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Evaluating Women's Ordination

Feminist Hermeneutics v Scripture

In March 1992, I attended a historic event: the ordination of Australia's first Anglican women priests. Not long before the event, I was gathered with the other clergy around Archbishop Peter Carnley when he announced his intention to ordain them without waiting for the Appellate Tribunal, the Church's High Court, to offer its view on the legality of doing so. The time for waiting was over, he said, the Holy Spirit was speaking through him! In his ordination homily, he used feminist rhetoric to frame his message: this was about rescuing the suicidal woman, trapped in the attic against her will, madly peeling away the yellowed wallpaper. What's beneath this rhetoric: justice, equality, freedom, the Gospel, clerical power, or just an unpapered wall?

Kay Goldsworthy can tell us. She was ordained in that first group of women. In May 2008, she was installed as Assistant Bishop in Perth. In March 2015, she was installed as Bishop of Gippsland. In February 2018, she was installed as Archbishop of Perth. As the first female archbishop in the Anglican Communion, Kay will probably be elected Primate one day. When that happens, within progressive circles there will be air-punching, virtue-signalling and, within politically correct boundaries, appropriate touching, although the novelty of a female Primate is already somewhat passé. Given the current dire state of the Church, other issues are more important than feminism, like preaching Christ faithfully to the nations, not the various versions of Christ we invent for our social and political purposes.

According to the public record, Kay is progressive. She voted for same-sex marriage in the postal survey. As Bishop of Gippsland, she appointed an openly gay priest in a same-sex relationship. In July 2017, along with the bishops of Bendigo, North Queensland, and Willochra, she co-signed a letter to the Primate requesting an investigation into the legality of the Archbishop of Sydney, and the bishops of Tasmania and North West Australia,

participating in the June 2017 consecration of Andy Lines as the Anglican Church of North America's first Missionary Bishop for Europe. A conservative province, the ACNA is not in communion with Canterbury but is affiliated with the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) and the Global South.

The co-signatories believe this action "raises fundamental questions of ecclesiology". A failure to determine its legality means "our fellowship in the college of Bishops will be gravely impaired". They ask the Appellate Tribunal to offer its view, pursuant to S.63(i) of the Church's constitution. In co-signing the letter, Kay was doing many things: making a statement about how female clerics use institutional power when they obtain it, firing a salvo in an ecclesiastical power game disguised as the Body of Christ, aligning herself with progressives against conservatives, while hiding behind a confected concern for Church unity.

Currently, apart from a conservative minority, most of the Anglican Church of Australia is indistinguishable from the progressive Left, hence the virtue-signalling way it promotes issues such as women's ordination and LGBTQ+ rights. It interprets Scripture in a Machiavellian fashion to further its progressive agenda. It uses its institutional power to harass its opponents. This is what the letter Kay Goldsworthy co-signed is really about.

In a letter of June 2017, the conservative Archbishop of Sydney, Glenn Davies, justified his actions to the College of Bishops. He noted a precedent from 1984, when his predecessor, Donald Robinson, was asked to consecrate Dudley Foord as bishop in the Church of England in South Africa. Robinson decided any irregularity, in consecrating a bishop for a Church with Anglican polity not in communion with Canterbury, was overridden by gospel imperatives. Davies was purposefully defending the Bible's teaching on marriage "not merely for the sake of correct doctrine, but that we might preserve the message of the gospel for the

salvation of all”.

Progressive Anglicans, who currently dominate the Church's power structures, either stopped believing in the gospel of salvation a long time ago, or confuse it with their partisan programs, and they dislike conservative Anglicans more than they fear the Church's enemies. So, the Church is fighting the culture wars on internal and external fronts. Conservative Anglicans are more considered. Sydney is a legalistic diocese. Davies is on solid ground. His actions were carefully thought through. In a footnote, he refers to an article by Mark Smith at the *Church Society* blog which argues that Andy Lines's consecration does not violate Canons 15 and 16 of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

In theory, women's ordination should not depend on feminist rhetoric. In practice, its rationale cannot be separated from feminist rhetoric. Feminists lament the absence of a theology of female ordination, which is true, yet there is no theology of male ordination either. There are only historical traditions evolved from observed biological facts, one of which is how male headship is Apollonian while female headship is Dionysian.

This is where things get difficult, since the idea of the sexes having traditional complementary roles can no longer be spoken about in the public forum. Third Wave Feminists insist that sex and gender are functionally independent and gender is socially constructed.

