

The Dialectic of Belonging:  
Resistances and Subversions of  
Women Priests in the Church of  
England

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to understand how women belong in the priesthood in the Church of England, a vocation that has traditionally been exclusively male. The first female priests were introduced in 1994 after a long and divisive campaign. The Act of Synod that legislated for women's ordination created the institutional mechanism allowing parishes to reject the priestly ministry of women and seek oversight from bishops who only ordained men (Furlong, 1998). Given this structural separation of women clergy from parts of the Church, my research asks how sex and gender differentiation in the priesthood impacts upon women's belonging, institutionally and symbolically. I explore the stories of 26 women priests from several feminist theoretical perspectives to identify how they experience the institutional discourses that shape their status and place in the priesthood. I examine how women priests negotiate relationships with male clergy who oppose female priesthood, how female bodies fit the cultural and symbolic environment of the priesthood, and how the feminine is expressed in the language of the priesthood (Spender, 1985). Using the lens of feminist phenomenology (Young, 1990), and the tools provided by Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001), I analyse the everyday experiences of women priests to reveal how they resist and subvert institutional and cultural discourses and establish their own ways belonging, setting up a dialectic between belonging as object and belonging as subject.

# Contents

Abstract.....	2
Contents.....	3
Acknowledgements .....	6
Author's Declaration.....	7
Chapter 1 Introduction: Women Priests as Interlopers?.....	8
Chapter 2 Methodology: ...As the Researcher Said to the Vicar .....	16
2.1 Introduction: Symmetries and Silences .....	16
2.2 The Interviewees: Curates, Chaplains and Clergy Mummies .....	23
2.3 The Interviews: 'I've Never Talked So Much'.....	26
2.4 The Analysis: Thematic Phenomenology and Poetic Discourse .....	29
Chapter 3 Eva's Call: Feminism, Sexism and Corporate Shock .....	36
3.1 Introduction: Feminism and Serious Theology .....	36
3.1.1 The growth of feminist theologies.....	39
3.1.2 Literature of pioneers .....	40
3.2 Monstrous Regiment: The Struggle for Women's Ordination.....	42
3.2.1 The Act of Synod: Institutionalising difference.....	44
3.2.2 Is change in the air? .....	47
3.2.3 Current research and current sexism .....	51
A Transcription Poem .....	56
Chapter 4 Boundaries and Relationships.....	57
4.1 Introduction: Doubt and Masculine Domination.....	57
4.2 The Fake Priest: Boundaries and Power .....	61
4.2.1 Power over difference and interpellation .....	61
4.2.2 Heresy and marginality .....	64

4.2.3 Precarity and reception .....	70
4.3 Keepers and Destroyers: Discourses of Power .....	72
4.3.1 Integrity.....	73
4.3.2 Silences .....	80
4.3.3 Mutual flourishing and good disagreement .....	84
4.4 The Lovely Man and the Trickster Priest: Relationships and Power.....	99
4.4.1 The nurturing economy .....	100
4.4.2 Ambivalent sexism .....	102
4.4.3 Boundary play .....	112
4.5 The Dialectic in the Making.....	117
Transcription Poem.....	118
Chapter 5 Bodies in Ecclesiastical Space.....	119
5.1 Introduction: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil .....	119
5.2 A Gynocentric Turn? .....	125
5.3 Modalities and Phenomenal Space.....	131
5.3.1 Touch: a blessing, a violation, and a pollution.....	132
5.3.2 Space as gendered .....	136
5.3.3 Phenomenology at the altar .....	138
5.4 Radical Evil and the Eucharist .....	143
5.4.1 Abjection .....	145
5.4.2 The curse.....	153
5.5 Maternal, Sexual, Grotesque .....	159
5.5.1 Maternal telos of the body .....	160
5.5.2 Dressing the female priest's body .....	167
5.5.3 The humiliated and grotesque female priest .....	176
5.5.4 Pitching from a female voice .....	178
Transcription Poem.....	183

Chapter 6 Words Become Flesh.....	184
6.1 Introduction: The Dominant and the Muted .....	184
6.2 Beauty and Rhythm: Words that are fixed .....	186
6.2.1 Personal and public activism .....	191
6.2.2 Liturgy as a cultural object.....	193
6.2.3 Neutrality in language.....	196
6.3 ‘What Are We Going to Call You?’: Words That Are ‘Sticky’ .....	198
6.3.1 On first name terms .....	201
6.3.2 Titles and power .....	204
6.4 The Word Becomes She.....	208
6.4.1 Uncoupling meaning.....	210
6.4.2 Toxicity of the Father and the universal womb .....	212
6.4.3 Feminine – the authorised version .....	217
6.4.4 The gender-neutral God .....	219
Chapter 7 Conclusion: The Dialectic of Belonging .....	227
Appendices .....	237
Appendix 1: Biographical Information.....	237
Appendix 2: Transcription Poem .....	239
Bibliography.....	259

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## Chapter 1 Introduction: Women Priests as Interlopers?

The appearance on the scene of independent and self-actualizing women must necessarily disrupt the whole symbol system [. . .] She does not fit; there is no place for her.

Daphne Hampson (2002, p.207)

Women were ordained into the Church of England 25 years ago and the novelty of a woman behind the altar, dressed in vestments and collar, is gradually diminishing. But does this normalising mean full belonging for women priests? The priesthood has been exclusively male for centuries, constructed by and through a male hierarchy and underpinned by androcentric beliefs about the entitlement to authority, power, and relationship with the divine. I began this project by exploring the process by which women might have equal access to the meanings stored within the symbols of the priesthood, which became a question of belonging. There are points within this thesis where I discuss experiences of the institution, the symbol system, and language that are pertinent to all women who are exploring their place within the Church of England (and in Christianity more generally). Yet, the discussion also aims to focus on those interactions that are specifically the experience of women as priests. For example, in Chapter 6 I examine whether the masculine nomenclature applied to the divine impacts upon the framing of all women in relation to Christianity, but the system of finding a title and name for women when they become priests focuses the attention on how the priesthood itself specifically differentiates women *as priests*. Whilst all women who count themselves as belonging to the Church and who menstruate are likely to experience the ripple effect of religious discourse around female blood, I explore in Chapter 5 how being a priest at the altar compounds the menstrual taboo, sharpening the focus on how the symbolic role of the priesthood is constructed in masculine terms. These kinds of specific experiences for women within the priesthood are part of the reasoning behind this close exploration of women who are priests, rather than lay women within the Church. My interest is in exploring whether and how the priesthood in the Church of England is gendered, and how women priests in particular experience the vocation, whilst at the same time acknowledging that the institution and the Christian symbol system impact on women priests in ways that lay women are impacted also. I argue, though, that by focusing on the experiences of women within the priesthood, it is possible to pinpoint how the masculine

paradigm of the Church and its version of Christianity seriously chafes against assumptions that male and female have equal access to institution and symbol system.

How women priests belong is revealed through their experiences, how they negotiate and manage relationships, and how they understand the meaning-making that constructs femaleness (and femininity) in the priesthood of the Church of England. Throughout this thesis I grapple with two blocs of feminist thought; humanist, derived from de Beauvoir's insistence that women should overcome biology (which can be read as overcoming essentialism), and gynocentric, exemplified by Irigaray's goal of revealing sexual difference in parity. As the following discussion shows, the stories told by women priests can be viewed from both perspectives, revealing a blurring of how experiences within the Church are defining sameness, other of the same (to use Irigaray's phrase), or a self-actualising sexual difference. The 26 female clergy interviewed for this project act out their priesthood, whether in a parish post or in a chaplaincy, ostensibly unhindered. Yet, there are places in the Church where female priesthood is not recognised and where an ordained woman is not welcome to practise her priestly ministry. There are also less visible ways women priests are differentiated that function beneath the surface. If the priesthood is oriented towards the male and women are constructed in difference, how *do* women belong in the priesthood of the Church of England?

The starting point is unpromising for women: The Church of England is exempt from equality legislation regarding the priesthood (Furlong, 1998), allowing the exclusion of women priests from some parish posts, something that periodically captures media interest (for example, Jones, 2019). How the Church developed such a differentiating and discriminating structure is outlined in Chapter 3, but more interesting questions are found in the deeper symbolic and cultural factors that underpin the partial exclusion of women priests. There is also a fundamental divide between passive and active elements of the Church. Melinda, a young Anglo-Catholic curate interviewed for this project, pinpoints how the Church is perceived as having agency separate from women. She tells the story of how, when she was at college, she heard that the Synod<sup>1</sup> motion for women to become bishops in 2012 had been rejected (a vote that was won two years later):

Our phones started beeping because we had friends saying, '[the vote's] been lost'. And everyone burst into tears [. . .] and just saying, 'how can we minister

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<sup>1</sup> General Synod, the decision-making body, was established in 1970 and includes bishops, clergy and laity, operating a voting system.

in a Church that feels like this about us?' [. . .] At one point [the Principal] said, 'Yes, we've really got to think about how we treat women in the Church' and I went for it. I went, 'women *are* the Church! You've got to stop [. . .] sixty or seventy percent are women, half the number being ordained are women. You've got to stop thinking about the Church and how it treats women'. And he apologised [. . .] saying 'I've still got a lot to learn', which was really nice. But that's still the default [. . .] that is still the thinking. I'm hoping women bishops is changing that.

The active, agential part of the Church – the 'we' – is considered male, acting upon the passive female. It is noteworthy that so much hope is invested by Melinda in women bishops, the existence of whom she argues might change the asymmetry of 'we'. However, the principle of collegiality<sup>2</sup> may stymie women's influence at the higher levels of the Church and the impact of their presence in the hierarchy is yet to unfold. But it seems that women clergy still anticipate institutional change as a result of the episcopacy being opened to them. As women entered the priesthood and the episcopate, the transition from the traditional notion that women are passive consumers of religion in the Church to having access to ownership of the institution, and its version of the Christian symbol system, through the priesthood, has not been smooth nor obvious.<sup>3</sup> How this separation of Church and women is carried into the priesthood is a fundamental issue to explore, and Melinda's story trains the eye to the question of how women priests belong as object rather than subject.<sup>4</sup> The male authority figure in Melinda's story is a good example of the concerned and supportive man hoping the Church finds a place for women. This is a vignette described by Hampson (2002) as she identifies the gap between Christianity (its institutions and its

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<sup>2</sup> Collegiality is about bishops being the focus of unity in the Church. An example of this is in the 'shared conversations' the bishops undertook regarding human sexuality. The resulting document presented to Synod in February 2017 was conservative and reactionary, with little evidence of progressive influence that some hope female bishops represent (Church of England, 2017a).

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that lay women are therefore left in the category of the passive consumer. I acknowledge there are important ways in which non-ordained women are influencing doctrine and theology. For the purposes of my discussion, it is the breaching of the priesthood boundary that I wish to highlight as a specific shift in structural positioning.

<sup>4</sup> This barrier to belonging sometimes becomes intolerable for women. Radford Ruether (1985) provides an account of an exodus of women in the 1980s from the US Catholic Church, to form a female-oriented worshipping community known as 'Women-Church'. There are other women's separatist groups, St. Hilda's Community being one that is prominent in the narratives of the debate around women's ordination in England (see Dagers, 2002). I have recently heard of an exodus of women from an Anglican church in the North of England after a vote to exclude women priests after 25 years of acceptance of women's leadership. Women do leave.

symbol system) and women who are becoming self-actualised. She suggests that 'well-meaning men seem to have no inkling of this gap' (p.68). One of the questions posed in Chapter 4 is whether women's belonging is helped by the well-intentioned magnanimity of male clergy; women may be reliant on relationships with such men to mitigate female precarity in the priesthood. It may be that the presence of women alone, even in significant numbers, in the priesthood is not enough to change the masculine centre of gravity, a stasis proposed by Hopkins (1996), Shaw (1996), and Thorne (2000). Without proactive powers within the Church working to establish women's parity, female priests are at risk of precarity, of being interlopers, even if they do not *feel* they are positioned as such.

Within the stories told by women priests there lies a dilemma that feminists debate: either the revealing of sex and gender difference hidden by the masculine paradigm leads to female subjectivity, or else difference is a fiction, a construction for the benefit of the male, and equality for women is to be found in dissolving binary sex and gender differences. Throughout this thesis I separate the terms 'sex' (the biological sexed body) and 'gender' (the constructions of femininity and masculinity) though often these appear in parallel. Sometimes the interviewees conflate sex and gender and I have on occasion interpreted the spirit of what the women say. Constructing difference is a potent use of power, and in Chapter 4 I explore how access to power mirrors how difference is negotiated. My aim is to respond to Braidotti's (2015) plea that feminist investigation should decloak this power in the lived experiences of those who are other. She writes:

'Difference' is never a neutral category, but a term that indexes exclusion from the entitlements to subjectivity. [. . .] to be different always means being different-from and to be worth less than. We're all human, it's just that some seem to be more mortal than others. (p.239)

Women priests are institutionally framed as different, separated as they are from some parts of the Church by theologies that refuse them the same subjectivity as male clergy. Women priests may find belonging problematic if they are 'more mortal' than their male counterparts. There is an argument that sexual difference requires a radical re-conceptualisation in the priesthood. In her theological treatise on women in the priesthood, Green (2009b) writes: 'the first women ordinands defended and pursued their call to vocation in the absence of a thoroughgoing theology that took account of their distinctness as women' (p.1). To formulate theology that supports women's 'distinctness', Green takes an Irigarayan view of sexual difference, arguing that for women priests to be

fully actualised in the priesthood the theological basis must shift, or women risk assimilation into a masculine paradigm as 'honorary men' (see Dowell and Williams, 1994, for further discussion on the perceived dangers of this label for women priests). This view suggests that women priests need to explore difference without reference to the male – a gynocentric approach – and this becomes central to my discussion about how women's bodies fit into the environment of the priesthood in Chapter 5. Whilst there may be some problems with mapping an Irigarayan concept of the feminine divine onto the existing androcentric Christian symbolic,<sup>5</sup> nevertheless, Green attempts to show how the existence of women priests challenges the obfuscation of sexual difference. There are points at which sexual difference is defined in the priesthood on masculine terms, but at times it is defined also on women's own terms, which may be the beginning of a female priesthood envisaged by Green. Equally, sameness – the dissolving of difference – is a theme that arises in how women priests approach nomenclature, representation, and presentation in the priesthood, and so my arguments are shot through with the tensions between female subjectivity in difference and the desire to blur the constructed boundaries of a sex and gender binary.

The structural separation within the Church of England, known as the two integrities, is the manifestation of a differentiation made between male and female priests, giving rise to an intricate relational dynamic across a boundary. The negotiations across this boundary are the focus of Chapter 4, where I envisage the woman priest as 'trickster' (Radin, 1972; Hyde, 1998 [2008]; Tannen, 2007). I describe the boundary-play of the woman priest in these terms because she might be thought of as the proto-priest, as the trickster is a proto-identity, one that is capable of splitting into characters and is comfortable on the threshold. The woman priest may still be searching for authentic form, trying bits of priestly identity on for size, but ultimately seeking ways of being a priest that speak to her femaleness. The female trickster, for Tannen (2007), refuses to be a victim, but is adept at resistance. The archetype of the trickster is a playful device, and for my purposes I borrow its wilful elements, its shape-shifting quality (the trickster is considered to be without gender, or sometimes possessing the identities of both male and female), and the ability to bend, break, and dissolve boundaries: the trickster a useful 'thinking companion' (Priyadharshini, 2012, p.548). My intention is to show whether women priests are subversive in their

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<sup>5</sup> Irigaray (1993 [2002b]), as I read her, refers to a separate symbolic system, rather than the rehabilitation of the worst excesses of androcentrism of the Christian symbolic. I remain unconvinced that Irigarayan sexual difference can be represented and reflected in Christianity.

relationship with the institution and with male clergy, or whether they seek belonging by ameliorating male pain caused by their presence in the priesthood. The woman priest may be amorphous in her positioning, or boundaries and traditions may hold her in a fixed position. Like the trickster, the woman priest often finds herself at the margins, where she aligns herself with other rhizomatic voices, dislocated from the ecclesiastic centre of gravity. Travelling in from the margins, in true trickster fashion, the woman priest is then faced with territory where she does *not* belong as priest. The question I ask in Chapter 4 is: what happens to her femaleness and her status as a priest when confronted with a context where her priesthood is denied? Since the foundations of the acceptance of women priests are built on the principle of ameliorating male fear and pain, as I explain in Chapter 3, women priests may remain anchored to that institutionally endorsed emotional labour, or they may now be rejecting the compromised basis on which they are constructed as priest. In other words, is the female priest ever willing to *not* belong?

The differentiation of women within the Christian symbol system focuses on the female body. The female is rooted in the material and constructed in juxtaposition to male transcendence. In Chapter 5, I explore how women's material presence relates to the everyday experiences of priesthood and to the symbolism in ritual and I ask whether the bodies of women priests disrupt the meanings around priesthood and whether they carry meaning that alienates them from the world of the priest. There is a question raised by those who oppose female priesthood as to whether women's bodies can represent Christ, the incarnation of the divine (for example, Baker, 2004), and this might be viewed as a metaphysical version of Lacanian lack of the phallus, the ultimate othering of the female. I examine how this becomes manifested in the everyday experiences of the female priest, as she presides at the altar, negotiates meaning that her body accrues, and as she makes choices about how her body is to *look* like that of a priest. There are various approaches women priests take in presenting their bodies as priests, and other research establishes how masculinities and femininities are entangled with appearance (Page, 2014). I want to complicate the appearance of femininity and explore the interplay between the separation of the woman from the priest's identity through being subject to displays of loathing and disgust, the meanings attached to the female body, and the contingencies placed on women priest's physicality, as well as the political choices around presenting the body. Some of these arguments are connected to the theological reasonings around how bodies are seen to represent symbols (the universality of the male is a fundamental part of this), and women priests have their individual ways of dealing with such beliefs. However, in

Chapter 5, I explore the possibilities of what drives such theologically expressed notions about the female body and attendant ideas about femininity. If women are to fully belong to the priesthood, must they overcome their biology and comply with somatophobic assumptions about the female body?

I agree with Slee's (1996) point that attempts to fix historicity and theology are 'doomed' (p.36), especially if women are to find femaleness and femininity represented in the Christian symbol system. Nevertheless, within the priesthood there *are* fixed points – or at least they shift so slowly as to give the impression of being fixed – which are resistant to heterodoxy, and to which even trickster priests must be anchored. 'Our Mother, who art in heaven' is something a trickster might throw into the symbol pool to see what occurs, but I ask whether this is safe territory for the woman priest, and whether a shape-shifting God is available to her either privately or publicly. In Chapter 6, I explore how women priests negotiate imagery and language to show how they experience and interact with the masculinised symbol system. The question of whether God can be called 'She' is explored through the experiences and attitudes of women priests, at the same time as asking how important it is for women's subjectivity to be able to see the feminine in the divine. It may be that women priests are reluctant to fall into the trap of essentialism by reifying the feminine in the symbol system, but at the same time they may experience alienation from the priesthood because of the traditional androcentric ways of describing the divine. The dilemma women priests face is whether to elevate feminine words, symbols, and imagery – the motherliness of God, for example – or to appropriate the existing masculine symbols and invest them with new meaning. I examine how much access women have to feminine symbolic meaning and whether such meaning-making is part of finding a female subjective belonging in the priesthood.

How women priests name themselves is a pivotal argument in Chapter 6.<sup>6</sup> Do women priests have the same choices around naming as their male colleagues? How women name themselves as priests is a revealing exploration into the extent to which the priesthood is deconstructed to allow female belonging, and whether women priests can claim either the masculine title as their own or whether they are able to invest priestly meaning into a feminine title. I borrow Ahmed's (2004) concept of 'stickiness' to examine where the power

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<sup>6</sup> The interviewees generally dislike the term 'women priests', however, I use the term for clarity. I hope women who are priests can accept this without too much consternation.

to name the female priest lies and how much influence women priests have over this naming process. The question 'what shall we call you?' that women priests are asked fleshes out the understanding of how women belong in the priesthood. My argument develops around what models of difference women priests negotiate – that is, difference as being 'other of the same' (Irigaray, 1985 [2002a]) and difference that is gynocentric rather than androcentric. This leads to the question of whether difference can be dissolved by women priests, if they seek belonging in sameness.

I give some detail about my own positioning in Chapter 2 and how this project has impacted upon my own relationship both with the institutional Church and with Christianity in a wider sense; implicit in this positioning is an attempt to distance myself from a theological position. My intention has been to root the arguments within a theoretical feminist framework, but paradoxically through the research process I have developed an argument that also sits within the landscape of practical theology – that is, the lived experience of women who operate within a theological context. I am propelled by this research into a field that I had not considered as my scholarly territory; on reflection, my interest in how women, specifically priested women, experience the institutional and symbolic environment of the Church of England is about theology as lived experience and the implications this lived experience has for gender justice and equality.

I intend to show whether there is a case for women in the priesthood to doubt their institutional belonging, and whether the terms on which they are accepted into the clerical hierarchy of the Church are problematic for female subjectivity. It may be, though, that there is a distinctly female priesthood that women forge for themselves in celebration of sexual difference that can be, in turn, projected into the symbol system. Although there are structural and cultural impediments to their belonging, I explore the agency of women priests in resistances and subversions, as well as how they experience the outworking of gendered discourses within the Church. The macro-interaction between women and the Church, as Melinda's story above highlights, is about whether women generate their own version of the priesthood, as subject, whilst waiting for the Church to change around them, or whether the priesthood and the Church are changing to allow for a fuller female belonging. Or perhaps neither of these scenarios are evidenced in the stories told by my interviewees. Perhaps there is a permanent precarity for women in the priesthood because it is constructed around the male and is symbolically unyielding to female presence. If this is the case, women priests must consider how they become honorary male or remain at the margins of the symbolic life of the Church. The stakes are high.

## Chapter 2 Methodology: ...As the Researcher Said to the Vicar

### 2.1 Introduction: Symmetries and Silences

Interviewing is rather like marriage: everyone knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets.

Ann Oakley (2005, p.217)

This project is a consciously feminist one. I explore the lived experiences of women priests in the Church of England through lenses provided by feminist theorists; the alignment with a feminist epistemology, or standpoint (Harding, 1987, 2004), offers a way of understanding the particularities of the experiences of the female priest. I am committed to the explicit drive towards social change, an ambition that underpins feminist research (Letherby, 2003). The political commitment to produce knowledge with the aim of improving the lives of women is not without its problems, and there may be significant differences between my interpretations and beliefs and those of the women clergy I interviewed. Reflecting on Duncombe and Jessop's (2002) argument that it is ethically contentious to assume the ability and right to research to create change in the lives of participants, ideas around impact are further complicated in this project because belief and faith contribute to the construction of the priest's environment. There is an ethical judgement to be made when arguing that some beliefs are gendered and oppressive and need to be replaced with other, more liberatory, beliefs. As a feminist researcher, I am critical of the structural conditions under which women priests work, and some of the theological beliefs on which this structure is built. However, women clergy are invested in the institution of the Church and the Christian symbol system, and I am mindful that my critique may not be *their* critique. Research with a theological context requires a deeply reflexive approach on the part of the researcher. Berry (2018) explores the notion that theology is built from 'particularity and oppression' (p.204) and in research with a diversity of female experience this understanding of theology is woven together with the researcher's own positioning (and I go on to discuss later how my post-faith identity and my evangelical Anglican history impacts on my response to the interviewees' stories). My purpose is to amplify the voices of the women I have interviewed and allow their stories to be the focus, whilst maintaining a transparent and critical feminist position.

Opposition to female priesthood is ostensibly based on theological positions and an understanding of the ontology of the priesthood. However, from a feminist standpoint (Harding, 2004) the experiences of women at the receiving end of these beliefs and practices become the focus of meaning. Having studied some of the literature explaining the positions that exclude women from the priesthood (for example, Podmore, 2015; Kirk, 2016),<sup>7</sup> I consider such theological discourse as androcentric and designed to bolster the privileged male.<sup>8</sup> In this argument, I 'take sides' (Denzin, 2001b, p.42). This is not to imply that all the women I interviewed share in this side-taking, and it is important to note that the interviewees do not necessarily see themselves as oppressed. The double-consciousness that women develop is identified in feminist standpoint theory (Brooks, 2007), and the understanding that women are conscious of both their own worldview and that of men to allow them to successfully negotiate their social environment is a useful tool. As Brooks argues, the androcentric point of view 'succeeds in temporarily convincing oppressed groups to accept their pain, to self-blame, or to deny it altogether' (2007, p.67). This helps to partially explain the significant variation in tolerance amongst my interviewees of a structure that creates 'women-free zones'<sup>9</sup> (as one interviewee describes the parts of the Church where she cannot minister). The tension created by this double-consciousness is important to whether women priests feel the need to agitate for change or whether they seek to mitigate the disruption their presence might cause. As other research indicates, the Church remains in permanent crisis over female priests (Thorne, 2000). My research pebble is being tossed into already agitated waters.

I approach this project with a specific set of experiences and in many ways Berry's (2018) notion of the 'problematic self' resonates (p.205). The Church of England and I have history. Having been brought up to attend church, I spent my young adult years as an enthusiastic Christian before becoming increasingly conscious of how the Church viewed sex, gender,

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<sup>7</sup> These are discussions of Anglo-Catholic theologies involving sacraments and ontologies. Evangelical opposition is based on the principle of male headship. I focus on those authors who discuss the sacramental and ontological arguments as these beliefs appear to be forefront in the establishment of the structure of the Church after the 1992 vote.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Douglas, in her essay on women's exclusion from ordination in the Catholic Church, bases her analysis on the understanding that 'maintaining gender difference is important' (Douglas, 1992, p.272).

<sup>9</sup> At least one commentator explicitly denies the intention to create 'women-free zones' within the two integrities (Warner, 2015, p.9). However, there is a gap between intention and the experiences of women priests.

and sexuality, perspectives which were alienating for me as a woman and a feminist. I am now, to borrow Hampson's (1996) phrase, a 'post-Christian'.<sup>10</sup> This reflexivity around the impact my research has had on my own positioning, attitudes, understanding of my 'spiritual' self and the draw towards atheism is, in Morgan's (2018) words, 'useful, ongoing and hard' (p. 190). As Morgan elucidates, understanding how to balance the researcher and the person with opinions and interests is an ongoing learning process. However, I am clear that my position is substantially different from that of Thorne (2000) for example, who studied the attitudes and experiences of the first cohort of female priests and who explicitly writes as a Christian feminist. This distinction is important, since whilst there are points of overlap in our research, our different positions lead us down distinct research paths. Thorne separates the institution of the Church of England from the Christian symbol system, which she sees as a way of allowing the symbolic to support feminist ideals of equality. I see the Church and the Christian symbolic as symbiotically related, each influencing the other, and both being generated within an androcentric paradigm.

My decision to research the experiences of female priests in the Church of England grew out of a personal interest in how religious symbols, structures, and discourses contribute to constructions of sex and gender and how, after centuries of exclusion from the priesthood, women can achieve belonging both materially and symbolically within the clerical hierarchy. This project is in part a response to my own experience of the vehement opposition to women's ordination during the 1980s and witnessing inequitable and sexist treatment of ordained women in the 1990s. This background gives me an understanding of what it is to have a faith, although my own has not survived, and what it is to be a woman in the Church of England, with its rituals, ecclesiastical language, and the decades-long division over the status of women priests. This could be considered an antagonistic position. So, during this project, I wondered whether I was employing a 'strategic silence' (Gillies and Alldred, 2002) about the complications of my insider/outsider position to avoid impeding discussion or confusing the aims of the research. I became alerted to potential ethical dilemmas when I was asked by an interviewee if I was ordained – I was clearly putting on my 'good self' (Birch and Miller, 2002) and I did enjoy revisiting the familiarity of

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<sup>10</sup> Hampson (2002) does not intend atheism to be construed from this label. It recognises that, although she no longer understands Christianity as a revealed truth, she carries its cultural imprint (p.57). I relate to this description.

ecclesiastic talk (I can still recite most of the Eucharistic service<sup>11</sup> by heart). By answering all questions about my position honestly, as Oakley (1981) advocates as an antidote to androcentric notions of objectivity, I created an open, two-way conversation within the interviews. There may be a valid point to make about the difficulties of ‘making strange’ those everyday meanings, the short hands, and the shared understandings that remain un-deconstructed (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011), and I hope the understanding that goes with deep familiarity has not resulted in the taking for granted of meanings and experiences.

Understanding what it is to belong in the Church provides me with a basis for empathy<sup>12</sup> and connection with the participants, but I am mindful that there is the ethical trap of the ‘fake friend’ (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). However, Oakley (2016) establishes the concept of ‘transition to friendship’ (p.196) and a sisterhood based on shared experiences of oppression when women interview women. I left some interviews with a feeling of connection described by Oakley, because of the emotional nature of the storytelling and the mutual warmth of the hugs on departing. On a cautionary note, Duncombe and Jessop warn that shared womanhood is not the basis for spontaneous rapport and that being women does not mean there is an innate tendency to do the emotional work. It was, however, difficult for me to suppress feelings of indignation on behalf of the interviewees on hearing about how they are at times rejected because of their sex, and I experienced what Kruks (2001) describes as ‘feeling-with’ during the interviews. I do not attempt ‘the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Haraway, 1988, p.581), as though no emotional engagement has taken place. How researcher and interviewee are involved in exchange became evident as my assumptions were challenged whilst undertaking the interviews. For example, I came to realise that my Church of England background was a narrow experience of evangelical Anglicanism and that there is a richness, intellectual rigour, and coherence within female Anglo-Catholic positions in the Church that I had not previously appreciated. I have learned a great deal from these Anglo-Catholic women about the importance of symbols, of ritual, and of sacraments, and their accounts have significantly shaped my arguments (and this is also partly due to a bias in the make-up of

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<sup>11</sup> The Eucharist is the communion service, where bread and wine are blessed and given to the congregation at the altar. The words used in this ritual are set out in the liturgy.

<sup>12</sup> Empathy as a concept is a complex notion in research which requires a fluid position. Kruks (2001) discusses the more nuanced idea of travelling within another’s world, allowing re-orientation of research agendas. This has been my intention.

the cohort, explored in Chapter next section). I pay attention to the differences between the positions and experiences of women. Even in the rarefied environment of the priesthood, where there is little obvious diversity, there are differences between women's theologies, perspectives, and rationales. These different viewpoints provide grist to the discussion.

Throughout the interviews, I searched for details of the everyday nature of the priesthood, but I was also interested in how women priests express their theology and religious experience. How people talk about religion is a neglected area of research (Wuthnow, 2011) and so I hope to contribute to the understanding of how women priests speak about belief and how religious language relates to social processes. The cultural turn in the study of religion 'challenged scholars to take seriously religious symbols and their meanings' (Wuthnow, 2011, p.3), as accessed through everyday talk and textual innovations, such as inclusive language in liturgy.<sup>13</sup> Wuthnow flags up that religious beliefs are difficult to explore by studying discourse alone and that internalised systems of belief should be separated from the *post hoc* justification of actions. In other words, interviews cannot reach unconscious or deeply embedded beliefs because of learned dialogue. The interviewees in this study do indeed use scripts and in-group language. Taking this point further, the challenge of exploring the meaning of ontologies built around the symbols of the divine lies in penetrating ritualised language. Phrases such as 'being called' and 'God's love' are dense with meaning and examining all instances of such language is beyond the scope of this project. I was, however, concerned with how to integrate spiritual concepts into the analysis. Perhaps there is room for a Gramscian<sup>14</sup> approach to spiritual language that is not dualistic and does not seek to separate the spiritual part of humanness from the material (Fulton, 1987). The work of sociologists such as Latour (2005) and feminist philosophers such as Barad (2007, 2008, 2017) may allow for gods to be actants<sup>15</sup> even

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<sup>13</sup> Wuthnow (2011) attributes the progress in liturgical inclusive language to feminist discussions around discourse.

