Paula** from 340 forward. These wealthy women disposed of their wealth and freed their slaves. They were related and Paula and her group learnt from Marcella the principles of the ascetic life. The evidence of these first women ascetics comes from the pens of Ambrose and Jerome. Despite the eminence, intelligence and holiness of these women we have no word of theirs. Therefore caution is neces-

sary in understanding the stories of these two male writers who both had an agenda to extol the ascetic life and who with Augustine a little later on saw it as the ecclesiastical solution to the problem of women.

Paula met Jerome who was one of the foremost scholars of the Hebrew Bible which he translated into Latin and he taught her nuns to sing in Hebrew. He and Paula were instrumental in setting up double monasteries of monks and nuns in Jerusalem. These were taken over by her daughters when she died. Her enormous wealth had made these institutions possible and of course it aided Jerome in his biblical work and translation. Marcella on the other hand engaged in the great theological arguments of the day and even the Pope consulted her when he ran into theological difficulties – of course it has to be remembered that many of the men in the high-ranking clergy of the time were initially chosen for their wealth and social status, not for holiness of spirituality e.g. Ambrose had become a bishop before he was even a Christian; Bishop Nectarius of Constantinople was also a layman when he became a bishop as was Fabian when he became Pope.

In the Eastern Church the two most famous women to found monasteries were **Olympias** and **Macrina**. Olympias (b 368) founded a house for consecrated Virgins in Constantinople when John Chrysostom was patriarch. This was time of great antagonism between the Orthodox and Arian Christians and Olympias had many difficulties as her convent was even destroyed by an Arian bishop. She was enormously wealthy and it has been estimated that she contributes the equivalent of 900 million American dollars to the church in Constantinople, which of course was extremely helpful to the church for its charitable works.

Macrina who died in 379 founded her own convent with her mother. Again from a wealthy family she had been trained in philosophy. Macrina was the sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa whose fame overshadowed her own achievements. With their cousin Gregory of Nazianzen they became known as the Cappadocian Fathers and were responsible for piloting the teaching on the Holy Spirit thru the Council of Constantinople in 381. Her brothers acknowledged their debt to Macrina and apparently she bullied Basil into the religious life. His famous rule which has been the basis for most Eastern monasticism was probably based on hers with its emphasis on strong leadership, close community and concern for the workers, the poor and the sick. By the 8th century there were 100,000 monks living under the rule of St Basil.

The Constantinian revival did not last for very long. The creation of two capitals made the Empire more fragmented politically and militarily. The sacking of Rome occurred in 410 by the so-called barbarians led by Alaric. These barbarians were Goths and Vandals who were in the main Christian Arians. They were really after food and land more than booty. Hence the environment the church now found itself in the West was not on the whole hostile. The Arians did not as a rule persecute and they were tolerant of Orthodox Christians and Jews. The Goths indeed respected many aspects of Roman civilization. The damage to the structure of Rome itself did not occur until the 6th century when it was repeatedly besieged and plundered. This occurred as the Emperor Justinian tried to reunite Rome with the East as its capital of Constantinople was untouched by the problems in the West. The destruction of classical Rome was the action of the Byzantines not the barbarians. The ruin of Rome was completed by Constans II who

stripped it of all its metal to be melted down for armaments. However this destruction was delayed long enough for Rome to survive into the new era of the Dark Ages and establish itself as the leading centre of Western Christianity. The dominating idea in the survival and rebuilding of the West, which took centuries to accomplish, was the authority of the Pope.

At its widest the Middle Ages or Medieval period is defined from the 4th to the 18th centuries. After the final destruction of the Western Roman Empire in the 6th century the Eastern Empire developed into a very advanced civilization, the Byzantine Empire. Christianity in the East extended its sway to many areas where the churches grew into distinct nationalistic structures. This difference with the West where the church was universal played a great part in the final schism between East and West when it finally occurred in the 11th century.

The early Middle Ages or the Dark Ages saw continual warfare and the number of Christians declined to the middle of the 10th century. This was due in part to the rise and conquests of Islam from the 7th century. The West was thinly populated because of war, famine, plague and commercial atrophy - it was all very primitive with the largest towns only having a few thousand people. In this period most priests, like the laity, were undereducated and barely literate. The individual was of little account and most people experienced Christianity through miraculous signs, relics of saints and ritual ceremonies. However the growth of Benedictine monasticism created centres of stability and learning in the war-ravaged lands and the period in the West before the 12th century can be seen as the Benedictine Age.

In these Dark Ages there were women who played major roles in Christianity. These Christian women were rich, powerful and aristocratic and through marriage to powerful rulers converted their husbands and by extension in those times, the population in each kingdom. Some of these women were **Clothilde** who married Clovis, the king of the Franks (6th century); **Bertha** who married King Ethelbert of Kent (7th century); and 30 years later their daughter **Ethelberga** converted her husband, Edwin of Northumbria.

Christianity in the British Isles had been introduced early on by the Romans probably in the 2nd century. This Church survived until the 5th century when it was cut off from the rest of Christianity by the Picts and the Irish. It had developed along different paths to the Roman version and monasticism was its cornerstone and bishops were consecrated to be holy men not authority figures. What we know of these times is mainly from the pen of the venerable Bede with some help from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. Palladius was sent by Rome to Ireland in 431 as first bishop and about the same time Patrick, an Englishman arrived and converted many in the North of Ireland. In the middle of the 500's the Irishman Columba founded monasteries in Ireland and then in Scotland at Iona- this became the great centre of Irish Christianity and moved on to Lindisfarne in Northumbria and then East Anglia. Another Irish monk Columbanus established monasteries in Gaul, Switzerland and Austria.

Celtic monastics had then gone to Europe and formed chains of monasteries, particularly in Germany. The contribution of women monastics in these conversion processes was invaluable. Abbesses such as **Walburga** and **Leoba** were trained with many other nuns as missionaries in Britain for the conversion of the Saxons in Germany. Many of the converted German princes instituted double monasteries of men and women in which they installed their female relatives as abbesses who ruled both men and women.

These abbesses often dressed as bishops with mitre, ring and crozier and as they were not strangers to power they assumed authority easily. Nevertheless every monastery of women was dependent on males for sacramental and liturgical ministry and there are endless stories of extremely hostile relationships between the men and women monastics.

In the British Isles and in Germany the years 600-900 were years of unmatched female influence conducted through the monastic system and aided by the much better treatment of women by the Celts and Germans than their Mediterranean counterparts. As long as the monastic system held sway over the episcopacy the role of women was promoted. It has to be emphasized that, with the Christian queens who converted their husbands, the influential women in monastic life were also rich, powerful and aristocratic. This is the only reason we have any evidence of their lives

The monastic institution served spiritual, educational and healing needs as well as acting as a safe house and providing general social work services. Women entered these institutions for a variety of reasons. Some entered at the age of consent – 12, later 15 years. Some children were offered to monasteries as a tithe. Unmarried daughters of the nobility were often sent to monasteries for safety as well as economy. Some of course entered because of a call from God. A dowry was required to enter and the social hierarchy outside the convent was repeated inside.

The type of Christianity which existed before the advent of Augustine, the first bishop of Canterbury, in the 6th century was that of the early Church Fathers before the rise of Benedictinism and the centralized role of Rome which had developed. The classical mind/body split which has dogged Christianity was less pronounced amongst the Celts e.g. the views of Pelagius (360-430) flourished amongst the Celtic monastics whose institutions had been influenced by the powerful asceticism of the desert and Eastern monks. Pelagius was later denounced as a heretic after his confrontation with Augustine of Hippo. Unlike Augustine, Pelagius believed that all creation was good and there was no such thing as original sin transmitted thru sexual intercourse- further he believed that unbaptized infants were not damned.

Celtic Christianity of the early middle Ages was characterized by a strong Incarnational Theology and nature appears as a theme to an unusual degree. Human creativity is seen in Irish art, like the Book of Kells, and Welsh poetry both of which stress the role of the imagination. There are positive and empowering images of women and indeed in the old Celtic culture there was a high degree of equality for women for the time. Christianity was syncretistic in combining aspects of the old Celtic religion with the new religion. The role of place like mountains and streams and birds and animals may reflect the old religious ideas as well.

In about 657 **Hilda**, the great niece of King Edwin of Kent, had become the abbess of a double monastery at **Whitby**. As we have seen these double monasteries were sometimes ruled by an abbot but usually by an abbess. The local bishop was subject to the ruler of these monasteries. Hilda didn't enter the religious life until she was about 30 years old and before moving to Whitby she had been the abbess of a small monastery at Hartlepool where she had gained a widespread reputation for her charity, meekness and humility, as well as for her extraordinary knowledge. When she moved to Whitby it was no surprise that it became a great centre of learning, one of the greatest in Western Europe. And as a major centre

of Celtic Christianity at least five bishops and endless numbers of scholars and theologians saw the monastery as their alma mater. The course of Christianity had not run smoothly since Edwin's conversion and it was a momentous time in the Christianization of Britain. There was unlimited scope for a woman of Hilda's talents and background, such as later Christian women have not enjoyed. Bede in describing her ability and holiness wrote, 'The splendour of her light lit up all of Britain'. Hilda and her houses followed the Celtic liturgy and rule but many other monasteries had been pressured into accepting the Benedictine rule. Hilda's zeal for learning led to the construction of a great library and she is credited with encouraging the first English poet, Caedmon.

It was at Whitby that the inevitable confrontation between the Roman and Celtic churches occurred. Hilda called a conference in 664 to help settle on a single monastic rule. Kings, queens, bishops, abbots and scholars attended. Hilda was a champion of the Celtic cause. Most controversy occurred around the dating of Easter and the tonsure of monks – seemingly relatively minor problems. The underlying debate was really about the power of Rome and the eventual Romanizing of the whole of British Christianity. The Roman side won and much bitterness resulted as the Celtic Church gradually began to die out. The monastery was finally destroyed by Henry VIII during the monastic dissolution of the 16th century.

Another English Abbess of enormous power was **Frideswide** (710-99) who was responsible for the origin of academic life at Oxford. While others like **Leoba and Walburga**, as mentioned, helped evangelise Germany through double monasteries set up where further missionaries were trained. Indeed the extent of these enterprises run by women has not been seen again in European history until our own time.