Since men and women are not constrained by biology, women can and should do anything men do. All that is required to create this utopia is a state and a church acting as agents for Cultural Marxism and Third Wave Feminism.

Of course, feminists will insist that any evaluation of women's ordination—its key performance indicators; its outcome measures—must be conducted by feminists using their rhetoric, since this is a women's issue, and we've heard enough from men.

So how's all this going?

All rhetoric is an attempt to persuade, which means rhetoricians follow journalists in stretching and spinning the truth. This is why Plato suspected the Sophists as well as the Poets and would have suspected the twenty-first-century media too. Platonic suspicion of sophistry, the original form of rhetoric, prevailed until the

Counter-Enlightenment displaced and banished the Enlightenment. Now we live in a world of competing sophistries, where all truth-claims are suspect unless they support whatever is floating around the Sophist's echo chamber. This lack of a stable definition of truth is a side-effect of the culture wars waged by those who control our institutions, including the Church.

Culture-war rhetoric stresses intersectionality: the ways in which interlocking systems of power oppress individuals by class, race, sexual orientation, age, creed, disability and gender. By this measure everyone non-white and non-male is everywhere and always a victim. In using feminist rhetoric, when ordaining Australia's first female priests, Carnley cast himself as a hero rescuing women from oppression and striking a blow for justice, equality, freedom and empowerment.

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Of course, this is also biblical rhetoric, although there's an unbridgeable gulf between what believers and feminists mean by justice, equality, freedom and empowerment. For believers, they are what flow from living by biblical precepts. For feminists, they are endless confected debates about inequality. What happens when these two forms of rhetoric conflict? If one side appeals to covenant responsibilities, the other side appeals to human rights, which is looking increasingly like a menu of choices, or perhaps a shopping list.

Nearly four-fifths of Australia's twenty-three Anglican dioceses

now ordain women to the priesthood. The few that don't still ordain women to the diaconate, an important and worthy ministry in itself. So, have the causes of justice, equality, freedom and empowerment been served? In theory, yes, as there is ample opportunity for female vocations to be fulfilled. Any woman with a vocation can present herself to a diocese that ordains women to the priesthood, and she can still be ordained to the diaconate in those dioceses that don't. In practice, no, as feminist rhetoric demands those recalcitrant dioceses be brought into line, since they are out of step with a nebulous something called community standards.

Feminist rhetoric is propagated by the manipulation of public perceptions through schools, universities, the media and the arts. Anyone trained to interpret texts—how plots are constructed, how signs are arranged, how subtexts operate—can see this for what it is: the drama of female identity and the theatre of female choice. In this mimetic

world, which imitates reality without being real, the trope of oppressed woman struggling against her victimhood, so she can act out her freedom, is a propaganda device to promote anything from social justice to lifestyle advertising. The famous Virginia Slims ads did this superbly. You've come a long way, baby, to get where you've got to today. You have your own cigarette now, baby. What's next on your shopping list?

In this manipulated tradition of socially-conscious media and arts, we see and hear everywhere the representation of victim and oppressor. We live in a civilisation of depicted suffering, in family and social life, and among intersectional identities. The problem with this propaganda is the debasement of its currency and how deceptively it is contrived. As Dame Muriel Spark once said, it cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, when it is really a segregated and segregating activity.

Women are oppressed by patriarchy, so we are told, but is this an accurate description of observed reality or biological fact? It is, if you believe the sophistries of academia, journalism and art. Since the late nineteenth century, the genres of realism, naturalism and modernism have described Judaism and Christianity as agents of patriarchy that distort female identity, hence revealed religion is portrayed as something to be avoided or overcome. Once upon a time, art dealt with the unhappy consequences of breaking the moral code. Now the moral code has been replaced by a menu of choices, or a shopping list. It's all about you, Virginia Slim, what else would you like with your sexy new cigarette?

Attaching women's ordination to feminist rhetoric is small-minded and mean-spirited. The overwhelming majority of women are not feminists, and feminism has long since become ideologically bankrupt. The rhetoric about women not being men, and men being the source of all evil—from colonialism to climate change to child abuse—goes nowhere, offers no solutions, and tells us nothing about female responsibility. When commenting on the shallowness of International Women's Day, Janet Albrechtsen wrote: "Female advancement would get a terrific boost if women did more than jump in front of a camera to declare their moral virtue by poking fun at men."