<sup>14</sup> Gramsci saw religious praxis as having parallels with socialism and saw value in the spiritual (*la mistica*) as part of the material, at the same time as seeing religion as a political hegemonic force (see Fulton, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Latour (2005) focuses on the agency of the non-human but I see no reason why this cannot be applied to the metaphysical, since the interviewees experience the metaphysical as having agency. This could be viewed discursively; there is an argument that 'the call' to the priesthood, for example, is a discourse that produces specific outcomes. The discursive and the material are progressively

though these thinkers aim to rebalance the privileging of the discursive with a renewed focus on the material. Such 'new materialist' theories (Barad, 2017) provide a bridge between the material and the discursive, without the need to judge what is ontologically viable and this (possibly) relieves my discussion of the limitations to what is knowable (Jantzen, 1995).<sup>16</sup> It is not my intention to explain the metaphysical elements of the women's stories, but rather to incorporate these into an examination of how sex and gender are calibrated within the symbolic.

During this project I was asked: Who might be interested in a study of women priests in the Church of England? It is reasonable to wonder whether a secular audience would engage with the ideas I am exploring. This research is important primarily to women who are priests; there are, according to the latest figures 5,690 (29% of the total number of clergy) women clergy working in the Church of England (Church of England, 2018), and more women than men are currently being selected for training (Williams, 2017). For these women, the gendered structure of the Church of England and the religio-cultural discourses that form hierarchical notions of sex and gender are fundamental to their lived experience and to have their stories told a little more loudly is important. Researchers have identified the need to understand what happens when women enter a traditionally male occupation in numbers (see for example, Bagilhole, 2002), so this project contributes to understanding how sex and gender are constructed under such conditions. I see this as part of a wider feminist project to dismantle those constructions that leave women without full subjectivity. I concur with Brooks' (2007) argument that feminist research has the aim not only of exploring the differences between women's experiences, but also of finding those common threads. There is a great deal in this research that will speak to women outside the Church. The Christian symbol system has, in western society, been a fundamental contributor to the reification of a sex and gender hierarchy (see for example, Lerner, 1986; Jantzen, 1995), and exploring how women negotiate its influence in the priesthood feeds into a wider understanding of how sex and gender accrue meaning. There is the question of how or whether women are positioned to *influence* the symbolic, and this project is about seeing 'cultural tool kits in action' (Wuthnow, 2011, p.4). In this sense, what the

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brought together in theoretical approaches, and I understand this as allowing the freedom to treat the metaphysical both discursively and as having agency (see Hekman, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> I critique ontologies that are brought into being through certain beliefs that are gendered. The claim that the priesthood is only ontologically possible for the male leaves the female priest as non-existent at best, at worst a blasphemous copy of the male.

interviewees do (or do not do) to shift the gendered meanings embedded in symbols and language is of wider interest and importance.

The theme of belonging arose from the interviewees' stories. I began this project with the question: how are women priests agents of change<sup>17</sup> in a traditionally male-only vocation? Using an inductive, rather than deductive, process (Letherby, 2003), it became apparent that women priests are undertaking a project of *belonging* through the exploration of meanings of sameness and difference in sex and gender rather than seeking to change the institution. What intrigues me is the question of whether (potentially radical) shifts in belief within Christianity that redress the masculine bias constitute a different religion introduced via the woman priest, a fear expressed most famously by C.S. Lewis (1948) during the campaign for women's ordination.<sup>18</sup> How belonging is defined and how it is practised may shed some light on the relationship between women and the religious symbolic.

There are strong indications in the interviews that the research process made an impression on some women, who expressed a new or renewed interest in feminist theology, for example. This makes sense of Letherby's (2003) description of the subjectivity of the research process and its two-way influence:

When we enter a field, we make footprints on the land and are likely to disturb the environment. When we leave, we may have mud on our shoes and pollen on our clothes. (p.6)

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<sup>17</sup> Niemela (2011) asks whether ordained women are agents of change in a wider set of churches concluding that priested women do invoke change. Whether women change the environment of the priesthood in the Church of England is considered by Bagilhole (2003). Her conclusion is that, considering the nature of the opposition still faced by women priests it is difficult to judge whether women priests effect change.

<sup>18</sup> C.S. Lewis wrote: 'To take such a revolutionary step at the present moment, to cut ourselves off from the Christian past and to widen the divisions between ourselves and other Churches by establishing an order of priestesses in our midst, would be an almost wanton degree of imprudence. And the Church of England herself would be torn in shreds by the operation. My concern with the proposal is of a more theoretical kind. The question involves something even deeper than a revolution in order [ . . . ] Suppose the reformer stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might just as well pray to "Our Mother which art in heaven" as to "Our Father". Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage were reversed, that the Church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. All this, as it seems to me, is involved in the claim that a woman can represent God as a priest does. Now it is surely the case that if all these supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion.'

The 'footprint' I have left may be the stimulation of ideas, new approaches, and heightened awareness of positioning among the ordained women I interviewed. I explained to one interviewee how my perceptions of Anglo-Catholicism had been radically changed through the interview process. 'My work here is done,' she replied, and now I have mud on my shoes and pollen on my clothes. As with Oakley's (1981, 2016) challenge to the assumption of one-way power relationships in research, this incident reminded me of how feminist research aims to redress asymmetry in the interview process. Whilst I have authorial power, it is obvious to me that during the interviews the ownership of the knowledge lies squarely with the interviewee. It is worth noting, however, that the amplification that my authorship gives to the interviewees' voices accentuates a type of silence. Without the conduit of this project, some of the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the interviewees may have remained unheard (and in some cases even unspoken) yet, through the principle of anonymity and my interpretations, the danger is that some voices remain silent still. Meyerhoff (2004) discusses the issue of silence in research and states:

It can be argued that where women's ability to express their experiences and intentions are systematically thwarted, this is just as real a form of silencing as any sexist proscriptions on a woman's right to utter certain words or phrases.  
(p.210)

My purpose is to improve the chances of women clergy's voices being heard, but there are many stories that have not made it on to these pages and that, for the time being, remain hidden.

## 2.2 The Interviewees: Curates, Chaplains and Clergy Mummies

There are anecdotes that I don't tell and have never told because I think they shame the Church. I think that's all the history we need to know.

Julia, retired priest.

I interviewed 26 ordained women in the Church of England,<sup>19</sup> representing various vocational stages and career trajectories and in various geographical areas in England. The cohort included non-stipendiary and part-time parish priests, full-time parish priests in rural

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 1 for further biographical data.

and urban parishes, curates in training, chaplains within various institutions and a small number of retirees. Some were mothers, married or single, and some were child-free. The interviewees volunteered in response to a social media post and I did not control the make-up of the cohort demographically. I did take steps to ensure that women with school-aged children were encouraged to participate after recognising their initial absence from the cohort. Participants were sought through the social media networking site 'Clergy Mummies', a resource that was closed to me but was accessed by an interviewee as a snowballing exercise. The ordinations of the interviewees span the two-and-a-half decades since the first women clergy were introduced into the Church of England in 1994, providing a collective story of the experiences of the immediate fallout of the long campaign for women's ordination and the experience of living with its aftermath.

The issues arising from self-selecting cohorts need some clarification. There is a risk that the information collected reflects only the views of women who have experienced sexism in their careers in the Church.<sup>20</sup> However, the first woman I interviewed (Sylvia) informed me that she had little to say about sex and gender in the priesthood but was interested in talking about her own ministry and experiences and apologised if her stories were not of use. (Like all the women I interviewed, she told rich stories that contributed immensely valuable information to this project). Some interviewees were fluent in arguments about their gendered place within the Church and within theology, though their positioning was not uniform. The rehearsal of ideas and beliefs may mask less consciously held thoughts and responses to the symbolic environment and I am aware that stories may change according to the context in which they are told (Letherby, 2003). As I was understood to be a feminist researcher by the interviewees, it is possible that I drew out discussions about sex and gender that may not normally loom large in the women's minds. It is also likely, conversely, that those who were not attracted to the project may well have different perspectives. Although some of the discussions were intellectual and academic in nature, there was a willingness in the interviewees to disclose personal stories, for which I am grateful, since hearing the reality of lived experience brings the abstract discussion to life.

In terms of class, education, ethnicity, and sexuality, the cohort could not be described as diverse. The majority were white (one participant identified herself as being of mixed ethnicity) and heterosexual and by dint of their profession all were highly educated. Except

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<sup>20</sup> Miller and Bell (2002) discuss the issues of having a clear research purpose to which interviewees can give consent, a helpful guide during the early stages of recruitment

for one interviewee who volunteered her identity as working class, there was little evidence that class was at the forefront of the participants' descriptions of themselves during the interviews. A very small number talked about their sexuality as an explicit theme; there may have been some participants who chose not to reveal their sexuality, and it should be remembered that anything other than heterosexuality is at odds with official doctrine within the Church. There was representation of the main Church traditions, though half the cohort more were from the Anglo-Catholic tradition than from evangelical and middle-of-the-road traditions. (There is likely to be some blurring of the lines between middle-of-the-road and evangelical identities, since definitions are diffuse. I have worked with how the women have self-identified without attempting to substantiate positions). Because of this bias in the cohort towards Anglo-Catholic traditions, the thesis leans heavily on stories from this part of the Church. Additionally, because the two integrities appear to be supported more systemically by Anglo-Catholic thinking, there is a bias towards those women who operate closest to the boundary because of their Anglo-Catholic positioning. There is a neglect of evangelical positions in some parts of the discussion because of the differences in theological positions, but this is not to obfuscate the difficulties women priests face regarding, for example, objections to female leadership. Despite the need to acknowledge the 'wings' of the Church, I have come to realise that it is more useful to think in terms of a theological continuum. However, I borrow the term 'assemblages' from Latour (2005) in relation to traditions since these are important groupings that produce their own discourses,<sup>21</sup> and the alignment with groupings or traditions in the Church is indicative of theological leanings. As I examined the make-up of my cohort, I became aware of research that revealed specific barriers to ordination for conservative evangelical women (Davies, 2017a), including complementarian and male headship views that are likely to be incompatible with ordination into the priesthood for a woman. This could explain why conservative evangelicalism is significantly underrepresented in this study.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note, however, that the theological positions of the interviewees are highly individualistic and, in some cases, only loosely aligned with theologies represented by traditions. The individual nature of the women's theological thinking became a feature of

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow this term to show that church traditions are more than an affiliation of people, but include metaphysical elements, such as the sacraments that have ontological status, for Anglo-Catholics, and scripture as an actant, for evangelicals.

<sup>22</sup> Research undertaken by *The Church Times* suggests that conservative evangelical women are dissuaded from ordination, which is more suited to complementarian views. Interestingly, one interviewee had been conservative evangelical but now sees herself as Anglo-Catholic.

the analysis in how they might see themselves as outside orthodoxy (Chapter 4) and finding female ways of thinking about theology (Chapter 5).

The interviewees might be presenting best-case scenarios, of themselves and of the institution: again, their 'good self' (Birch and Miller, 2002, p.94). Carol, a chaplain, began by saying that she had never experienced overt sexism as a priest within the structural environment of the Church but went on to describe significant gender prejudice, and we discussed how easily these incidents are pushed into the background. Interestingly, a study by Robbins and Greene (2018) found that women clergy did not readily identify events as sexist until they had the opportunity to revisit in discussion and I also found naming incidents as sexist was not straightforward for the interviewees. Rachel, a retired priest, explicitly declined to tell anecdotes from a period in her career that was painful, explaining that she wanted to contribute to institutional healing and not recycle bad experiences that would 'shame the Church'. Some interviewees, however, did not seek to protect the image of the Church and were candid about painful events. These were conversations in which the institution came across poorly. My intention was to strike an insider/outsider balance to allow freedom if the interviewees wanted to be critical or unorthodox (heretical, as some called themselves), or even if they wished to talk about giving up the priesthood. Having read numerous accounts written by women who were among the first to be ordained, I accrued a set of expectations, one of which was that female priests operate from a sense of solidarity. What surprised me during these conversations was that there appeared to be, in many cases, little interest in a 'sisterhood' or any collective actions by women priests. Whilst Women and the Church (WATCH)<sup>23</sup> fulfils this role, none of the women I spoke to were active in the organisation. It became clear during the interviews that the assumptions I had made about women priests grouping together for support or for more political action needed to be set aside.

## 2.3 The Interviews: 'I've Never Talked So Much'

I've always felt that women should have a voice and  
should be heard and listened to.

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<sup>23</sup> WATCH is a national organisation working for gender justice, equality and inclusion in the Church of England. See <https://womenandthechurch.org/>

Denise, curate.

The decision to design this project around semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate way to gather personal and individual stories was made at an early stage in the process and is a methodology aligned to the notion that 'feminist research is an emancipatory endeavour' (Porter, 2018, p.83), an endeavour to which I subscribe. Porter points out the importance of how the method of researching is an integral part of the feminist goal of seeking to enable the flourishing of women and in this chapter I highlight ways in which the interviewees expressed their enrichment by the process of being interviewed: not least being *heard* as Denise states in the above quote. Although interviews are a contrived setting for participants (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011), their conversational quality allowed the interviewees to control the flow of information and there was a good degree of freedom for the women to decide what was important for them to narrate and what they did not wish to discuss (see Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). The questions set out in the schedule (see Appendix 3) were intended to ensure the interviews covered largely the same ground, but each interview had its own tempo and direction and often raised ideas and themes outside the original scope. These questions included biographical information (such as age, marital status, and whether the interviewees had children or not) to give the stories and subsequent analysis context. As a 'warm-up' question, I began by asking each interviewee to recount their journey to ordination; this allowed more detailed biographical information to be offered where it seemed important to the interviewee and helped to establish the setting for the remaining questions, which covered career and employment status, raising themes around the relationship with the institution, notions of sex and gender differences that were part of the experience of the priesthood and attitudes to language and symbols, from which I hoped to understand whether and how women priests were actively changing the symbolic environment as well as the institutional environment. Although I set out with these broad themes in mind, I used the schedule for guidance and encouraged the conversation to be free-flowing. Venue choice was explicitly handed over to the participants and whilst many interviews took place either in church premises or homes, a number of interviewees preferred to meet in a café, sometimes for convenience, but significantly, one interviewee felt the need to hold the interview outside of her parish and was explicit in discussing her desire for it to be confidential. Because of the conversational nature of the interviews, several surprising themes emerged that I had not previously considered, such as the detailed stories of relationships with male clergy and the crucial role of ecclesiology, both of which became

features in the analysis. I cannot, and would not wish to, claim that there was no bias or influence from myself as the researcher. On the contrary, I shared my own thoughts when asked and approached the interviews in conversational terms, co-creating answers to questions at times. In other words, these were 'active interviews' (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, p.57). This chimes with Wengraf's (2001) detailed break-down of the approaches to interviewing and the requirement for semi-structured schedules to be open and loose, allowing for improvised questions that follow the course of the answers being developed. The interviewees, in some instances, recognised the nature of the interaction as a deeply-felt exercise in being *heard* and an opportunity to speak out loud previously unarticulated thoughts. The interview was as much about catharsis as about offering information. I was also aware throughout the interview process that meanings were created and explored as the women spoke and that the act of telling a story simultaneously unfolded into something newly thought (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). An example of this process appeared in Valerie's interview, who during our conversation began developing a theological position she had not previously articulated or consciously thought through:

I don't know that I've actually heard me articulate that before [. . .] I think the one thing that's bobbing around in my head now that I want to give more thought to is: what does a theology that's post-gender look like? Yes. Who could I be reading around there and can I start putting it into any sort of system?

In feminist standpoint theory, it is this type of scenario, within which a woman can articulate her everyday life, that 'inspires movement towards change' (Brooks, 2007, p.61). So, it is in the act of researching, the listening, and giving space for women to speak where the activism occurs.

I improved my technique over the course of the project, learning from each interview and gaining more knowledge with which to improvise questioning. One interviewee, early in the project, suggested there were possibilities for women's status in the Church if Mary Magdalene were recognised as an ordaining apostle. This struck me as a valuable way of discussing how the women felt about female genealogy in the historical Church and so I included the question in the rest of the interviews. As well as the spontaneous moments of co-creating meaning and ways of telling stories, it was clear that some elements of the interviewees' narratives were well-rehearsed, honed accounts, heavy with pre-existing meanings (such as the description of 'the call' to ordination, which all the women are likely

to have told many times over). Whilst these accounts of memories are not to be taken as factual or true reflections of past events (Jackson, 1998), but rather as ways of imprinting meaning on to a series of memories, they provided rich detail about how the women re-remembered negotiating sex and gender on their journey to ordination. Each interview contained personal histories, told with purpose and conclusion, alongside spontaneous thoughts, new ideas and connections constructed through the act of speaking.

## 2.4 The Analysis: Thematic Phenomenology and Poetic Discourse

If we are ever to struggle toward wider forms of feminist  
solidarity, we will do so by being attentive to one another as  
embodied and affective subjectivities and not only as  
discursively constructed subjects.

Sonia Kruks (2001, p.152)

There was a significant transition between the liveliness of the conversations and my memory of meeting each woman and the methodical handling of the transcripts. The interviews were anonymised (including place names and third-party names that were not already in the public domain) at transcription stage and my intention was to record some of the emotion of the conversations, such as moments of humour, to retain the heartbeat of the conversations as much as possible as they became text. The nuances of a jokey comment or conscious hyperbole proved important in understanding the spirit of what was said (an example is provided at Appendix 4 which illustrates this process with the use, for example of [laughs] to indicate humour). My aim was not to undertake conversational analysis (a method that focuses more on the technicalities of speech), though I noted thinking pauses and sudden changes of direction mid-sentence. When referring to the deity, I made the decision to capitalise nouns and pronouns for clarity, helpful as the discussions developed nuance and complexity around language. I acknowledge the dilemma of how much speech may be smoothed out in the transcripts. My judgement was to preserve the rhythm and tempo of speech as much as possible in the transcripts without over-burdening the final text version with idiosyncrasies of speech. An interesting point to note is that often the recordings began after some informal, but revealing, conversation as tea and introductions were being made. For ethical reasons, only the speech that was recorded and transcribed was used in this project, though at times I

offered the interviewees the opportunity to repeat interesting stories that had been told outside the formalities of the interview.

I began with thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), alert to themes that emerged from the transcripts, although influenced by what had struck me as important during the interviews. I followed Braun and Clarke's framework for this stage of the analysis, reading the entire set of interviews and noting emergent ideas, generating the first set of thematic codes manually (some of which were jettisoned later in the analysis), refining these themes and making decisions about narrowing the field of vision. The subthemes were coded manually and cross referenced; this exercise revealed correlations, such as the strong alignment between tradition and contact with male clergy who reject female priesthood, but a weak alignment between tradition and engagement with feminist theology. Whilst there were numerous and fertile areas for exploration, I judged that the experiences of women at the altar would be the crucial focal point, for example, as I intended to build the argument around the daily actions of the women within the phenomenal environment of the priesthood. This was not as simplistic a process as Braun and Clarke's framework reads; throughout the writing process, the cross-referencing continued and on occasion I returned to the uncoded transcripts to check the direction of my arguments. This continual return to the data was a healthy interruption in the thought-process and provided a check on assumptions I was tempted to make when reading stories isolated from the flow of the conversation. It was not my intention to highlight the (inevitable) contradictions and unfinished thoughts, but rather to uncover the gaps between how the interviewees described their thoughts and the experiences around which their stories formed.

The highly individualised nature of the interviewees' accounts made the thematic analysis challenging, and to avoid atomising stories I worked within three main broad themes: relationships with opposing male clergy and the institution, bodies at the altar, and language and imagery. The relationship theme was unanticipated since the literature (for example, Maltby, 1998; Selby, 1998) from the campaign for women's ordination and the years immediately following their entry into the priesthood focused on the resistance of women priests, their unhappiness with the structural arrangements in the Church, and the arguments that were conducted with those who opposed women's ordination. I imagined more friction (although, as I discovered in the analysis, the women have highly subversive thoughts and practices that do quietly challenge the structure). Once the main themes were established, the process of identifying subthemes revealed that choices about what seemed important to the overall research questions could not be judged by volume (Braun

and Clarke, 2006), and although I indicate where there is some consensus among the interviewees, sometimes a story I highlight is decidedly individual. To balance this individualism, as Denzin's (2001b) discussion on interpretive interactionism suggests, there is the notion of the universal singular; each individual experience is part of a wider set of social processes. For instance, 'the call' to ordination is almost always framed as a highly personal experience of external, divine instruction, always resisted (a micro-discourse itself), but something that must be verified and legitimised by others in authority. These individual stories of being called to the priesthood were remarkably similar and revealed a generalised set of discourses around the meaning of being called to be a priest.<sup>24</sup>

One of my aims in this project is to understand how sex and gender are constructed within the priesthood, not only through the practices of women priests but also through the specialised discourse of the priesthood (see West, Lazar and Kramarae, 1997). Discourse analysis offers a strategic process with wide-ranging methods that seek to understand the relationship between language in speech and text and social processes. I have been drawn to those practitioners who articulate the method with respect to social change, particularly Van Dijk (1997, 2003) and Fairclough (2001), authors who have been instrumental in the development of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses on issues of power, hegemony and social domination. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that CDA is politically driven, and its analysts are activists who, by revealing opaque discourses and power relationships, seek to facilitate change.<sup>25</sup> Understanding this approach was useful as I developed the discussion on relationships in Chapter 4, and examined how masculine dominance is reproduced and/or resisted. Not only am I in search of cultural hegemonies that wield power through belief systems (Fulton, 1987), such as how gender is naturalised through religious symbols, but I also explore micro-discourses that express individual agency, such as how some women change the masculine words of hymns as they sing (see p.186). Seeing the interviewees as members of groups formed through in-group discourses allows me to examine the role of the institution in forming discourses. Exploring the contextual and social structure from within which the women speak enables me to analyse the historical discourse that has constructed the current context and how the women relate

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<sup>24</sup> This is reminiscent of C. Wright Mills' notion of personal, inner perspectives becoming a public discourse (Jackson, 1998; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Fairclough talks about direct change through policy and interventions into how social institutions interact with people. My project is more likely to initiate change through consciousness-raising and a clearer understanding of gender constructions through religious discourse and symbols.

to past debates about women's ordination and the continuing influence of these debates. Whilst these notions are complex, Van Dijk simplifies the task by framing analysis within the following questions: 'How do (more) powerful groups control public discourse? How does such discourse control the minds and actions of (less powerful) groups and what are the social consequences of such control?' (Van Dijk, 2003, p.355). Chapter 4 uses this model to examine how protesting behaviour is controlled and modified through hierarchical control of discourse around disagreement. What is interesting about this cohort of ordained women, and what impacts upon how they negotiate discourses, is that their patterns of belief fall into different categories. They have a *personal* acceptance of beliefs relating to a wider religio-cultural hegemony and they are obliged to hold, or at least act upon, beliefs *institutionally* – these may not be the same beliefs. They also have a way of discussing parallel beliefs that challenge traditional ontologies. This dialectical relationship between personal belief and institutional hegemony is a theme I explore.

What draws me to Denzin's (2001b) method is his theoretical treatment of 'epiphany' – those moments of experience that radically alter positions and worldviews. Denzin describes four types of epiphany: the major, the cumulative, the minor (and illuminative) and the re-lived (p.37). These can be applied to each woman's description of her own 'call' for example, and subsequent revelations of understanding. Negative epiphanies are also peppered throughout the interviews: the first time a woman experiences someone's refusal to take communion from her, or the moment when the interviewee realises a close friend or mentor does not accept women's ordination are moments of epiphany regarding their liminal position. During the interviews, the women re-lived these experiences and developed new realisations through the storytelling process. There is the relationship between the individual and the universal to be considered:

Interpretive studies, with their focus on the epiphany, attempt to uncover this complex interrelationship between the universal and the singular, between private troubles and public issues in a person's life. In this way, all interpretive studies are biographical and historical. They are always fitted to the historical moment that surrounds the subjects' life experiences. (Denzin, 2001b, p.39)

This draws me back to the story of the campaign for women's ordination in the Church of England, which was a bruising experience for many and which remains inscribed on the

institution and the individuals ordained into it.<sup>26</sup> The ‘private troubles’ of ordained women are not a string of individual experiences but need to be interpreted within the ‘universal’ story of the development of Christian theologies and their institutional and symbolic manifestations. The personal and the public are symbiotic.

As an aside, Denzin’s (2001a) notion of ‘Seventh Moment’ research techniques enabled me to spend some time breaking out of the traditional approaches to analysis. Using poetry as a method of analysis (see Faulkner, 2009), I distilled some of the conversations with the women into stanzas that pull forward aspects of their experiences. I explored the interviewees’ speech regarding menstruation, arranging their words into a poem<sup>27</sup> that acted both as amplification and as a method of revealing what connected the women’s experiences. Slee (2018) explores the possibilities of transcription poetry, particularly in the context of researching women of faith as a way of expressing the metaphysical threads of the women’s stories: the ‘prophetic’ elements in Slee’s words (p.38), beliefs and feelings about faith to which the poet-researcher can respond. Moreover, as Slee points out, producing a version of participants’ stories, using their own words, arranged in poetic form, offers an accessibility to their voices that is less easily achieved in academic writing (and for this reason I include some transcription poems in this thesis). This exercise became, following Denzin’s method of how to use this in a creative process, a performance poem.<sup>28</sup> This poetry work influenced the focus of the argument in Chapter 5, in discussing bodies at the altar. This is a method I found surprisingly useful (and creative) and will continue to be part of the toolkit of dissemination of this research.

There is another dimension to the stories told: what the women experienced and how they acted. Inspired by Kruk’s (2001) discussion, I have integrated into my methodology a phenomenological<sup>29</sup> analysis, focusing on the experiences of the women as they are described in the interviews. This is foregrounded in Chapter 5, where I explore how women experience the priesthood through their bodies within the phenomenal space of the

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 3 for a brief synopsis of the campaign.

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>28</sup> The performance was a piece of ritualised theatre that centred on the women’s words about menstruation and I performed it, with a colleague, at a Nordic Summer University Symposium. The audience engagement revealed how research can be creatively disseminated.

<sup>29</sup> For example, when the interviewees talk about congregants and male clergy refusing to accept the sacraments from them, I am not seeking the rationale behind these actions, but rather how the women themselves experience this rejection.

priesthood. Whilst the theological and philosophical ideas offered by the women are interesting, I focus on what the interviewees feel they can *do* with language and imagery rather than what they *think* about it. I ask, for example, whether women priests have the desire, authority, and confidence to stand in front of a congregation and use 'She' as a name for God, regardless of their theological and intellectual agreement with such nomenclature. This is an example of how phenomenology attempts to suspend how experiences are interpreted through assumptions and beliefs (Kruks, 2001). I bracket off the discussions with the interviewees about what they *say* about the feminine divine whilst exploring how they describe their *experiences* of speaking about the feminine divine (and suspending my assumptions about seeking the feminine divine, about challenging the status quo and about how a female priest is positioned in terms of authority and the power to speak). It is the gap between discourse and experience that is a window into how women are formed by the priesthood.

I am aware that feminisms can be separated into secular and spiritual camps (Braidotti, 2008). There is a need to challenge this secular/spiritual divide to understand the impact of gendered religious symbols and myths on wider cultural tides from *within* the religious group identity and relate more to the notion of multiple versions of Christianity and multiple versions of feminisms (Shaw, 1996). There is, though, an academic divide between secular and religious feminism. Researching the lives of women of faith has been portrayed as futile and this is a two-way suspicion (Llewellyn and Trzesiatowska, 2013). I see my project is part of a rapprochement. Braidotti warns us that to align feminism with secularism is to make invisible the spiritual lives of women and to misread the cultural flow towards post-secularism. My positioning is a bridge – one foot outside with a commitment to 'secular' feminist knowledge, which makes no reference to the divine, and the other foot inside the world of spiritual language and experience. In bricoleur fashion, I have drawn on several feminist theorists to explore meaning-making and experience in the priesthood that centres around sex and gender differentiation. Young (1990) and Kruks (2001) provide explorations of feminist theories that are considered foundational and have been invaluable for a deeper understanding of, for example, Beauvoir's humanist feminism in the project of equality, the critique of which has led some to explore gynocentric feminisms. Feminist theologians, such as Green (2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011), draw on Irigaray (1993 [2002b]), because she speaks to a spiritual paradigm, although I am unconvinced that the mapping of Irigaray's feminine divine on to the androcentric Christian symbol system is in the spirit of *parler-femme* (see Dallery, 1992). Other feminist thinkers whom I reference are

less inclined to rehabilitate the masculine Christian symbol system. Theologians such as Daly (1973 [1995]), Radford Ruether (1983), and Hampson (1990), although they have different approaches, provide sharper tools for examining the androcentrism of Christianity, though it should be noted, these feminist theological discussions do not necessarily speak to women priests or their experiences in the Church. In exploring sex and gender differences, I work with a variety of feminist theories. Kristeva's (1982) study of abjection features in Chapter 5, in the exploration of how women's bodies are received into the priesthood, and Wittig (1985) and Braidotti (1997, 2008, 2013) provide analyses of how gender is formed in hierarchical difference. The point I want to make at this juncture is that I knowingly incorporate different feminist perspectives to explore ideas from multiple angles and this, in turn, challenges my own understandings of sex and gender. By being open to multiple theories and not restricting my analysis to one method only, my intention is to provide a fuller and deeper account of the lives of women priests in the Church of England. Having studied various feminist theories, I am now less likely to become attached to one viewpoint, and although there is potential for polemical debate between humanist and gynocentric feminisms and biophilic and somatophobic ways of seeing the material world, I have garnered useful ideas from all the thinkers cited in this project. However, the focus remains on the women's stories, although it may be that at some points my interpretations will surprise the interviewees. Whilst I hope my arguments are convincing, they are not, of course, intended as a presentation of 'truth', but rather as stimuli for further discussion.

## Chapter 3 Eva's Call: Feminism, Sexism and Corporate Shock

### 3.1 Introduction: Feminism and Serious Theology

My own stance upsets many people in the Church of England who are worried by my involvement in the women's movement. It also confuses many of my feminist friends who feel that asking to join an oppressive patriarchal structure like the ordained ministry of the Church of England is hardly the best way of expressing feminist convictions. I can understand both points of view [. . .]