However the various edicts inspired by the Carolingian reforms, the Benedictine monastery at Cluny and Leo IX and Gregory VII in the 10th and 11th centuries insured the end of these powerful women's enterprises. The Cluniac reforms sought to reestablish the original ideals of Benedict which in many cases had become corrupt. These reforms dominated the church for two centuries. The Norman Invasion of England from 1066 coincided with the enforcement of the Cluniac reforms and it is believed by many historians that this combination was responsible for the loss of many rights English women had enjoyed in the previous centuries

While attempting to force the clergy into celibacy there was an insistence on strict enclosure for women who were now forbidden to teach. This was done in conjunction with a widespread denigration of women in religious life where they lost their power to choose their abbess and even their property was taken from them and sometimes handed over to male monastics. As well they could no longer take part in any liturgical activity and were confined to the convent – thus being deprived of any form of income which then resulted in them being blamed for their burdensome existence

Early in the 11th century the outlook in Europe as regards economic conditions, religious ideals and forms of government began to change dramatically from previous centuries. The pope assumed a new power of intervention and it then became natural to speak of the clerical hierarchy as the Church and thus the laity became demoted. The Benedictine Rule lost its monopoly in the religious life and an entirely new outlook was being taken in law and theology and several important steps had been taken towards understanding the physical world. Probably the most important factor was the expansion in eco-

conomic growth in the late 11th and 12th century. This expansion saw population growth and new villages spring up and for the first time in its history, Europe had a surplus population and surplus production and it rapidly developed a self-confident outlook – an outlook that did more than anything to break down the social and religious harmonies of the past age. The expansion of Europe had begun but we do not understand the causes of massive changes on this scale.

These factors help explain the development of the Western European push, spearheaded by Pope Urban II in 1096, to free the Holy Land from the Infidel. While this has always been seen as the major reason for the campaigns there were other factors involved. The most important being the acquisition of land for the burgeoning European population and in later campaigns the destruction of heretical movements. The stress in the West on violence was particularly strong; whereas the East tended to the teachings of Basil the Great who saw war as abhorrent – as of course did the early Christians who preferred death to resistance. This changed with Augustine of Hippo who as we have seen coined the idea of a justified and holy war ordained by God – and incidentally discredited the pacifist. Augustine related the concept of the just war to the destruction of the heretic; so that violence was not only justified it was meritorious,

There were seven official crusades altogether to the Holy land with several unofficial attempts like the Peasant's crusade, the Children's Crusade and the Shepherd's crusade which were all complete disasters. The Crusade Movement had wide reaching ramifications for many centuries as they were far more widespread than originally intended. Eventually every country in Europe was involved at some stage and every facet of life was touched. While the chief field of activity was in the East against Islam there was an enduring effect on the Western Islamic world and the Baltic.

We have seen over the centuries that even though women may be equal in holiness and ultimately in heaven and be so learned that priests seek their guidance, women were forbidden to teach publicly as their words of council and inspiration were to remain private. They were excluded from the public teaching of the church. However much their memory and even their relics were venerated as saints, their writings were not preserved as official tradition. The situation of women's lack of public teaching in the church continued throughout the Middle Ages and was renewed in the Reformation. Indeed it has only begun to be overcome in our own time.

Nevertheless from the 10th century and becoming a huge stream from the 12th to the 15th centuries we find more and more women's writings. This was in a variety of fields, not just letters and saints lives, but plays, theological treatises, guides to the spiritual life and above all in the later Middle Ages accounts of mystical experiences. More and more women began to commit their thought to paper or had this done by a male scribe. The reasons can be found in the institutions of female religious life where women learnt elements of Latin and their own language. They had libraries and scriptoria, their paintings and their thoughts were written down and copied and distributed to others. Although women could not officially be preachers they could be prophets as this was seen as revelatory experience. These experiences had to be validated by male religious authority, the higher the rank the better. When male authorities were divided on the authenticity of a woman's prophetic experience, the winner determined whether the writings were circulated, suppressed or even burnt at the stake along with her body. The question

was where did the revelatory experience come from, God or the Devil? And as in the case of Joan of Arc, which men had the power to make the crucial decision?

The most powerful woman in the Church in the 12th century was **Hildegard of Bingen** who is one of only three women ever to become a Doctor of the Catholic Church (the other two are Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Lisieux). She received the highest validation possible from the pope and thus was able to use her extraordinary talents as a prophet and abbess to whose sermons great prelates listened and from whom they begged advice. Hilda was the 11th child in a noble family and was given as a tithe to the Church at the age of eight and was cared for at the Benedictine monastery of St Disibod. Although she gained a thorough grounding in Latin she was mainly self-taught in developing her understanding of Christianity, music and language. She regarded her thoughts and spoken words as revelatory and also developed a secret language based on Latin which was used as a mystical form of communication when she became the abbess of her own convent.

From early childhood Hildegard had visions which occurred when she was conscious and began when she was a small child in conjunction with debilitating life-threatening illnesses. She kept them secret for 40 years until she was persuaded to write them down. These visions were recorded in books and covered the whole of salvation history from the beginning of creation to the end in heaven. To accompany the books she commissioned the painting of each vision at her direction. Modern interpreters of Hildegard have been struck by the way she always affirmed that her visions were a gift from God while discounting herself as a “poor little female figure”- physically weak, unlearned without status as fallen Eve. This however was the only way a woman at the time could gain a voice i.e. by going along with the subjugation of women because of their inherent inferiority and primary role in the Fall. As a prophet, authority was not seen to be in her name but she was the mouth piece used by God, despite her weakness. Once validated as a prophet by Pope Eugenie III Hildegard could and did speak with a thunderous voice to the greatest men of her day, although there was some opposition. Many sought her out humbly however to ask for her prayers and insights about the future.

Apart from her visions, Hildegard was extremely gifted in music, language, and science; as well she had enormous will power to contend with the many battles against powerful ecclesiastics. When God spoke to her he addressed her as a human person not as a male or female, but nevertheless Hildegard's concept of gender in creation and the fall is difficult to work out. It seems as if she subscribed to the subservience of women in marriage as they were physically weaker and in need of protection. Also as the male was seen to be the sower of the seed in conception and woman only a nurturer, this dictated an hierarchical social order so wives must obey their husbands. This difference continued in the Church and women were thus excluded from the priesthood. Nevertheless on a cosmic level she saw that both men and women were equal. Interestingly she held that class hierarchy in society was quite acceptable. Further she held that those who married, although capable of redemption, were of a lower order and would live in a lower part of heaven than the celibates. Not surprisingly she strongly encouraged Pope Gregory's reform that tried to impose celibacy on the priesthood.

Her theology of the feminine was seen through her use of the universal church as female the divine figures of wisdom and charity. This gave her nuns a religious ideal which did away with female inferiority

while not offending the orthodox view. Between 1158 and 1170 when in her sixties and seventies she conducted four preaching tours throughout Germany mainly denouncing clerical corruption and calling for reform. So through using the model of the weak woman who prophesized she was able to teach, preach and write without offending male dominance.

The 12th and 13th centuries were times of religious revival characterized by the desire of many to live close to the apostolic ideals of poverty, chastity and service to others. As we have seen the celibacy and worthiness of priests had been emphasized by Pope Gregory VII in his reforms of the previous century. New religious orders for men arose in response to these ideals but the opportunities for women had become limited. Convents attached to the new orders grudgingly begun to accommodate the large numbers of women clamouring to enter the religious life but by the end of the century it was ordered that no new convents were to be opened for women. A long campaign to discipline nuns was undertaken and a regime of strict enclosure was enforced. Nonetheless the aim to restrict the institution of new communities failed and by the end of the Middle Ages there were nearly as many women as men religious on the continent.

From the 12th century the secular rulers had been burning those who refused to acknowledge Catholicism. Alarmed by the heresies springing up in the Church, particularly the Waldensians and the Cathars, the authorities abandoned its opposition to capital punishment. As a result the permanent tribunal of the Inquisition was established and this came to be run by the Dominicans. While many countries would not admit the Inquisition, it became almost a national institution in Spain where it was controlled by royalty.

In the 13th century the Franciscans and the Dominican Friars were instituted and dominated theological thought. Both the Franciscans and Dominicans played a large part in the universities of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford. This shift of scholarship from monastery to university excluded women and brought a decline in the educational standard of nuns.

The thought of St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was mainly occupied with the brotherhood of all creation. Further he held to a concept of the individual worth of all humans, an idea in its infancy at the time. Many of his followers tended to see his vision of freedom in poverty as a new religion and consequently the church was very keen to absorb and control his thought. Further it was seen to be a counter to the heretical Waldensian Movement which held to the same concept of poverty and humility. His disciple, **St Clare** (1194-1253) appears to have caught his spirit more than anyone else. St Francis turned to her for advice on more than one occasion and she was one of the few people he spoke to concerning the stigmata he had received. Clare began a religious community using a Rule of Life she drew up following Francis' concept of absolute poverty which after much animosity was finally accepted by the pope. Her rule is seen as a unique document and an expression of individual freedom.

The two main heresies from the 11th century in Europe, the Waldensians and the Cathars or Albigensians allowed women a far greater role and status than did the Catholic Church. This situation is of course reminiscent of earlier heresies particularly those of Gnosticism. Like the Gnostics the information we have of these sects is mainly found in the polemic against them as their writings were burnt with

their followers whenever possible. The Waldensians began in 1173 and were followers of Peter Valdes who advocated the apostolic life of voluntary poverty and preaching the gospel. At first this group were sanctioned by Rome but were cautioned not to preach as that was a priestly prerogative. However they believed that the gospels could be preached by everybody and the proliferation of literature from about this time repeatedly condemned the Waldensians for the unauthorized preaching they advocated for all believers. An unauthorized layperson who preached was labeled a heretic and should be treated as the anti-Christ. An unauthorized woman who preached was all this and more – a threat to the social order of the state and church. Most of the Waldensians were wiped out by the Inquisition.