If we are to evaluate women's ordination meaningfully then non-feminist language should be used. Attacks on conservatives being out of step with community standards are misleading and irrelevant. Invocations of community standards often smell like veiled threats. Also, the Church exists to be counter-cultural, which is the opposite of bowing to the zeitgeist. This is why the letter Kay co-signed was so disingenuous. It was

a strategic move in a power game hiding behind constitutionalism.

Neither male nor female

The rhetoric Carnley used in his ordination homily was about freeing the madwoman in the attic while acknowledging that patriarchy constructed her identity, sent her insane, and locked her away. Like all rhetorical propositions that stretch and spin the truth, this one rests on the shifting sands of many debates around which Western self-understanding revolves: nature–nurture, rationality–irrationality, freedom–necessity, religion–science, patriarchy–matriarchy. At many points, these debates revolve around sophistry, which means their rhetoric depends on accepting logical fallacies as true.

If there is no theology of female ordination, or male ordination either, what's the Church saying when it ordains women to the priesthood? That women and men are equal rather than complementary? That there are no biological differences between them? That gender is fluid, so men can become women, and women can become men? When the rhetoric surrounding women's ordination is laid bare, there is nothing to see apart from a culture of anti-discrimination which now outlaws all distinctions between categories.

Over the years, there have been many arguments in favour of women's ordination. Early on in the movement, much was said about positive female attributes: nurturing, intuitiveness, peace-making, consensus-building, collective decision-making, emotional intelligence. It was once hoped women would bring these hypothetical attributes to the priesthood, allowing them to model the feminine aspect of God. Where is this rhetoric now? Why has it disappeared? Has it suddenly become untrue, or just politically incorrect? The disappearance is easily explained. Feminists now insist these non-male attributes, once attributed to the female realm, are intrinsic to male constructions of female identity, hence they are intrinsic to patriarchy and must be banned.

Feminist hermeneutics—the term given to feminist interpretations of Scripture—has two broad agendas: first, to critique the male bias of Christian theology; second, to discover or unearth an alternative historical tradition that supports the full personhood of woman—whatever *personhood* means—and her inclusion in leadership roles in Church and Society. The intention here is not to supplement the male tradition but to replace it with new norms for interpreting what is true and false about it. Most feminist theologians are suspicious

about the usefulness of traditional feminine concepts in theology—such as Wisdom, Mariology and Mother Church—even when filtered through an affirming Jungian typology, because these are now understood to be the shadow side of male domination.

All feminist evaluations of Scripture proceed from three principal moves. First, *deconstruction*, or reading what runs counter to the intended meaning and structural unity of a text. Second, *retrieval*, or discovering what the text may have suppressed or erased (reclaiming what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges”). Third, *reconstruction*, or reconstituting the text to make it acceptable to feminists, which is of course a mug’s game. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur coined the term “hermeneutics of suspicion” to capture the common spirit pervading Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, which situates all interpretation within a Counter-Enlightenment context. This context is how feminist hermeneutics becomes inseparable from Cultural Marxism.

If it’s difficult to see common ground between feminist hermeneutics and biblical belief, it’s easy to see the link between feminist hermeneutics and the culture wars. Feminist hermeneutics is now hegemonic across all non-STEM disciplines and is imposing its ironfisted will everywhere. Its precepts are accepted as true and its language is mandatory. This hegemony means it is no longer acceptable to believe in traditional Christianity, the theory of evolution, the idea of Nature, or any male description of human biology, since these have all become “mansplaining”.

Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the US Episcopal Church from 2006 to 2015, once preached in Caracas on Acts 16. After the obligatory praising of diversity, and ritually noting a human tendency to devalue “otherness”, she interpreted Paul freeing the slave girl as an example of patriarchal oppression and intolerance: “Paul is annoyed, perhaps, for being put in his place, and he responds by depriving her of her gift of spiritual awareness. Paul can’t abide something he won’t see as beautiful or holy, so he tries to destroy it.”

Now it beggars belief that any member of the historical episcopate would interpret the demonic possession of a slave girl as something “beautiful and holy”. In freeing the girl, her owners are robbed of their income, so they complain to the authorities,

and Paul gets thrown into prison. To Jefferts Schori his imprisonment is just: “That’s pretty much where he put himself by his own refusal to recognise that she too shares in God’s nature, just as much as he does—maybe more so!” Jefferts Schori rejoices that a mid-first-century Philippian version of the thought police had the good sense to imprison patriarchal Paul for his non-Jungian intolerance of Satan.