Una Kroll (1979, p.46)

The campaign for women's ordination has a long history in the Church of England, associated with the suffrage movement (Heeney, 1988; Armstrong, 1993; Gill, 1994), and culminating in a narrowly won vote in the General Synod in 1992. It is an extraordinary women's story, in which persistence, resilience, and organisation were required to overcome deeply embedded, and taken for granted, theological and cultural perceptions of women's roles in church life. With the impetus that the women's movement offered, literature appeared in the 1970s and 1980s that encapsulated the arguments for women's ordination (for example, Furlong, 1984; Furlong, 1988; Chapman, 1989). A flurry of pamphlets and more lengthy discussions were published in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, Carter, 1975; Flockton, 1975; Riley, 1975; Seward, 1978) largely arguing in favour of an exclusively male priesthood and exposing the fear that female priests would denigrate the nature of God (Oddie, 1984). Objections to women's ordination also came from other women, and as a mirror-image of Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), there appeared the group Women Against Ordination of Women, producing literature to support a male-only clergy (see Morley, 1988). On one level, the debate can be seen as part of a wider conversation about the equality of women, however, ordained ministry is not regarded by the Church as simply a management position of employment.<sup>30</sup> Recent research details how the priesthood is understood in terms of professional vocation that centres around God (Geene, 2017), personal sacrifice, and commitment, and how the priestly life and body is watched and disciplined (Peyton and Gatrell, 2013). Peyton and Gatrell focus on the sexuality and intimate lives of male and female parish clergy and

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<sup>30</sup> Robson (1988) offers a critique on the insular professionalisation of the priesthood and its language-games before the entry of women.

provides a useful platform from which to develop my research into how women experience *different* discourses in the priesthood because of their sex. As Greene (2017) elucidates, ordained ministry, whilst having some aspects in common with other industries, is highly gendered.

The status of the priest requires a theological basis, and whilst it may seem unfathomable to non-Church onlookers that the institution has split itself in two over the issue of women's ordination, there is a seriousness around the theologies that have been at the centre of the struggle (see Williams, 1984). Both sides of the debate needed to formulate and articulate the theological and spiritual basis for their argument. However, some scholars from within the Church presented an approach that understands the socially constructed nature of the priesthood, the clash of medieval and modern epistemologies leading to a fixed, and confused, understanding of ontology (Yates, 1998). Others (for example, Greenwood, 1994) added to the debate the notion of tension between social agent and ritualist roles of the priesthood. It may be that women priests see themselves as both social and spiritual activists, but the question of whether and how they are differentiated from their male counterparts in the priesthood eclipses this distinction, though both are present in nuanced forms. Before the advent of women's ordination, there was an air of confidence amongst some that the Church would retain an exclusively male priesthood, and thoroughgoing theological explanations and justifications were neglected by the opposing side of the debate (Baker, 2004). Some of the literature that represents the position of those under the Forward in Faith<sup>31</sup> banner was only consolidated in earnest some years after the ordination of the first women (see Baker, 2004; Podmore, 2015; Kirk, 2016).

The campaign for women's ordination was seen by some Christian women as belonging to the wider feminist movement, an unsettling association for many in the Church, since feminism was perceived to bring into the Church all the worst aspects of 'the world' (Wakeman, 1996, p.7). One woman, ordained shortly after the legislation was approved, writes about the conflicts between the Christian ideal of womanhood and 'secular' feminism, leading to campaigning for women's ordination being associated with 'strident' and 'pushy' women (Baisley, 1996, p.102). Yet, there was an appetite for Christian women to see a sisterhood with other feminists and vice versa (Thurlow, 2014). Una Kroll, a leading

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<sup>31</sup> Forward in Faith is the umbrella organisation for those opposed to women's ordination.

figure in the debate, wrote for *Spare Rib* to emphasise that female ordination was relevant to all feminists, with or without a faith (Kroll, 1979), declaring that the intention 'to turn the Churches' structures upside down' was 'revolutionary' (p.46). Other women followed suit, keeping the non-Church feminist audience abreast of the campaign (for example, Dowell, 1986). The imbricated struggles for women's ordination and secular women's movements are an established part of the narrative (for example, Field-Bibb, 1991; Armstrong, 1993), however, misgivings were (and are) expressed by some feminist theologians who argue that clericalism has dubious masculine foundations and that while it remains un-deconstructed, women would be wiser to avoid being drawn in (see, for example, Radford Ruether, 2011;<sup>32</sup> Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007).

The influx of women into a vocation that has been a male preserve for centuries generates interest for researchers, though the corpus of academic work is relatively small. Whilst scholars have examined the employment conditions for women priests (for example, Bagilhole, 2006), the gendered characteristics of male and female priests (such as, Robbins, Francis and Rutledge, 1997; Francis and Musson, 1999; Jackson, Jones, Francis, and Robbins, 2003; Francis, Robbins and Whinney, 2011), and how femininities and masculinities are played out in the priesthood (such as Thorne, 2000; Page, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016), there is less published research on the deeper connections between the structural differentiation of women priests, the androcentric symbolism of Christianity around which the priesthood revolves, and the cultural attitudes to women entering a non-traditional vocation. Building on the work that examines sex and gender differentiation in the priesthood, I ask more fundamental questions about whether women can fully belong on the same terms as men, going beyond the question of how types of femininities are supported, to examine how women are differentiated corporeally, symbolically, and structurally from male priests. The landscape within which this research is positioned includes feminist theologies which seek to explain and deconstruct the androcentrism of Christian symbolism, the published personal accounts of the campaign and journey into ordination, and several studies from sociological and psychological points of view.

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<sup>32</sup> Radford Ruether (2011) continues to argue against clericalism, responding more recently to the Catholic women's ordination movement.

### 3.1.1 *The growth of feminist theologies*

The need for cogent arguments to support women's inclusion in the priesthood contributed to the continued growth of and interest in feminist theologies (see Chaves, 1997;<sup>33</sup> Maltby, 1998), a field already being developed as women reinterpreted their position from the theological source. Female theologians in both the UK and the US have produced biblical exegesis (such as Fiorenza Schüssler, 1983; Trible, 1984 [1992]; Brenner, 1993; Russell, 1995) and theological and doctrinal treatises, with the aim of highlighting the extent to which Christianity is masculinised, and how the institutional Church (particularly the established Anglican and Catholic Churches) needed to change to allow women of faith their full subjectivity, some producing more radical theologies than others (for example, Daly, 1973 [1995]; Radford Ruether, 1975; Hayter, 1987; Loades, 1990; Hampson, 1990; Russell, 1993). As Slee (2003) points out, the corpus of feminist Christian theological work is now vast and intellectually sophisticated, having penetrated academia (though should not be viewed as an exclusively academic project) and constellated into specialisms, with authors producing navigational introductions to the subject (for example, Isherwood, 2002; Watson, 2003; Slee, 2003). Even though there is a close relationship between feminist theological development and the unfolding of women's access to the clerical profession, my research suggests that such theologies are regarded by women priests as part of marginal, or specialist, liberation literature, rather than mainstream thinking on which to develop their priesthood. This is understandable given the post-Christian and neo-Christian character of some of this work. For example, Hampson (2003) has explicitly rejected Christianity as a result of her feminist quest, and authors such as Daly (1973 [1995]) explore radical interpretations which make the Christian symbol system unrecognisable to those familiar with orthodoxy.

As Thorne (2000) notes, there is a difficult relationship between Christianity and feminism, and at times the Church has contributed to the backlash against feminism as a movement, though Christian feminists have long been 'challengers' and 'persuaders' in the Church (p.112). In her study of women priests, she found that 75% had an antipathy towards feminism (and it is worth noting that she found more negative attitudes to feminism amongst evangelical female clergy). I interpret much of the positioning of my interviewees

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<sup>33</sup> Chaves (1997) talks about the ecumenical pressure that had a two-way pull for the Church of England: the gravity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches (a point of contention), which are against women's ordination, as opposed to the liberal evangelical churches (especially the US Episcopal Church) which encouraged women in the campaign to be ordained in the Church of England.

as ‘persuaders’, and often in its mildest sense (as I go on to discuss, those who have been campaigners in the past, deliberately shelved that type of overt challenge to the Church once ordained), yet, at intervals in the interviews, there is a rearing up, at least in the storytelling, against alienation and differentiation that is forced upon them. I recognise the ‘disassociation’ from feminism that Thorne notes amongst her cohort of female priests (p.115), though a small number of my interviewees did identify as feminist. Despite this general separation from feminism, Thorne identified a positive drive towards inclusive language, though I do problematise this by drawing a sharp difference between human language and God-language. Clark-King’s (2004) study throws additional light on to this separation between women clergy’s praxis and engagement with feminist theology. She interviewed women with a Christian faith, finding that there were inadequacies in how feminist theologies speak to the lives of northern, working class women. In my research, there are tentative efforts to reference some feminist exegesis regarded as mildly challenging in pedagogical circumstances, and the use of feminist theologies is determined by levels of acceptance and interest shown within congregations. There appears, therefore, to be a fissure between now highly developed feminist theological work and women’s praxis in the priesthood.

### 3.1.2 *Literature of pioneers*

The story of the campaign for women’s ordination into the Church of England has been documented in full by writers with journalistic interest (such as Petre, 1994) and by those telling the stories of ‘insiders’ in the Church who were active in the campaign on both sides of the debate (for example, Dowell and Williams, 1994; Webster, 1994; Wakeman, 1996; Baker, 1998; Barr and Barr, 2001). Some authors examine a bias towards male advancement through the hierarchy and how the history of the permanent diaconate<sup>34</sup> for women – positioned as distinct and different from ministries of men – affected the trajectories of women’s careers (Nesbitt, 1993; Francis and Robbins, 1999). There have been several personal accounts of female clergy written since the first ordinations in 1994 (Walrond-Skinner, 1994; Webster 1994; Wakeman, 1996; Butt, Threlfall-Holmes and Vasey-Saunders, 2004; Rees, 2012; Peyton and Gatrell, 2013) and these provide an insight into the emotional investment of women in the campaign and in their subsequent ordained

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<sup>34</sup> A deacon is not a priest but is part of holy orders. Women have been deacons since the 1970s, seen as a permanent diaconate. (See Gill, 1994, for a detailed timeline and explanation of the course of events that opened the diaconate to women).

vocation. These accounts also evidence the peculiarity of the position of ordained women in the Church of England, and the hostilities and barriers they have faced within its occupational structures, arising from a complex relationship between women and what some regard as an abusive and patriarchal institution (Walrond-Skinner, 1994). There is a perennial debate over differentiation between male and female clergy and a struggle over the meaning of 'women's gifts' and their non-maleness has been commented on from the earliest years of women's ordination (for example, Wakeman, 1996; Barr and Barr, 2001). There are suggestions in some of the literature that the priesthood has been changed by the entry of women into its ranks, despite ongoing discrimination, though this is articulated more by international studies, in locations where women's priesthood has been established for longer (see for example, Lehman, 1993; Charlton, 1997; Deckman, Crawford, Olson and Green, 2003; Niemela, 2011). It should be noted that the Church of England has a structure, established by the Act of Synod 1993, that makes the English experience of female priesthood uniquely complex. There may be a gradual, indirect, approach to change, however, I want to problematise the assumptions of progressive change caused by the praxis of women's priesthood by emphasising the disciplining discourses that stymie women's influence and the normalising of the two integrities, which now seem to be accepted as a permanent structural arrangement. In one important way, however, women have not been seen to make a difference in the Church of England; church attendance does not appear to have been impacted (Roberts, Robbins, Francis and Hills, 2006). The fear that women's ordination would negatively affect the Church's attendance (Furlong, 1991, p.112), and the more hopeful opposite anticipation that it would attract a wider audience, is not supported by empirical evidence.

The personal stories written by women in the priesthood often use revealing language that frames the desire to be ordained in a context of self-sacrifice and servility, portraying the opposite of the stereotyped authoritarian male priest (Walrond-Skinner, 1994). The tempering of ambition or equality for equality's sake was a feature of the campaign (see Furlong, 1998) and the entry of women into the priesthood needed to be focused on spiritual principles rather than cultural pressure. Equally, those opposing women's ordination frame their views not as human prejudice but as a divinely ordained plan and order (Petre, 1994). This is an important context. The notion that gender equality was not considered grounds for opening the priesthood to women by both sides of the argument has implications for how women priests are able to define what is sex discrimination. There is a discourse that circumvents gender inequality and there are some (notably women in

defence of male opposers) who go to much trouble to explain how oppositional beliefs are not sexist (see Butt, 2012; Storkey, 2017), but the obfuscation of the sexist ideology behind the theology has been tackled head on from a sociological standpoint (Nason-Clark, 1987). Additionally, the discourse that frames the service model, rather than the authoritarian model, of priesthood may involve a gender bias, so that women priests are required to negotiate the terms of their authority against their femininity.

This background is important to how the women priests I interviewed position themselves within the Church, since sex and gender relations and constructions are still defined by the long-running debate and the eventual entry of women into the priesthood. The notion of 'being called' to the ministry becomes entangled with religious discourse that disallows overtly expressed female authority and feminist awakening to a desire to re-balance the highly masculinised nature of Christianity (Walrond-Skinner, 1994; Wakeman, 1996; Francis and Robbins, 1999; Barr and Barr, 2001). There are residual anxieties about femaleness on the part of male clergy who reject women's ordination and fears amongst women priests that their presence is still schismatic and wounding. The drawn-out process of achieving women's ordination was seen by some as damaging to women's collective and individual self-esteem (Furlong, 1991; Francis and Robbins, 1999). Women had exposed themselves to years of ridicule and pejorative arguments and had found themselves cast in the role of schismatics. The struggle for women to enter the priesthood on the same basis as men ultimately ended with a deeply flawed and compromised structure that institutionalises discrimination and sexism, constructed in an atmosphere that privileges the male oppositional position (Selby, 1998).

### 3.2 Monstrous Regiment: The Struggle for Women's Ordination

I sense the evil of the dehumanization of women, of  
which the modern Church is also guilty.

Clare Herbert (1994, p.39)

Female exclusion from the priesthood is part of a wider history of the denigration of women in western philosophy, and the long campaign for women to be priested revealed how deeply fear and loathing of women ran (and runs still). Herbert (1994), an ordained woman, argues that the centuries of exclusion of women from the priesthood solidified male power and undermined the confidence in women in the Church. The question for my

research is whether the self-esteem and confidence of women has grown because of their entry into the priesthood. At the turn of the 20th century, the antipathy towards women seeking to be ordained was unalloyed. John Knox was misquoted to provide the description of women agitating for change as a 'monstrous regiment' (Furlong, 1991).<sup>35</sup> We should keep in mind the thread of teaching that came from the oft-quoted Aquinas – based on Aristotle – that women should be excluded from Holy Orders because in their *nature* they are 'misbegotten males', inferior by biology, defective and subordinate to men (see for example, Hampson, 1990, p.18). Historically, 'sex, sin and woman were bound together in an unholy Trinity in the western Christian imagination by the powerful theology of Augustine' (Armstrong, 1993, p.107), a trajectory developed by Luther,<sup>36</sup> effectively disabling the emancipatory value of the Reformation for women. Because of Christianity's strong attachment to heritage and historical lineage (Hampson, 1990) this type of philosophy is deeply embedded in the Christian psyche. Additionally, the doctrine of male headship was transformed into 'an outright assertion that women had not been created in the image of God' (Armstrong, 1993, p.134). The associations made between women and pre-Christian goddess religion imbued the concept of the 'priestess' with pejorative overtones of paganism (Armstrong, 1993), the famous example being that of C.S. Lewis (1948) who wrote that priestesses would pull the Christian faith into worship of the Goddess (see footnote 17). Writing on the cusp of women's entry into priesthood, Armstrong (1993) noted that 'centuries of Christian conditioning have made the very idea of a woman presiding at the altar emotionally impossible for many people. We should try to understand why this has happened and whether this revulsion is justified' (p.5). Accounts of the negative reactions expressed towards women priests, particularly in the early years (for example, Wakeman, 1996), support Armstrong's statement and my research indicates that there remains an emotional difficulty for some in accepting the ministry of a woman.

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<sup>35</sup> John Knox's work, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regimen* [sic] of Women, published in 1558, is an attack on female monarchs, but became 'monstrous regiment' as a descriptor of agitating women.

<sup>36</sup> Luther coined the phrase 'a woman's place is in the home' (Armstrong, 1993, p.152).

The Anglican Church is not homogenous in attitudes or beliefs,<sup>37</sup> but contains a broad range that can be grouped into Anglo-Catholics, evangelicals,<sup>38</sup> and what is commonly referred to as middle-of-the-road. This ability to be comprehensively inclusive (Maltby, 1998) is a feature of the Church of England. It is extraordinary then, as Maltby points out, that the institution has resorted to structural differentiation in the case of women's ordination. Some Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelicals, in an unlikely alliance, provided the backbone of the opposition to women's ordination from two theological standpoints. Tradition, relationship with the Catholic Church,<sup>39</sup> and doctrinal issues such as *in persona Christi* and the Apostolic Succession<sup>40</sup> are argued largely by traditionalist Anglo-Catholics in opposition to women's ordination. The biblical argument of male headship is prominent for conservative evangelicals (for a thoroughly *Anglican* critique of all these objections, see McAdoo [1997]). For many years, it was assumed that most of the Church would not contemplate female ordination and Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1960s, declared it would be 'millions and millions and millions of years' before women would be ordained (Petre, 1994, p.33). The Measure<sup>41</sup> to allow women's ordination was, in fact, passed by Synod in 1992.

### 3.2.1 *The Act of Synod: Institutionalising difference*

The Measure was passed in the Synod by the smallest of margins and though this was the beginning of the juridical process to allow women into the priesthood there was an emphasis on those who could not accept women's ministry, revealing the dominance of the male 'tribe' in the Church (Selby, 1998, p.78). The desire to appease those who opposed

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<sup>37</sup> Parts of the Anglican Communion worldwide have been ordaining women for many years. The first woman to be ordained by the Anglican Church was Tam Li Oi, in China (see Petre, 1994, for a chronology).

<sup>38</sup> Conservative Evangelicals is a term used to separate those who use biblical text more literally and are likely to reject women's religious leadership.

<sup>39</sup> Baker (1998) offers an account of how this appeal to unity with the Roman Church is spurious, since there are significant differences between the Anglican Church and Roman Catholic Church in how the priesthood is perceived and the reasons it should remain male.

<sup>40</sup> The unbroken lineage of male bishops and priests thought to come from the very early years of the Church. The breaking of the Apostolic Succession by ordaining women is seen as the source of 'taint' for a bishop, leaving his own sacramental assurance in doubt. *In persona Christi* refers to the priest's role as representative of Christ at the altar, which takes on various nuanced meanings.

<sup>41</sup> The Measure was voted on in Synod in 1992 and the Act of Synod went through Parliament the following year. The Act became controversial because it added concessions and compromises that were not in the original Measure, which were responding to criticism that the Measure was too liberal (see Maltby, 1998).

women's ordination led to a scramble to accommodate them within the structure, fuelled by the fear of an exodus of Anglo-Catholic priests to the Roman Catholic Church (through a vehicle known as the Ordinariate<sup>42</sup>). Several writers who experienced the shockwaves of the 1992 vote describe the subdued mood in the Church. One bishop, perhaps indulging in emotional hyperbole, said he felt 'mutilated' (Furlong, 1998, p.3).<sup>43</sup> It is clear from contemporaneous accounts that women were not given the space to enjoy and celebrate winning the vote (for example, Webster, 1994) and that the focus was on the wounded sensibilities of the minority in the Church that remained opposed to women's ordination, laying the foundations for the disproportionate influence of this position on the Church's future structure. The bishops drew up the Manchester Statement, entitled *Bonds of Peace*, which presaged a new direction for what would become the Act of Synod (see Furlong, 1998), establishing a structural duality that became known as the two integrities, a response that was taken in 'corporate shock' (Selby, 1998, p.79) and the 'managed institutionalization of discontent' (Aldridge, 1994, p.508).

The Act of Synod allowed parishes that did not accept women priests access to an alternative system of episcopal oversight, to avoid the bishops whose sacramental assurance was brought into question by the act of ordaining a female. Parishes were also given the ability to refuse to employ women priests. Furlong (1998) presents a thorough account of how this impacted on women waiting to be ordained and how it was seen to denigrate women at the same time as allowing them into the priesthood. As Petre (1994), a journalist documenting the long debate, writes: 'it was an extraordinary piece of legislation, a recipe for officially sanctioned division' (p.2). The concessions to those opposing women's ordination were, at the time, accepted as a compromise by women's ordination supporters, in the spirit of charity (Mayland, 1998; Francis and Robbins, 1999) and in the hope that flaws in the legislation could, over time, be dealt with (Selby, 1998), but many of the pro-women's ordination Synod members who had supported the Measure came to regret it (Webster, 1994; Selby, 1998). The Act was a 'betrayal' which was 'taking the argument into

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<sup>42</sup> This is the voluntary departure of male clergy (some to the Roman Catholic Church) after women were ordained in the Church of England. The reported figure of those resigning and receiving compensation was 430 before the cut-off date of 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006. The cost to the Church was reported to have been £26m (Church Times, 2006). It was the exaggeration of the size of this exodus (rumoured that it could be as high as 3,000) that propelled the concessions in the Act of Synod, leaving women priests structurally discriminated against (Furlong, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Furlong (1988), writing before the 1992 vote, describes the dire warnings given by the male hierarchy which framed women priests as disastrous for the Church, like a 'virus' (p.8), and much of the talk was about how to safeguard the Church against the damaging impact of female clergy.

a completely different realm and seemed to me to be untheological, uncatholic, unecclesiastical and completely contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England' (Mayland, 1998, pp.68-69). The Act substantially limited the status of female clergy and permanently integrated the position of those opposed to women's ordination, creating a situation of 'apartheid' (Furlong, 1998, p.8) and was 'the institutionalisation of sexism *par excellence*' (Shaw, 1998, p.18). As Shaw states: 'the disorder created by the provisions and reception of the Act of Synod directly contradicts one of the stated intentions of the Measure, which was to entail that "the order [of priests] is a single whole"' (p.22). The Church created two internal conditions: one fully accepting women to the priesthood and one negating it, which some felt was an impossibility to work with (Walsh, 2001, p.176). The Act of Synod has, according to Shaw (1998), combined two views of women: the notion of the female being an inferior version of the male, and the notion of complementarity, of being different but equal. In Shaw's argument, the Church has a structure that reinforces difference without parity, and I examine how this chimeric construction of sex and gender is experienced and negotiated by women priests. Shaw's analysis of the Act of Synod highlights the fiction of complementarity used by the Church to ringfence women's roles. My research examines the impact of this underlying differentiation reified in the Act of Synod, and whilst women move into the higher offices of the Church, there remains an institutionalised ideology of woman as other which impacts upon the female experience of the priesthood.

The Act of Synod not only created structural inequality but was also seen to re-invigorate the archaic doctrine of 'taint'<sup>44</sup> (Walsh, 2001; Furlong, 1998; Shaw, 1998; Armstrong, 1993), a concept forthrightly denounced as 'sexist voodoo' by supporters of women's ordination (Petre, 1994, p.154). Publicly, the Church hierarchy has denied there is any official doctrine of 'taint' (Maltby, 1998), though as legislation was drafted to allow women priests, 'taint' was widely referred to as justification for separating parishes who opposed women's ordination from the main structures of the Church (Furlong, 1998). Shaw (1998) notes that ordained women, through the articulation of this notion of 'taint' with Church legislation, are structurally and ideologically framed as fundamentally different ('nay, untouchable' [p.21]) and the source of 'taint' through the breaking of the male Apostolic Succession. Rejection and discrimination of women priests are structurally and hierarchically justified,

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<sup>44</sup> Maltby (1998) provides a synopsis of how the doctrine of taint is derived from 4th heretical sect known as Donatists, who asserted that bishops who had succumbed to persecution were traitors and their sacramental ministry was tainted.

making 'taint' an ecclesiological reality (Furlong, 1998, p.1) even if the language used has since been tempered. The boundary set up by the two integrities does not necessarily contain all those who oppose women's priesthood and my research suggests that some women clergy are confronted with circumstances where their authority is challenged, questioned, and diminished in the parishes in which female priests are structurally accepted. There is a body of literature (some of which is published under the umbrella of Forward in Faith) that sets out the ecclesiological and theological case for the maleness of the priesthood on which I draw to understand the foundations of the rejection of women's ordination (see for example, Baker, 2004; Podmore, 2015; Kirk, 2016). Whilst structurally and numerically small (weakened by the Ordinariate arrangements), the opposing integrity is materially and symbolically significant. The structural parts of the Church that reject the ministry of women priests are not simply barring women. Because of the nature of some of the theological arguments against women's ordination, the female priest is perceived as non-existent, symbolically and ontologically, and so, at the deepest level, the institution both affirms and denies the vocations of women in the priesthood.

### 3.2.2 *Is change in the air?*

Recent figures show that 4.4% of parishes have voted for special episcopal oversight signalling the barring of women priests from working in the parish (Church of England, 2018). Bentley (1998), a female priest, points out that explicitly protecting those who are opposed to women priests in terms of appointment and career progression ensures a continuity of the two integrities and polarisation of positions in the Church.<sup>45</sup> Under these conditions, how likely is structural change? A bishop supportive of women's priesthood highlights the difficulty in undoing the work of the Act of Synod. Writing five years after the implementation of the Act, he states: 'we are at a point where neither campaigning for instant repeal nor sitting back and waiting for the Act to "wither away" makes any sense' (Selby, 1998, p.84). Many women felt that the climate at the time was not conducive to criticism of the Act and its highly discriminatory tone (Maltby, 1998; Mayland, 1998) and so objections were muted at the outset. Other authors have questioned the assumption that over time the Church would converge on a consensus, something perceived as impossible whilst the two integrities formed the structure of the institution (Roberts, Robbins, Francis, and Hills, 2006). Work on the structure in the years following the Act of Synod has focused

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<sup>45</sup> This was to mature into the concept of 'mutual flourishing' as women entered the episcopate, continuing to assure those still opposed women's ordination of equality of treatment.

on the pastoral and practical considerations of the two integrities (Furlong, 1998), and as I go on to discuss, there is little evidence of any campaigning verve amongst female priests, some of whom now are not old enough to remember the campaign or the circumstances under which women entered the priesthood, and perhaps longevity increases the chances of a permanently divided structure.

There have been flurries of campaigning against the two integrities over the years. In February 2006, the Group for the Rescinding of the Act of Synod (GRAS) took out a half-page advert in the Church Times, declaring that the Act was 'institutionally sexist' (Church Times, 2006),<sup>46</sup> having already published a report in 2001 detailing how women priests were still experiencing discrimination some years after the vote to allow women to be ordained (Petre, 2001). Whilst the Act of Synod was dissolved and replaced by legislation to allow women bishops in 2014, the restrictions to women clergy's ministry remain. The Church attempts to mitigate the impact of the continuing separation of female clergy from part of its structure through the Five Guiding Principles,<sup>47</sup> promoting the 'mutual flourishing' of both integrities (Church of England, 2014b; Cocksworth, 2018a). Furlong (1998), whilst hoping one day the two integrities will be dismantled, offers the notion that grassroots Christians will 'soften and sweeten the damaging implications of the Act' (p.13), and my research suggests that this can (though not always) be the case for women priests working in parishes.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the rewarding work with supportive congregations dampens the desire to agitate for structural change. As several of my interviewees observe, the structural arrangements have normalised under the imperative of allowing wounds of those opposed to women's ordination to heal.

A few authors focus on the ecclesiological notion of the acceptance of such a change in the priesthood, which provides context for the Church's ambivalent position on women priests and the slow pace of change. Avis (2004a) examines the *persistence* of controversy in the

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<sup>46</sup> The full text of this advert was published by Forward in Faith (2004).

<sup>47</sup> The Five Guiding Principles are contained within the Bishops' Declaration, a document designed to promote mutual flourishing of both structural integrities. These state that the Church is committed to a priesthood that includes all, regardless of gender, that everyone in the Church must understand this is a clear decision, that the decision should be seen within a broader process of discernment in the worldwide Church, that the Church remains committed to the flourishing of those who wish to avoid the ministry of women, and that there is no time limit on the two integrities.

<sup>48</sup> I want to avoid sentimentalising the relationship between the parish priest and the congregation. It may be that grassroots acceptance and support of the female priest contributes to her belonging, but this should not mask the complex ways power is exercised over the priest and sexist discourses supported.

Church over women's ordination and explains how 'reception' – the principle that doctrinal changes need to be taken on board by the worldwide Church – is developed as an ecumenical mechanism to halt the further fracturing of the catholic and apostolic union between denominations (emphasised much more on the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England). Women's ordination was a major doctrinal break with tradition, pulling away from the Catholic Church and other conservative Anglican churches in the Anglican Communion, and its reception is talked about in terms that create precarity for women priests (and I discuss this later in more detail). Reception as a concept allows the Church to change, but with the onerous caveat of ensuring continuity with past traditions (Rusch, 2004). If a doctrinal change remains divisive, it can be assumed to be wrong. What is unclear is the timescale to which reception is bound.<sup>49</sup> Could a generation of discord over women's ordination render their ministries unacceptable? This view of change places it beyond sociological stimulus and democratic pressure (Rusch, 2004). Ecumenical reception obfuscates the discriminatory ideologies at work and places campaigning and cultural pressure at odds with Church tradition. It should be noted that tradition is not treated lightly by those who oppose breaking with it; tradition is not 'culturally conditioned' but is an integral part of the theology of salvation (Baker, 2004, p.4). Avis (2004b) maintains that reception is a nuanced concept, but one that might easily frame congregations as receivers of doctrine from the magisterium (the authority of the Church) and not the shapers and deciders of doctrine. This explains why women, so long excluded from the spiritual elite, were unable to affect doctrine relating to them, since individual conscience is subjugated.

Avis (2004b) also implies the door is left open for a reversal of the legislation, should there be no gradual acceptance of women priests. Women clergy remain, for some at least, provisional in their status (Baker, 1998; Bentley, 1998) and I go on to explore whether this precarity is experienced by women priests themselves. Importantly, reception is essentially a conservative process and Bagilhole (2002) explores such conservative resistances and hostilities towards women working in the same roles as men in masculine environments. Indeed, bullying and harassment of women priests was widely reported in the first decade of their entry into the priesthood (Jury, 1998) and the Church commissioned its own investigation into the treatment of women clergy (see Thorne, 2000). One of the dynamics

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<sup>49</sup> In an informal discussion with a member of Forward in Faith, it was suggested the two integrities would disappear within 50 years because of the external pressure of social change and because of discourses that discredited the oppositional position. The withering away of the opposing integrity does not resolve the issue of reception, but it would make it moot.

within the Church that Bagilhole pinpoints is that of women being viewed as ‘visitors’ to an environment (p.115), which may well be generated by the notion of reception and residual hopes that women’s priesthood is a temporary aberration. Whilst commentators have discussed the nuances of this imprecise doctrine of reception, there remains the thorny issue of those opposed to women’s ordination being encouraged to ‘flourish’ within the Church of England (Cocksworth, 2018a), thereby disrupting any active process of shedding or diminishing a dissenting view. As Baker (1998) points out, the Church continues to ordain men opposed to women’s priesthood, and consecrate them as bishops, further jeopardising the reception of the change (and there is an oblique reference to the precarity that reception injects into women’s priesthood in the preamble of the Act itself).<sup>50</sup> By maintaining two integrities the Church disrupts the logic of reception.

The numerical imbalance between male and female clergy in the Church is changing, with the rapidly increasing numbers of women being selected for ordination (Church of England, 2018). Some commentators argue, though, that numbers of women clergy do not necessarily lead to parity between male and female in the priesthood (for example, Chaves, 1997). The same point is made in research in both the Church of England (Thorne, 2000) and in churches in the US (Nesbitt, 1997). Women’s ability to transform an organisation is controlled ‘in a manner that effectively grants female presence but little substantive opportunity for transformative influence’ (Nesbitt, 1997, p.585), and ominously, Nesbitt predicts that ‘the evidence suggests that men are unlikely to surrender their dominance of religious leadership’ (p.596). Chaves (1997) argues, even ‘in denominations with formal gender equality women face many obstacles preventing the attainment of real parity with male clergy’ (p.24).<sup>51</sup> The Church of England itself is perceived by some as fundamentally hierarchically gendered despite the numbers of women entering the priesthood and the hierarchy (Greene and Robbins, 2015). My research examines the barriers to women belonging to the priesthood in the same ways as men, and asks whether there are structural, cultural, and symbolic impediments to women priests accessing the power to effect change in the institution.