Catharism was the main religious dissent of the Middle Ages and was widespread throughout Christendom. Originally thought to have originated in unchristian beliefs, it is recognized today as a Gnostic Christian sect with Christian rites and origins. It considered itself to be the true church in opposition to the Catholic church of false prophets, ministers of evil and the Anti-Christ - all familiar themes we hear several hundred years later in the Reformation. The term Cathar was first applied in Northern Europe in about 1160 and it went under other names in different regions. Around Albi they were called Albigensians. The Cathars held to docetism i.e. Christ was not truly human; defiance of the papacy; a refusal to venerate the cross and holy pictures; a rejection of all Catholic sacraments; a simple blessing of bread instead of the Eucharist, and the practice of a single sacrament – baptism in the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. Women participated in the religious life and were allowed to preach to other women. The Cathars believed that women had received from Christ the ability, just as men had done, to absolve sinners by performing baptism in the Holy Spirit. Most Cathars led lawful and industrious lives and were known as Believers or the Elect. There was an organized group of ordained nuns and monks called Good Women and Good Men who both performed baptism - but the women only if a Good Man was absent. The concept of an hierarchical clergy was retained over men and women who lived in religious communities and took the usual vows of poverty, chastity and abstinence. Unlike Catholic nuns the women were free to come and go as they liked, so they had a pastoral mission to the poor and sick and usually offered accommodation and meals. Some community houses were run as hospices and almshouses.

The Cathars were being burned in many areas in France, Holland and the Germany of today. The main Cathar area was that of Lanquedoc where the territorial princes tolerated them and their ministry. Hence it virtually became the established church in this area. This changed in the social and political upheaval that followed the Albigensian Crusades to wipe out the Cathars (1209-29), the ensuing conquest of the French and the arrival of the Inquisition after 1233. The Albigensian Crusades were conducted with unbelievable cruelty by disreputable soldiers who were given a plenary indulgence for forty days service, plus a moratorium on their debts, with the possibility of the redistribution of the heretic's lands among the crusaders. The Movement finally disappeared in the 14th century.

In the 1230's loopholes were closed in canon law by which abbesses had exercised elements of pastoral office and thus great power as we have seen. Women were strictly forbidden from public teaching and preaching, touching sacred vessels, censing the altar or taking communion to the sick. The male laity were also banned from preaching in 1234, while the reasons given for the ban on women was set out in a manual in 1277: - (1) Women are lacking in sense (2) they are inferior and subject to men (3) If they

preach they promote lust (4) they are forbidden to preach in memory of Eve who first preached and caused the downfall of the whole world.

These reasons although not new had been promulgated by the most famous and influential Dominican of his time, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) whose theology has been of great importance in Catholicism ever since. Aquinas viewed women as more swayed by passions and more prone to lust than men. This view affects Aquinas' Christology and view of the priesthood i.e. Christ had to be male to represent the headship of the New Adam because only the male possesses complete humanness of soul and body. He further used the recently rediscovered philosophy of Aristotle in his theology. The Greek thinker had an extremely derogatory attitude to women whom he considered to be not only deformed males but inferior in soul, mind and will as well and as a consequence he questioned the reason for their existence. Admittedly while incorporating Aristotle's ideas, Thomas maintained Augustine's distinction between women's equality as image of God in her inner nature and her subjected status as woman in her pro-creative role.

So it can be seen that activities of a woman like Hildegard in the previous century, even though acknowledged as a prophet, becomes hard to imagine 100 years later. In the mid 14th century, Catherine of Siena did intervene to end the French Avignon captivity of the pope but she did so in a private matter by audiences and letters.

Despite the restrictions placed on the foundation of new religious orders at the Lateran Council of 1215, there remained increasing numbers of women seeking to live a religious life of apostolic poverty and service in the cities. **The Beguine Movement** appeared in the Low Countries with dispensation obtained by the pope early in the 13th century and were able to spread as far south as Cologne and Strasbourg and also to the German-speaking east. These women were not enclosed but adopted poverty and chastity while performing works of charity and were particularly associated with Leper hospitals and schools. The Beguines did not follow any established rule and the life they led, living from the work of their hands, was hailed by the theologians of the time as the perfect form of the Christian life. The development of this movement was part of a desire to democratize religion, a realization that Christianity was properly a way of life accessible to all.

The Movement gradually died out after much male opposition and suppression. However because of the inconsistent policies of the popes some communities continued in the Low Countries and the Rhineland until quite recently. The life-style of these women led in general to the development of a spirituality that was of the world and they all wrote in their everyday language. Many of the early Beguine writers' spiritual orientation was to mysticism and so most of the early writings of these Beguines were mystical texts that showed a greater spiritual inwardness than allowed by the church. In this mystical literature, God could be either male or female.

The concept of mysticism is to find God within oneself through a process of self-emptying or self-abnegation and contemplation. Mystics had to be very careful with their descriptions however as even Meister Eckhart, one of the most famous scholars of his day, was denounced after his death. The problem from a clerical viewpoint is that mysticism really cuts out the necessity for any clerical intermediary

between the human and God. As a union with God was open to all it was seen as subversive as it freed religion from institutions and gave it a center in the individual.

All the mystics from the Rhineland were influenced by the thought of Augustine of Hippo and Eastern Negative theology, while the later Beguines like Mechtild of Magdaburg were further influenced by the romanticism of Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) a Cistercian and the most famous and influential monk of his day. While the Beguine works are entirely unsystematic and no new theological thought is expressed, they all use language to show that all speech about God has to be metaphorical. They articulate what many have felt, a sense of awe at the gulf which separates God from humans and the wonder of God's love. When images are used to speak of God there can be no pretense of absolute accuracy and no image should be regarded as a statement of fact. The problems many Christians have with the description of God as Father, fixing on it as implying the maleness of the Divinity, may be eased if that image is just one among many. Indeed many mystics, both men and women, speak of God as Mother or Parent.

From the 12th century there was a growing interest in purgatory. This caught the imagination of pious women who found a ministry to the suffering dead. This fulfilled their traditional role as mourners and they could offer their prayers, tears, illnesses and ascetic feats for the salvation of their loved ones. Later they could buy indulgences to this end. Purgatory was traditionally a place of suffering as punishment and forgiveness entered by the elect before they entered heaven. The martyrs in the early church, like Perpetua and Felicitas, were seen as the first witnesses to purgatory and the martyred by their prayers have a special right to deliver the helpless dead from torment.

Hildegard wrote a whole book devoted to purgatory and the Beguine movement became very involved. Their 13th literature emphasized prayer for those in purgatory as a central obligation. Mechtild of Magdaburg, who we will look at next, saw that the gifted soul should work for sinners and those in purgatory as well as the needs of all the living and the dead. Mass was seen as the most effective weapon for those in purgatory which of course only male clerics could perform. Buying masses as indulgences came to be an enormous source of income for monasteries. The Crusades were also seen as a form of indulgences, even for those in hell not just in purgatory.

Mechtild of Magdaburg was born about 1208 into a noble family in Saxony. She made the point more than once in her writings that she was unlearned. This meant that she knew little Latin and had no training in theology, which might invest her word with religious authority. At the age of 12 she believed she was greeted by the Holy Spirit which was her expression for the outpouring of divine favour and which continued daily for about three decades. About 1230 in her early 20's she went to Magdaburg to become a Beguine. In her 40's she obeyed God's command to write down her visions but we know little of her life as a Beguine although there is some evidence that for a time she was the superior of her community. As she suffering through periods of sickness, she reacted strongly to criticism and threats against her book. All these trials she saw as an imitation of Christ the bridegroom's redemptive suffering.

Mechtild not only resisted those who challenged her visions but developed a general view of the state of Christianity of the day as corrupted by sinful clerics and religious which didn't endear her to them. She shared with Hildegard and the orthodox Christianity of her day the general assumption about salvation history. But where Hildegard's visions survey the entire sweep of these events, Mechtild's mysticism saw her concentrate on the intense intimate drama of the soul in its ecstatic flight to and union with God the beloved internally. To describe this love drama between the soul and God she used the mystical readings of the Song of Songs and the poetry of courtly love of the time. In the salvation drama of creation, the fall and redemption, Mechtild does not believe that women are in any way inferior to men in their spiritual nature. However like her contemporaries she accepts women's marginalized place in society as a given, but relates it not to divine punishment but to divine favour because women are less tempted by worldly power and far more likely to share Christ's suffering.

With **Julian of Norwich** we move to the 14th century thriving city of Norwich, England. We also encounter a third form of the religious life, that of the anchoress. We do not know Julian's real name and hardly anything of her life outside this enclosure. Her name was taken from the name of the church of St Julian to which her anchor hold was attached. She was born about 1342, probably to a prosperous family of Norwich. She must have developed a serious devotional life when young, as she tells us about three gifts that she prayed for – to see Christ's passion as if she were really present; a sickness to the point of death; and three wounds, contrition, compassion, and a full-hearted longing for God. Beginning on May 8 1373 when Julian tells us she was thirty and a half years old she experienced an answer to her prayers. For seven days she was critically ill and then she experienced the beginning of what she described as 16 'shewings' of Christ's dying on the cross, as well as God's relation to and love for us.

After having seen Christ's suffering in vivid detail until his death and resurrection Julian was transformed to health. Shortly after this experience she wrote down what she had seen and experienced as well as the interpretations that had been given to her and her reflections upon them. She spent the next 25 years pondering on her visions and writing a much-expanded text. It is not known when she entered the anchorage but it was probably after the visions, as the solitude of the life would have enabled her to concentrate on her analysis of these profound events. As an anchoress, Julian was enclosed in a room attached to the church for the rest of her life, never to emerge until she died. But it was not an isolated or miserable life. A window into the church enabled her to participate in the liturgy and another window into an attached parlour allowed her to counsel many who came seeking her advice and prayers, one of whom was Margery Kempe another famous mystic. The local religious authorities provided her with simple but adequate food and clothing. So Julian's main task was to construct her own self-disciplined life of prayer and meditation.

Like Hildegard and Mechtild, Julian felt the need to justify her extraordinary visions and her writing as a woman normally excluded from higher theological education and public teaching authority. Like her earlier compatriots she did so by denigrating herself as an ignorant, feeble and frail woman who nevertheless has been commanded by God to write of her experiences for the benefit of the whole Christian people; in other words these women described themselves as prophets, the only acceptable way of preaching for women. Yet Julian does distinguish between what has been revealed from God and her own voice in which she ponders on questions to which she has received as yet incomplete answers.