Jefferts Schori is an object lesson for what happens when feminism obtains power, becomes hegemonic, and Christian life becomes one long Kavanaugh Senate hearing.

Jefferts Schori’s tenure as Presiding Bishop was highly controversial and marked by unprecedented schism. At her direction, the US Episcopal Church initiated lawsuits against departing dioceses and parishes. She spent vast sums of money on punitive measures against conservatives. She established a policy whereby the properties of departing congregations could not be sold back to them. Under this policy, some of these properties were sold to Muslims, below market price, and turned into mosques, while the former Christian owners were forced to relinquish their equity and buy new property elsewhere. She is a supporter of LGBTQ+ rights, same-sex marriage and abortion. She epitomises feminism’s abuse of power.

In her opening address to the 2009 General Convention, Jefferts Schori said: “the great Western heresy—is that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God”. This collectivist feminist talking point—it takes a commu-

nity for salvation to occur—is pure hubris, yet it characterises the methodology of most theological theses based on feminist rhetoric. There is little else to this talking point apart from included and empowered females lamenting female exclusion and disempowerment.

The paradox of feminist hermeneutics, like the paradox of women’s ordination, is propelled by the idea that the Church must change, yet its institutional structures must remain the same. The Church is contracting, precisely because of the hollowness of progressive ideology and the poverty of feminist rhetoric, but it must now support a growing female hierarchy with special needs. As such, feminism is colonial in a post-colonial way, or imperialistic in a post-imperial way. The paradox is this: women

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are coming to power in the Church precisely at a moment of contraction and existential threat. In responding to this threat, the Church should be proclaiming Christ faithfully to the nations, not getting distracted by the shopping list of feminist choices. Jesus isn't a protagonist in the drama of female identity. Christianity isn't *Hedda Gabler* or *A Doll's House* or *Ghosts*.

Jefferts Schori has done enormous damage to the Anglican Communion at a critical moment. She should have preached the Kerygma, the good news, not a feminist exegesis of why the Kerygma is bad because it was described and disseminated by males. Her malicious persecution of conservatives, in such a publicly humiliating way, was appalling.

Wherever Anglicanism exists, its governing structures mirror each nation's constitutional structures. For this reason, what Jefferts Schori did in the US would be harder to do in Australia, given the Church's Westminster-style governance here. In spite of this, the culture wars are just as strong in Australia, as are the demands of feminist rhetoric. The struggle between progressives and conservatives is real, whether it occurs in the US or Australia. This is the real back-story of those two letters: the one co-signed by Kay Goldsworthy in July 2017; the other from Glenn Davies of June 2017. The issue at stake, the consecration of Andy Lines as a Missionary Bishop for Europe, is really about progressives using institutional power to contain the growing influence of GAFCON and the Global South.

Confected anxieties about "fundamental questions of ecclesiology" and "gravely impaired fellowship" within the College of Bishops are smokescreens for progressives' fear of losing control of the agenda. Up to this point, their business plan has focused on bowing to the zeitgeist, chasing after secularism, and thumbing their noses at the Diocese of Sydney. The problem with this is now obvious. Even

if the Church says yes to the progressive Left's every demand, not one person will turn to Christ. On the contrary, many will turn away and tune out. The data about this paints a grim story. Liberal Protestant denominations are shrinking. Bible-based churches are growing. Glenn Davies knows this. So does everyone involved with GAFCON and the Global South.

Wrapped in their cosy bubble of God's love, which is all-embracing, non-judgmental, and makes no moral demands, progressives champion diversity, inclusion, the drama of female identity, the showbag of human rights. They use the Church as a bully pulpit as they try to stop the pendulum swinging away from their grasp.

We may never know what was going on in Bishop Goldsworthy's mind when she signed that letter in July 2017. She must have known she was involving herself in the eccesiological equivalent of factional politics. What will happen when she becomes Primate, as she inevitably will? Will she preach the Kerygma or will she preach feminist hermeneutics and social justice? Moore Theological College often offers conferences and workshops on Christ-centred expository preaching. She might want to check them out.

Paul makes a critical point in Galatians 3:28 which the Church has always accepted as true: "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." The followers of Jesus have always been one in Christ. Most women in the Church know this, except disgruntled feminists. Women's ordination adds nothing to this truth and, ironically, takes something away from it.

Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. He wrote on GAFCON in the article "Anglicanism's Crisis and Its Joyous Counter-Rebellion" in the April issue.