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<sup>50</sup> The injection of such precarity into the legislation is, according to Baker (1998), ‘preposterous’ since the Church is highly unlikely to undo such a major decision, making the notion of reception vacuous rhetoric and a ‘cruel way of devaluing the priesthood offered to our women’ (p.32).

<sup>51</sup> Chaves (1997) maps how formal moves to gender equality do not match practice in US churches, and some of these are echoed in my interviews, particularly the institutional reliance on women as surplus labour, gendered career paths, and the ability for parishes to only accept male clergy.

### 3.2.3 *Current research and current sexism*

Recent research indicates that women experience sexism in church environments (this research is not restricted to the Church of England) and that institutional sexism is identified as one of the main barriers to women in church leadership (Sophia Network, 2017). Inquiries into sexual abuse in the Church of England have raised the issue of sexism as a contributory factor to the inability of the institutional Church to establish reliable safeguarding processes (Church Times, 2018). Women priests may find themselves the target of sexist attitudes and their public and visible presence within a differentiating structure can make them the focus of abuse and harassment (Robbins and Greene, 2018). On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2018, International Women's Day, Ripon Theological College, Cuddesdon, near Oxford, was home to artwork created out of comments made to ordained women in the Church of England. The installation was entitled 'Eva's Call' and featured phrases such as 'daughter of Satan' and 'your miscarriage is probably a blessing, given your job', arranged in speech bubbles over the now-iconic phrase 'nevertheless she persisted' (Davies, 2018a).<sup>52</sup> Projects like 'Eva's Call' show how women priests continue to face general sexism, however, the lacuna in current research is in understanding whether the institutional practices and the Christian symbol system collude to make women priests differentiated from their male colleagues and the focus of sexism. The resistances to the female and the feminine within the priesthood are documented by, for example, Bloor (2012), an ordained woman who through her research hints at alienation created by the institution for both male and female clergy, not least because of the structure of the two integrities. My research aims to provide more detailed explanation of why, for example, women priests are reluctant to identify sexist and discriminatory events (see Robbins and Greene, 2018), and why they are differentiated from male colleagues in ways that may impact on how they experience the priesthood, as well as their career trajectories.

The institutional governance and employment conditions are areas which may be slowly improving for women in the Church. A survey in the 1990s of women deacons discovered that significant numbers of respondents felt the Church did not actively support their careers and that the institution's attitude to women damaged their ministry (Francis and Robbins, 1999), but a few years later, Jones' (2004) survey found that 81% of clergy had positive feelings about the ministry of ordained women. However, this same survey also

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<sup>52</sup> This artwork, called 'Eva's Call' can be seen in full in the blog written by Alice Watson at <https://artsrcc.wordpress.com/2018/03/02/evas-call/>.

revealed issues remain around equality of opportunity for women within the Church and the day-to-day difficulties of working within the divided structure of the Church. Other employment issues have been identified. Greene and Robbins (2015) found that female clergy are disproportionately in non-stipendiary roles and that the Church has often exploited the additional labour offered by married clergy couples who were only allocated a one and a third salary, rather than two full time stipends (Walsh, 2001; Bagilhole, 2006; Randall, 2015), suggesting the institutional leveraging of assumed dispositions to service and self-sacrifice in women. Whilst my research does not address employment issues *per se*, it is interesting to note that a few interviewees suggested women in heterosexual clergy couples are now treated more equitably, but women priests in same-sex civil partnerships are treated significantly less favourably in employment arrangements. Factors such as marriage, sexuality, and gender seem to affect career paths and according to Randall (2015), quantitative data reveals a pattern of different trajectories for male and female clergy, although there is an acknowledgement that 'calling' is not seen as synonymous with career. There is a corpus of research that explores the nature of calling, identifying complexities in religious discourse and female calling and associations with career. Madden, Bailey and Kerr (2015) explore the tensions between female calling and the Church through the story of one ordained woman, and Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) offer a discussion around calling as career, particularly in the religious context. These studies point to the individualistic nature of being called and its significance as a discourse is a theme that emerges from my interviews with women priests, revealing how calling can become entangled in issues of access to power.

The Church of England has been framed as a hostile environment for women priests (Greene, 2017) and Bagilhole (2002, 2003, 2006) provides evidence for this in her work on women entering non-traditional occupations. She suggests the Church of England is homosocial: a masculinised environment where women are expected to fit on male terms and where they are subject to marginalisation and subjugation. Bagilhole's cohort of female clergy reported patterns of exclusionary behaviour in male colleagues, who often framed women clergy as problematic or pejoratively different. Her respondents complained that the selection process was secretive and informal, allowing the 'old boys' network' free rein (2006, p.116) – the 'plum' parishes felt out of reach (2006, p.116). Comparing the Church with other organisations, Bagilhole notes the similarities in how male power is preserved to the disadvantage of women, who are identified 'as the deviant gender' (2006, p.109). The interesting conclusion she reaches is that female clergy are more likely to be able to effect

institutional change in the Church than women in other male-dominated organisations. This she puts down to the maturity of the first waves of ordained women, toughened by their experience in the campaigning they undertook during the 1980s. Though not denying change is taking place that favours women priests, such as their entry into the episcopate in 2014, my research suggests that women clergy do not necessarily consciously act as agents of change, and in some situations are disciplined in ways that mitigate protest.<sup>53</sup> One area of change is in attitudes to inclusive language. The correlations between age, educational level, personality test outcomes and active support of inclusive language have been investigated (Robbins, 2001; Jackson, Jones, Francis, and Robbins, 2003). My research picks up this research thread, as I ask whether activism around language helps women priests belong, or whether it can become a marginalising issue.

Research conducted after the entry of women into the episcopate concluded that the Church of England remains hierarchically male-dominated, with informal discrimination still apparent (Walsh, 2000, Greene and Robbins, 2015). Walsh (2000) explores, through discourse analysis, the context of the discrimination of women in the priesthood concluding that women priests are subject to overt and covert forms of discrimination and these institutional discourses are part of my discussion in Chapter 4. Greene and Robbins discuss the vocation of clergy in relation to the feminine self-sacrificing trope that determines how and whether women resist the discrimination within the organisation. Developing their research (Robbins and Greene, 2018), these authors argue that there is a concern amongst clergywomen that there is a perceived feminisation of the Church and that this is expressed in a complex mixture of blindness to sexist treatment and ambivalent views on whether women priests have changed the Church. My research builds on the findings of the authors cited above as I look in more depth into the way women are discouraged from protesting and the ways relationships with male clergy who oppose women's priesthood are formed, holding contradictory positions in tension. Whilst Jones (2004) reports a conciliatory environment (78% of respondents in her research had good relationships with those of opposing views), I examine the basis on which these 'good' relationships are constructed. My research shows that through effort and compromise amicable relationships are established. However, I analyse these relationships more deeply to understand how they are shaped by disciplinary discourses and expectations of female emotional labour. I

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<sup>53</sup> Further research is needed on whether the appointment of female bishops has enhanced the position of female clergy, or whether it galvanises the remaining opposition to women's ordination.

critique the idea that such relationships are an indicator of full acceptance in the priesthood and problematise the notion of an *entente cordiale* between women clergy and those opposed to female priesthood.

The background to women's presence in the priesthood is characterised by the 'ambivalent invitation' to women priests (Walrond-Skinner, 1994, p.7) and 'the frostiest welcome imaginable' (Furlong, 1998, p.17). For some more recent commentators, this ambivalence remains (for example, Percy, 2017). Contradictions are embedded into the institutional structures legitimising continued opposition to female clergy – an atmosphere which, initially at least, encouraged women to feel that the 'whole difficult situation was their fault' (Furlong, 1998, p.5). There is, however, a background belief that women were quickly and successfully integrated into the priesthood, and as the first few years of women's entry into the priesthood passed, fewer negative experiences were reported and more positive relational stories told (Bentley, 1998). This is where, twenty years on, I pick up the story and ask whether the integration of women priests permeates the structure and the symbol system of the Church and why there remains a sexist ambivalence around women's priesthood (Robbins and Green, 2018). What the body of recent research shows is that male and female clergy are differentiated according to sex and gender. Sometimes this differentiation is in the form of binary traits, and when these traits are resisted by women clergy they are framed as having a masculine way of working, or as honorary male, and the male priest who undertakes emotional labour is displaying feminine traits (see Francis and Musson, 1999). In my view, focusing on binary traits in research misses the point. It reveals little about the processes that construct a priesthood of two halves and does not adequately explore the resistances of women clergy to such binary arrangements.

Whilst some of the research detailed above reveals patterns of gender discrimination experienced by women priests, what is needed is a deeper understanding of the differences between sexism within the cultural life of the Church and how the female priest is constructed through institutional discourse, Christian symbols, and theology. Percy's (2014) research seeks to provide a deeply nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of clergy, using the mother metaphor to describe the 'under-articulated' (p.1) side of ministry; the metaphor for Percy provides an opportunity to challenge assumptions around feminine instinctual patterns of ministry (though it is not a study of women priests or mothers *per se*). Percy's work speaks to the discussion in Chapter 6 about linguistic values, and it is interesting that there is a sense of re-fashioning the mother metaphor in a liberatory sense. Yet, the question that the 'Eva's Call' display raises about why women priests attract fear

and loathing requires an exploration at a deeper level. How women priests' bodies are framed within the Christian symbolic and how they negotiate the institutional discourses designed to protect the male are questions that call for research into the entanglement between symbols, beliefs, and socially constructed ideas of sex and gender. My research aims to address this entanglement. The illuminating study of the priesthood offered by Peyton and Gatrell (2013) ends with a description of women priests belonging because they stay – suggesting priest as a verb rather than a noun – undertaking a journey of 'becoming' priests as they 'belong' as priests (p.178). My argument aims to reveal how the belonging process is far more complex for women than simply staying. The slogan 'nevertheless she persisted' in 'Eva's Call' may highlight the resilience of women priests, but in my discussion that follows I intend to disarticulate persistence and being accepted – women priests may stay, but do they belong?

## A Transcription Poem

### Slip into it

Why be the man?

If it wasn't the man that was able to do the saving?

If it isn't the man that's got all the answers?

That's just not how I see it

But I know I slip into it

When I do, I go male

Valerie, Anglo-Catholic curate

## Chapter 4 Boundaries and Relationships

### 4.1 Introduction: Doubt and Masculine Domination

One should expect control strategies to concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries.

Haraway, (1991, p.212)

'I work happily with women clergy', wrote Rev. Houlding (2012) in the *Church Times* following a failed vote in the Church of England's General Synod<sup>54</sup> to allow women bishops. In this opinion piece, Houlding, a priest within the Catholic Group in the General Synod and a member of Forward in Faith, wrote about his respect for women clergy and their positive contribution to the Church. The article included, however, a reminder of the existence of theological positions that cast doubt on the status of women priests, offering a window into how some in the Church frame the tension between opposing women's priesthood and working alongside female clergy. 'I have always been careful not to use the language of "invalidity,"' writes Houlding, a statement that simultaneously raises the notion of sacramental doubt and creates distance from it. To minimise the debate over women's legitimacy in the priesthood, he suggests: 'the most we can say is, that there is, from a wider Catholic perspective, an element of doubt that the admission of women into the ministerial priesthood has introduced'. It is the 'doubt', here wrapped in appeasing tones, which underpins institutional and symbolic discourses to create structural liminal space and the daily negotiation over belonging that is the lived experience of women priests.

Houlding shores up the legitimacy of the structural separation of women clergy, arguing that the two integrities is a helpful structure, as it draws boundaries that allow a 'level playing field' for traditionalists. The two integrities provide a structural shield against the naming of sexism and misogyny:

The Catholic tradition has been able to flourish in an unselfconscious manner, as if it were as normal as any other part of the Church. The givenness of these

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<sup>54</sup> This was short-lived disappointment for those in favour of women bishops. In 2014 legislation was passed to allow women to be consecrated (Gander, 2014).

arrangements has been helpful, as they preclude any accusation of discrimination against women priests. (Houlding, 2012)

The two integrities are framed as protection for a set of theological and ecclesiological practices and beliefs, and normalisation enables male clergy who oppose women's priesthood to operate in a separate ecclesiastical sphere without being exposed to open challenge about how the female is differentiated by the structure: framed as other and external to the priesthood. The structure itself is protected from being perceived as oppressive and discriminatory, and its role is re-cast as a mechanism to provide equality for males who oppose women's priesthood. In a subtle manner, oppression is subverted, and the male becomes the victim of discrimination. This view of the two integrities undermines the legitimacy of women priests *feeling* discriminated against and the discourse of the male as victim makes female objection to their separation unreasonable. The definition of discourse is important to note: discourse is 'that which constrains and enables what can be said' (Barad, 2008, p.137). Discursive practices form boundaries that impact upon women priests as much as the structural boundary of the two integrities. In this chapter, I show how institutional discourses shape what women priests can say, control how they can challenge, and determine what can and cannot be named as sexist. Are women priests diverted, by institutional discourse and through relationships, from insisting on full material and symbolic belonging in the priesthood? The answer to this question requires an examination of power and whether the maintenance of doubt over women's priesthood, their structural liminality, and the de-legitimisation of female protest in the Church reveals asymmetries in the access to institutional and symbolic power.

The daily experiences of women priests reveal how power is exercised over them, power which is formed around sex and gender differentiation. At the same time as providing male clergy who oppose women's priesthood with a safe space separated from women priests, institutional power creates liminality for women priests and stymies female protest by controlling the ways in which challenge can be voiced. However, the interviewees' stories often highlight how acts of resistance are played out at the individual level. Resistance differs from protest in that women clergy can trouble their institutional position outside the controlling mechanisms that ringfence female access to power. For example, Emily, an evangelical priest, used lipstick to 'play Devil's advocate', in resistance to how sex and gender are differentiated in the priesthood and dared the Church to refuse her call to ordination because of her display of a type of femininity. Such resistances appear in a range of contexts: how women priests align their bodies to the symbolic, how they dress, and the

choices they make around language reveal daily resistances against a masculine hegemony. More importantly for women priests, ‘resistance is predicated on a subtle understanding of the workings of power [. . .] it is unrealistic to expect individuals to reject wholesale the very symbolic structures through which they understand themselves as active subjects’ (McNay, 2016, p.45). Women priests do not necessarily want to dismantle systems or the institution, but many do see themselves as having the power of agency to perform acts of resistance. Protest is rarer amongst women clergy and this may be because protest is too disruptive, too visible, and perceived to be at odds with the model of ministry women align themselves to. Resistance and protest are both ways of accessing power for women priests, but they find using agential power to resist – such as Emily’s use of lipstick – the least disruptive to their own sense of belonging.

Agential resistance occurs at the relational level, and I therefore focus on interactions between women clergy and male clergy who do not accept female priesthood. These engagements not only reveal the complexities and contradictions of how power is accessed, but also show how women clergy move in and out of *feelings* of belonging, despite their continually compromised structural belonging. Sometimes women clergy resist the discourses aiming to shape their belonging as object and sometimes they allow themselves to be carried by the flow of such discourses. There are times, however, when the trickster priest appears to subvert how power is accessed, as she negotiates her standing in the various traditions of the Church or turns marginal space into creative space. To provide a framework in which to explore access to power in the priesthood and how resistance, protest, and liminality are part of an entanglement, I draw on Allen’s (1998) discussion that identifies three forms of power. Firstly ‘power-over’ can be seen in institutional control of the liminal status of the female priest (there are thresholds over which she cannot exist) and in the discourses that discipline women clergy’s protest, for example. Women clergy do not have access to this power since it is systematised and wielded by the (male) hierarchy.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, ‘power-to’ is women’s ability to act as a priest in their own way in seeking belonging as subject, for example, in how they relate to male clergy who do not accept female priesthood. The third facet of power Allen identifies is ‘power-with’, which describes the collective access to power. Using these categories of power to explore the experiences of women priests, a complexity is revealed in how

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<sup>55</sup> I argue this even though there are women bishops and I propose that their presence currently does not alter how power is accessed.

women belong as object and subject in the priesthood, and how forms of power circulate around the boundary of the two integrities.

Some interviewees explicitly recognise that access to forms of power can be gendered. For example, Alice, an Anglo-Catholic priest, expresses it thus: 'I feel it is still a patriarchal structure. A very patriarchal structure'. Carol, in a civil partnership with another female priest, feels uncertain about her position but understands where the centre of gravity is in the Church and that as female and lesbian she is alienated from power: 'I can kind of guess about different things about me that might mean that the men in power aren't very keen'. For Carol, power is male and heterosexual. Similarly, Karen, who had a long and difficult experience of the selection process, feels it was male access to power exercised over her that was most disruptive to her journey: 'once you get to the point of ordination, that's the point when I've really encountered how much male power is still out there'. What is meant here by 'male power'? There is a polarising feminist debate between positions that theorise male power that frames women as victimised and positions that emphasise forms of power that women are able to access (Allen, 1998). Both viewpoints see power as part of defining sexual difference. However, Allen argues that feminist theories of power should avoid such polarisation and acknowledge that women are both subject to male power (to which they do not have access) at the same time as exercising forms of power to which they do have access as *women*. How women priests negotiate male power is bound up with how they negotiate sex and gender difference. Understanding that there are ways women can access power, as well as being subject to male power, helps to explain how they can belong to the priesthood both as object (under male power) and subject (attained through accessing female power). There are signs that gynocentric approaches in the priesthood allow women priests to flexibly negotiate their access to power, sometimes relying on their sexual difference to access symbolic power unavailable to the male. There are more stories told by the interviewees about power being exercised over them than there are about women's own access to power, but there are significant moments where women priests seize power-to. However, the institutional discourses of the Church and the way women priests are structurally separated means that there is an asymmetry to the access to power. Male clergy, via androcentric institutional discourses, have access to all three facets of power: power-over, power-to, and power-with and I examine how each impacts upon the lives and belonging of women priests.

## 4.2 The Fake Priest: Boundaries and Power

We live in an environment that suggests we are perhaps ‘not quite’ priests. I have often thought of us as Schrödinger’s priests – like the cat, one day the box will be opened, but until then, it is perfectly OK to believe both that we are priests, and that we are not.

Judy Stowell (2019)

### 4.2.1 *Power over difference and interpellation*

How women are constructed as different in the priesthood is fundamental to understanding the asymmetry of access to power. Structurally, the two integrities are a manifestation and perpetuation of difference that is the product of the male formed as the norm, which, as Braidotti (1997) proposes, makes female difference ‘monstrous’, an analogy she associates with abjection.<sup>56</sup> She writes: ‘the misogyny of discourse is not an irrational exception but rather a tightly constructed system that requires difference as pejoration in order to erect the positivity of the norm’ (p.64). In other words, for men to be supported as the norm, women must be framed as negative in their difference, and practices that materialise this difference are not accidental or idly conceived. More precisely for the Church, the male priest is the norm which is supported by a fragmented attempt at accommodating the female in difference. The two integrities define the female priest in terms of symbolic lack (there is a boundary over which she cannot represent, and she cannot produce sacramental ontologies), and is therefore a few degrees away from the ‘zero’ that is the male (Braidotti, 2013). The structure of the Church helps to construct the woman priest as ‘monstrous’ from which some male clergy (and some laity) require protection. Thus, the rejection of women’s sacramental ministry – such as the refusal of female-blessed bread and wine at communion, a common occurrence for the interviewees – is a display of pure abjection, a recoiling from the difference that women represent that is ‘forever associated to unholy, disorderly, subhuman, and unsightly phenomena’ (Braidotti, 1997, p.64). Boundaries are erected as protection from the abject (Kristeva, 1982), and so the Church structure itself is confirming and legitimising the abjection of the female priest through the two integrities. Symbolically, the part of the Church that rejects women’s

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<sup>56</sup> Abjection is a term expounded by Kristeva (1982) and I use her understanding of the term in more detail in Chapter 5. ‘The monster’ is a symptom of abjection for Kristeva (p.11) and in terms of religion, rituals are created to purify or protect from the abject.

priesthood frames the female in such a way that she relates fundamentally differently to the symbolic divine, preventing women from being always and everywhere priests. By forming women as differently human in relation to the divine, the two integrities create the very monstrous difference the structure is designed to keep at bay. Power manifests and maintains female difference.

The fundamental differentiation that is concretised by the two integrities has significant implications, not just for access to power, but also for the access to the priestly identity. The Church has created spaces where women priests do not ontologically exist, meaning that actions taken as *priests* therein are rendered non-existent. This separation of women from the same access to the divine as men may begin in the theological minds of those who oppose women's priesthood, but its symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) spills out into the lived experience of all women priests. The violence is perpetrated at the level at which identities are formed. Alice, as an Anglo-Catholic, understands there are limits to her belonging that are bound up in the Anglo-Catholic ontological view of the priesthood, and yet she remains invested in those theologies that introduce dubiety into women's priesthood. Surrounded by male clergy, she believes they see her as a fake priest:

I think identity is a big thing [. . .] particularly the men in my deanery who are not affirming of women's ministry. Although they are never unkind to me, there is, I know it, I know that they think that what I'm doing is made up almost.

The undermining Alice feels comes not from active hostility, but from the gendered epistemology of some male clergy. Alice knows that how they come to a theological understanding of male priesthood is entangled with how they see sex and gender, and therefore how they see her. The denial of the ontology of women's priesthood, even if it is unspoken and only a minority view, deconstructs the female priest into woman and non-priest. This institutional power-over is an act of symbolic violence that violates mental processes, induces complicity, and lessens the need for external coercion (Bourdieu, 2001; see also Chambers, 2005). The symbolic violence I read in Alice's account is revealed in how her actions are robbed of their meaning and her priestly identity is fractured.<sup>57</sup> The symbolic violence of denying female priesthood is one way that power is exercised over the

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<sup>57</sup> Those opposed to women priests can see them as canonically priested, without the ontological status that the male priest is conferred with at ordination. This bypasses the conflict but does not bring women priests out of their structural liminality.

female that discourages protest and paves the way for the belonging of women priests to be shaped as object.

One of the key elements in Alice's story is that there is an alienation that is unspoken – she *feels* it and is conscious of it, though she is not subject to outward hostility. The discourse of dubiety is silently at work and male clergy do not need to display open hostility for Alice to feel undermined. The sense that Alice's priestly actions are constructed as 'made up' comes from the power being exercised over Alice's priestly ontology. I wonder if, in this sense, women become 'drag' priests, in an involuntary way, when their priesthood is refuted by the structure of the Church and by individual male clergy. 'Drag' has been used as a short hand for objections of some women priests to the masculinised look of priest's clothing (Oliphant, 2016) – this is about *looking* like a fake (male) priest. However, I use the term to capture how the ontology of female priesthood is controlled by external forces which form women clergy as non-priests in priest's clothing, acting out a male-priest role. I am borrowing from the complex analysis provided by Newton (2006),<sup>58</sup> which explores (in the context of female impersonation) how inside identification and outside presentation are 'incongruous juxtapositions' (p.125). There is a tension created between femaleness and the priesthood by external powers which, under certain circumstances, make priest impersonators of women. Carol, also an Anglo-Catholic, understands the donning of a priest's dress as a superficial process of making a female fit the male priesthood: 'They've just slotted women into the same mould as the men, only with earrings. With earrings and skirts'. This 'slotting in' suggests that the priesthood feels un-deconstructed and androcentric for some female clergy. Women priests are perceived by some to mime the actions of a priest, evoking Butler's (2009, 2011) notion of repetition that de-idealises and de-naturalises the original. The more women priests are framed as non-priests by the two integrities, the more the male original is disrupted. I am appropriating Butler's exploration of the performativity of gender and sexuality; however, it does help underscore the issue

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<sup>58</sup> Newton's study of female impersonators was ground-breaking in the 1960s, and some of the contextual detail may now be dated. However, she identified how the term 'drag' can be used in a broader sense to mean role-playing which uses differences between inward and outward identities. In the context of female impersonators, Newton found this role playing was accompanied by humour and positive rebellion against sex-roles. My use of this term is to indicate an enforced impersonation by the rejection built into the structure of the claim women have to the ontology of the priesthood. Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007) discuss the example of a woman in drag from the apocrypha, noting that this has been interpreted as the need to shed femaleness since Adam's rib has been symbolically returned to him to make the human whole in Christ. In other words, the idea of women becoming spiritually male is given an outward presentation in the form of masculine clothing.

for women priests, that clergy in opposition to female priesthood have access to power to rob women of ontological viability. The two integrities deliver a split in the institutionally legitimised powers of interpellation that allow women to be named as *not* priests.<sup>59</sup> It is not clear from the interviews that there is an intention to destabilise the original version of the (male) priest, yet faced with their ontological erasure, women priests must, at the boundary of the opposing integrity, be challenging the legitimacy of the original they are seen to copy. Difference in the priesthood, therefore, is formed around the power over the ability to name ontologies – by framing women as non-priests in parts of the Church, the two integrities create difference.

#### 4.2.2 *Heresy and marginality*

Not only is the differentness of women priests reified by the two integrities, but the structure creates liminality in which they reside. Liminality is about being held at the boundary as ‘threshold people’ who are ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventional, and ceremonial’ (Turner, 1969 [2008], p.95).<sup>60</sup> Liminal space is ambiguous, without the ‘consummation’ or ‘aggregation’ provided by the full passage through a process of claiming a legitimised new status (p.94). Such liminal space produces ‘threshold people’ because they are unable (and sometimes unwilling?) to fully transition from one state to another (p.95) and so remain at the boundary. Ritual process is designed to resolve such liminality, however, despite going through ordination, women are not fully received as priests across the institution of the Church of England. The female priest is only partially transformed, and she is interpellated differently to the male priest. Often, explains Turner, those in liminal spaces are regarded as ‘dangerous’ and ‘polluting’ (p.108). Liminality therefore compounds the polluting powers that are attributed to women priests in the quasi-doctrine of taint and in the menstrual taboo, for example

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<sup>59</sup> There is merit in considering how Butler (2011) experiments with Althusser’s notion of interpellation. Whilst Butler is looking at the discursive construction of gender, it is the power of the structural that is of interest here. The Church of England is part of the ideological state apparatus that has the power to ‘hail’ (to name) an individual in the process of constituting subjectivity. The Church splits this power of interpellation between the official ‘women *are* priests’ (shored up in the Five Guiding Principles) and the unofficial, but legitimised, ‘women are *not* priests’. How they respond to this second institutional ‘hailing’ is the subject of this chapter: whilst they necessarily resist the naming, women priests are unable to resist the constraints this naming places on them.

<sup>60</sup> Turner points out that ‘liminal entities’ are often portrayed as monsters (p.95), giving Braidotti’s monstrous difference and Kristeva’s monstrous abjection more potency in liminal space.

(which I discuss in Chapter 5).<sup>61</sup> The other important issue associated with liminality is that it constructs unequal power relationships; those in liminality are, according to Turner, subservient to rule-makers who are the orchestrators of the rite of passage. If women priests are held in this state institutionally, this may impact on their psychological approach to belonging, and may on various levels keep attached to women the neophyte qualities associated with liminal space.<sup>62</sup> The female is not given the full belonging status by the institution and this means that subservience associated with liminality may not be fully eliminated for women. This concept of liminality is complicated in the case of women's priesthood, since those who oppose female ordination are denying the 'betwixt' possibilities by believing there is no passage to aggregation for women: the threshold is made untraversable. However, I see this obliterating position as the *reason* for women's threshold status, rather than the *defining* of it. Liminality is also complicated because even in spaces where women's priesthood is accepted, abjection still occurs and there is a spillage of notions of pollution and of sacramental assurance into other parts of the Church. The existence of an institutional space that is liminal, specifically made for women priests, alters how power is accessed, and it may also mean an increased vulnerability for women as the object of such power. However, if the trickster priest is to be successful in achieving belonging through subversive means, liminal space is the most fruitful of places (Tannen, 2007); the trickster does not care too much about being aggregated into the whole.

The question is not, therefore, simply about how women priests move around the structure, or challenge a 'stained glass ceiling' (Sullins, 2000), but how women priests negotiate from a position of structural liminality. Being structurally liminal impacts on the way women relate to orthodoxy and sometimes they interpret their own thoughts and positions as heretical.<sup>63</sup> I interpret this as a response to the structural threshold space that

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<sup>61</sup> Turner refers to Douglas' (1966 [2002]) seminal discussion on pollution, which underscores how things and people falling between boundaries and categories take on polluting power, so liminality is strongly associated with impurity.

<sup>62</sup> Some of the interviewees tell stories of their curacies that resonate with this neophyte-instructor power relationship, which applies to all trainees, however, there are hints that women feel this power is exercised in gendered ways.

<sup>63</sup> I think it is worth making the connection with the long history of women's attraction to heretical groups because of the egalitarianism they have offered from the Middle Ages onwards in England (see Jantzen, 1995; Frederici, 2014). Women's heresy could be considered a form of proto-feminist rebellion against the gendered strictures of the Church and certainly it attracted backlash. The relationship between women and heresy, though, is not straightforward, and groups where women

separates them from the fullness of belonging enjoyed by the male priest. For some women heresy is a rebellious and subversive way of escaping orthodoxy. Self-named heresy is often applied to theological notions that drift from official doctrine (many of the interviewees disagree with the Church's stance on issues such as human sexuality, for example), and in the context of seeking ways to see the feminine in the Christian symbol system. For example, Valerie, an Anglo-Catholic curate, whilst exploring what a female transfigured<sup>64</sup> Jesus might mean for her sense of femaleness, asks (rhetorically), 'is that utterly heretical, do you think?' Heresy, or allowing for the possibility of heresy, is about subverting the liminal position by inferring a resistance to belonging to orthodoxy, and such anti-orthodoxy is a mark of the trickster (Priyadharshini, 2012). Valerie plays the trickster priest in her admission that she does not see the Bible as infallible<sup>65</sup> and (light-heartedly perhaps) wonders if this risks being 'thrown out of the Church of England'. Valerie is not living as a 'liminal entity' (Turner, 1969 [2008], p.95) because she courts non-orthodoxy. Her exploration of the feminine in the symbolic may be crucial to her sense of belonging in the priesthood, even if it does not change her structural belonging. So, since remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy stymies this exploration, Valerie explores the concept of heresy and perhaps it is because of the two integrities that women priests find freedom to access a wider set of symbols (I return to this theme in Chapter 6).

However, women priests are positioned in a thinking space that risks the implications of heresy, which may subvert their liminal existence, but it compromises their belonging in other ways. Women priests may continue to explore non-orthodoxy even if the liminal space were to be dissolved, however, the existence of liminal space gives rise to the conditions helpful for unorthodox thinking. There is a catch-22 in the embrace of the possibility of heresy: to belong symbolically as women in the priesthood they may need to think beyond orthodoxy, but to go beyond orthodoxy risks compromising belonging to the aggregated whole. Some women priests are undeterred. Karen develops an embodied theology based on her motherhood,<sup>66</sup> and sees her views as 'incredibly dodgy'. Una, a

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took leadership positions and had authority attracted the heresy label. Women and the notion of heresy in the Church of England continues to carry overtones of rebellion against androcentrism.

<sup>64</sup> In the Bible, Jesus' transfiguration is a stage of transformation before he ascends into heaven. By focusing on transfiguration, Valerie is exploring resolution from liminality. A female transfigured Jesus reveals the female who is not contained in liminality.