Julian asks like so many before and since, 'how can an all powerful and all-loving God have allowed evil to exist'? Julian sees that the Trinitarian God she comes to name as Mother, Father and Lord had created the world and everything in it and all that exists is good because of God's nature. Yet evil still exists! How can this be reconciled with divine goodness which is in all creation? Julian differentiates humans into what we might call essence and existence. As essence the human is completely good and united to God but in existence and given free will, humans fall into alienation from God and from themselves. This fall into alienation is woundedness for the human who assumes God is very angry for this failure. Julian insists this is not so and God does not blame us for our fall and never stops loving us. We are never really alienated from God or from our true nature. The condition for our restoration with God and our own true selves is through the suffering of Christ. To attain our full spiritual maturity it is necessary to experience this alienation from and restoration to God.

Despite her optimism the dilemma of evil remains for Julian. How can it be that all will be well when evil and suffering are everywhere? She has only to look around – in her time the Black Death killed perhaps two-thirds of the population of Europe and one-third of that of Norwich; there is a war between England and France that will last for 100 years; papal schism; the moral collapse of the friars is occurring and the monasteries degenerating as they became the greatest landholders in England. Further there were the first English heretics, John Wycliffe and the Lollards. Her solution is a typical one among the faithful i.e. try and forget the problem of evil and trust in God who is in control of everything and has a purpose. God will do a great deal and everything will be alright.

Julian treats Christ as Mother and in this she was supported by theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm, Aquinas, Clement of Alexandria and other mystics like Margery Kempe and Richard Rolle. This identification of Christ as Mother came from her identification of the 2nd person in the Trinity as the feminine Wisdom, and her understanding of the Church as Mother Church, the body of Christ – Christ is the Church, the Church is the mother, Christ is wisdom, and wisdom is the feminine. God is therefore Mother and Father. Therefore central to her views is that divine love is incapable of real rejection and will never cease and so she can safely say that 'all will be well'.

As one of the most famous English mystics, Julian was very sensible and unlike many continental mystics not given to incredible feats of asceticism. None of the other English mystics were either and perhaps this had something to do with their nationality! In her books, the first written by a woman in English, she gives no preliminary exercises for mystical union with God in the soul nor does she describe the ultimate ecstasy of this union as many others have done. Perhaps this was because she was only concerned with telling God's revelation which when it was gone left no sign or token. All that she describes is faith that leads by prayer into the actual experience of oneness with God.

Over the last centuries of the medieval world there was a change that has earned the name of the feminization of Christianity. This was a movement more of heart and soul than of religious institutions, although these too were involved. It emerged most deeply not only from the mystics but as well from the painters and poets of the Renaissance. This move did not abrogate the male-centred values of Christianity but it did complicate them. Despite the papal bulls, the burnings and persecutions, late medieval Christianity heard an unprecedented range of female voices. This was not because these women

were on some sort of a feminist push, but because they were devout Christians. This movement disappeared in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Nevertheless there is undoubtedly an undercurrent through the ages, of women and men's desire for a feminine version of God. This led to the veneration in some sects of the Virgin Mary as a goddess; the Holy Spirit as female and attempts to have a divine mother in the Trinity. It has often been argued that when the concept of the Holy Spirit as feminine fell away as we saw in the very early days, the cult of the Virgin replaced it and Mary became the third divine person as Theotokos or Mother of God. A new devotion to the Virgin came about in the 13th and 14th centuries in conjunction with an emphasis on the infant Jesus and Christ's humanity. The Christian devotional life became more centred on the Eucharist, and this has often been seen as inspired by women mystics. We have seen the concept used by Julian of Norwich of Jesus as Mother and male religious authorities also using maternal imagery. The one who used this imagery more than any other was the 12th century figure, Bernard of Clairvaux. He used Mother to describe Jesus, Moses, Peter, Paul, bishops and abbots. Christ who saves through his blood was likened to a mother who feeds a child through milk.

So it can be seen that it was not women who originated female images of God, nor women writers. Therefore there is no need to assert that the feminization of God is a feminine insight. Moreover it is not clear that women are particularly drawn to feminine imagery, although this is usually assumed. In fact women may have been less attracted than men to devotion to the Virgin as it does seem that monks were more attracted to female imagery than nuns who preferred symbols of the baby Jesus and adolescent Christ.

A correlation has been attempted at times between the abundance of female images and real opportunities for women and it has been argued that here a real distinction is lost. That is that the female (woman) and the feminine are not the same. The former is a person of one gender; the latter may be an aspect of a person of either gender.

Part 2

From the early 14th century great opposition and complaints about the church and the papacy began with demands for their reform. In England this saw the emergence of John Wycliffe (1320-1384) who believed that the secular ruler was superior to the pope. This naturally pleased the English rulers at the time and gained him their support. He promoted these and other views which anticipated many of the key-doctrines argued against in the Reformation e.g. transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, consecration of relics, prayers for the dead, pilgrimages, images, warfare and confession to a priest. The two chief teachings of Wycliffe were the emphasis of preaching over the sacraments and that the Bible should be in the hands of everyone in their own language. Consequently he organized a translation of the Bible into English for the first time.

As he gathered followers to his cause he began sending out lay and clerical preachers, the Lollards, to promote his views. These supporters with their leader were blamed for the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Although Wycliffe remained untouched, many of the Lollards were burned as was his exhumed body several years after his death. While many women joined this Movement and helped distribute literature

there is also evidence of a female network teaching Lollardy to family members and neighbours. Women thus helped Wycliffe's views to survive and 100 years later his concept against the subordination of the English Church to Rome started to blend with those of the continental reformers.

Jan Huss (1369-1415), the Bavarian, was almost exclusively influenced by Wycliffe despite the presence of earlier Bavarian reformers. He became the spokesman for the Czech people against the predominance in the government of Germans. He therefore became involved in conflict with the church as well as the state. Hus spoke against indulgences directly using Wycliffe's thought that humans obtain forgiveness of sins not by indulgences but by real repentance. Excommunicated and persecuted by the Church, Hus and his followers tried very hard for reconciliation but in 1414 he was tricked into attending the Council of Constance where he was condemned and burned to death. Among his last words are alleged to have been 'In 100 years God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed'. His death initiated the Hussite wars from 1419-36, which the Hussites only lost because of disunity among them. This led to religious instability in this region so that it was here that the 30 years war over the Reformation later began in 1618.

All the problems the Church was having with dissenters led to the conclusion in the minds of many by the 14th century that something new and dreadful had appeared – diabolical sorcery, the single greatest threat to Christianity. It was believed that the Devil with his evil angels residing in the earth's atmosphere caused all manner of strife – famines, wars and plagues – and witches were his handmaidens. The early organized heretics like the Cathars were seen as devil worshippers. The burning of witches was an appalling outcome of the Church's bid for control. Catholicism was not alone in this regard as the Protestants later also burnt their fair share. The numbers of witches burned or executed over several centuries is difficult to ascertain but perhaps between 40,000 and 100,000, mainly women. They were almost certainly innocent people who were tortured, confessed and burned usually having been turned in by their superstitious or vengeful neighbours. It has been suggested by 20th century feminists that witch burning was also an expression of misogyny and a way to keep women under control– but on the other hand, witches were usually denounced by other women.

The close of the Middle Ages was a time of intense religious life when people were desperately looking for the assurance of salvation. Worship services increased enormously; astrology was universally popular from the pope and kings down; there was great demand for religious literature and for works of comfort in the face of illness and death; the veneration of the Virgin and the Saints increased. – Mary was depicted as part of everyday life and close to people; an increase in pilgrimages also took place to Rome and Palestine if possible and otherwise to the places where relics resided and local miracles had occurred. Overriding all these endeavours was the indulgence, the decisive way of securing salvation - and individuals and families bought and gathered as many as possible.

Nevertheless the need for reform was widespread amongst the upper clergy and educated laymen. In the 15th century attempts were made to reform the papacy. This was undertaken by councils of bishops that believed they were superior to the papacy. There was even a brief reconciliation with the Greek Orthodox Church, which broke down very quickly. The outcome was that the papacy triumphed over the councils and the idea of power sharing they had promoted was defeated.

A movement of immense importance of the Renaissance at this time was that of Humanism. This Christian Humanism was concerned with scholarship, the dignity of humans and the importance of the individual. This was in complete contrast to the concept which had prevailed for millennia of the primacy of the community. This movement developed in the northern Italy cities and its spread was greatly assisted by the invention of the printing press. It was particularly influenced by the rediscovery of the great thinkers of the ancient world, like Plato, Homer and Aristotle whose work had been protected by the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations. With the arrival of these ancient Greek works came the New Testament in its original Greek and many mistakes were discovered in the old Latin translations. This so-called New Learning held that through greater knowledge a purer spiritual truth would be found. The uncrowned king of the humanist movement was Desiderus Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). For nearly four decades his writings covered a huge field embracing the Christian life, education, the meaning of scripture, the state of society and the church and the need for reform. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his works were circulated and he became probably the world's first bestseller. He was even offered a cardinal's hat by Pope Paul III – a generation later he was branded by Paul IV as the father of all heretics. If Erasmus could have foreseen the outcome of the reformers he may have toned down his condemnation somewhat.

THE REFORMATION

The Reformation blew apart an entire world order and led to long term changes and effects. It is seen to have begun in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses calling for reform to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Even though reform took a long time to filter through to most people, the changes which occurred in the Christian Church were awesome. Really there was more agreement between Catholics and Protestants in their ideas of reform than diversion and it has often been stated that if the movement had begun even 20 years earlier it may have succeeded and there would have been no schism. An outcome of the Reformation was that from 1528-1648 war was endemic with one brief respite in the first two decades of the 17th century. These conflicts were without any redeeming features and destroyed much Christian faith, human life and material civilization.

While the causes of the Reformation were multiple and diverse, the role of individuals in the process was pivotal. Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Melancthon and Calvin, the main leaders of the Protestant reforms disagreed amongst themselves nearly as much as with the Catholic Church. The reforming ideas of all the leaders of the Reformation, Protestant and Catholic were related to an inward religious experience that changed their lives and gave them incentive to alter the lives of others.

Overall given the divergence of opinion in the Protestant outlook, perhaps the major theme in its Reformation was the rise of the concept of the freedom of the individual which led to the reassertion of the role of the laity. Whereas for Catholicism it became the obedience to the Church in the centralized doctrinal authority of the pope, proposed by Ignatius Loyola. A most important reform running thru both movements was the creation of an educated clergy which led to the education of the people about the faith.

Clerical celibacy was probably the biggest single issue of the Reformation, as about half the clergy lived with women as concubines and their illegitimate offspring. Other issues of the Reformers were desire to have the Bible as far as possible in the language of the people; indulgences and reform of the papacy.

Women were not simply passive recipients of the Reformation and the changes it brought but responded to them actively. Swept up by the enthusiasm of the early years, single and married women often stepped beyond what were considered acceptable roles for women. Taking literally Luther's revival of the idea of a priesthood of all believers, women as well as uneducated men began to preach and challenge religious authority. These activities were viewed with alarm by civic authorities who even objected to women getting together to discuss religion. In their view women preachers clearly disobeyed the Pauline injunction against women speaking in Church and moved perilously close to claiming an official religious role. No German government forbade women outright to read the Bible, as Henry VIII did in 1543, but the authorities did attempt to stop them discussing it.

However the Protestants didn't break with traditional ideas about women, indeed they agreed with the concept of women's main role in the Fall and consequently the subjugation of women was thus inherent from creation. Luther for instance saw that the devil only approached Eve because he knew that Adam would have stomped on his head and ignored him. Marriage was seen as desirable for everyone against the classical Christian understanding of the superior state of celibacy. At times some Reformers, particularly Bucer, modified the hierarchical position of the husband and gave greater emphasis to the companionship of marriage rather than procreation as the central purpose of marriage. As the ideal moved from the clerical hierarchy to the family as the center of faith, the status of women, given their position as mother, must necessarily have increased their power. These patterns crossed Protestant and Catholic lines, particularly in England, where Catholicism was suppressed and meant the necessity of secret worship for Catholics in the home. So the responses of ordinary women to the Reformation, both Protestant and Catholic were similar and domestic – prayer, meditation, teaching children and singing hymns.

It is notoriously difficult to generalize about the changing status of women in any era, but particularly in the complex times between 1500 and 1700 in Western Europe and so the question as to whether the Reformation brought positive changes to the status of women is difficult. Although women continued to be regarded as inferior, both physically and mentally, in Protestantism the spiritual equality on earth of the sexes was emphasized and liturgically and ceremonially certain steps were taken in this direction. For example, the Catholic liturgy had differing baptismal services for males and female babies and this was abandoned in favour of one order of service. Similarly in the purification of women after childbirth in Roman Catholicism women had to wait 40 days for a male child but 80 days for a female. This was changed to the same length of time. Traditionally in RC churches women and men were separated during services, although this was not always strictly adhered to, and the move in Protestantism was to segregation due to social status where men and women sat together but this took over 100 years to institute.

It has been argued that the reformer's removal of the role of the Virgin Mary and saints from popular piety had a great effect on women because suddenly there was no role model for women in male-oriented Protestantism. This is debatable because by the end of the Middle Ages the cultic image of Mary

as almost an equal redeemer with her son began to be reduced as spirituality became more Christocentric – emphasising the humanness and physical suffering of Jesus on the cross. The image of this time became the Pieta or the grieving mother holding the body of her dead son. This was translated into that of the grieving parent of the adult son. It has been argued that this image made the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism far easier as did the humanization of the saints that was occurring at about the same time.

Women's status in this era, as indeed in any time, needs to be seen in the context of geographical region, social class and marital status. Particular changes such as the abolition of celibacy in Protestant areas, not only affected men differently from women but also affected different groups of women differently. Guardianship for adult unmarried women had died out by the later Middle Ages and consequently single women or widows could hold land in their own names, make contracts and represent themselves in court. This changed with the Renaissance revival of Roman law, which defined women as incapable of legal responsibility due to their imbecility. Early modern European law codes strengthened the subjugation of women to a male guardian, whether father, husband or other. Nevertheless the 16th century still saw a number of significant queens as heirs in their own right in Spain, England and Scotland who deeply challenged a European world that was generally narrowing women's political status. Of course this is a good example of the difference that social status confers on women in all times and places.

The Counter-Reformation had begun with the Council of Trent in 1545 in order to defeat Protestantism. Many bishops would gladly have conceded most of the Reformer's complaints if the council had been held 25 years earlier. However there had been a move to the right just before the council began and this was not to be. What emerged from the Council were training schools for clergy and new orders. The driving force behind much of the reform was the Society of Jesus begun by Ignatius Loyola. It was introduced early in the 16th century and was most instrumental in saving Austria, Bavaria, the Rhineland and Poland for the Catholic Church. The Jesuits greatest triumph was their missionary work in the Americas which then spread in the 19th century to many other parts of the world.

Like the Protestants the Catholics backed discipline and order. As a result illegitimate births were kept low, stage plays, cruel sports, fairs, dancing, ballads, disorderly funerals, Sabbath breaking, swearing and gambling were frowned upon by both sides. Both regimes burnt dissenters on an unprecedented scale and in particular female witches. With the exception of Zwingli all the Reformers were enthusiastic witch hunters, particularly Calvin. Wherever the Calvinists went, Scotland or the Americas for example, witch hunting followed just as it did on the Catholic side, particularly by the Jesuits.

The Protestant group who initially suffered most persecution by both the Reformers and the Catholics were the Anabaptists who believed in the baptism of adults as the only sacrament. In just 10 years 30,000 of them were executed. Anabaptism was attractive to many women and Dutch women were public participants in a number of eccentric activities. In a famous outburst at Amsterdam in 1535, a group of Anabaptists – seven men and five women - threw their clothes into the fireplace and ran naked through the streets. As a near contemporary reported, no more ghastly a spectacle was possible. When

arrested the Anabaptists responded that the truth had to appear naked – their dedication must have been very strong as it was mid-winter – they were all executed.

Although the legal status of women declined in the revival of Roman Law in the Renaissance, and Protestant women lost any option of a religious vocation distinct from marriage, it does appear that educational opportunities increased in both Protestant and Catholic areas. In England for example in 1500 only 1% of women could read but by 1750, 40% were literate (this often meant they could read but not write). Certainly the Council of Trent had stressed the need for a general education of the common people as well as the clergy and as a result religious orders of women arose, particularly in France for teaching and charitable work. The problem was that the Council had insisted on enclosure for all nuns and what eventuated was those not wanting enclosure were not to dress as nuns or take permanent vows, like the Beguines of an earlier time. The emphasis shifted from the enclosed contemplative to the cloistered nun who still had an outreach to the world. This later evolved into the simple vowed groups.

One forerunner of these groups were the Ursulines who formed early in the Reformation - they did not take permanent vows and were not enclosed. These women tried to educate whole communities which had little religious education, but by the 17th century they were forced to accept cloistering and teaching behind a grill. The English Catholic, **Mary Ward** (1585-1645), the founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Loreto Order, who modeled her work on the Jesuits, was another who tried to get un-cloistered communities of women recognized as nuns. This was unachievable in her lifetime. It took nearly three centuries of efforts for this to occur and was basically due to the disastrous effect of the French Revolution on the religious orders in Roman Catholicism – in the forty years after the revolution male orders decreased from 300,000 to 30,000. As a result these losses to the European church made religious instruction a high priority and women were encouraged to form groups of religious congregations without enclosure or solemn vows.

The pronouncement that women should keep quiet in church (1 Cor 14:34 and 1Tim 2:11-15) became more accented in mainstream Protestantism because of the importance of preaching. During the period of the English Civil War prophetic preaching and writing flourished amongst men and women. There were up to 40 well known women preachers active at this time, usually associated with the Baptists and other obscure sects. The heirs of this prophecy were the Quakers or the Society of Friends begun by George Fox in 1647. Twenty years later the Quakers spread rapidly to Holland, America, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. According to George Fox (1624-91) God exists in everyone and we must seek this life within ourselves and serve God thru our actions. If God is in everyone then all have to be treated accordingly – so there developed a theology with a deep respect for life and for the equality of all people who would all be saved by a gracious God. He saw there was no need for priests, liturgy, sacraments, sermons, prayers or hymns.

George was a mystic and experienced a revelation from God in the form of a voice speaking to him and from which his concept of the inner voice or light originated. He realized that there was no need for him to have a theological education because he could receive theological truth direct from within. So Quakers worshipped in silence broken only when someone felt the need to speak. Quakers didn't fight,

swear oaths or pay tithes to the Church. They lived simply with no frivolities like sport, theatre, jewelry, etc, Further they didn't believe in the death penalty and few believed in hell or eternal punishment.

Fox gathered followers who spoke the truth uncompromisingly to everyone- those in power included - a lot went to jail including George, some died in prison and others went to America. From 1662-1688 the Quakers experienced severe persecution. While imprisoned the Quakers suffered severe beatings, and dreadful jail conditions – the women suffered with the men and were often subjected to sadistic savagery because of their calm faith and determination and many were also accused of being witches. The name Quakers is supposed to have originated when Fox suggested to one of the many judges who sentenced him to prison that he should tremble at the name of the Lord. The judge sarcastically referred to Fox as a Quaker.

Margaret Fell was converted by Fox and when her husband died his estate became the center for worldwide Quakerism. She and Fox later married and in the spirit of his convictions George renounced all claim to her property. Quaker life encouraged literacy amongst its members and there was an active movement of women's ministry and they networked with one another through letters, journals and travel diaries. As well they wrote tracts defending their convictions and Margaret Fell wrote many of these. Quaker women were therefore preachers, missionaries, writers and leaders of women's meetings. Quakers saw that apart from spiritual equality, men and women were equal in creation and rejected the notion of female subordination. Initially the Quakers were farmers, artisans, shop owners and servants mainly from the north of England, who were loud in worship, quaked and wept and went into trances. A century later they had become a much more reserved group of industrious and relatively prosperous people. They helped shape the basis for a new benevolent human activism as crusaders for social and political justice. By the 19th century they were at the forefront for women's suffrage, abolition of slavery and pacifism.