<sup>65</sup> The infallibility of biblical text is often problematic for women, so to eschew the inerrancy of scripture is a belonging strategy.

<sup>66</sup> See Chapter 5.

middle-of-the-road priest, would like to open up the doctrinal dimension of the Church to include a broader range of beliefs, but immediately labels this as ‘probably heresy’. These comments highlight the *sense* of being external to orthodoxy, rather than a theological assessment of what is correctly identified as heretical (and many of the ideas they discuss could be considered within the realm of orthodoxy). What is important here is the *feeling* the interviewees express about their outsideness, rather than the theological definition of heresy, suggesting that women express their compromised feelings of belonging by either making the assumption they are challenging orthodoxy, or by consciously playing with the notion of being heretical. It is not only female theological exploration that is labelled as risky, but their sex in the priesthood can mean women priests are framed as the embodiment of heresy. Tracy, a curate in the North of England, was told by a relative when the vote was won in 1992 that female priesthood was ‘heretical’: heresy is placed upon them by external discourses. However, being institutionally liminal – which is based on sex and gender difference – may provide access to alternative ways of seeing belonging, being framed as heretical brings with it a freedom to think heretically, a rebellion against the between-space by moving women to the outside, marginal spaces.

The importance of the comments on heresy offered by the interviewees is that they show how some women priests at times position *themselves* outside orthodoxy because they are seeking ways to make sense of liminal space, sometimes *as* women, but always *because* they are women. Perhaps femaleness is understood as heresy-in-difference in the priesthood. Heresy is both an act of self-deprecation and a subversion of, and challenge to, the androcentrism of orthodoxy (a positive form of heresy). The approach to heresy is double-edged since occupying liminal space gives women the freedom to explore different ways of thinking, whilst the partiality of their acceptance also helps to define female epistemology as suspect. The female priest becomes associated with a challenge to orthodoxy if she seeks femaleness in the symbolic, if she brings femaleness into an embodied theology, and if she challenges biblical inerrancy to save her sex from being reified in guilt, shame, and with an auxiliary status. Perhaps a more fluid term for the female challenge to orthodoxy is heterodoxy.<sup>67</sup> There is subversion in heterodoxy and as Ahmed (2017) argues, to dissent from orthodoxy is a wilful, feminist act. Such a description

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<sup>67</sup> As Slee (2003) explains, orthodoxy can be seen in terms of winners and losers; the articulate and powerful establish their version of belief over those whose voices are muted and who have little power. When female voices in the clergy begin to articulate different experiences and understandings, there is a struggle over what is considered orthodox.

may surprise some of the interviewees, who do not all necessarily align themselves with a feminist position (though some do). Whilst the willingness to embrace the naming of heresy in imagining feminine symbols may be rooted in ritual incompleteness, perhaps being in liminal space creates room for wilful resistance for the woman priest in the form of testing the boundaries of orthodoxy. There are suggestions in feminist theology that orthodoxy is an inhibitor of inclusivity (see Greene-McCreighton, 2000) and so the struggle over difference takes place between the borders of orthodoxy and heresy, another liminal space. Women priests like Valerie see orthodoxy as narrowly male-owned formulations that are actively differentiating the female priest. Heresy, or heterodoxy, is a way of challenging hegemony, but it may also contribute to women priests being pushed further into marginality.

When the interviewees examine what it means to be marginal, I detect another space-creating dynamic. Carol, for example, sees the value in the marginality of being openly gay, because 'someone's got to be there', so she rolls this into the purpose of her ministry. But marginality is sometimes an undermining push by the crowd of orthodoxy (Ahmed, 2017)<sup>68</sup> that is difficult to see and resist. Carol's civil partnership is a source of uncertainty and alienation for her<sup>69</sup> (see Church of England, 2017b). Her sense of marginality comes from both her femaleness and her non-heterosexuality. She lives in marginality in two dimensions of how she identifies, a double-threshold existence, since a civil partnership does not have the equal sacramental transformative value as the marriage ritual. Carol does not precisely identify the mechanism that drives her to the edges of the orthodox crowd but alludes to it: 'I feel a bit marginalised I think, and it's never been clear to me why that is'. Her liminality is formed through the heteronormative public discourses of the Church (Church of England, 2017a), but on a personal level her *marginality* is less clear because the discourses work more quietly, or more opaquely. It is interesting that Carol does not feel able to explicitly name these discourses, yet she knows that aspects of her identification chafe against the priesthood. Perhaps she can mitigate some of the impact of marginalising forces by holding on to deniability that might soften the blow against the

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<sup>68</sup> Ahmed (2017) offers an analogy of movement created by a crowd that is directed by discourses – the movement of orthodoxy. To resist the direction, either by will, by conviction, or by embodying heresy (simply by having a female body and being a priest), is to be pushed to the margins by the flow of the crowd.

<sup>69</sup> The Church is struggling to move away from the notion of heterosexuality being the only legitimate sexuality. One interviewee stated that these debates would eventually be more damaging to the Church than debates over female priests.

institution to which she is committed – a space-creating strategy. However, Carol’s reluctance to put a name to her marginality may also mean that she internalises the causes of her lack of access to (male) power she sees as exercised over her, as though she herself is the source of non-belonging, rather than being positioned as such by the structure and by external discourses.

Marginality and the structural liminality of women priests are related. Because the Church holds women priests at a threshold of belonging, marginal spaces may provide an alternative *sense* of belonging: belonging as subject rather than object. The space-creating potential of marginality is, for some women priests, centred around the re-configuration of outside-ness into spiritual capital, thus it becomes a form of empowerment. Denise, from a middle-of-the-road tradition, views working at the edges as activism in social justice: ‘That’s a passion of mine. Marginal voices. Maybe because I’ve struggled, and I’ve fought, I’ve fought for other people and maybe I’ll do that for all my ministry’. It strikes me that other people’s marginality is a way for Denise to work with legitimacy at the margins of the Church.<sup>70</sup> The conscious move towards marginality re-orientates Denise towards rhizomatic voices, and away from the masculine centre of gravity in the Church, an act that diffuses power. The incompleteness of her status institutionally is re-configured into a holy marginality, which in turn transforms a compromised status into one that has legitimate value and respect as spiritual capital – a resistance against structural liminality. Denise’s comments also reveal how women priests ‘stand in’ for all marginalised groups that have been othered by the androcentric Church (Green, 2009a, p.25), and perhaps she intuits her female otherness is a proxy for all otherness. Beatrice, also from a middle-of-the-road tradition, alludes to margins as having spiritual capital: ‘There are areas in which the Church demonstrates a prophetic voice for good. There are other areas where the Church is seen as a toxic brand’. ‘Prophetic’ spaces are marginal spaces which allow value to be generated away from orthodoxy and the nexus of power. An example of this orientation away from the centre is the support most of the interviewees (but not all) express for those who identify in non-binary ways, and so there are alignments being developed with marginalised ways of identifying. Marginality brings with it the ability to develop a wider set of meanings,

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<sup>70</sup> A US study showed that there was a gender gap between male and female protestant clergy in political beliefs and activities and because of their own experiences of marginality, women clergy are drawn to other marginal voices (Deckman, Crawford, Olson and Green, 2003). A recent discussion of a study involving trans people’s experiences of the Church may suggest women priests are likely to be supportive and welcoming, and the tentative suggestion made by the authors is that women clergy relate to minority or marginalised identities (Dowd and Beardsley, 2018)

according to Spender (1985), which is an advantage over the (male) dominant group who have limited meaning within their own, unchallenged, worldview.

For some women priests, the margin is a place where they are at ease, not least because it creates space to express priesthood in ways that do not conform to a male hegemony. However, it is also a place where there is precarity. There are evangelical parts of the Church that do not accept women's leadership (a different position to the Anglo-Catholic ontological one, but with similar impact on women priests) and Natalie, a middle-of-the-road priest, is concerned that work at the margins of the Church is being eclipsed by evangelical movements that 'get bums on seats'. She wonders if her work is in jeopardy because of its marginal status and is dubious about how honest the hierarchy is about institutional imperatives being privileged over certain types of ministries: 'I think my question to [the hierarchy] is whether the ministry that people like me have, and presented to the Church twenty years ago, is still valid. And that question is live for me'. Natalie is clear that she does not want to label her less visible ministry as a typically female ministry – she refuses the stereotypes that it suggests. However, the evangelical mission-oriented movement in the Church, which she sees as being privileged because of the financial weight it brings (to reduce 'institutional panic' as she sees it), is 'a big takeover of evangelical boys'. Natalie might resist having her ministry identified as gendered, but there is a palpable threat from a type of ministry that *is* defined by gender, potentially harnessed to negative attitudes to the female place in priesthood. Precarity of this sort may be resolved as fashions around ministry change. There is though, another form of precarity that women priests face which is less visible than existing on the margins: the discourse of reception.

#### 4.2.3 *Precarity and reception*

Liminal space and marginality may be productive spaces for women priests that give rise to resistances, however, there is a threat inherent in both these spaces that continues to compromise their belonging in the institution. Women priests' vulnerability as the object of power-over is intensified by the potential permanency of their structural liminality and also the temporariness of female priesthood. At the same time as being held at the threshold of belonging, women priests are also faced with precarity that comes from a discourse that sees women's priesthood as provisional until the worldwide Church is accepting of it. Whilst there is a desire amongst supporters of women's ordination to see the two integrities – and therefore the liminality of women priests – as temporary (see Chapter 3), the opposing discourse is that of reception (Avis, 2004a). Until the doctrinal rightness of female

priesthood is agreed more widely by the Christian Church, so the argument of reception runs, women's priesthood cannot be viewed as permanently accepted in the Church of England. There is an oblique reference made to reception in the Church's Five Guiding Principles (see Cocksworth, 2018a), within the Bishops' Declaration following the vote to allow the consecration of female bishops.<sup>71</sup> The creation of female bishops has not, for some, solved the precarity of the ordained woman: 'there is no reason to believe that the ordination of women to the episcopate in the Church of England will bring to an end debate about the rightness or otherwise of such ordinations' (Podmore, 2015, p.xv). Polly, an evangelical vicar in her 60s, recognises reception as a cyclical argument that preserves the two integrities:

I think there's a train of thought that this is just for the, you know, time being. What do they call it? Reception. But the worst thing that they did was after 1992, they should have insisted that those people who came forward for training would accept that they would have to work with women colleagues. And they didn't do that. So, they've divided training courses and colleges that are women-free zones and they're allowed to say [. . .] and it's got worse with the bishops, about who puts hands on whose head.<sup>72</sup>

Polly lives in discomfort with the reception discourse and understands that it ensures women's continued structural liminality in the priesthood. Perhaps the definition of liminality is also being stretched by the discourse of reception. Even if the two integrities were to be dissolved, there may be yet another threshold at which to wait for full acceptance. The sensing of this precarity is significant, since it may affect not only how women priests *feel* about their belonging and how their difference is framed as ill-fitting the priesthood, but also their belonging at the structural level. The 'women-free zones' are an outward sign of differentiation embedded into the structure and the symbolic realm,

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<sup>71</sup> The third principle states that the Church of England understands its 'clear' decision on gender and ministry should be seen within a wider process of discernment across the whole of the Christian Church. The final principle specifically states there is no time limit on the separation of structural arrangements that allow those in opposition to avoid the ministry of women priests and bishops. It is this document that establishes the mutual flourishing principle, whereby those in opposition should have a parity as a minority and should receive no prejudice in careers in the Church. This is ironic of course, since their position is entirely based on preventing women from exercising their vocations as priests and bishops.

<sup>72</sup> Polly is referring to the controversy of bishops laying on hands on the heads of women for ordination and now consecration. The physicality of the ritual of laying on of hands creates a toxicity around the female embodiment of taint and pollution.

carried through a process of deliberate decision-making by the Church hierarchy. Polly uses the word 'they', signifying a sense of alienation from the decision-makers and from institutional power, jeopardising Polly's sense of belonging as well as her structural belonging.

Such alienation, according to Bartky (1990), is caused by 'the prohibition of those activities which are constitutive of selfhood' (p.34). It is not too much of a stretch to see that alienation from the symbolic and the institution of the Church is the result of women clergy's liminality, and that this threshold existence institutionally undermines not only their priesthood, but their self-hood, in particular as the two integrities are based on sex and gender differentiation. Reception, then, is a concept that continues to frame women as separate from the (male) priesthood and generates a sense of waiting for their status to be confirmed, something that Podmore (2015) argues will be many years in the coming (p.xv). However, Polly and several other interviewees point out that by continuing to ordain men who reject female priesthood the institution is feeding the two integrities. This delays reception indefinitely, maintaining the conditions of liminality for women clergy. The twist in the narrative of power-over is that the institution of the Church of England is simultaneously seeking *and* preventing reception of female clergy through its structural organisation designed to protect those who continue to oppose female priesthood. The desire to protect the male priest who does not accept female ordination creates a perverse struggle to ensure that both integrities are regarded as having equal legitimacy and in doing so women priests are in a precarious state. Given that women priests exist in this place of compromised belonging, it is curious that the male who does not accept women's priesthood sometimes adopts the position of vulnerability, whose position needs to be shored up by the appeal to tradition, to unassailable theology and ecclesiology, and who requires shielding from accusations of sexism. What male clergy opposing women's ordination seek is support from the discourse that gives their position *integrity*.

### 4.3 Keepers and Destroyers: Discourses of Power

Priesthood has a lot to do with power [. . .] so, all priests have to remember that we're servants first.

Rachel, liberal Catholic priest.

### 4.3.1 Integrity

The establishment of parity of esteem between the two integrities does not overtly serve the belonging status of women priests but is part of the strategy to assuage male pain caused by women's entry into the priesthood. Some women priests are angrier and more perturbed than others about the institutional bolstering of parts of the Church that are opposed to women priests, and the implications this has on female belonging in the priesthood. Alice is a priest who is angry and outspoken and has an intellectual and emotional way of resisting in ways that are surprising, and for these reasons I lean heavily on her story. Her resistance – and with it comes a fierce rebuke to the hierarchy from her – against the two integrities begins with how the discriminating structure is named:

That word 'integrity'. The appropriateness of the word 'integrity'. As if there is equal integrity in both systems. As if that position has an integrity. As if they are the keepers of the tradition and we are the evil destroyers, usurpers.

Alice questions the language used to describe the structural arrangements and understands how the word 'integrity' is intended to construct meaning that obfuscates its function. Efforts to frame the opposing integrity as an equally legitimate alternative structure creates for Alice a powerful discourse that constructs the female priest in negative terms. Her objection reveals the fear that the institutional protection given to those who oppose women's priesthood supports and legitimises a claim to ownership of tradition, and women in their novelty assault a set of truths. As an Anglo-Catholic with an investment in the same tradition that is being shaped around the male, Alice is cut off from the source of her belonging. Once again, if orthodoxy is claimed by those who disavow women's priesthood (see Sani and Reicher, 2000), women clergy themselves are therefore placed outside that orthodoxy. Whereas some women priests play with the notion of heresy, Alice reacts against the idea that she, as a priested woman, is part of a changed, heretical, Church of England. She sees herself as part of the tradition and orthodoxy, but feels she is being made to represent an anti-orthodox set of beliefs, a position which for her destabilises female belonging. It is not an abstract that is articulated by the word 'integrity', but something that profoundly impacts upon women's *experience* of the priesthood and how they are positioned structurally and culturally in the Church.

Alice's view is a straightforward challenge to the structure that fractures her status as a priest, highlighting that the use of the word 'integrity' wields power over the position of female priests. But other women clergy present a more complex set of attitudes to the two

integrity. There is a tendency to differentiate between male clergy (and laity) who appear to have a *thought through* theology regarding the maleness of the priesthood and those who act on sexist conditioning. In this sense, integrity is a concept that some women priests use to negotiate on a relational level. Judging the difference between positions that reject female priesthood appears to depend on how well male clergy can *display* integrity in their theological stance. How this distinction is made by women priests is unclear, and it may be that they use the experience of relationships to make a judgement. If there are positive relationships being developed, women clergy are more inclined to try and be understanding of a theological position. Whilst the women are definite about the ‘wrongness’ of theologies that reject them as female priests (and how can it be any other way?), the experience of this wrongness is mediated and mitigated relationally, rendering it ‘right’ from a certain point of view because it is associated with theological *thinking*. Carol, for instance, nonchalantly says of members of Forward in Faith: ‘they just have this theological viewpoint’. Bella, a young evangelical, sees integrity in the biblical interpretations that exclude women from the priesthood and Church leadership: ‘if that’s their understanding, that’s fine and I don’t think they are being unfaithful because that’s how they interpret it’. Faithfulness to a theological position is given spiritual capital, even when such a position is oppressive to women and bolsters male access to power. It is the epistemology that is given legitimised status above ontological conclusions. Wendy, an Anglo-Catholic, refers to the difference between those who have been ‘brainwashed’ into objecting to women priests and those who are able to justify their position through rationality and conscience:

For a priest who believes that [women cannot be priests], then that’s fine with me [. . .]. If it’s thought-out theology and that’s what they believe, I’m not going to say they’re wrong, because they’ve got integrity in that. In the same way that I’ve got integrity in what I believe.

Integrity is a powerful discourse that protects oppressive ideology, but it also allows women priests to claim their own access to power over what can be regarded as ‘truth’. Perhaps there is a type of balance of terror between precarious and liminal women priests and the opposing male priest who needs to shore up a minority claim to orthodoxy – the mediator is parity in integrity. Wendy does not focus on the impact of opposing beliefs on her own sense of being a priest, and she shields herself by claiming parity of esteem in the position that allows her to be a priest. This mutuality enables her to engage relationally across the boundary. Simultaneously, Wendy’s own priestly identity is protected (since

theological positions are given contingency – a way out of reductionist arguments) whilst the two integrities are supported.

The offer of seeing a person's internal congruency is not an unreasonable one since Wendy's male colleagues may indeed be acting and thinking congruently for themselves. The issue of integrity becomes related to power when the belief system itself is oppressive and is supported through an asymmetrical access to power. Investment in discourses of integrity, congruency, and mutuality masks this asymmetry. Women priests who offer to support the notion of parity between theologies are perhaps doing so as one strategy for negotiating the institutionally-legitimised shaping of female belonging as object, and it may be a way of gaining clarity around being female in the priesthood with the expectation that integrity is mutually allowed. However, the investment in the discourse of personal integrity diminishes the desire to protest about liminality since the *reason* for protest – the perceived wrongness – is pushed further into the background. Establishing institutional parity of esteem between the two integrities does not alter the power-over that the institution has invested in theologies that oppose women's priesthood – women are still hailed as non-priests by parts of the Church. Even where the dominant theologies and ecclesiologies support the existence of women priests, the structural arrangement allocates powers of interpellation to minority voices who do *not* hail women as priests. By focusing on individual integrity, the larger hegemonic environment that may be sympathetic to the female as priest, but hands institutional power to those who are not, disappears. The advantage for women priests in focusing on individual relationships to render viewpoints with a theological basis as equally valid is that they avoid having to negotiate male dominance and power at a structural or paradigmatic level, at least temporarily.

The possibility that anti-women's ordination beliefs are theologically valid, if held with integrity, indicates that for some women priests the two integrities are therefore constructed through reason and conscience, and that it is legitimate on its own terms. The two integrities are also seen to be beneficial for women priests. Louise, an Anglo-Catholic, tells a story that suggests the boundary thrown up by the two integrities, along with the Five Guiding Principles, provide a stabilising force for both sides of the argument, allowing women and the men who oppose them to feel more secure. This sense of security releases positive energies within the Anglo-Catholic wing, now that gender is, for Louise, slowly becoming less contentious. She explains:

Now we have settled down with the two integrities, some sort of creative power within the Anglo Catholic tradition will be set free, because there's been so much unhappiness and people have been hunkered down in their bunkers, only sticking their heads above the parapet to take pot shots, or with study and prayer it will all go away [. . .] the argument isn't the issue, living with the fall out is [. . .] how you avoid kicking people where it hurts, re-opening old wounds [. . .]. But also, just the fact we've finally come to an arrangement that's not ideal, no, with ordaining women as bishops, that people can live with will hopefully allow more fruitful dialogue and open dialogue. The danger of course is that it just cements, and we end up with a church within a church. Which might happen, but I mean, certainly the priests I know in the other integrity are quite keen to not, to look beyond the wall. I don't know where the future's going but I'm much more hopeful than I was.

Louise hints at the need for male clergy who oppose women's ordination to avoid ensconcing themselves in an alternative church structure, which would leave them, and the Anglo-Catholic tradition, vulnerable to (negative) marginalisation. The mutuality of esteem has a wider importance in terms of whether it concretises the structure or whether it allows open dialogue. In Louise's experience, male clergy may not be entirely comfortable with isolation from female clergy, at least in the structural sense and is hopeful that the introduction of female bishops will ease tensions around the two integrities (and other interviewees express this same hope). The 'wall' between the two integrities, for Louise, need not be impermeable since it can enable dialogue. It should be noted that women priests who are Anglo-Catholic are likely to experience the boundary between the two integrities in a different way to those women from other traditions, as there are specific theologies that come from the Anglo-Catholic wing that disallow female priesthood. So, for Louise, the interactions that produce and re-produce the group with a shared 'communitas' (Turner, 1969 [2008]) may override the impulse to directly challenge the two integrities. Because of her tradition, Louise is as invested in the status quo working well as much for the preservation of her male colleagues across the boundary of the two integrities as for herself as a female priest. There is the possibility of becoming invested in that which is fought against (Ahmed, 2017) and it may be that, paradoxically, there are benefits for women hidden in the foundations of the boundary. Male clergy on the other side of the boundary are required to mask, or prevent, harm to the women priests they encounter. This protection is mutually beneficial since the boundary's longevity is likely to be

dependent on the absence of protest as well as the investment in the status quo of the women who are made non-priests.

The ability to distinguish between positions amongst male clergy who do not accept women's ordination is a key factor in how women priests negotiate relationships. Whilst some women are generous about the integrity of male clergy who oppose female ordination, some interviewees do express deep scepticism about the reasoning and logic on which their rejection is based. But there are degrees to which these positions are accepted. For example, some interviewees find it more difficult to engage with 'impossibilists'. These are male clergy who would not change their position regardless of changes in Roman Catholic doctrine and believe that the ontological maleness of the priesthood is generated by the divine and cannot be changed by any form of human decision-making. Believing female priesthood is always ontologically unviable is differentiated from the belief that the proper authority to recognise women as priests comes from a partnership between institution and the divine, traced to the hub and origin of institutional Christianity – the Roman Catholic Church. Women clergy are required to learn the nuances of male clergy positions and how these differences might affect relationships. Louise's thoughts are more explanatory:

Bishop North is on record as saying what would happen if Rome were to ordain women, and he said, 'I'd go and buy a case of champagne and invite all the women clergy I know round to help me drink it', which is sweet, but it's a bit... I don't agree with people who take that line on it, but I can still, I can deal with it [ . . . ]. It's sad that there's that, but I can cope with it. I can still be friends with them.

Louise rejects the logic of waiting for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women<sup>73</sup> but is willing to extract from it the relational energy that is required for her sense of belonging.

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<sup>73</sup> The Mawer report (2018) reproduces a statement from Bishop North explaining that his non-ordaining stance is related to his belief that the Church of England is not able to make doctrinal change without the agreement of the wider Christian Church. However, this distancing from other theological objections is confused by the Bishop's association with Forward in Faith, an organisation that actively objects to women priests theologically. The articulation of women priests and disunity in the wider Church feeds the perception of woman as a locus for schism, yet there is in Bishop North's account a side-stepping of the deeper motivations for excluding women from the priesthood. To focus on the threat to the unity of the Church without questioning the basis on which unity or disunity is debated (that is, women are differently human) is intellectually precarious. This is Louise's difficulty with this positioning.

The potentiality suggested by this Rome-must-lead position may open another gap in the boundary of the two integrities, at least in Louise's mind – that one day she might be drinking Bishop North's champagne. I wonder if Louise and other women priests are knowingly engaging in pure boundary-play, and that clergy who say they are waiting for the worldwide Church to agree on women priests are also knowingly side-stepping the implications of separating women from male ontologies. The positions that women *should not* be priests and that women *cannot* be priests are different on the surface. The latter is a permanent and symbolic erasure of female priesthood and the former allows for institutionally sanctioned change (however unlikely this might seem to be), yet both positions are part of the erection and perpetuation of a structural and symbolic boundary against the woman priest. Perhaps more significant is that the nuances of opposing positions are conflated under the two integrities: the exclusion of women priests is the result.<sup>74</sup> What the subtle differences do mean, however, is that some male clergy are able to form relationships based on the ability to distance themselves from the oppressive theology itself, (it's not me, it's Rome!),<sup>75</sup> without conceding any ground in the praxis of separating women priests within the structure of the Church. The outcomes are the same for women, but male clergy can avoid the ultimate responsibility. The distinctions between positions also make resistance difficult for women priests, since the target for resistance is shifted elsewhere. The bishop in Louise's story, by using doubt in the viability of the decision-making process, is able to support a positive relationship with women priests – indeed, he is well-known for this (Premier, 2017) – sapping the debate of energy, whilst remaining positioned against female ordination. Some of the interviewees recognise these subtleties and are willing to use the opening they provide whilst remaining sceptical about the rationale.

The ability to see integrity in the position that opposes women's ordination may be shaping what practices women priests see as sexist. In her exploration of how sexism is normalised by remaining unnamed, Tannen (2007) argues that women face being labelled as deviant if

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<sup>74</sup> I focus on Anglo-Catholic oppositional beliefs, since these seem to have had the most impact on the structure. There are other beliefs, such as male headship – a conservative evangelical stance - that come into play in the arguments against women's ordination.

<sup>75</sup> In an informal discussion with a member of Forward in Faith, the disassociation from the outcomes of holding anti-women's priesthood theological beliefs was made even more clear. This priest said he was internally conflicted because he wanted to accept women as priests but believed it was not God's will, defined through tradition and through scripture (including the argument that the ancient Greek word for priest is male). The terms on which the debate takes place are therefore narrowly defined and many women clergy feel disinclined to engage along these lines.

they break the taboo around sexism and misogyny. The avoidance of naming beliefs as sexist is a common approach raised in the interviews as positive relationships are being described and this is a symptom of the institutional shaping of women's belonging as object, which discourages women priests from naming sexism, but may also obscure what is perceived as sexism. The men who reject female priesthood are sometimes not held personally accountable for these views, or the consequences they have wrought. There is little evidence of enmity between the interviewees and such male clergy (though more anger is expressed by the women at the more abstract notion of discrimination in the Church). Suzanne, ordained in 2002, describes how her diocesan bishop refused to ordain her because she is a woman, but she does not interpret this as a sexist or personally degrading gesture. She says of those who hold an anti-women's ordination position:

I respect them because they are not misogynist, they are not aggressive with it, they are not antagonistic, they are not deliberately making divisions along the way and they are doing their best to treat everybody the same [. . .] I think the [diocesan bishop] at that point was a real example of that, because he took the hit to an extent. He said, 'Well, OK, I can't do this. So, I can't do it for anybody'. [. . .] rather than have all the men and ordaining them and sending the girls out to be ordained elsewhere, he didn't do that, and he could've done that.

Suzanne does not *name* sexism in views that oppose women's priesthood because she does not recognise them as sexist. On the contrary, she frames the actions of the bishop as honourable and self-sacrificing. The behaviours of those who oppose women's priesthood are therefore seen as an indication that there is no deliberate oppression in such a position. Suzanne's story does not identify sexist practice that is legitimised by the structure but focuses on the generosity of the male bishop who refuses to ordain women. The reluctance to name the pain of misogyny that underpins theological beliefs about women, and the consequences of these beliefs, is part of a psychological constriction placed on women that requires conscious effort to overcome.

The masking, through minimisation, of the boundary's power to keep women priests in structural liminal space forms a seedbed for befuddlement over the *purpose* of the boundary. Even when women clergy feel aggrieved, the power of discourses about agreement and belonging reduces their ability to name misogyny. Instead, for some women priests there is a feeling of sadness bordering on sympathy for those who oppose women's priesthood. Helen is a non-stipendiary priest (working without a salary) and has difficulty

accommodating beliefs that oppose her ordination. She is, however, compelled to 'respect' and work at positive relationships. She feels her ability to resist *and* protest gender injustice in the Church structure is muted:

I struggle to [. . .] part of me feels that we have to respect each other even in disagreements. One of the things about being the Body of Christ is that we are different, we try and work together, but I struggle to understand how they can see things like that. How they can argue that case so vehemently. I suppose, perhaps I feel, what's it saying about them? What's gone wrong for them?

As a woman priest she necessarily has no doubt that the beliefs that would prevent her from being a priest are wrong from her standpoint. But the argument becomes relativised as she perceives the oppositional clergy as not *being* wrong, but something having *gone* wrong for them. The grammar is passive and distances the male priest from choosing an anti-women's ordination position, which allows female priests to see the conflict in a more acceptable way – with love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin generosity. Those who oppose women priests are cast as victims of wrongness rather than propagators of misogyny. Yet this wrongness must still be treated with respect. If Helen feels disciplined to be non-confrontational ('we have to respect each other'), her liminality as a priest is continually being re-produced, since there are no structural or hierarchical indications that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' position to take, an ambiguity that is part women's liminal position. The environment of the Church discourages, or makes difficult, the naming of wrongness of a theological position that opposes women priests, compounding the precarity of their position and also minimising the ability of women to name oppression. If it is equally valid to believe women cannot or should not be priests, as it is to believe the priesthood is open to all, then it is not the male priest's position that is made ambiguous, but that of the female priest.

#### 4.3.2 *Silences*

The ambivalence towards naming practices and attitudes as sexist for some women priests may be partly due to the sense of restriction around how the two integrities can be discussed. Louise believes the boundary between the two integrities can stimulate debate because of the security it provides; other women's stories indicate there is a tacit arrangement and that debate about the structure and its impact on women is actively discouraged. Valerie describes one colleague who does not accept the priesthood of women as 'wonderful' and 'supportive' but that 'you would know nothing of the position

he takes from anything he says or does'. This is a silence that is entangled with the relational. The mismatch between (unspoken) beliefs and supportive action makes it difficult to challenge or resist the symbolic stance taken against women's priesthood – if it remains unspoken, not acted upon and buried beneath warm relationships, it is not held up for scrutiny. The ability for women to negotiate the unspoken attitudes to women's priesthood relies on knowledge of churchmanship. The positions of male clergy, and their churches, may not always be made explicit enough and without such knowledge women are at risk of being powerless. Karen, for example, came into the Church of England without the background knowledge to navigate the Church's split structure and so had no awareness of the potential positions of male clergy, significant for a woman seeking sponsorship from her parish priest. Despite this knowledge being crucial in the journey to priesthood, in Karen's case there was never an explicit explanation given by her vicar of his anti-women's ordination positioning, even as she pursued her call to the ministry under his sponsorship. This silence meant she was unable to navigate the process without difficulty, and not understanding the implications of the two integrities, and her local church's place in the structure, left her vulnerable to the individualised male power exercised over her. Without knowing it, she was hailed as ineligible for the priesthood by her sponsoring vicar.