The Moravian Movement (descended from Jan Hus and the Waldensians) under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf from 1722 was like its forerunner, the so-called Pietist movement, a reaction against the churches emphasis on orthodox doctrine and more emphasis on living the Christian life and prayer. This Movement, like the Quakers, gave women an exceptional measure of equality in which they undertook leadership roles, gave written and oral testimony and preached to other women. The Moravians instituted ministerial offices of bishops, deacons and presbyters and women were ordained to all except the Episcopal office. This was despite the fact that Zinzendorf shared the common belief that women had caused the Fall but he argued that their full worth and dignity had been restored by the fact that Christ had been born of a woman. However women were still subordinate to men in temporal matters, particularly married women. After the death of Zinzendorf in 1760, women began to be restricted in the speaking roles they undertook and lost much of their power, as also happened in the second stages of Quakerism. The Moravians joined in the expanding Protestant missionary endeavours that were emerging like the London missionary Society, SPCK (Promotion of Christian Knowledge) and SPG-(Propagation of the Gospels) which increased as the British expanded their empire. The Moravians went to the West Indies, Greenland, Africa and America.

In 1584 the first English colony had been founded in North America – Virginia. The following century saw many religious groups moving to America to escape persecution in Europe. The Pilgrim Fathers to Massachusetts in 1620, the Roman Catholics to Maryland in 1634 and in 1681 William Penn, a Quaker, founded Pennsylvania as a colony where there was complete religious freedom - an ethos that was to become a part of the culture of the US after independence. Women began to organize along the entire Atlantic seaboard with prayer meetings, Bible studies and charitable endeavours.

By the first half of the 18th century Quakers, German Anabaptists, Swiss Mennonites, Scottish Presbyterians, Calvinist Baptists, German Lutherans along with Anglicans and Puritans flourished in the American Colonies where religious pluralism prevailed. In these sects there was often more scope for the role of women in religion, but only in Quakerism did women preach. So in the American colonies the Quakers and their offspring the Shakers (Mother Lee) were sects in which women played important roles. Later the early Methodists too often gave women functions as preachers and leaders, whereas the Baptist church was where African Americans found their spiritual home. **Barbara Heck** (1734-1804) is seen as the Mother of American Methodism and she is an early instance of a woman affecting the organization of an entire church, not just working with her own sex.

From the 1730's there was a surge of revivalism in the American colonies known as the Great Awakening. This created Christianity separate from the state, not taking orders from Europe, in fact independent sects with democratic systems of church government and lay leaders. The most important expression of the Awakening was the role of the laity and at times laywomen as well as men denounced degenerate ministers and at times took over their parishes. During the American War of Independence from Britain, women took part in activities organized by the churches to support political freedom and justice. These efforts were a symbol of the protests that would become a major part of church women's work in the future.

It has been argued that Protestantism has had more influence than any other factor on the development of the distinct culture and ultimate democracy of the US. Nevertheless the much-lauded Declaration of Human Rights, which saw all men were created equal, really meant all white men, certainly not women, Indians or Blacks. This declaration was a product of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason which produced the belief in the power of the human mind against authority- secular and religious. By the end of the 18th century all the stock arguments against religion had been produced except the scientific that would emerge in the 19th century. The concept in Protestantism of a reasonable religion had developed with the evolution of a family spirituality with the idea of the wife as the husband's helpmate. As well the idea arose that middle-class women were more pure and chaste than men – a complete about face from the classical idea that women were the more evil and lustful.

By the early 19th century women in the United States were slowly gaining more status and more of a share in church life. This coincided with the so-called Second Great Awakening in American religious life. The holiness theologians in the USA taught that all men and women could achieve entire sanctification on earth and this allowed for the reconsideration of the long standing injunctions against women's authority in the church, because it did not regard original sin as the permanent state of humanity and thereby lessened the burden of Eve's sin. They also relied heavily on the Acts of the Apostles in which

women figured prominently. As a new climate began to emerge for the greater participation of women in society outside the home there also arose a Women's Rights Movement which came from female involvement in the anti-slavery struggle in the two decades before the American civil war of the sixties.

Among the supporters of the abolition of slavery were the first female lecturers in the USA, **Angelina and Sarah Grimke**. In their support for Abolition they also brought the concept of the equality of the sexes to the agenda in the 1830's. These two women were most remarkable in their era as they had been raised in the South in a prosperous slave-owning family but had become increasingly repelled by the treatment of slaves. They moved to Philadelphia and joined the Quakers who by this stage were downgrading the status of women as the movement became more "establishment". As well black members were forced to sit on benches at the back of the Meetings. As a result of these events the sisters left the Quakers but continued their efforts not just for the overthrow of slavery but also of racial prejudice. They firmly believed that women and men should have equal and shared moral rights in all spheres of society, both domestic and public. They argued that when the domination of one group of people over another is established then the status of the subjected group is reduced to that of property. From this the sisters launched the 'woman question' amongst the abolitionists, a question to be taken up by their successors.

The successors to the Grimke sisters were Quakers, **Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony** - they are the historical leaders of the women's suffrage movement in the USA. Lucretia Mott worked tirelessly for the cause which also became linked to temperance and pacificism which made her extremely unpopular. The turning point for her attitude to Women's Rights came when she attended the World Anti-Slavery Congress in London as a delegate from the USA and with several other women delegates was refused entry because of their sex - one of these was Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the two women resolved to form an organization to promote women's rights. Thus the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls was instituted in 1848.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton came to shift her Christian views to attack the Bible and Christianity as the primary tools of female subjugation and wrote a critique of the Bible to prove her point - the Women's Bible. This was an explosive work as it clearly condemned the Bible as a man-made book whose primary effect had been to justify women's subjugation - she saw that the greatest fault in Christianity was in convincing women that self-sacrifice was their greatest duty whereas it should have been self-development. Later a whole new generation of evangelical feminists such as **Frances Willard and Anna Howard Shaw** (the first woman ordained in the Methodist Church) repudiated Stanton's ideas and instead saw Christianity as the basis for women's equality and their basic moral superiority.

Other outcomes from all the new ideas and movements in the States saw Antoinette Brown of the Congregational church as the first woman ordained in the USA in 1853; while outstanding women who were instrumental in forming new Protestant denominations were **Mary Baker Eddy** and her movement of Christian Science and **Ellen G. White** of the Seventh day Adventist movement. Both these women were born in the 1820's in the New England area and as children suffered debilitating diseases that curtailed their education ;as young women they also both suffered from uncontrollable spells that left them unconscious for long periods and in which they saw visions. They both sought cures in vegetarian diets and

other fads like hydrotherapy which were extremely popular in the United States at the time. As well they both grappled with the meaning of salvation in this period of great religious revival

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) founded Christian Science or the Church of Christ Scientist and was widely recognized outside her church, although she had many detractors who thought her a plagiarist or stupid, a liar and an hysteric. But as Noel Coward wrote after denigrating her –‘in the minds of millions she had the status of a deity’. Mary also became interested in other fads like spiritualism and homeopathy. She was also very influenced for a while by the thought of Phineas Quimby who had a concept of mind over matter. As well as all her other interests she was also attracted to the Women’s Movement.

In 1866 she was healed of a serious injury as she read the account of one of Jesus’ healings in the NT. This led her to discover what she came to understand as the science of Christianity – Christian Science. She became a healer and a mind-reader and in 1875 wrote Science and Health, the textbook of Christian Science. This has been translated into 17 languages and sold 5,000,000 copies. Married in 1877 she gathered students around her and they called her Mother. While her talented students performed the healings she concentrated on teaching and theory and came to believe that all suffering was created by doctors and ministers of religion. Unfortunately she chose to have morphine when she had renal colic – a difficult event for her followers to explain, but they managed.

There was equality in Christian Science even though the organization seemed to favour men in powerful administrative positions. It was however a Church headed by a woman and most of its members and healers were women. Mary had no problems with male dominance in other areas because she believed that God was everything – Father and Mother, the creator of the universe in whose image humans were formed.

One of her last and greatest achievements was founding the Christian Science Monitor in 1908 – her 88th year- today this newspaper is respected around the world for its editorial integrity and news insight. In 1995 she was elected to the National Women’s Hall of Fame for leaving an indelible mark on society, religion and journalism.

Ellen Gould White (1827-1915) and her husband James were the followers of William Miller, a Baptist preacher, who between 1831 and 1844, launched the great Second Advent Awakening that believed Jesus would return in 1843 or 1844. When this did not eventuate Miller’s followers experienced what came to be called the ‘Great Disappointment’. Most who had joined his movement left but a few reinterpreted the biblical assessments and figured that what had been predicted instead was that Jesus would begin a special mission in heaven for his followers in 1844. They still expected Jesus to return soon, just as Seventh Day Adventists do today. Among the small group who refused to give up after the Disappointment were several leaders who rose to build the foundations of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Amongst these were James and Ellen White. Ellen grew into a gifted speaker, author and administrator who became and remained the spiritual counselor of the Seventh Day Adventist Church for seventy years after the Church came into being at Battle Creek, Michigan in 1863 - she was given the status of a biblical prophet because of her visions which gave heavenly messages regarding past and present events. In 1863 she had a special vision on health in which there was to be no meat consumed or stimu-

lating foods, alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Further she became very interested in modifying women's dress as she believed that strong corsets were bad- the dress code occupied much thought over the next ten years after which Ellen gave up because of the unpopularity of her views.

By the turn of the century vegetarianism had become the exception rather than the rule. Ellen herself resumed eating meat in 1881 and for her it didn't seem to be an issue. However on a trip to Australia in 1884 in an appeal against killing animals she reverted to vegetarianism and introduced an anti-meat pledge. Due to progressive revelation dairy products became allowable.

For the first ten years after the founding of the Church conversion was confined to the USA but after the outreach went worldwide the Church today is established in 209 countries and there are about 5,000,000 adherents.

At the time of Ellen's death only one other woman had contributed more to the religious life in America – Mary Baker Eddy. Yet the Adventist died relatively unknown outside her own church having never sought or received the worldly recognition given to the founder of Christian Science. Interestingly Ellen had little time for Mary whom she regarded as nothing better than a spiritualist. As we have seen the two women had much in common in their early life and their later search for cures of illness, while both succeeded in establishing distinctive churches. Despite these similarities they had basically different goals. Ellen White longed for a mansion in heaven while Mary wanted hers here on earth. Thus Mary died one of the richest and most powerful women in America, while Mrs. White lived her last days in unpretentious surroundings still waiting for the Lord to come.