There is evidence in Karen's story that there is a reluctance to conduct open discussion about the subject of positioning on female priesthood. The subject may have become sensitive and personal, information that is not straightforwardly discussed. Only after some years, having overcome numerous, (and to her, unfathomable), institutional obstacles, did Karen learn that her sponsoring vicar was opposed to women's ordination, a situation which almost derailed her selection process. Since she was unaware of her priest's views, and how much his position could impinge on her own journey, the fallout was personally devastating:

The DDO<sup>76</sup> asked 'did no-one ever tell you [your vicar] was Forward in Faith?' and I said, 'No, they didn't [. . .]. I certainly felt unworthy to be called as a human being, but I didn't feel unworthy to be called because I was a woman, if that distinction makes sense. And all of the experiences after that of effectively men via the institution questioning that – I just never agreed with it. I

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<sup>76</sup> DDO refers to the Diocesan Director of Ordinands – the person who manages the process of people going through the selection.

experienced it and I went through it, but I always wanted to give them the two fingers. I wanted to tell them to grow up.

Karen highlights the perception that access to power belongs to the male hierarchy and without the patronage of men her journey to priesthood would have failed. Her story is full of frustration and anger at how her own access to power was disrupted, partly because of the institutional arrangements, but also because knowledge was hidden from her. Her willingness to endure the process comes from another strong discourse, that of the calling to a vocation, but over which the Church has ambivalent power. The silence around who might support her as a woman, and who might not, meant that Karen lacked the power (by moving churches, for instance) to negotiate the barriers. This example reveals not just how access to power is blocked, but also the impact of the division of the Church's power of interpellation on the experiences of women priests. The male vicar who was supposed to be her sponsor wielded power to disrupt her selection, and power to legitimise her call to the priesthood is complicated by Karen's own powerlessness. The belief that the Church is not discriminatory (Houlding, 2012) and the silence around institutional cognitive dissonance are attempts to hide the structure's impact on women priests.

Reticence to debate ongoing gender issues in the priesthood, whilst contributing to the normalisation of the two integrities, is a response to the continuation of the pain of the wounds the Church inflicted upon itself during the debate over women's ordination before the 1992 Synod vote. Julia, now retired, remembers the intensity of the atmosphere during the years before the priesthood was opened to women: 'There was no way I could have campaigned and retained both my sanity [. . .] the only tactic available to me was to keep my mouth shut about the issue'. So, for some women, the reluctance to talk about the impact of the two integrities may provide respite and reduce risk of personal discomfort that accompanies open debate. Louise believes there remains unresolved division that still causes anxiety in Anglo-Catholic circles, with the disruption caused by the original campaign for women's ordination resulting in withdrawal and reluctance to continue the debate on both sides:

People tend to be quite quiet about it because the experience of women's ordination was quite traumatic, whichever side you were on [. . .] there's this tradition within Anglo Catholicism of discretion being a virtue, of being quite reserved about what's going on and only talking about things obliquely, working things out through the liturgy often or through para-liturgical

devotions, rather than open debate. Or you know only after the third gin and tonic [. . .] It's both a curse and a blessing.

She interprets the silence around her priestly fragmentation because of her sex as part of a type of priestly code of conduct, an expectation that divisive views are not openly discussed. Louise believes debate is mediated by religious practice undertaken by priests and this has implications about access to the power to define what requires mediation, who can set the terms of the debate, and how it is concluded. The mechanics of debate, therefore, are regulated in parts of the Church. The 'curse' is that the silence works against the female priest, since she cannot engage in persuasion, or challenge, whilst the boundary becomes normalised. The impact of the two integrities on women priests remains obscured, or at least it is downplayed. Louise intimates she knows there is a masking of female pain as well as male pain and that the lack of open debate about the two integrities is due to the trauma experienced on both sides. This positioning obscures the differences between female and male pain in the priesthood: female pain is based on rejection, guilt, and the constant need to justify their presence, whilst male pain in those who oppose women's priesthood is rooted in the loss of institutional power and the fear of the female. The maintenance of the two integrities through a discouragement of debate privileges male pain over female belonging as subject. The 'blessing' for Louise is that the silence makes space for women priests to continue their work, allowing 'things to happen', a gradual working out of co-operation without the need to constantly deal with open hostility. The silence allows the 'trauma' of the entry of women into the priesthood to quietly diminish, whilst the boundary remains unchallenged.

The notion of open discussion causes discomfort for some women priests, who feel theologically ill-equipped to answer the arguments against women's priesthood and so do not engage with the continuing debate. Valerie notices the avoidance of debate, but also downplays her ability to engage:

We have colleagues in this deanery who have a very clear idea of headship. For some reason they never ever chose to have that conversation with me. And I don't know why, because I don't think I could give a very clear changed theology on that.

From Valerie's experience, it is those with views opposing women's ordination who are reluctant to debate, but it is Valerie who feels unprepared to give a theological justification

for her own priesthood, implying she would be perceived as the loser in such an exchange. Sometimes female insecurity in argument, though, is seen as being encouraged by institutional discourses. Alice sees self-censorship as another indication that power is exercised over female clergy: 'You're not allowed to speak unless you've got it all organised and sorted so, let's remain silent. And I think a lot of women do stay silent because they haven't got it all sorted, and they contradict themselves'. The avoidance of debate is a protective strategy fed by female fear that they lack knowledge to justify their priesthood, and also resistance to the expectation that women should justify their presence on the same terms as male clergy who oppose them. This is not the only reason for women to disengage from debate over their priesthood. Some women simply wish to avoid conflict. Valerie goes on to explain that because her own ordination had been received poorly by those around her, she minimises conflict by not engaging in discussion about her legitimacy as a priest. How women clergy weave contingency around the character and viability of the continuing debate over their place in the priesthood (whether they feel it opens wounds, or they feel a lack of confidence in theological knowledge, or whether they simply wish to abstain to avoid confrontation with people around them) is part of wider set of disciplining and silencing discourses with which women in the priesthood contend, both relationally and institutionally.

#### *4.3.3 Mutual flourishing and good disagreement*

Women priests' ability to challenge the structure is subject to conscious and active institutional discourses designed to protect the male who seeks separation from female difference. The structure of the two integrities is bolstered by the discourse of 'mutual flourishing' (Church of England, 2014), which confers continued legitimacy on anti-women's priesthood positions. Mutual flourishing seeks compliance from women clergy in contributing to the symbol system that is hyper-masculinised through a divinely ordered 'gracious patriarchy' (Baker, 2004, p.101). The principle of mutuality requires the hierarchy of the Church to support contradictory beliefs, but more significantly, a position that is fundamentally at odds with female subjectivity in the priesthood is being explicitly encouraged to thrive. This attempt at mutuality gives rise to politically fraught moments of high drama that feed an environment in which women priests are problematised, rather than normalised. The Archbishop of York, for example, was required to publicly defend his position, having become embroiled in a discussion about the quasi-doctrine of taint, after agreeing to delegate the act of laying on of hands in the consecration of Philip North, in a show of belief in the purpose of the male Apostolic Succession. The Archbishop had laid

hands on the first female bishop, Libby Lane, in consecration (Troup Buchanan, 2015) which jeopardised his sacramental assurance for those who believe in a male priesthood.<sup>77</sup> This event was widely publicised, and it highlights how the Church's accommodation is not focused on women achieving full belonging in the priesthood, but on ensuring conditions are generated to allow those who oppose women's priesthood to maintain their position. The impact of views opposing female ordination is not, therefore, ringfenced but affect other parts of the Church. Alice expresses anger at the circulating force that pushes the ideology of the opposing integrity beyond its boundary:

It's almost an appeasement [. . .] the whole thing with the Archbishop of York [. . .] as far as I'm concerned Philip North wasn't ordained a bishop because he wasn't ordained properly [. . .] 'I'm not going to touch you because my hands are filthy from all of the women' [. . .]. What would happen if Bishop Libby said, 'I'm not going to ordain men anymore'?

The political understanding of the boundary expressed here is that at an institutional level the part of the Church that does not recognise women priests now demands to be fed through an outward institutional show of legitimacy. Alice is highly subversive in how she frames the controversy arising from Bishop Lane's consecration, and she refuses to lend her own legitimacy to the consecration of a male priest (now Bishop North), who she sees as dissenting. Alice resists the discourse of mutual flourishing and politically rejects the boundary, despite her Anglo-Catholic identity, a different position to other Anglo-Catholic interviewees who make attempts to ameliorate the boundary's effects without defying it outright.

Mutual flourishing requires a normalisation of the two integrities which has implications on women's daily experience of the priesthood. Rachel, who describes herself as a liberal Catholic, explains the structural gymnastics that take place to ensure women's pollution is ringfenced:

The previous bishop [. . .] used to say, 'Oh [Rachel], you're the trouble. I can't go to [name] church, my hands are tainted since I ordained you'. [. . .] they

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<sup>77</sup> The two consecrations, of Philip North and Libby Lane, were separated, though both were present at each event. This separation is framed by those who oppose women's ordination as a positive example of how two sets of beliefs about women's entry into the priesthood and the episcopate can co-exist in the same institution, though it does not mean a future 'free of clamour' (Warner, 2015, p.3).

were the first ordinations he did after becoming bishop, so that was quite fun.  
I find it offensive.

Rachel is supported by her bishop in this story, but the discourse centres on the female priest as 'the trouble' (though this is said light-heartedly). Mutual flourishing requires women priests to accept they are disruptive to the Church structure and to the personal consciences of some male clergy, amidst a pollution-fixated narrative. Rachel's story shows how normalised the focus on 'taint' is and the discourse of mutual flourishing leaves women priests in ambivalence. Supportive bishops are playing according to rules that women priests find offensive. Either access to power has become overly complex in the hierarchy, benefitting the status quo, or there are other institutional considerations given precedence over the full belonging of female priests. Whilst women priests are constantly problematised by the two integrities, the discourse of mutual flourishing aims to normalise these conditions. Alice, though, raises a question of fundamental importance in her objection to appeasement of those who oppose women's priesthood, and its subversion is unthinkable in the current Church climate since the power-over is not accessible on female terms: what *would* happen if Bishop Libby Lane refused to ordain men?

Mutual flourishing also means material flourishing of both women priests and male priests who oppose female priesthood, and this revolves around employment. Carol tells her story about applying for parish jobs and it is an important story, since it shows how the concept of mutual flourishing does not protect women priests. Under the discourse of mutual flourishing, Carol should be secure in the knowledge that outside the resolution parishes,<sup>78</sup> she will not be discriminated against. Having reached interview stage for a parish that ostensibly accepts women priests, she was alerted to the wider implications of the two integrities arrangement on her career:

They'd explained that all the parishes around them were resolution C parishes, so they had a different bishop and they didn't accept the ministry of women. They explained to me they weren't a parish like this but [. . .] if they had a woman vicar there, these other priests wouldn't be able to cover for holidays because the altar would have been deconsecrated by having been presided at by a woman [. . .]. So, I said to them, 'I know you've not had a woman before, a

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<sup>78</sup> Resolution parishes are those parishes where the parochial council has voted not to accept women priests.

woman vicar here, have you had anyone preside here? You've obviously thought about this in your interviewing process' and they said. '[. . .] we were quite worried [. . .] if we appoint a woman to be a vicar here all the other churches around town, they'll think we just had to settle for second best because there wasn't a man available'. I wasn't offered the post.

Carol delivered the story stoically, but it emphasises how the boundary between the two integrities is not fixed and the impact of positions opposing women's priesthood can be felt across the whole Church, touching the lives of women priests in significant ways. The parish in Carol's story had not formally voted to exclude women priests, but being located close to other parishes who had, the cultural effect overrode any positive positioning. The boundary becomes fluid as the theological stance of other male authority figures impacts upon the part of the Church where women expect to be fully accepted, something Bentley (1998) identified as a structural issue early in the establishment of the two integrities. Mutual flourishing is about establishing access to power for those who oppose women's ordination and does not seem to protect women clergy from barriers to flourishing themselves. Carol's story also raises the issue of access to power in naming sexism – the principle of mutual flourishing stymies women's ability to cry 'foul' and gives legitimacy to misogynistic practices that materially damage women in the priesthood.

Related to the discourse of mutual flourishing is the discourse of Christian disagreement, and whilst it is ostensibly designed to minimise division in the Church, the effect is the control over women's protest. Before exploring the discourse of disagreement in the Church, I want to establish the context in which female protest is set. There are both internal and external pressures that impact upon how women priests view protest. Female clergy can access power-with through collective protest, though this power is curtailed by both internalised conflicts about the nature of the priesthood and by external disciplining forces. There have been moments when the frustration of women clergy has reached boiling point. In 2009, for example, when progress on making provision for the introduction of women bishops stalled (Ashworth, 2009), women clergy, angry and frustrated at the impasse, considered strike action in protest, but the protesting energy quickly dissipated. Christina Rees, at the time the Chair of WATCH, said:

It's a wonderful idea and great to fantasise about; but I've checked it out with a number of women clergy [. . .] But these clergy have a commitment to their congregations, the people they visit in hospitals and prisons, and just can't do

it. But they would love to show the hierarchy how they are feeling. The feeling is of outrage. (Church Times, 2009)

This display of potential collective power-with seems rare for women priests, based on the evidence in my interviews, even though WATCH is an organised presence in the Church. The interviewees had little to say about collective protest, though many express anger about the discrimination they face. In discussions about how they might be activist in language, for example, most felt they should put their congregations first. This seems to be a common attitude amongst female priests. Research by Greene and Robbins (2015) suggests that there is a reluctance amongst women clergy to protest against the structure of the two integrities, and they conclude that whilst women are unhappy with the institutional arrangements, they hold the view that their vocation requires them to accept and accommodate the structural division and work alongside male clergy who do not accept women's priesthood.

There are several ways women priests are systematically discouraged from challenging their differentiation in the Church. In the first place, the ability to speak out is bound up in the ability to access the power to represent. If female priests are formed as different to male priests by the structure, the institutional body presents the male as norm and the female priest's voice does not come from within the institution but is external to it. The representative aspect to a body politic – or body ecclesia – is formulated around the male and a woman speaking from this body is unable to do so from her own epistemological viewpoint (Gatens, 1997). The body imagery employed by the Church is gendered (see Vasquez, 2011 for a brief history of body imagery in Christianity), and using Gatens's (1997) argument, these body images matter in how women speak and what they protest about. Masculine ways of representation come from a long history of naturalising male authority over women. Christ's body and bride/'whore' imagery have androcentric imaginings which influence the ways the female can speak and be heard. Some interviewees want to separate the two imagined bodies of the Church, the institutional and the body of believers, and I interpret this as partly because of the difficulty women have in speaking from within the institutional body. Zoe, a non-stipendiary priest, for example, needs to be clear about the distinction between institution and the Christian symbol system. She explains: 'Christian faith and the Anglican church are not one and the same thing [ . . . ] And that was very male dominated and shaped by lots of different men, but they didn't shape the Christian faith, they only shaped the Anglican Church'. The institution is male-shaped, and Zoe strategically

separates what forms the basis of her faith from the Church. Alice also wants to make a distinction between the institution and Christians:

I realised that I'm within this institution, I'm not working for this institution.  
There's Church with a capital 'C' and the body of Christ the church with a small  
'c'. Who says the body of Christ is a man's body anyway?

Alice is aware of the androcentric nature of the institutional body, in the way that Gatens (1997) describes how the female voice is silenced because of the inability to represent an institutional voice.<sup>79</sup> As such, Alice holds the institutional version of the Christian body at arm's length. Perhaps to have a voice, women priests need to constantly have in their minds a sense of separation between Church institution and the body of believers, though even the imagery of Christ's body raises issues of how women are represented by the universal male.

So, against the backdrop of institutional body imagery, women clergy do not have the same ability to speak and be heard as males in the hierarchy since they are not synecdochally representative. The issue of protest is not simply one of access to the power to speak, however. For those women who do protest more openly, there is a significant risk of opprobrium. One commentator, after protest over the appointment of Bishop Philip North (a bishop who does not ordain women) to Sheffield See, framed the protesting women in pejorative terms: as 'unchristian', unreasonable and 'spoilt', suggesting that 'even the Anglican Church was not wide enough to contain their antipathy and contradiction' (Ashenden, 2017). Alice recognises the danger of women being framed as unreasonable in their protest: 'there's a bit of me which is like, you go ballistic, they're just going to go "hysterical woman". And I'm not having that. Angry man-hating woman, because you can't ever just be "woman" can you?' Alice is aware that the content of female expression can be side-stepped if it is not expressed on male terms, an observation that chimes with Spender's (1985) discussion of constructions of feminine ways of communicating. However, there are other internalised brakes that are applied, as Greene and Robbins (2015) discuss, in that the self-sacrificing nature of the vocational call works against rebellion (and this may well be the same for the male priest). When the internal notion of what priesthood looks

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<sup>79</sup> The use of the 'body of Christ' to describe the church comes under criticism from feminist commentators for its underlying suggestion that women are required to identify with the male body if they are to partake in the salvific message (see Slee, 2003).

like is coupled with external forces that act against women clergy's ability to voice challenge, there is a gendered aspect to who can access the power of protest.

The discourse around how disagreement is appropriately expressed in the Church has become focused on *female* disagreement. Christian disagreement – also known as 'good disagreement'<sup>80</sup> (Groves, 2014) – is an attempt to create differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable protest, drawing from Christian ideals and has been used institutionally to shape and control types of female protest. Those who protest in ways that are deemed to be outside the hierarchy's definition of Christian disagreement are at risk of being framed as transgressors, a Foucauldian notion of discipline which takes on a disembodied presence (Kruks, 2001). The discourse of 'good disagreement' can be a gendered disciplining device, used to undermine, or mask, claims of discrimination. Returning to the intervention of the Archbishop of York in the conflict over Bishop North's appointment to the diocese of Sheffield in 2017, the protesting reaction of women clergy and their allies in the diocese was framed as inappropriate (Sentamu, 2017b). How disagreement is defined behaviourally and culturally is a signifier of where the power is located; women clergy may either subject themselves to the institutional pressure that directs them away from protest, action they may perceive as enhancing their belonging, but which supports the status quo, or they disrupt, through protest, the normalisation of their segregation and risk further precarity and marginalisation. A metaphor that is useful in describing the potency of a disciplining discourse like Christian disagreement is Daly's (1978 [1991]) description of the 'electrode' (p.19), embedded through myriad social processes, interactions and discourses. When this electrode is stimulated, in this case by the appeal to biblical moral parameters around disagreement, it can silence women through reflex action. Protesting women are framed as unreasonable and hysterical, which wires them to a silencing 'electrode'. Only those women who have severed the circuit are able to continue the protest, distanced to some extent from the impact of being cast as unchristian, disloyal to the (masculine) Church and doubly illegitimate as priests. Alice's comments above, about not working for an institution but for the body of believers, becomes more significant when viewed in the context of women clergy needing to sever a circuit of institutional loyalty if they wish to agitate for a change in their liminal status. But what happens when women *do*

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<sup>80</sup> Jayne Ozanne, a layperson and LGBTQ+ activist in the Church believes 'good disagreement' is a positive strategy to encourage discussion but is concerned that it is not used as a way of maintaining stasis in Church positioning (Ozanne, 2018). My argument is similar, that 'good disagreement' can be a device to open dialogue, but it becomes a way of disciplining particular voices in the Church.

become visible protestors? I want to briefly explore this question and offer an explanation as to why such protests might be infrequent given the structural discrimination faced by women priests.

The appointment of Bishop Philip North, who is publicly prominent in Forward in Faith,<sup>81</sup> to Sheffield diocese created a furore and protesting women clergy, unhappy with the prospect of working under a bishop who did not accept their priesthood, became visible. The protest eventually forced Bishop North to withdraw from the appointment (Yorkshire Post, 2017; see Percy, 2017 for a synopsis of this event in the context of the history of women's entry into the priesthood).<sup>82</sup> I want to contrast the story of the Bishop's decision to withdraw from the appointment with that of Carol's interview experience, whose femaleness was made problematic for a parish post (see p.84). Carol's story is a hidden one, an everyday rejection as she looks for employment in the Church. It is private, does not attract attention, and may be a common experience for women clergy. Philip North's rejection produces corporate shock, national headlines, and a wounded male in retreat. As well as the protests, what also became part of the public discussion was Bishop North's popularity amongst female clergy he had worked with in another diocese and some of my interviewees corroborated the Bishop's good reputation ('he was really good and supportive' affirms Polly). Women bishops were also reported to have 'rallied round' him (Davies, 2017b). The Bishop's warm and supportive attitude towards women clergy appears to be used to mitigate his active endorsement of theologies and ecclesiologies that deny women's priesthood.

The ensuing institutional debate about Bishop North's failed appointment is interesting to examine. Some voices in the Church framed the male bishop as vulnerable and wounded in contrast to female clergy and allies (see WATCH, 2017) who were problematised and whose behaviour was described as damaging (for example, Ashenden, 2017; Storkey, 2017). The

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<sup>81</sup> The Bishop's views on women priests are disputed. As a bishop he does not ordain women and is a leading figure within Forward in Faith. The Mawer report notes the denial from both Bishop North and Forward in Faith that there is an official subscription to the doctrine of taint and a denial that Bishop North does not accept the ministries of women priests (there may be a way in which he accepts women's ministry but denies their *sacramental* ministry). This does seem contrary to his refusal to be consecrated alongside a woman bishop and his refusal to ordain women. Women clergy must mentally process such denials at the same time as dealing with exclusionary practices.

<sup>82</sup> The Mawer Report (2018) highlights the intervention of Prof. Percy who had, after the appointment of Bishop North, written about the undesirable nature of the two integrities. I wonder if this discrediting of the two integrities is still too rare a discourse to pose a serious challenge to the gendered nature of the structure of the Church of England.

Church commissioned the Mawer Report (2017) to scrutinise the process, and this inquiry recognised the institutional failure to account for the potential of women clergy to balk at the appointment of a bishop who did not recognise their priesthood. The response of the Church hierarchy to the outcry failed to examine *why* women clergy protested but was concerned with the *behaviour* of women; the root of the protest was eclipsed by opprobrium over the manner of the protest. This is a case of women being the ‘muted class’ in the context of public discourse expressed in the male ‘register’ (Spender, 1985). The voices of women clergy and how they deliver messages are subject to scrutiny that aims to control protest by constructing transgression of ideals of Christian femininity. How women clergy protestors are defined shows how they are made different. Writing about the Sheffield protest, Ashenden (a former Chaplain to the Queen who is now Roman Catholic) portrays the protesting women clergy as wild, tormented, and vicious, and Bishop North as a type of hunted quarry:

‘Good Disagreement’ turned out to be a euphemism for ‘bad bullying’. The moment the announcement was made the air was filled with screams of pain from women clergy, their supporters, and other secular feminists, like the local MP. Their aim seemed to be to manage their own pain by inflicting pain elsewhere. Pain on those who elected him, pain on those who clung to the five principles, and most especially, ad hominem pain on Philip North personally, as a privileged proponent of the patriarchy. And pain in such degree that he would retire, fatally undermined and wounded. (Ashenden, 2017)

Ashenden denigrates not only the basis on which the protests are made, but also draws on the pejorative descriptions of feminine emotion and pain, the negative opposite of (masculine) reason (see Ahmed, 2004). His use of language casts the women’s protests as illegitimate, a primal display of emotion (there surely were no actual ‘screams of pain’): the image is of the female priest out of control and undignified. This description is about *how* women protest, but not about *why* they protest. Ashenden may be a minority voice, but similar strategies can be seen in the hierarchy’s response. Archbishop Sentamu’s appeal for Christian disagreement (Sentamu, 2017a, 2017b) during and after the event may have been designed to broker peace, however, the effect was to curtail female protest and to discipline and re-shape how women clergy (and women in the Church generally) might legitimately express discontent. As the Mawer report (2018) stated, ‘some of those who had been critical of Bishop North’s nomination felt that the Archbishop’s statement unjustly implied that all who had genuine questions about that nomination had, in expressing them,

failed to behave in a Christian fashion' (p.36). The phrase 'Christian fashion' reveals the power that accrues in symbolic discourses and how they are used to control protest. It has the hallmarks of Daly's electrode theory, targeting a deeply internalised view of ethical and spiritual behaviour and constructions of femininity.

I suggest a factor in the vilifying of the protesting women priests in Sheffield was their failure to submit to the expectation of emotional labour that contributes to the nurturing economy: women nurture and heal male wounds (Bartky, 1990, 1997). When the contract of the emotional economy breaks down, women priests are viewed as dissenters and bullies and oppositional male clergy as emotionally and institutionally vulnerable (Ashenden, 2017; Storkey, 2017<sup>83</sup>). The vulnerability of the male bishop in this example was bolstered by emphasising his contrasting reasonableness, his excellent working and personal relationships with ordained women and his unimpeachable niceness. A protective boundary is thus erected around the individual male and around androcentric theology and ecclesiology, whilst protesting women priests are framed as the source of damage. On the 'ambivalent sexism' scale (Glick and Fiske, 2011), the male is normally supportive and benevolent, but the mood turns to hostility when women step out of prescribed nurturing-style activities. The male show of vulnerability in opposition to women's priesthood asks for nurturance, though this is a risky strategy, because it goes against masculinities that are invested in power, the rational and the unemotional, which cultivates difference (Bartky, 1997). On the other hand, emphasising the wounded male and his vulnerability in the structure draws attention away from discriminatory beliefs and taps into the nurturing economy. (However, some women priests are invested in being the peacemakers and undertaking emotional labour.) How the feminisation of the clergy might contribute to this discourse of male vulnerability is explored by Nesbitt (1997): the display of vulnerability may be a clue to the perceived threat to male authority that women priests pose.<sup>84</sup> Such

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<sup>83</sup> Elaine Storkey is a well-known Christian feminist (Slee, 2003; Ogilvy, 2014), and it is significant, I think, that the protest against the appointment of Bishop North attracted opprobrium from her, suggesting that the story of women clergy's structural liminality in the Church of England has been lost even to some feminist commentators. Ogilvy (2014) states that Storkey's 'gift' is to 'speak up for women' (p.89), so it is surprising that Storkey entered the Sheffield debate to denounce how women had protested against Bishop North's appointment. By focusing on the wounded male, Storkey is contributing to a narrative that supports the privilege of the male and fails to contextualise the protest of women asked to work under a male bishop who does not recognise their full priesthood.

<sup>84</sup> Nesbitt (1997) cites US studies (women have been in the clergy far longer than in the UK). Complaints of male clergy include the perceived weakening of authority of the position, sexual tensions and even impotence. There is some suggestion of male flight from the profession. This highlights the need to research current male clergy attitudes in the Church of England.

vulnerability in male clergy who oppose female priesthood is interpreted by some women priests as evidence of male fear of the female. Polly, for example, understands how women clergy's protest can be stymied:

I think they find it very threatening if you're too feminist [. . .] you get, 'you've got to respect the integrities'. So, saying actually there's this deep-seated real antipathy for women among men in the Church which is disguised as theology, which is the 'truth'. That's not a popular thing to say. I have said it, but it's not popular.

Whilst Polly is willing to verbally protest, there is an underlying sense of being out-of-step with institutional needs. Feminism becomes a scapegoat that allows challenge of the two integrities to be ignored, dismissed as being disrespectful. Again, in Polly's comments there is the notion that discourses around disagreement and mutuality cut against the full belonging of women priests, and that male clergy who oppose women's priesthood are not seen as a valid target for protest and challenge. Polly resists by naming the discourse of mutual respect and by understanding the discomfort female activism generates in the Church. The trickster priest is willing to be unpopular by unveiling discourses which are meant to be hidden and by naming male fear and male antipathy towards women, Polly, though it is unpopular, is willing to play the trickster.

How women clergy are subject to disciplining discourses when they openly protest suggests that displays of how women *feel* about their compromised status are unwelcomed by the institution and leans on the rational/emotional binary that is aligned with the denigrated feminine (Ahmed, 2004). Not only this, the charge that women's protest inflicts pain on the Church, or on a (male) member of the clergy, re-opens the old wounds from the campaign for women's ordination, where women felt the burden of guilt for their schismatic demands (Furlong, 1998). Being cast as inflicting pain on the Church has the potential to damage the status of the female priest and therefore acts as a disincentive to visibly protest. It is interesting that disciplining forces become active when ordained women's voices take the form of *public* protest. The discourse of Christian disagreement serves to position open protest around the two integrities as morally dubious and disruptive, and an abuse of power against the vulnerable male. Re-visiting Allen's (1998) discussion of gendered power, the power women clergy have accessed through solidarity (power-with) has prevented the appointment of a male bishop who wields power-to and power-over. But the female act of

accessing power is met with significant resistance and becomes associated with unchristian behaviours.

‘Good disagreement’ may disrupt women’s access to power-with and power-to, but it may be a two-way (though asymmetrical) process. Carol, as a lesbian, requires a wide spectrum of belief in the Church for her sexuality to be accepted, and because of the turmoil the Church is experiencing over issues of human sexuality (Jagger, 2017c), she requires ‘good disagreement’ to be part of the conversation for herself. She explains that she values the institution’s broadness of opinion, and that in principle the ability to disagree without conflict is a positive aim, if somewhat disappointing in reality:

You can have disagreements on quite profound things and still be Anglican and still be Christian [. . .] though in practice, now I’m in it, it doesn’t always work like that. Particularly with the gay thing, people are very much trying to consign each other to hell.

Carol is conscious that discourses are symbolically powerful, and that ‘hell’ is a concept that feeds into the power to control – those who have the symbolic ownership of its definition, who goes to hell and for what reasons, wield its power in material ways (a Foucauldian concept of the otherworldly nature of the punishment). Carol is likely to benefit from the ideal of ‘good disagreement’ (where people are not consigned to hell) because of her sexuality, though as a woman who has experienced the discrimination of the two integrities, ‘good disagreement’ works against her position in the status quo. At points where theological and doctrinal positions exclude (and even condemn) significant aspects of a person’s subjectivity, including sex, gender, and sexuality, ‘good disagreement’ may mask the power invested in the (male heterosexual) norm to construct differing identities as other. However, Carol is thinking more deeply and begins to unpick the silencing discourses that attach themselves to both issues of gender and sexuality. The double jeopardy of being a female and a lesbian priest (see Ledbetter, 2017) means for her the practice of respectful disagreement feels patchy as she finds herself on one side of a debate within the institution on two fronts. I wonder whether being female and lesbian makes challenging the status quo more difficult because of a fragmented sense of belonging for Carol, who is rejected by parts of the Church because she is female and lives with the potential of being rejected in other parts of the Church because her sexuality is framed by doctrine as differing from an ideal (and these latter boundaries may be less visible). In this context, ‘good disagreement’ works in favour of those who wield power over doctrine,

theology, and the structural arrangements of the Church, and against those who are marginalised in multiple ways.

Part of the power of the discourse of Christian disagreement lies in harnessing the internal barometer of Christian morality, to ensure behaviours are aligned to particular 'Christ-like' tropes. Una is an older priest and speaks plainly about the impact of these moral triggers, or 'electrodes' to use Daly's (1978 [1991]) metaphor again: 'I think the Church [. . .] bullies its females. But that's not a fashionable thing to say, because we're all nice and kind and lovely to each other [. . .] I'm supposed to be nice. I think niceness is what kills the Church'. Una understands how institutional power is at work in constructions of qualities that favour the status quo and is openly disdainful of how such power is used. Because Una strongly believes the Church should stop ordaining men who oppose women's priesthood,<sup>85</sup> she experiences disciplining forces: 'I am told that that is not biblical [to want the Church to stop ordaining men who oppose women's ordination], I'm told that is not being Christ-like and I'm told there is room in God's Church for everyone'. Ultimately, Una believes these discourses and the protection of male pain will 'kill' the Church. However, her positioning – speaking out against her discrimination – is framed as dubious, as unchristian. There is a hint in Una's description that she understands the structural and cultural barrier to her potential resistance and rebellion. She talks of the discourse being handed to her, and that to be framed as un-Christ-like is strongly pejorative and curtails her ability to protest. The power in this type of discourse is obscured by the appeal to symbolic ideals, ideals that are likely to be ostensibly shared by women priests. However, there is an argument that the discourse around being Christ-like is an instruction to mirror the male (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998). Yet this trope is given sacred capital: Christian women are expected to align themselves as closely as possible with the male personification of Christian morality.<sup>86</sup> To be labelled as resistant to mirroring Christ-like qualities (which are constructed to benefit the status quo) is a deeply wounding device used against the female priest, who may feel she has legitimate reasons to protest, but is curtailed in how she may protest.