The half century from 1870 in the USA to the winning of suffrage in 1921 saw some shifting in the ground for the struggle for women's rights. The focus became more an agenda to win the vote rather than a broad agenda of social transformation. The belief in civil rights for all was abandoned by some of the new suffragette leaders. Instead they argued that women should have the vote because of their moral superiority, which would help uplift society. This argument of course was racist and classist, as it supported the disenfranchisement of blacks and was hostile to immigrants. Thus by the end of the 19th century feminism in the USA presented a contradictory range of arguments about gender and religion. For some, Christianity was seen as the basis of women's emancipation, while others saw Christian patriarchy as beyond repair which must lead to the rejection of the religion. Some feminists clung to the belief in the essential likeness of men and women as the basis for women's equality while others combined claims to equality with a belief in female superiority. All these outlooks were to reappear in the rebirth of the feminist movement of the 1960's.

In England, the 19th century Established Church of England was to see the rise of Evangelicalism and the Catholic-orientated High Church, Oxford or Tractarianism Movement. These two apparently opposite poles of the religious spectrum were to profoundly influence the English Church at home as well as that established in the ever-expanding Empire. A major broad movement of thought in Europe in the early part of the 19th century was that of Romanticism. It was a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and was greatly influenced by then 18th century philosopher Emmanuel Kant. So the concept of Romanticism, of men such as Schelling and Schleiermacher, saw a world of thought in which feelings

were uppermost. It greatly influenced the Oxford Movement in England as well as authors like S.T. Coleridge and Walter Scott. However as the century progressed there was an increasing influence of evolutionary thought and scientific method that resulted in a vastly different world.

In the early part of the century women's status slowly increased but the sphere of women's influence still remained the family and few women worked outside the home except the very poor - indeed there were few openings for respectable women's work. The pervasive effect of the industrial revolution in combination with the evangelical concern for social reform brought about amazing changes in the perception and actual role of women in society.

In Germany the role of Deaconess was revived in Lutheranism early in the century, as it was in other mainstream Protestant denominations in England and elsewhere. As well there were calls for the equivalent nursing and social work organizations of women to undertake the sort of work Roman Catholic nuns had done for so long. This saw the creation of Anglican religious orders from 1845. All of this was part of a broader philanthropic movement which eventually saw hundreds of thousands of women become involved in charitable endeavours. In combination with a move to greater education for men and women and emancipation for men, other areas also began to open up for women in the world outside the home. The outcome of these events saw reforms to women's rights in the areas concerning their children, property rights and marriage laws. As higher education began to open up for women so did entry into the professions – and the serious push for female emancipation began.

An example of the charitable and religious fervour which gripped England in this century was in the work of the Salvation Army that invaded the streets of London in 1865, bombarding the working-class streets of London with flamboyant preachers and brass bands. The Hallelujah lasses, as the Army's women preachers were known, excited the most controversy. Salvationist women preached and assumed positions of leadership and authority when few Protestant denominations or other working-class organizations permitted women to do so. These women drew large crowds and helped transform the Salvation Army from a small London mission into the national and international denomination with the strong social service wing we know today.

The distinctive role of women had its origin in the work of **Catherine Mumford Booth** (1829-1890) who founded the Army with her husband, William whom she married in 1855 – both of them were from a Methodist background. She fervently argued for women's right to preach the gospel and became a respected independent preacher. Her interpretation of female ministry drew on Methodism and American Holiness teachings as well as her own class position and family situation. The Hallelujah Lasses followed Catherine's example but built on her work to transform the practice of female ministry.

Methodism, a denomination which was an offshoot of Anglicanism was usually made up of laboring people. It offered women unusual opportunities that included female preaching in the early years. Some Methodist women preached to mixed audiences with great effect in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. But as we have seen many times, once a sect became more mainstream women's contributions were devalued and by the middle of the 19th century few Methodist women preached.

In the new Salvationist Movement it was seen that women and men could be equally called by the Spirit to preach, indeed, women possessed the right to preach. Women were also permitted to be leaders and eligible for any office in the Church, as well as being able to speak and vote at all official meetings. Although Catherine never held any official position or rank she was known as the Army Mother.

The Army was a tightly disciplined, hierarchical order that demanded complete obedience from its members. Officers for example were often moved with no recourse and women's authority has its limits. This was because the Army, as did Catherine, insisted that women must obey their husbands, while at the same time endorsing their public religious authority. Joining the Army entailed learning to preach outdoor, sing hymns publically, guide penitents, hire halls and keep accounts – such work was an enormous change for the working class women who joined the movement- many of whom had been inspired by Catherine to join.

The Hallelujah Lasses used the culture they worked among, particularly that of the Music halls and theatres that surrounded them on the streets – they trembled, shook, shouted, rocked to and fro, clapped and fell into trances. They thus horrified many observers in a time when no respectable woman went outdoors without wearing a hat. In fact the view was widespread that they were completely disreputable. In 1883 then bishops of Oxford and Hereford asserted that Army Meetings encouraged immorality which resulted in illegitimate births. However the women were not deterred and went where others were afraid to go to rescue the bottom stratum of society, particularly prostitutes who were seen to be associated with disease, putrefaction and death, but who nevertheless performed a great social need in hypocritical 19th century Victorian society.

When Catherine Booth died in 1890, 30,000 people lined the streets of East London to watch her funeral procession. She was called the most famous and influential Christian woman of her generation. Her own preaching and ministry persuaded people of the value of women's roles. Salvationist women were part of a long tradition of non-Conformist radicalism that challenged both church and state. The Salvationists built on that tradition creating an alternative to the dominant models of female religiosity of the time in England.

The Suffragette Movement began in England in 1867 and was at its height between 1903 and 1914. It aimed to open opportunities for women to exercise their moral and spiritual influence in public. Men and women broadcast this message on the streets of London giving speeches, wrote in newspapers and were often involved in bloody confrontations with police and male hecklers. The suffragettes led by **Emmeline Pankhurst** and her daughters, **Christabel and Sylvia** saw the vote not as an end in itself but as the means to a purer, stronger and more godly nation. In her memoirs Emmeline directly acknowledged the use by the Movement of the revivalist methods of the Salvation Army and its philosophy of sexual equality and Christian Socialism. Women over 30 attained the vote in 1918 and many suffrage workers then moved into the long fight to allow women to preach and be ordained in the Anglican ministry. Even a few Catholics of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society argued that women should be allowed into the priesthood. These women recognized that the authority of preaching from a pulpit gave the opportunity not only to promote social and political reform but to critique and combat the deeply rooted cultural sources of women's subordination.

The improvement in the status of women in England and the US was mirrored in those Australian colonies that were well populated. Everything was necessarily on a much smaller scale given the quite different nature of the two societies, socially and religiously and the priority of the expansion and development of the colonies. The religious mix in Australia was quite different to that of England and although the Church of England claimed the largest number of adherents, Roman Catholics made up 25% of the population and there were proportionally far more members of Protestant churches. As the 19th century had progressed many women became involved in charitable works but nothing on the scale of the involvement of women in England. However this involvement tended to strengthen women's interest in politics and voting rights and the attainment of female suffrage occurred with far less struggle than in other Western countries. Between 1894 and 1902 all the colonies and the new Commonwealth granted women the right to vote, far sooner than in England or the US. It has been argued that the fact women were granted the vote with so much less fuss was due to the desire of the conservative politicians of the time to stop the progress of the newly formed Labor Party – it was believed that women would not vote for the Labor rabble.

Education had become a priority of the developing colonies and state aid was removed from the religious denominations school system and redirected to the public system. The Catholic Church had lost most by the withdrawal and as a result it developed a unique system of education in which virtually all its schools were run by women and men in religious orders. In the second half of the century the arrival of nuns from Europe, but mainly from Ireland became a flood. Many of these religious congregations experienced great difficulty with the clerical hierarchy - **Mary MacKillop** for example was excommunicated for disobedience for a time. The enormous contribution made by these women to Australian society and education has only been recognized in the last few decades as they have begun to withdraw from so many of their institutions.

While women were a large majority in the church congregations and worked enthusiastically particularly in raising money, they had no role in worship or government. Although many were involved in dedicated church work this was always under the control of men. One area where women often found an independent place in the Protestant denominations was in the overseas mission fields, where single women often found themselves in charge of mission stations and assumed roles of control in religious matters. At home female influence was wielded through the husbands as many women preferred this line of attack and still do.

The changing role of women in the churches coincided and grew in the early years of the suffragette movement and then not until after WW2 from the second feminist wave of the 60's and 70's. As we have seen in the US Women were first ordained in the Congregational churches from the 1860's. In 1926, Winifred Kiek was the first Australian ordained, also into the Congregational church. On the other hand Presbyterian and Episcopal churches, like the Church of England followed more slowly. Increasing secularism and disbelief in the West after WW1 had helped a move among Protestant denominations to ecumenism and the eventual creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

However it was in the 60's that in a religious sense and particularly a social sense a turning point was reached. There was a new global perspective, the second wave of feminism arrived and there was the

Second Vatican council from 1962-5. The latter has been a watershed for the whole of Christianity. For the Catholic Church the emphasis seemed to move from private devotion to concerns with global justice almost overnight. As well there was a call for the renewal of the religious life and many basic social institutions were also put under review including the church itself, marriage and the family. The ecumenical movement and then force of the growing influence of the laity saw a much closer relationship develop between all branches of Christianity.

The feminist movement of the 60's reiterated a much louder call than 19th century feminists for women to be considered for ministry in the church particularly the ordained ministry. This coincided in the Roman Catholic Church with a great decline in priestly vocations and the religious orders as well as the abandonment of the ministry by many men. As well from the 60's many women entered theological colleges and thru their studies realized the ambivalence of Christianity towards women. As a result women from different traditions began sharing these new experiences.

A milestone for women seeking greater freedom of ministry in the churches was the institution of the Commission on the Status of Women set up by the Australian Council of Churches in 1973. Unsurprisingly it emerged that although women made up the great majority of church-goers and were the ones mainly concerned with fund raising, they had little say in decision-making bodies. For example on the Sydney Anglican Synod there were three women representatives out of a total of 600 members. In the Methodist General Conference of 1972 there were 11 out of 89 lay representatives and in the Presbyterian Assembly in 1973, eight out of 226 elders were women. In the next 20 year this changed enormously so that in the Uniting Church in 1988 there were 92 females of 220 members of whom 37 were ordained ministers. In the Sydney Anglican diocese the number of female synod representatives had risen to 101 by 1988. The first woman was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1974 just before the formation of the Uniting Church from the Methodist, Congregational and part of the Presbyterian Church. In 1991 the continuing Presbyterian Church voted to exclude women from future entry to the ministry, although in some areas they can be elders. The role of Roman Catholic lay woman also expanded after WW2 and particularly after Vatican2. In 1986 the Catholic Religious orders in Australia formed a group to look at female ordination – Women in the Australian Church - this body amalgamated with overseas bodies in 1993 as the Ordination of Catholic Women. However given the complete rejection by John Paul II and the present pope, of the possibility ever of female ordination things seem to have reached a bit of an impasse. Nevertheless there is a strong Roman Catholic movement in the USA – the Women's Ordination Conference that works for justice and equality of women in the Church. They have been criticized as a white feminist movement of over-educated women who are very nuns. One nun a former head of the Loreto order and a lecturer at a catholic theological seminary believed "that it takes courage to be woman of integrity and justice and freedom in this church". One recent survey done in the Roman Catholic Church in US shows a strong majority supports the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The road to emancipation for women in the Australian Anglican church has been far more acrimonious than the process of obtaining the vote in secular society. The Church after all has its routines anchored in systems of thought which come from what is considered eternal and given, which is the opposite of

modern thought which sees that change is constant and accelerating, even if not always for the common good.

The movement for the ordination of women in the Anglican Church can be traced initially to the introduction of the Deaconess Movement into the English Church in the 1860's. But the role played by women in the mission fields, given their exclusion from leadership roles at home, is generally seen as the major force that led to the push for ordination. However lay women's participation in the government of the Church was essential to any movement towards ordination.

From fairly early in the 20th century an argument erupted over the status of the deaconess as a member of the threefold ministry of the Church. This inevitably led to a powerful argument for full ordination to the priesthood. However at the 1920 Lambeth Bishop's Conference it was affirmed that the deaconess was not a member of the diaconate and that ordination to the priesthood was out of the question – a position being raised by some of the newly enfranchised English women. This same conference affirmed that women could hold any lay office in the Church. Fifty years later another Lambeth conference acknowledged that the Order of Deaconesses was within the diaconate. Despite their weight in the Anglican Communion in the areas of faith and morals, the Lambeth conferences have no legal status. In 1969, the Australian General Synod rejected this proposal. A major concern of the clerical hierarchy was that the admission of women to the threefold order of ministry would spell the "death knoll" of the appeal of the Church to men.

An English report in 1972 that there were no theological objections to the ordination of women led to the galvanisation of those in favour of women priests. This saw the formation of the Sydney based, but Australia-wide group, the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) in 1983. It is of interest that those who oppose the ordination of women persistently claim that the movement to female ordination comes exclusively from the secular women's feminist movement – a movement that has been called demonic by some bishops and clergy.

After much controversy, both theological and constitutional, the first women deacons were ordained in Australia in February 1986 by Archbishop Penman in Melbourne. Most of these women were former deaconesses. This move opened the floodgates and since 1992 women have been priested in most Australian dioceses. Today the dioceses which don't priest women are Sydney, North-Western Australia, Ballarat, the Murray and Armidale on a limited basis. Wangaratta permitted women priests in 2007 while the Murray and Ballarat don't ordain women at all. By 2007, in the Australian Church there were 179 female deacons (45%), 412 female priests in the Australian Church (12% of 3,450 priests). In 2010, 28 of the 38 provinces in the Anglican Communion ordain women as priests while 17 have removed all barriers to women bishops.

In 2004 legislation was introduced at the Anglican General Synod for the creation of women bishops- the necessary two-thirds majority was not achieved. What did emerge however was support for the idea that parishes that did not support a particular diocesan bishop could be allowed to negotiate to join a bishop and synod outside their geographical diocese – Alternative Episcopal Oversight which had been mooted earlier after women were first priested. This conference changed this concept to ensure the authority of the Diocesan bishop to Alternative Episcopal ministry.

Archbishop Jenson believed that the church was at a precipice and stated that the 'no vote' for women bishops was not misogyny but submission to God's word – which was that women were equal to men but different and they should not have headship over men. In contrast to this outlook Archbishop Watson from Melbourne, formerly a Sydney bishop, told the Synod that in Melbourne there was wide-spread support for women bishops with which he thoroughly agreed.

Despite this earlier defeat, in 2008, the Church's appellate tribunal ruled that there was nothing in the Church's constitution against women bishops. Since then two have been consecrated – **Kay Goldsworthy** (Perth) and **Barbara Darling** (Melbourne). The other countries to consecrate women bishops are New Zealand and Polynesia, Cuba, the United States and Canada. In the United States **Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori** was elected in 2006 to be the first presiding bishop in the history of the Episcopal Church and therefore the first female primate in the Anglican Communion.

The debate over women's ordination has been bitter and it has been shown to concern the very essence of the Church, namely the nature of God. The opponents of ordination usually come from the opposite poles of the theological spectrum. The respective arguments against ordination revolve around two positions – the particular interpretation of select portions of scripture, or the nature of tradition in the Church. Some Anglo-Catholics are mainly concerned with the 2,000-year tradition of an exclusively male priesthood in which is embedded the concept of the maleness of God and the inferiority of women – this outlook we have seen throughout the history we have been looking at. Therefore only males can be representatives of God and his son in the Eucharist. Suggestions that the perception of God's maleness might be due to the influence of patriarchal culture in shaping both theology and language have been dismissed.

On the other hand, fundamentalist Protestants rely on selected passages of scripture to affirm the headship of males in every sphere of life (e.g., 1 Cor 11:3; 1Cor 14:34-5; Eph 5:22-3; Col 3:18-19; 1Tim 2:11-15). Although the push for ordination has often been ridiculed as an expression of Western radical feminism, the whole debate is not just one between the sexes. Men were the main advocates of female ordination and this is similar to the part they played in female education and the suffrage movement in the 19th century. Conversely many women either agree with the proposed theological objections or are happy in the role they had undertaken in the Church, wielding influence through men. Further like many men, not all women desire to undertake leadership roles and often dislike women who do.

The question of the way authority is exercised in the parish is one of the great concerns in the discussion of women leaders. The feminine proponents of ordination had hoped that women as clergy would move away from the hierarchical structures that exist in the various churches and move to a kinder, gentler church. This has not been the case and there have been no radical changes in worship or theology. At the present time most congregations seem to prefer a male but contact with women ministers tends to lessen this attitude. Mostly women leaders are found in small struggling parishes where they have to perform at a higher level than would be expected of their male counterparts. While older persons are usually more conservative on gender role attitudes, others see women as less reliable and less able to cope with the pressures of both home and job. The better-educated members of all congregations were found to be more responsive to female clergy. There are undoubted difficulties with women leading congregations and some find it too hard to persevere and certainly for successful outcomes traditional structures have to change. Obviously

the career path for ordained women is difficult and women clergy are still disillusioned about their future. It is a convoluted way forward towards eradicating the sexism, racism and homophobia that continues to permeated the church.

CONCLUSION

Christianity has always had a problem with women and the Church has continually reinforced sexism in society as well as in the Church; yet age after age women have flocked to the Church as fervent followers. Female subordination is one of the few universals to be observed in human cultures and egalitarian practices barely survived the immediate circle of Jesus and his friends. Despite the teaching of the church that through Jesus all people are equal (Gal 3:28), women have only ever been as equal as the common ideals of the broader society allowed. Therefore we have seen that through the history of the church the place and role of women has been diverse – from the way in which Jesus treated women through their gradual marginalisation as the church became institutionalised. The view that women were created subordinate by God took hold and intensified after the pronouncements of Augustine of Hippo despite the emergence of some powerful women in the Dark Ages. By the second millennium medieval thinkers and mystics drew at times on the concept of Wisdom to speak of the feminine aspects of God and this was expressed fervently by Julian of Norwich. The Reformation however continued Augustine's and Thomas Aquinas' views on women. This was particularly seen in the theologies of Luther and Calvin. It was not until the 17th century that the Quakers developed major changes in thought which nevertheless had no real effect on social thought until the 19th and 20th centuries.

It has been obvious as we have looked at the history that usually in heretical sects and marginalised new movements as indeed in the early Church, women had a greater role than in the orthodoxy of the time – a status which tended to be dissipated as these marginal movements, if they survived, became more mainstream.

In the case of women's speech there has been a fixed set of strategies through the centuries to silence them. This saw the moral character of women attacked and certain portions of scripture used to show that women's subordinate status was a part of the natural order. On the other hand, scripture was cited as well to support the legitimacy of women teaching and preaching. This was seen particularly in the command of Jesus to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:17-18) whereby she became known as the Apostle to the Apostles; and in the concept that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on women as well as men (Acts 2:17-18). Other passages seen as significant were the assumption in Paul's letters and Acts that women were prophesying and teaching. Appeals were also made to the life of Old Testament women like Deborah and Esther. Above all this was the belief that the Holy Spirit can at any time override any injunctions against women's speech as particular women, like men, are called to preach and prophesy.

Almost all women preachers in their day were able to challenge the way women were seen at that time. They interpreted Genesis in a way that didn't see Eve and all women bore the responsibility for the fall of humanity and thus the necessity for the crucifixion of Jesus. They tended to create communities where the emphasis was on the quality of the internal spiritual life rather than on external structures even though these individuals had widely differing theological outlooks.

So while the equality of all people introduced by Paul saw no widespread emancipation of women or slaves for nearly 2,000 years, the idea lay dormant until our own era. The overwhelming conclusion I believe is that despite marginalisation women have persisted in enriching, shaping and sustaining Christianity throughout its history.

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