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<sup>85</sup> The vote in favour of allowing women into the episcopate was achieved through concessions that protect the two integrities. Without this, the vote to allow women into the episcopacy may have failed (Forward in Faith, 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Slee (1996) offers a way out of the need to align in specific ways to Jesus/Christ by suggesting a more fictionalised approach, however, I am arguing that it is a reified set of characteristics that ironically force women to align to a male figure whilst emphasising characteristics that trap women into patterns of self-abnegation.

There is more to the discourse of 'good disagreement' than its disciplining potential. The interviewees talk about how they integrate a non-conflict position, seen as constructive, into the nature of the priesthood. Rachel's view of the priesthood is helpful here. Having spent years being visible in the campaign for women's ordination, once ordained, Rachel alters her way of interacting:

I try [. . .] to stand up when it's necessary, but actually to deflect, because, and this is very different from before I was ordained, because I think one of the things priests should try and be is peacemakers, servants and peacemakers.

Even though Rachel remains dismayed about, and opposed to, the two integrities, on becoming a priest her priorities are transformed, and open protest and debate become secondary. A woman taking on the servanthood and peacemaker roles of the priesthood raises the question of whether these traits become conflated with a constructed type of femininity and whether it makes aspects of the priesthood a better 'fit' for women. Some women have found themselves at odds with perceptions of ideals of gender and how they become entangled with ideals of priesthood and relationships based on asymmetrical power. For example, Fiona, a curate who describes herself as middle-of-the-road, bristled when her training incumbent put in writing (a report that Fiona herself was asked to type up) that he was 'concerned about her lack of obedience'. Whilst this might be interpreted as a power dynamic between a training incumbent and a curate, the expectation of female obedience has associations with biblical mandates of female subservience under male headship. Fiona's disgruntlement is because she experienced the encounter as gendered. Similarly, the aspects of the priesthood that align with 'good disagreement' are potentially more constraining for a female priest because they tap into traits of passivity, nurturance, and servanthood that are aligned with ways of being feminine. Whilst servanthood, peace-making, and expectations of obedience might be associated with the priesthood, for women, these attributes are entangled with meanings accrued around femininity. This entanglement between priestly and feminine traits may discourage open challenge to the structure that disadvantages the female, since such challenge calls for transgression of both priestly and feminine ideals. Women have more to lose within the discourse of Christian disagreement, since they are differentiated at the most fundamental levels, which in turn differentiates how *women* priests are expected to behave.

Rachel may have discarded protest in favour of peace-making traits of the priesthood, but the first generation of women priests were more anxious to retain their activist role.

Research done by Bagilhole (2006), who studied the attitudes of the first women to be ordained, reveals how they were 'conscious of the need for and determined to enact organisational change' (p.110). It may be that women clergy, subject to the development of disciplining discourses, now find themselves unable to maintain the political power to effect change. Concessions such as the introduction of female bishops, for instance, weaken the legitimacy of protest against the structure. Without changing the structural liminality of women priests, they now have access to the hierarchy, and this may be a trade-off that further protects the two integrities (it appears that ordained women have achieved their goals). Institutional change is not an active priority amongst my interviewees, and I have highlighted the forces that work against female agitation for change. However, this is not to say that protest and resistance to gender differentiation in the priesthood are not taking place. In Chapter 6, I explore how resistance is part of some women clergy's everyday practice, and so it would not be accurate to say women priests are not challenging how they are excluded. Indeed, women priests *must* actively disagree with masculinised theologies and ecclesiologies or they risk remaining permanently in structural liminality.

So, since protest is made risky by institutional discourses, women clergy find other sites in which to challenge and resist. A complex mixture of resistance and willingness can be seen in the relationships between women priests and male clergy who reject female priesthood, which reveal how the institutional discourses play out at the personal level, and how women find ways of subverting power flows. It is through relationships that the Church seeks to mitigate the tension generated by the two integrities. The Mawer Report (2017) explores the paradox inherent in the Five Guiding Principles (Cocksworth, 2018a), which are designed to hold incompatible positions regarding the ordination and consecration of women within the Church structure: 'At heart, they are about relationship, about how relationships (and with and through them, mutual trust) can be sustained in the face of fundamental differences of theological understanding on the issue' (Mawer, 2017, p.9). The report recognises that relationships across the boundary of the two integrities are crucial for the maintenance of the Five Guiding Principles (see footnote 47), and ultimately of the Church structure as it stands.

#### 4.4 The Lovely Man and the Trickster Priest: Relationships and Power

Sometimes you have to weigh up if it's harming you being in [the priesthood], how much change really are you causing, you know, compared to how much harm it's causing you?

Carol, Chaplain.

There is a two-way investment in friendships that 'blossom across the spectrum', in Houlding's (2012) words, however, the rewards for such relationships are different for the male and the female priest. It should be noted that not all women priests develop good relationships with male clergy who do not accept their priesthood. Julia, an Anglo-Catholic with many years of experience in the Church, has a sense that positive relationships and collegiality between the two integrities has diminished. On a more personal level, Polly is reluctant to accept collegiality when her priesthood is questioned: 'How can he be my colleague when he doesn't actually believe and seriously holds the view that I am not able to lead that church? How can I be in a collegial relationship with him?' There is, therefore, some level of antipathy and anger amongst the interviewees about how their priesthood is rejected. I want to first focus though, on those relationships that do manage to flourish with male priests who do not accept women's ordination. The benefit for these male priests is that relationships contribute to the survival of the two integrities and to the flourishing of their own position. For women clergy, whilst such positive relationships are a source of confusion, they may act as an atonement for being disruptively female and schismatic in their demand for entry into the priesthood (see Furlong, 1998).

There is an important distinction to be made between feelings of belonging and the structural and material belonging of women priests. Relationships with male clergy who do not accept female priesthood allow for a fuller *feeling* of belonging, and there may be ways women can mitigate the impact of their structural liminality through emotional labour. What these relationships do not achieve is the structural change required to eradicate female liminal space from the structure of the Church. Moreover, I venture it is female emotional labour that sustains the structure, acting as a safety valve for both female frustration and male fear. However, as women priests invest in peace-making discourses and practices at the relational level, there may be an underlying subversive movement amongst women who develop ways of avoiding conflict, mitigating institutional marginality as well as bolstering the internal feeling of belonging. Women priests are required to

undertake a type of double-think in their engagements with male clergy who oppose women's ordination. For example, Valerie, a curate since 2015, explains she can talk 'naturally' and 'happily' to those who reject her priesthood, at the same time as internally resisting the implications of the belief that the priesthood is male. It may be that Valerie is passively accepting the status quo, but Ahmed (2017) provides a helpful exploration of how women might change an institution from within: 'she might pass as willing in order to be wilful' (p.83). Some women priests appear as 'willing' in their relationships across the boundary of the two integrities, but they are also wilful and resistant. Perhaps the *appearance* of belonging by investing in relationships with male clergy who oppose female priesthood is necessary if challenges and resistances are to be made possible, though the effectiveness may be structurally constricted. Is this Braidotti's (1997) monster in camouflage?

#### 4.4.1 *The nurturing economy*

By using the term willingness, I am describing both emotional labour of women priests in avoiding conflict – such as avoiding naming of positions as sexist – and the development of positive relationships that allow women to feel integrated. This chimes with Bartky's (1997) 'economy of smiles' (p.135) and the appropriation of women's emotional labour by men which comes from the female proclivity towards 'the feeding of egos and the nursing of wounds' (1990, p.104). The habitual nature of social practices creates normalisation that resists change and moreover this 'normal' is transformed into 'natural' (Chambers, 2005). Women priests are engaged in an economy of nurture and of peace-keeping and undertake significant amounts of emotional labour within relationships with male clergy who do not accept women as priests. Having heard the stories of how women experience being called to the vocation, there is clearly a genuine commitment to the institution and to the priesthood and I interpret the development of positive relationships as part of the contribution to the life of the institution. The stories offered by the interviewees focus on the ways in which women priests act as peace-keepers and nurturers for the amelioration of male and institutional pain. The *quid pro quo* is that nurturance helps to quell objections and the perceived threat woman priests present to male clergy. Rachel sees the Church's turmoil over issues of gender in terms of relationship: 'I also think it's very good what Archbishop Justin has done [. . .] what Justin says is that Church is a family, families have disagreements but still hold together, and I think that argument is a very good one'. The quarrelling family analogy supports the nurturing economy and perhaps women priests see their role as analogous to female familial roles. A US study (Shehan and Wiggins-Frame,

1999) suggests that women clergy demonstrate nurturance as ‘mothers’ (p.251) in their professional life to mitigate the resistance to their presence in the priesthood. Taking on a nurturing role as symbolic mothers may partly motivate women priests in the Church of England to adopt soothing, rather than challenging, positions. This imagery of the institutional mother as mediator in a quarrelling family, though, belies the fundamental nature of the ‘disagreement’ – that women are framed as differently human in the symbolic realm, something that is legitimised structurally. Perhaps the nurturing economy is partly how women priests invest in their femininity, as institutional peacekeepers and ‘mothers’, and I wonder if it is a way of seeing difference as positive, something that only female priests can bring to the institution.

The healing of the institution is an important aspect of the interviewees’ narrative and is often wrapped up in belonging to a tradition, where shared theological understandings act as a conduit and a bond. Pauline, an Anglo-Catholic, explains how she feels about connection over beliefs in this tradition in the Church: ‘when they can engage with women who take the same thing seriously that they do it actually builds bridges and is quite healing’. But the question remains: bridges to where? Whose wounds are ‘healed’? Who benefits from the nurturance and avoidance of discussing institutional pain? For some, the motivation seems to come from an imperative to protect the institution. Julia, also speaking as an Anglo-Catholic, told me she would not share certain stories since she wished to pursue a more *healing* discourse: ‘there are anecdotes that I don’t tell and never have because I think they shame the Church’. There is a symbiotic relationship women clergy have with the institution - if the Church hurts, they hurt. Emotional labour is not therefore simply about individual relationships but is given for the sake of the institution and more widely of Christianity itself.<sup>87</sup>

Nurturance also means not reciprocating the rejection that women experience. Pauline, talking about Walsingham, a shrine that does not allow women priests to preside at Mass, is unwilling to respond negatively to those who have made her feel that she does not belong: ‘it helps that I’m not treating them like some kind of untouchable, even if I’ve been made to feel like that myself in the past by some people’. The reluctance to reciprocate rejection seems to act as a stent, that maintains a flow across the boundary, preventing

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<sup>87</sup> Church activists such as Jayne Ozanne (2017) are attempting to change this idea of protecting the institution from shame. It will be interesting to see if further research identifies how much this discourse is changed through movements such as #metoo.

atrophying of relationships. Female nurturance is about managing these relationships and if relationships do not flourish, perhaps the position of women priests will become more precarious still. Their belonging may be dependent on their contribution to the nurturing economy. The emotional labour performed by women priests for both the individual male colleague from across the boundary of the two integrities and for the institution seems to be part of a complex system of rewards, but as Barkty (1998) argues, it is often inextricably woven into hierarchical arrangements: 'insofar as women's provision of emotional sustenance is a species of compliance with the needs, wishes and interests of men, such provision can be understood as a conferral of status, a paying homage by the female to the male' (p 109). What emotional labour reveals, argues Barkty, is that there is a crisis in the female's epistemic position, that her world is taken over by the world-view of the male. I wonder if, at times, the epistemic point of view of the female priest is substantially undermined by the two integrities and by the continued opposition to their presence. There are strong drivers to invest in the nurturing economy. If male objectors to female priesthood are comforted, then perhaps women clergy feel less precarious.

#### *4.4.2 Ambivalent sexism*

The nurturing of the wounded male (and the wounded institution as a proxy for the male) is often reciprocated and some of the interviewees experience positive attitudes from male clergy who oppose women's ordination. This is one side of the 'ambivalent sexism' scale (Glick and Fisk, 2011), whereby women can benefit from positive attitudes from men who respond to the apparent naturalness of female nurturance: or 'benevolent sexism' (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). The negative end of the scale is explicit hostility to women. This scale of sexism, because of its ambivalence, explains how institutions and individual males can have both antipathy and positive attitudes towards women. Since compassion towards women is a driver of support in employment environments (Hideg and Ferris, 2016), benevolent sexism is part of the positive relational experiences of women priests. The ambivalent sexism scale is made more complex in the Church because of the structural separation of women priests. It is, however, the co-operative environment where benevolent sexism flourishes, even creating 'paternalistic affection' (Glick and Fiske, 2011, p.534). The priesthood generates the circumstances in which female priests are seen as nurturers, despite their own wounding caused by structural differentiation, and as such they experience positive responses from male priests who do not accept women's ordination. Being subject to both ends of the ambivalent sexism scale might explain the confusion that many women priests feel about their treatment in the Church – often personally supported

by male clergy who reject female priesthood. Sexism is hidden by the supportive and kindly environment that can develop through relationships.

Experiences of support are common in the interviews: a male Anglo-Catholic colleague from the opposing integrity offers to coach a woman to do Mass 'properly' (yet how can this be? In his symbolic world, she cannot exist to say Mass), a hug is given to a woman after her ordination by the bishop who refused to ordain her, sorrow is shared across the boundary at the first failure of the vote at Synod to allow female bishops (as was Natalie's experience: 'he rang me up and we were both crying on the phone. And both just saying, "this is shit"'). The women see these interactions as significant yet are not always able to explain what this significance is. These moments of positive interaction could be deeply subversive and boundary-suspending for women priests, as supportive interactions prorogue the hailing of women as non-priests. But there is a lack of certainty: some women clergy ask whether these interactions are healing or manipulative, and whether they enhance belonging or continue the othering of women priests. The supportive and collegiate attitudes of some male clergy who do not recognise women's priesthood are often difficult to explain and understand. Fiona, for example, finds 'it very puzzling really. Very puzzling'. Denise wonders if there is a strategic element to positive relationships: 'it's almost as if they've been told they need to have a relationship with us and park the theology'. On the other hand, many of the interviewees talk in warm terms about clergy who oppose women's priesthood with whom they have developed relationships. Olive, an Anglo-Catholic, offers a clue as to how such contradictory relationships can flourish. Speaking of a bishop who is well-known for his opposition to female ordination, she explains: 'he accepts us as fellow ministers of the gospel and we can work together, we can work together very well'. Olive pinpoints a level of acceptance of the status of women priests, though this is not the status of a male priest. Structural liminality is given a name here as women priests are hailed as 'fellow ministers of the gospel' (but not priests in the ontological sense). This is important to Olive, since it allows her priesthood to be recognised even if it is through liminality. These supportive encounters also provide a subversive opportunity to reveal a disjuncture created by theology that erases female priesthood. Male clergy are required to find ways round their opposition to women's priesthood, in new definitions for a female priesthood that maintain their separation but allow relationships to positively flourish.

However, not all stories offered by the interviewees are about positive relationships and some women priests are clear that their management of relationships is dependent on how

they are accepted in their priesthood. Women withdraw emotional labour as the hostility increases. One red line some women draw is at the point their calling is questioned. It is useful here to briefly consider how the discourse of the call is experienced in gendered ways. Being called may not begin as a gendered discourse, however, as Greene and Robbins (2015) argue, the call to a religious vocation for a woman generates gendered meaning, as it contributes to her tendency to accept discrimination and institutional difficulties – and could be described as a ‘sacrificial embrace’ (Peyton and Gatrell, 2013). A calling to a vocation is understood as prosocial, consuming, and arising out of a passion, though there is a darker side to the ‘psychic cost’ of a calling (Madden, Bailey and Kerr, 2015, p.867). Of course, what is problematic for women clergy is that their state of belonging (as opposed to how they feel they belong) is savagely compromised by their differentiation within the structure of the Church, that is, their liminality. The ‘psychic cost’ of their calling is accentuated by conflict between the consuming nature of the draw to the vocation and the burden of how women priests are made to feel shame and guilt. Some interviewees associate shame and guilt with the inheritance of a schismatic quality placed on women priests. Suzanne for example, in describing the way her bishop handled his inability to ordain her, explains: ‘what was good about the way he did it was it didn’t mark people out but, it kind of does. You know why he’s had to take that step and *it’s our fault*’ (my emphasis). Women clergy are framed as the villains of the piece. Warner (2015), a commentator against women in the priesthood, frames female priesthood as the causal factor in the tearing of the fabric of communion with the universal Church and as the unravellers of the weft and warp of the Church’s tapestry, something which is regarded as ‘very ominous’ by some (Warner, 2015, p.8). It is only through damaging, breaking the threads, that women have been able to enter the priesthood, and so for some, women’s priesthood is based on destruction. Women priests are therefore required to defend their call against institutional forces and within personal relationships. Suzanne’s experience, once again, highlights the liminality of women priests, their sex being a *force majeure*, part of the nature of the threshold preventing the full acceptance of their calling.

It is poignant that despite institutional endorsement, women experience the denial of their calling through relational interactions. Wendy feels it is an attempt to separate her, in her femaleness, from a contract between her and God. As the contract is troubled, the relational becomes toxic for Wendy:

The thing that got me the most was someone said, they were saying, ‘Oh your vocation isn’t...God hasn’t given you this calling to the priesthood’. They were

sort of questioning my vocation, even though I'd been through three years of discernment, three years of training, the Church of England had recognised my vocation, but they were saying, 'No, God hasn't called you to this'. That was the hardest thing. Not so much the biblical arguments, which I don't agree with, but I can accept their integrity, their belief. But when someone says to you, 'God hasn't called you to this', that was it, really.

Wendy is unable to accept the contradiction: the Church recognises her call, which should make it an unquestioned aspect of her belonging, yet other clergy can deny this call. There is a history of 'negative space of female calling' in the religious context (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015, p.162), whereby female calling is afforded less worth than that of a male. Yet it gives rise to deep personal fulfilment and sacrificial commitment. A calling is a device by which a woman priest might elevate herself (see Madden, Bailey and Kerr, 2015), despite the institution holding them in liminality and the discourse of dubiety propagated by those opposed to female priesthood. Women priests need to overcome the inheritance of female vocation being given less value both materially and symbolically. Wendy may be attuned to this devaluing discourse, and so fiercely resists it by limiting what she will tolerate. For someone opposed to women's ordination to undermine her call ultimately discredits the institution, however, the issue is also a personal one.

It is important to recognise that the discourse of the call is a potent ontological event for the woman priest, because when it is recognised and legitimised by the Church, it legitimises her priesthood and challenges the structural liminality in which women priests are placed. Yet it is the structure itself that denies the call that women lay claim to. To be called to the priesthood is the last word in validation for women priests and for Wendy it is an inviolable position, regardless of the beliefs that construct the other integrity. It is the ultimate conundrum that women priests experience: that the Church both legitimises their call at the same time as legitimising the ability to deny it. This is the split in the powers of interpellation at the most potent and personal level. When her call is denied, the strategy of allowing personal congruence in beliefs no longer works for Wendy. Not only does she see it as a personal attack on her integrity, but it jeopardises the discourse relied on by the women to secure their priesthood status, whereby the divine call overrides erasing theologies and doctrines. The denial of the call is the final act of erasure and it is not an uncommon event. When Pauline went to a male priest to say she had been called to the priesthood, his reply was 'No, you haven't. Have you thought about being a nun?' This derogation of the female, the denial that she has heard correctly, invented her vocation, or

is lying, is a significant weapon to use, since the bargain several interviewees strike is that their faith in the rightness of the call secures them at various levels. It may be on one level an unstable discourse since it can be rationalised, changed, debunked, made to look ridiculous, but comes into its own as an anchoring force as the woman priest relates to the symbolic. The power to say what is legitimate and what is not rests with those who are most invested in the distinctions on which forms of capital rely – that is the male, who loses his distinction when women enter the field of religious leadership (Bourdieu, 1984 [2010]). Although women priests have been through this process of legitimisation, the call remains a front on which women priests must defend their status.

Whilst some women have experienced the denial of their call, it is the case that many are told they do have a legitimate call by male clergy who oppose women's priesthood, presenting further confusion. Again, ambivalent sexism helps to explain this: male clergy can believe that women cannot be called to the priestly vocation but are able to affirm individual women's calling. Fiona describes her confusion over how these two notions can be held together:

He doesn't theologically believe in women priests [. . .] He went, 'I know you're called by God'. So, if he knows that, and he does know it, then why are they making these rules that only men can do it. It just all doesn't make sense [. . .] I really don't understand it...once they got to know me, they're like 'Yeah, we know you're called by God'. Well, if that's the case, let me get on with it.

Whilst they can hold a general belief that the priesthood is male, Fiona discovers that male clergy can present contradictory beliefs about her calling because they know her as an individual. She is treated as exceptional to a general rule that precludes women being called to the priesthood. Whilst the women are unable to explain this contradiction in positioning and personal relational interaction, it is perceived as a part of the legitimisation of their priesthood and does seem to mitigate some of the effects of the boundary, but without destabilising it. In other words, the individual acceptance of a woman's vocation does not change the general belief in the maleness of the priesthood. When a relationship yields recognition of a woman's call to the priesthood, it has a gendered belonging energy, which can only be experienced by the precarious female priest: a male priest does not need his call to be bolstered because his maleness does not create doubt. Several of the interviewees expressed puzzlement over the ability of male clergy who reject female priesthood to support the calling of women priests in individual relationships. The

contradictions are difficult for women priests to process. If a male priest holds the view that the priesthood is male but acknowledges that a woman can be called to it, his continued opposition in institutional terms is contradictory. The alternative is to admit that the male priesthood is a (male) human construction and is therefore entirely open to change. This contradictory positioning of some male clergy holds further precarity for women who rely, at times, on the generosity of male clergy. The powers of interpellation seem to be subject to vagaries and are dependent on female willingness to manage relationships. There is also emotional labour involved for women as they process the contradictions in which they are asked to play a part. As Fiona's comment suggests, women clergy can feel as though barriers are put in their way which are then negated privately by those who work to support the two integrities to keep themselves separated from women in the priesthood.

There is, then, a juxtaposition between the supportive male priest or bishop and the rejection of female priesthood and this is a 'joint' (Hyde, 1998 [2008]), an articulation that holds relationships and discriminatory theological positioning together. The trickster metaphor positions the woman priest as the 'artus worker' (Hyde, 1998 [2008]), who prises open the joint and by illuminating the contradictions weakens the power-over discourses to which she is subject. A male priest who denies the subjectivity of the female priest through his position can have warm and supportive relationships with female (drag) priests, and the woman priest can reciprocate – although in this reciprocation she is ready to reveal the discomfort that discriminatory theology generates in both male and female clergy. Louise, still in her curacy, describes her relationship with a bishop prominent in Forward in Faith, who is actively against the ordination of women:

But he's been very helpful, very supportive [. . .] he has got a very good reputation from the women clergy. I don't know how he squares the circle himself personally, but he does it very effectively, being a bishop. He didn't take part in the ordinations of deacons or priests, but he was there and came bounding up at the peace and gave me a hug.

Personal support and affection are offered to Louise by the male bishop who refuses to ordain women. The warmth around the relational is disconnected from actions that debilitate the woman-as-priest. A dissonance rings through Louise's relational experiences and she picks up the idea that there is a vulnerability at the joint between theological beliefs and relationships – she does not know how he 'squares the circle', how he is able to maintain a supportive and an undermining position articulated through relational

interaction. Since Louise is completely aware of this set of contradictions, the joint begins to creak.

As an Anglo-Catholic, Louise's narrative brings out an interesting contingency in relationships. She understands that it is the Anglo-Catholic shared view of tradition, doctrine and sacrament that acts as an entry point, the joint at which to work. Seeing Anglo-Catholicism as a set of strong bonds allows for artus work to access power that circumvents sex and gender difference. Louise uses her Anglo-Catholicism to shift focus from the gendered boundary of the two integrities to the non-gendered boundary of ecclesiological belonging, where she shares important beliefs in sacrament and liturgy. This allows her to model a priesthood that is female but that speaks to these shared values. As an Anglo-Catholic, Louise understands she has more in common, theologically and ecclesiologicaly, with the bishop who will not ordain women than with her evangelical diocesan bishop who is theologically at ease with women's ordination. She is in an interesting position: her femaleness finds resistance along the hard boundary of the two integrities, and her Anglo-Catholic beliefs differentiate her along the more pliant boundary of ecclesiology. Louise's relationships with male clergy are largely bound up with Anglo-Catholicism, the tradition that germinates the ontological objections that her priesthood must face down. But within this tradition, she believes there is scope for integrating the female priest:

I remember this vicar saying [. . .] one of the reasons why people in this tradition are wary of women priests is because they associate it with a certain liberal, very un-liturgically minded strand, and when they meet a woman priest that doesn't fit that mould and shatters that stereotype, things begin to shift.

Louise, because of her alignment with the Anglo-Catholic tradition, invested in liturgy and not 'liberal' in the sense that doctrine is easily overturned, believes she can help influence attitudes. Importantly, it is the sharing of Anglo-Catholic beliefs in ritual and tradition that allows her to experience warm comradeship, support, and guidance helpful to her career from the very men who do not accept her priesthood theologically and ecclesiologicaly, and it is this 'assemblage' (Latour, 2005) that becomes important in how some women negotiate across the boundary of the two integrities. Alice, as part of the Anglo-Catholic community, enjoys spiritual patronage from oppositional male clergy, but begins to explore how this apparent contradiction – the belief in the maleness of the priesthood and the warmth towards a female priest – is possible: 'I didn't think those two could exist together

and maybe on one level they can't.' On what level does she think this cannot happen? Perhaps on the symbolic level, where the separation of woman and priesthood is given its legitimacy, the support to and denial of women priests is difficult to yoke together, but there remains the question of what it means for a woman priest in the material world.

As the interviewees talk about their relationships with male clergy who oppose female priesthood a common storyline of the 'lovely man' emerges. The framework of ambivalent sexism that Glick and Frisk (2011) propose offers an insight into the dynamic at work in these relationships:

Ambivalent sexists are not 'mentally conflicted', rather their subjectively positive and negative attitudes reflected a key feature of sexist attitudes [. . .] at least as ancient as polarized stereotypes of the Madonna and Mary Magdalene. (p.532)

For Glick and Friske, the ambivalence is reflected in the Christian feminine archetypes used as references for the framing of women (and notice that Mary Magdalene is the opposite of the Madonna, something the interviewees recognise as a sexist device to quell women's claim to religious authority). Despite this ambivalence, women clergy are willing to see male clergy who reject female priesthood as genuinely caring and concerned for the wellbeing of women clergy. For example, Clare, an Anglo-Catholic, values her relationship with a bishop who opposes women's ordination: 'we get on, I got more affirmation and support from him than I did from the [bishop] who was meant to be all woolly liberal and nice'. The shared Anglo-Catholic position is likely to be a factor for Clare, but she emphasises the difference in support offered: even though her priesthood is undermined by the bishop's beliefs, he offers more support than another 'liberal' bishop (described in a slightly pejorative tone). Women priests who find such relationships contradictory may be helped by the notion of ambivalence and the co-existence of attitudes to women within one institution and within one male priest.

However, although the benevolent end of the scale allows women priests to operate more freely, it is less innocent when considered in the light of MacKinnon's (1997) analogy of difference as 'a velvet glove on the iron fist of domination' (p.8); the lovely clergyman who does not acknowledge women's priesthood uses sex and gender difference to bolster his access to power and to legitimise male domination. Benevolent sexism may sound well-meaning and less harmful, however, it helps to perpetuate the structural liminality in which

women priests are held. The positive qualities of the male who excludes women from the priesthood can blind women to the symbolic violence that is perpetrated through such beliefs. Beatrice, for example, describes her mentor as 'lovely' even though he rejects women's priesthood. This loveliness diverted her from thinking critically about his views and how they impacted on her own relationship with the divine:

I loved [him] to bits. Very gentle, pastoral man. And I just accepted his teaching. If asked, his view was that women couldn't be ordained. Lovely, lovely man. And I never questioned it because he was such a lovely man and to me, he radiated God's love. I never had any reason to question it. And it wasn't a thing. It wasn't anything that was, it never occurred to me, I think. So, if I thought about ministry, I thought maybe I would become a missionary or something. Just never crossed my mind.

Beatrice identifies the relational bonds that formed her view of female ministry as 'missionary or something.' The 'something' is *other* than sacramental, producing a sense of the auxiliary in the way Beatrice previously framed this female calling. Her femaleness in relation to a divinely organised world was fabricated through the positive relationship with a male priest within her formative Christian experience. Whilst he was supportive, Beatrice's vicar nevertheless wrought symbolic violence on female priesthood, and Beatrice admits that she was willing to accept his positioning because he was 'a lovely man' who 'radiated God's love'. This is part of a powerful discourse – one where the divine is mediator – which, at this point in her story time-line, ratified the propagation of gendered differentiation directly connected to the symbolic divine. Radiating God's love is not easily associated with even benevolent sexism, since it is transcendent. Male 'love' is perfected through the association with the divine, which moves the relational into the transcendent, a realm where challenge is much more difficult to exercise – a male priest constructed as revealing something of the divine resists critique and protest.<sup>88</sup> The discourse of loveliness is enticing and dulls the ability to question positioning. The risk for the women priests is that by challenging sexist beliefs held by men who 'radiate God's love' it becomes entangled with objections to the transcendent and ultimately the divine.

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<sup>88</sup> The protestations of Lord Carey at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse hearing echo this assumption that the male cleric is exempt from scrutiny and suspicion, saying of a male bishop found guilty of sex offenses; 'I couldn't believe that a bishop in the Church of God could do such evil things, so I actually believed him for a time' (IICSA, 2018, p.24).

Listening to the women's stories about their relationships, it is clear there is for many genuine respect and admiration for male priests who do not accept female priesthood. Natalie, for instance, has enjoyed particularly good and supportive relationships with male clergy (not all of whom reject her priesthood): 'These guys embody priesthood. They are the real deal for me. And the thing about [name] is, he doesn't agree with the ordination of women'. A priest who does not recognise Natalie's own priesthood because of her sex is still 'the real deal' for her. The irony is obvious. The 'real' priest is the male priest who theologically cannot say in return that Natalie is 'the real deal'. Sexist attitudes are knowingly pushed into the background in favour of the value that is placed on how priesthood itself is being expressed. This does not easily fit with Natalie's own ministry at the margins and her own attitude to gender justice, and yet she is able and willing to build positive relationships. Not only is the male priest required to exercise a strategic forgetfulness about positioning, or circumvent it, but women clergy are called upon to do the same if they are to enjoy mutually warm relationships. The strategy of focusing on the positive qualities of male clergy means that the belief in sexist theology and doctrine can be overridden. There can be a curious heroic discourse around male clergy who oppose women's ordination. For example, Olive told me that Bishop North had 'so many women present' at his consecration, a litmus test of his ability to support women clergy even as he refuses to ordain them. It is not, therefore, the theological positioning that always matters, but the ability of male clergy to present a supportive persona.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely why women clergy are sometimes so heavily invested in relationships with male clergy who reject female priesthood. Some hope that through dialogue and relationships male clergy will change their minds. Una describes a bishop, who does not ordain women, in glowing terms: 'I worked with the bishop who was brilliant, absolutely brilliant and you know, very supportive'. At the same time, as she worked with him, Una hoped this bishop would be put in positions that would challenge his views on women in the priesthood, that others would ask him to explain his stance in the hope that he could be persuaded into theological acceptance of female priesthood. The loveliness of men who oppose women's ordination presents a slippery target for resistance (a word I borrow from Carol: 'because the Church is exempt from equality legislation it becomes more slippery' she told me). How can sexist theology be protested when it comes from a lovely man?

Many of the interviewees may disagree with the suggestion that supportive relationships are a patriarchal strategy, however, there may be significant benefits for male clergy in the

opposing integrity in positive relationships with female clergy. I want to briefly explore these relationships as a 'gentling' device (Haraway, 2003), a term I have borrowed from Haraway's discussion of street dogs experiencing enough human kindness to enable them to live without aggression within human families. In relating the idea of kindly assimilation of an animal to the assimilation of women in the priesthood, I do not interpret this as a simple act of pacification, or worse, training through indoctrination. I use the term to describe a relational strategy that seeks to create a fit, a way of belonging and co-existing. In the Introduction, Melinda's story shows that some male clergy are well-meaning in their efforts to help women find a place in the Church. This brings the discussion back to the type of belonging that is being generated: belonging as object. Street dogs, for survival and comfort, need a human family, and gentling is a necessary and loving process. The process of gentling undertaken by male priests who do not recognise female priesthood is a kindly attempt to help women assimilate into their role as *non*-priest, or deficient priest. Gentling may help women priests belong as object, dulling the appetite for protest, helping to diminish gendered conflict in the Church. This, then, becomes an uglier social process. It does not result in the woman priest's undifferentiated belonging (belonging as subject). I am not arguing there is a passivity in the women themselves, but I draw attention to the potential silencing discourses within relationships that aim to draw women into a state of assimilation and dissuade them from rebellion. I also want to associate gentling with Daly's notion of 'taming': 'in the tamed state, women are domesticated, dedicated to the cult of male divinity' (Daly, 1978 [1991], p.344). Gentling and taming describe a dynamic that seeks to create a type of belonging for the woman non-priest, who is unable to claim full status everywhere in the structure, but is required, for everyone's benefit, to find a place in the Church.

#### 4.4.3 *Boundary play*

Much more challenging symbolically are the relational interactions that draw women priests directly *across* the boundary of the two integrities. The trickster metaphor (Hyde, 1998 [2008]; Tannen, 2007) is useful here. Through relational encounters, the female priest can enter a space that requires a temporary adjustment to how she is able to enact her identity, but she risks, at the same time, losing her sense of what *femaleness* means – evoking Daly's (1978 [1991]) 'toxic male caves', where women should not linger too long. The spaces in the Church where women are not accepted as priests are 'toxic' in the sense that they strip women of the status of priesthood (as understood by the male clergy who inhabit this space), and so women priests need to negotiate the space from their liminality.

Two stories, shared by Louise and Olive, both of whom are Anglo-Catholic and therefore closer to the main ecclesiology that underpins the two integrities, show how women find ways of engaging across the threshold as trickster priests finding gaps in the boundary. Whilst I see both stories as subversive, Louise and Olive must diminish aspects of how they identify to journey across into the opposing integrity. Things are left behind, although this is not like leaving one's shoes at the threshold, since the conditional status of women priests is imposed on them by others. Louise's story focuses on her sense of belonging to the community of Anglo-Catholics and she is aware that at times she is required to diminish her femaleness to belong. Not all male clergy in this group reject her priesthood, but the shadow of the two integrities requires Louise to see her femaleness as a site of contention, and for the sake of group cohesion it is minimised. Whilst she is positive about relationships with male clergy who do not accept her priesthood, she is also aware of knotty contradictions as she negotiates the homosocial character of the group:

I tend to band together with the Catholics, even though they're mostly blokes and actually, some of them don't accept my orders. Weirdly they seem to be able to perform an act of cognitive dissonance and see me as one of the boys. It's really odd. It's really, really odd. And if you start to think about it too much you... it's simpler, because we've, even though we've got one thing that we differ very greatly on, in other ways where we're coming from is more similar. And I find that continuing tension of my ministry, particularly when it comes to church politics and questions, what my understanding of what happens at the Eucharist is much closer, probably pretty identical, to Bishop Tony's or Bishop North's, you know it's a lot more in common with that than with the area bishop who is an evangelical. So, there's that oddity too.

Here, Louise is on the edge of something startling: 'if you think about it too much you...'. What is the ending to the sentence? Louise is highly thoughtful in her analysis of her position, but holds lightly, in the subjunctive tone, the idea of thinking too much about the oddness of her being in this place where how she identifies is fragmented. It is an invitation to speculate on what would happen if thoughts were thought. Here I invoke Haraway (2016b) again: 'think we must: we must think'<sup>89</sup> (p.36). Thinking is part of the process that forms Louise's priesthood and she is aware that some thought patterns may begin to

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<sup>89</sup> Haraway in using this phrase takes her inspiration from by Virginia Woolf when she declares in *Three Guineas*, a treatise on women and academia, in 1938 'think we must'.

threaten the relational balance. If she allows herself to fully explore the implications of her positioning, set according to the beliefs of her male colleagues, she may experience an unravelling in how she belongs to the Anglo-Catholic group. This self-censorship, not just in speech and action, but in thought, may ensure she too can hold in tension her priesthood and her anomalous femaleness.

It is significant that Louise ascribes 'cognitive dissonance' to how some male clergy relate to her as a female priest. She strikes an unspoken bargain where her embodiment of the priesthood is downplayed as she negotiates her place in the Anglo-Catholic group. Her flesh is female, but her shared Anglo-Catholicism in priesthood is perceived as male. Perhaps she is considered spiritually male, whilst her material presence is female, and is split across ways of being (is she priest or woman?). The device of being spiritually male is historically how women of exceptional spiritual status could escape the material and auxiliary role of the female and Louise being 'one of the boys' signals the continuing reliance on this device which separates femaleness from the spiritual. Wendy, also Anglo-Catholic, experiences a similar device: 'the people who would look at me as maybe an honorary man would be the people who wouldn't recognise my priesthood'. To maintain a way of working across the boundary of the two integrities, some male clergy must perceive women priests as faceted: one face presents the (male) priest, and another, the woman. Being 'one of the boys', or 'an honorary man' is aligning the female priest to the male 'zero degree of difference' (Braidotti, 2013), whereby the degrees of difference are blurred. This is for the benefit of the group and it is a way for women priests to achieve a sense of place, but there is a subversion of the belonging as object taking place. The institution shapes the belonging of *women* in the priesthood. Louise, across the boundary, experiences belonging as an Anglo-Catholic, but not as female. She is a priest, but a priest who borrows masculinity.

The splitting of Louise's femaleness and her priesthood as she moves across the boundary of the two integrities may cause tension in her ministry, but Tannen (2007) suggests that dualities held by women are useful. These inner contradictions can act as separate trickster characters, as though they are independent parts of the woman priest, and I wonder if this describes Louise's ability to put aside femaleness to become 'one of the boys'. But I also wonder if the tension caused by the priest/woman duality is ameliorated by the ideological *communitas* (Turner, 1969 [2008]) of Anglo-Catholic tradition. This is not to ignore the dialectic between *communitas* as homogeneity and the structure that separates women priests (see Sandall, 2011). I am not proposing that the *communitas* of Anglo-Catholicism melts away gendered boundaries, but the flow experienced through the shared connection

to God in Anglo-Catholic ritual, and the shared belief in the ontology of the Mass, provides strong, momentary communal bonds. *Communitas* is a gap through which the trickster priest can cross the boundary, and it allows some women priests to be subversive by their very presence in a fraternity. Perhaps Louise is re-assembling fraternal boundaries by using *communitas* as she allows herself to be ‘one of the boys’. Shedding femaleness (even if temporarily to fit into a group) could also be an act of rebellion against her enforced status as a *female* priest, where femaleness is the basis of her structural liminality. Louise symbolically shape-shifts, using the visible bonds of fraternal ecclesiological allegiance to mask her femaleness. The barrier between her embodiment of femaleness and her *ecclesiological* belonging, however, is only made permeable through these moments of ecclesiological *communitas* and relationship. For women, this *communitas* relies on compromise and is sometimes not fully accessible. Where *communitas* has worked for Louise, it is a stumbling block for Wendy, for example: ‘part of me would love to actually be able to say how wonderful Apostolic Succession is, that’s my High Church bit. But actually, I can’t because it doesn’t work for me, obviously’. *Communitas* is disrupted in Wendy’s case because she is unable, or unwilling, to suspend her femaleness or ignore the implications of belief in the (male) Apostolic Succession for the sake of belonging to the tradition, though part of her seeks this full engagement with its doctrinal life. On this level, being ‘one of the boys’ is not a panacea, and at some point, the female priest must confront the implications of some aspects of ecclesiology on her belonging as subject.

Olive’s story of belonging does not diminish her femaleness, but she is asked to put her priesthood to one side as she engages across the boundary of the two integrities. To be active as a *female* priest in such spaces in the Church is not possible, but another trickster strategy is to temporarily shape-shift into a non-priest. Olive agreed to act as deacon for a male colleague who is in an equivalent position in the hierarchy, but who opposes women’s ordination. Since the relationship is warm and cordial, indeed *loving*, Olive sees no harm in this – she holds on to her femaleness, but her priesthood left at the threshold. She enters a space where she is not recognised as a priest, an act that flows from relational imperatives, although executed through a sense of individual agency:

I actually get on quite well with a number of people who are Forward in Faith and when we work together, we sort of skip around each other in quite a loving way really. For example, [a male colleague of equal standing] ‘oh come along’, he says. ‘Come and deacon for me’ [. . .] I say, ‘Oh alright, why not?’

It is significant that two priests enact the structural liminality of the female in this way. The male priest accesses power over Olive's status as a priest and by doing so reifies the structural liminality in which she resides. However, this power is exercised within the context of a positive relationship. Olive uses the relational to describe her conflicts. To 'skip around each other' in a 'loving way' hints at a camouflaging dynamic, but one which is also like a dance, a mutual set of choreographed movements which allow certain relational moves to veil the boundary's implications. As Latour (2005) proposes, once the dancing stops the 'assemblages' cease.

I wonder if this acting as deacon is about testing the liminality of Olive's position. Her tone suggests she holds the character of the boundary lightly, not taking too seriously its implications for her own priesthood. Internally, Olive retains her understanding of herself as a priest but enacts her structural liminality by taking on the deacon role (reprising the discussion of how the female priest is constructed as the 'drag' priest). The trade-off may be the positive relationship, important for female belonging in the priesthood. This situation is not about assimilation or being 'one of the boys'. Olive is not being accepted on condition that her femaleness is diminished, but on condition that her *priesthood* is diminished. The relational aspects of this story are entangled with symbolic power. The male colleague invites Olive into a space where he retains the power of interpellation, separating her from the priesthood. If Olive were to remain in this space, she would only ever be a deacon with no power to access sacramental symbols. Liminal structural space does at least provide a priestly identity for the woman, even if the symbolic contract is only partially fulfilled by the institution. Olive appears to have a resistance to the toxicity of the integrity where her priesthood is denied and may not consider acting as deacon a risk to her own sense of belonging as a priest. She can act as deacon since she 'knows' she is a priest. Even in structural liminality, then, women have a confidence in their belonging within the priesthood. As with Louise's story, however, Olive's account is about femaleness and priesthood accruing meaning in parts of the Church that create a mutual incompatibility. Olive's compromise could never be reciprocated in the same way, since there are no spaces in the Church where maleness is problematised. I wonder if Olive would ever ask her male colleague to deacon for her and I wonder what the response would be.

## 4.5 The Dialectic in the Making

I actually find it really important to be a woman in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.

And say we belong here too. This is part of our inheritance, we're not going away, and we can live it out as fully as a man can. And we do.

Pauline, Anglo-Catholic priest.

Emerging from these patterns of negotiating with institutional boundaries and discourses is a dialectic of belonging. Women priests maintain a conversation between forces that shape their belonging as object and their own resistances and subversions that forge belonging as subject. On one side of the dialectic access to power is controlled and differentiated, the belonging of women priests being contingent upon the soothing of male and institutional pain and amelioration of fear of the female manifested in the institutional boundary between the two integrities. Women priests belong as object because they are acted upon, hailed as either priest or non-priest, made structurally liminal and precarious and called on to act in prescribed ways within a nurturing economy underpinned by ambivalent sexism. On the other side, women priests are seeking, antithetically, to belong as subject. This belonging involves resisting liminality, acting as trickster to find the gaps in the boundary, making marginality holy, responding to rhizomatic voices rather than the centre of gravity of male power, and embracing heterodoxy as an antidote to the stifling orthodoxy of the masculine symbolic. The belonging as subject is fragmentary, uncertain, and individualistic – it is in this sense that women priests are proto-priests. The boundary of the two integrities is part of the structural shaping of belonging as object, a product of a more fundamental dichotomy of immanence and transcendence. The next chapter explores how women's bodies fit into the environment of the priesthood, and whether their materiality is part of this dialectic between belonging as object and belonging as subject.

## Transcription Poem

### **Girl in a blue dress**

My big plan? I've got little plans

Images and icons of Mary

Our Lady of This and That

Like when I go to church in my cassock

People no longer call me bonnie lass

People will call me Mother

Alice, Anglo-Catholic curate

## Chapter 5 Bodies in Ecclesiastical Space

### 5.1 Introduction: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Given that the public sphere has historically been almost an exclusively male sphere, it has developed in a manner which assumes that its occupants have  
a male body.

Moira Gatens (1992, p.124)

The ecclesial space occupied by the priest has been constructed around the body of the male. The maleness of this space becomes apparent when a female body is present, creating layered tensions for women clergy around how their bodies are given meaning. Women priests are unable to transcend their bodies: as Bingemer (2014) argues, they are ‘the sign of their identity and an object of discrimination, it is impossible for women who do theology or who assume any service within the Church not to include their own bodies’ (p.366). Women priests are required to negotiate the physical difference the female body suggests (or is made to suggest) in the vocal timbre, and feminine accoutrements used to present the body, and bodily contours, all of which are reminders of sex and gender in the priesthood (Bieler and Pluss, 2010). But the question is whether such reminders destabilise female clergy belonging. The aim of this chapter is to explore whether women clergy are alienated from the priesthood because of their sexed bodies and the relationship their bodies have to gender. There are two interweaving aspects to my arguments. How the women view and experience their sexed bodies within the priesthood sometimes spills into how gender (particularly types of femininity) is framed. This is a feature of how some of the interviewees discussed breasts, for example, and how the meaning-making around their sexed bodies influences meaning-making around gender. In other words, sex difference is constructed around the body, feeding gendered constructions such as motherliness and nurturing as feminine qualities. When I first began to think about the female priest’s body, my intention was to remain anchored in their materiality. However, the interviewees’ stories often touch on how they experience the discursive in relation to their bodies: discourse generates real impact on material, ‘gendered bodies’ (Hekman, 2008, p.90).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Hekman’s (2008) synopsis of the gulf between the discursive and the material in epistemologies is useful. She suggests that the material and the discursive cannot be mutually exclusive in explaining

Women, in their biology, their fleshy presence, disturb both the symbolic and the material world of the priesthood and the religio-social discourses in return shape female material presence. Menstruation, reproduction, and how the woman's body is dissected and given teleological meaning have an impact on what women do, how they experience the priesthood and what meaning is accrued around their bodies as priests. The second aspect I address is how women embody the priesthood, how they present their bodies to look like priests, and whether the priest's clothing is an ill-fit (literally and figuratively) on a woman's form. The argument about whether a female body can represent at the altar is central to the opposition to female priests<sup>91</sup> and this is the subject of feminist theological discussion (for example, Furlong, 1991; Dowell and Williams, 1994; Green, 2009a; Slee and Burns, 2010; Slee, 2011; Cones, 2017). As my interest lies in how women priests experience the consequences of different theological positions, I restrict my argument to how women view and use their bodies at the altar and in their daily lives as priests, rather than the background theology (as important as this is). My intention is to focus on how female bodies are made abject and how this is experienced by the interviewees. It should be noted that bodies and embodiment are difficult to explore separately, and these concepts overlap at times as I discuss what it means for a woman's body to inhabit the cassock and how the presentation of the female body as a priest is made more complex by perceptions of femininity.

I attempt to disentangle the notions of sex and gender, in the Beauvoirian sense, in an exploration of how biology is constructed as destiny; the teleology given to the female body becomes problematic for women in the priesthood. Gender and sex are often conflated in the narratives of the interviewees, but both are used, in terms of structure and discourse, to differentiate female clergy from their male counterparts, making female presence incongruous at times. How female priests' bodies are given meaning deeply influences how women experience the priesthood. A woman priest may see her body as a burden: how it is looked upon, the controversies she causes by how she presents her body, and how she must negotiate physical space. This taps into the feminist dilemma of whether women should transcend their biology, the humanist feminist argument derived from Beauvoir

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the social world. I have felt the need to bridge the gap to see discursive practices as part of constructing a sexed and gendered experience of the material.

<sup>91</sup> For some interviewees, the notion of *in persona Christi* is not part of their tradition, though there are interesting questions raised as they see themselves as representing the congregation to God. The intricacies of representation are often talked about as an inward understanding rather than adherence to a group doctrine.

(1949 [2009]), or whether they should celebrate it in its difference. In exploring this latter idea, the work of French feminist philosopher, Irigaray (1985 [2002a]), is attractive to feminist theologians, such as Green (2009a), who attempt to find subjectivity in the revealing of sexual difference that is hidden within the masculine paradigm. So, one of the questions I ask is: can the priest's body be viewed from a gynocentric feminist perspective, whereby her bodily femaleness is the key to her parity and belonging as subject in the priesthood?

The Beauvoirian understanding that biology is not destiny may be anti-essentialist, but how the female body is *socially* constructed still constitutes the woman as inferior, fundamentally shaping experience (Kruks, 2001). In this sense, biology is *made to mean* destiny and as I go on to discuss, this destiny is made spiritually potent by some somatophobic theological notions woven around the female body. Women priests may have to negotiate perceptions about their gender (for example, challenges around how femininity is displayed, what traits are handed to women, and so forth), but women's bodies also accrue meaning through how they are treated: as different and, under masculine domination, as secondary (Kruks, 2001). Whilst complementarian accounts of gender have circulated in the Church of England which have maintained constructed differences between male and female clergy – and this is sometimes the basis of academic research (for example, Francis 1991; Francis and Musson, 1999)<sup>92</sup> – this type of differentiation is not necessarily the crux of the arguments against women's priesthood. On the contrary, the notion that women provide traits that were missing from an all-male priesthood was used as leverage in the arguments in favour of women's ordination (see Lehman, 1993 [a US study across different denominations]; Furlong, 1998). It is the material presence of the female body that is a significant basis of the two integrities, ensuring that biology *is* destiny. The female body is constructed as unfit for the priesthood, an idea that

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<sup>92</sup> Most interviewees dismiss complementarity as irrelevant to their ministries. This calls into question the basis on which some academic research is undertaken amongst clergy, which continues to focus on gendered traits (for example, Francis, 1991, 1992). This is a continuation of the binarisation of gender in the priesthood, where women priests are described as having masculine qualities and male priests as having feminine qualities in cases where they transgress from a framework of gender constructions. Almost all of my interviewees bristle at this reification of gendered traits. Polly, for example, told me that research done by Francis (who has spearheaded numerous research projects involving clergy in the Church of England) has been used 'for the wrong reasons' that left her with the impression that extrovert young men were idealised as leaders in the Church and that such focus on gendered traits made the Church 'a horribly sexist institution'. Complementarity is used to construct a fiction of equality leaving the female as that which the male is not, and so the allocation of traits along gendered lines works against women's subjectivity.

circulates around the inability of the female body to represent the maleness of Jesus during the Eucharist (see for example, Baker, 2004; Podmore, 2015). I do not, however, want to limit the discussion to encounters with the boundary between the two integrities, since there are other ways the female body is differentiated from that of the male and problematised in the everyday circumstances of the priest that are not restricted to tradition or to one integrity, but permeate the Church in its entirety.

Women priests need their bodies to mean 'priesthood' as much as a male body, and this is played out both in the material and symbolic realms. The issue women priests face is that the female body is not universally representative in the way a male body is and some of the interviewees challenge how the male body is privileged in the Christian symbolic. Alice's comments highlighted in the previous chapter (p.86), reveal how she separates her understanding of the body of Christ from the institutional Church.<sup>93</sup> She asks: 'who says the body of Christ is a man's body anyway?' The use of body metaphors is questioned as the male body goes through a process of apotheosis because of the incarnation and its derivative metaphors. The alignment to Christ (to be Christ-like) goes beyond behaviours and attributes to privilege the male body – this is evident in how theologies opposing women's priesthood make much of the representative power of the male body. The privileging of the male body is a crucial debate for women priests, and as Currie and Raoul (1992) explore, how the body is appealed to because of the meanings that are attached to biology is problematic for women trying to gain a foothold in the clerical world of the Church. They write: 'Through somatization we present political, economic, ecclesiastical, and domestic institutions as somehow physical, and as natural, biologically immutable, and divinely ordained' (p.20). Women in the priesthood work against the inertia that is generated when meanings around bodies are naturalised. Alice, in her challenge of the maleness of the 'body of Christ' as a way of describing the church community, is beginning to theorise along the same lines, that the male body as universalising imagery results in the bodies of female priests being misaligned, out of place, in the symbolic. If the universal

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<sup>93</sup> This separating of institutional Christianity and faith as lived experience is brought to the fore by Eccles (2018) as an important distinction that should inform research methodology, but in ways that acknowledge the blurring of the boundaries between the two. In my research I detect an instinctive understanding of the boundaries between the 'religious' and the 'spiritual' in the interviewees' stories and whilst this has influenced how I have grouped themes together, the ritualistic and systematic (or religious) elements of the women's experiences are imbued with deep, personal attitudes to faith, presenting on one level a heavily blurred boundary between the religious and the spiritual.

body is male and divine, this privileges the bodies of male priests. Whilst female body imagery and metaphors can find their way into the Christian symbolic (and I explore this further in the next chapter), they are often pejoratively sexual, reduced to the reproductive, or else used to describe subordination under a masculine metaphor,<sup>94</sup> leaving the female body juxtaposed against the male body in a polarised process of meaning-making. As I will discuss, it is perhaps no surprise that some women priests often want to hide or downplay their bodily presence as they negotiate differentiation on symbolic and material levels.

The bodies of women priests operate within the Christian symbol system that describes the human spiritual struggle against a triad of enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil.<sup>95</sup> The problem for women living within this philosophy is that they are positioned as belonging to the world of flesh, fundamentally separated from the transcendent male and his symbols (Young, 1990).<sup>96</sup> Christian theology frames women as having a tellurian, biological presence upon which a gendered hierarchical binary is built (Green, 2010), extended by the Enlightenment<sup>97</sup> to the separation of mind and body, perpetuating the dichotomy of the male as transcendent, thinking and rational, and the female as biological, emotional, immanent (Grosz, 1994).<sup>98</sup> This dichotomy is required to allow the male his subjectivity. As Midgely (1997) argues: 'women [. . .] were still called on to remain hierarchical, feudal, emotional, "bodily", and biological, in order to make it possible for the men to become totally free, equal autonomous, intellectual, and creative' (p.65). The female body in the priesthood must overcome immanence or integrate it into the priesthood, both in spiritual

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<sup>94</sup> For example, 'whore', 'bride', and 'mother' are part of the set of metaphors in Christian symbolism that form the female body as sexual and reproductive.

<sup>95</sup> This has long been a Christian struggle propagated by historical Christian figures such as Abelard and Aquinas.

<sup>96</sup> Beauvoir saw the world, the flesh and the devil as a fundamentally gendered ordering of the Christian symbol system. The woman as Other is the incarnation of all three, locked in immanence, in contrast to male transcendence. Other feminist thinkers seek to counter the disparaging of immanence as a way of knowing (see Wilshire, 1992).

<sup>97</sup> I concede that Christianity, as a religion based on revelation, is not an easy bedfellow of Enlightenment thinking, since, as Hampson (2002) points out, it encourages the Kantian condition of being a minor to an external guardian (and Una, one of the interviewees, is Kantian in her distaste for the tendency of Christian imagery to be infantilising). However, the Enlightenment continued dichotomous thinking, always leaving the female as inferior.

<sup>98</sup> Rousseau declared that nature (and reason) had arranged for women to be under the judgement of men (Currie and Raoul, 1992, p.7) so the Christian naturalisation of masculine dominance remained entirely intact.

and in cultural terms, ensuring immanence has spiritual capital. Overcoming the body for the female has led to the notion of being accepted as spiritually male, and I suspect, as I discussed in the previous chapter, there are echoes of this way of thinking attached to the female body in the priesthood.

The mind/body dualism presents a difficulty for women in a Christian context as they make sense of their biological presence. The subordination of the female who is associated with the material is an asymmetry supported in Aristotelean thinking on which Christianity leans. The soul belongs to the male and the body belongs to the female (Currie and Raoul, 1992) (however, eschatological doctrines are one way of relieving women of the burden of mind/body dualism).<sup>99</sup> Since the material body is considered secondary, the female is secondary, moreover, 'the ambiguity in which the body is held has a great deal to do with the suspicion of female bodiliness and a complex, dialectical association of female bodiliness with imperfection and with anti-divinity' (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998, p.75). Under this symbolic system, the bodies of female priests are juxtaposed against the (male) priestly space. Some interviewees indicated an understanding of the inherent problems with Cartesian/Christian dualism. Pauline recognises how female bodies are oppressed and subjugated:

We are still caught up in the Neoplatonic let's-not-have-bodies-at-all because the spirit needs to be free from that [ . . . ]. I think there is a huge issue with being embodied, being incarnate. The classical perception that women are A, not fully human in the first place and B, are only incubators and the full thing that made you human was contained in the sperm.<sup>100</sup> And it took that long for anyone to challenge it, so we're still working from some of those assumptions.

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<sup>99</sup> Some commentators, such as Radford Ruether (1979) (who actually prefers to abandon ideas of eternity), see that the eschaton (the Christian notion of the passing away of the material world) is a way for women to believe in a future and eternal equality with the male once their bodies have been discarded, (though there is the Christian doctrine of the resurrected body which troubles this). Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007) propose that the eschatological premise may be that women disappear entirely once their bodies cease to exist, subsumed into the perfected version of 'man', the ultimate stage of becoming spiritually male. Eschatology, these authors suggest, reflects the male concern for independence and individualism (and is ecologically disastrous). Some feminist theologians reject the idea of individual eternal survival after death, though others see this as 'conceding the otherworld to patriarchy' and reducing personhood to a 'thickened' material realm (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007, p.121).

<sup>100</sup> Pauline is referring to the biological assumptions, most famously propagated by Aquinas, that set the course for Christian philosophical denigration of the female body, which still haunts the symbolic.

The issues with both the fleshy presence of a woman and her embodiment are noticed by Pauline, and I wonder if she is leaning towards Butler's (2011) understanding that the separation of body and spirit is an androcentric philosophy which frames the material presence of women as inferior. Pauline succinctly pinpoints how the female body is formed as 'less than human' and she recognises that this is the basis on which her female body accrues gendered meaning. During the interview, Beatrice responded emotionally as we discussed the struggle for women to be accepted into the priesthood. For her, the debate raised the question: 'are women really human?' Being framed in difference that fundamentally questions female humanness is the basis of the structural liminality of women priests, discussed in the previous chapter. This liminality is founded on bodily rejection and abjection that runs deep in the Christian psyche and symbol system. For Kristeva (1982), abjection is a mechanism of protection from defilement and it is the male priest in the opposing integrity who seeks this protection. The fears that give rise to the separation of female priests from those who are opposed to women's ordination is founded on a dualism that casts the female body as impure and polluting. Women priests need to either overturn this dualism to escape liminality or find ways to elevate their association with the material. So, before I explore the female priest's body in the space that reveals its contentiousness – at the altar – I want to consider the surprising and remarkable ways women priests develop somatic thinking as they see their bodies as telling theological stories.

## 5.2 A Gynocentric Turn?

[. . .] starting with the body, we were also faced with all the layers of patriarchal readings of that body so have found 'body theology' to be a difficult and at times painful process of unmasking and laying bare.

Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (2007, p.27)

There may be an 'epistemological revolution' (Currie and Raoul, 1992, p.14) taking place whereby women priests are subversively thinking through their bodies, reflecting the notion that feminist theologies are produced through 'experiences of oppression, relationships, sexuality, motherhood and so on, as a major *source* for reflecting on reality' (Slee, 2003, p.5, italics in original). Looking at this through the lens of gynocentric feminist thought, the use of the female body to generate theological ideas might be a radical re-structuring of the foundation on which the priesthood is built. To provide context for the

analysis of some of the stories told by the interviewees, it would be useful to briefly consider the narrative of the movements in feminism from humanist to gynocentric thought provided by Young (1990). From a humanist feminist viewpoint emphasis on the female body as a source of difference is likely to stir up fears of essentialism. On the other hand, the problem that Beauvoirian somatophobic thought presents is that the elements that make up male transcendent subjectivity are not deconstructed but are in danger of being perceived as characteristics that define being human, maintaining the denigration of female material and biological difference. Women priests may hide their biology to belong (to be like the male or to lessen the focus on the female form), or they may see their bodies as a source of theological thinking, which may turn out to be a destabilising force in the priesthood. Hampson (2002) hints at this destabilisation when she talks of female ordination as a 'transgressive practice' (p.105). The female body may be a source of radical, even revolutionary, shifts in epistemology, challenging the desirability to emulate masculine transcendence. Challenge to the Apollonian structure of knowing (the external and the rational) is part of the feminist project, since such a structure of knowing belongs to the system of opposites that casts women as part of the emotional, earth-bound world of not-knowing (Wilshire, 1992). If women priests build an epistemology based on their bodily experiences, this would be a significant subversion of traditional theological thought, a system of thought that has not served women well. Female commentators have begun work on seeing the body as a way of accessing knowledge. For example, Isherwood and Stuart (1998) build a system of theological thinking around the female body, using as a springboard second wave feminist Adrienne Rich's (1976) exploration of meanings around the maternal body. Rich writes about the female body as a 'miracle and paradox', hoping that women can begin to 'think through the body' (p.192). If there is an argument that the female priest might access the divine symbolic on her own non-masculinised terms, it may lie in this somatic, bodily thinking. Isherwood and Stuart (1998) are interested in how the female body can escape otherness and explore how an Irigarayan<sup>101</sup> path to becoming the subject external to the patriarchal symbol system may be developing sex/gender difference that is disarticulated from oppression. However, they concede that 'even our body-knowing

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<sup>101</sup> Irigaray's (1993 [2002b]), proposal that women should find their own subjectivity external to the masculinised Christian symbol system culminates in finding the feminine divine. I remain unsure whether Irigaray's ideas can escape essentialism, and there are times when so-called feminine and masculine traits are un-deconstructed when she describes what the feminine divine might offer women's subjectivity.

bears the mark of Patriarchy' (p.22). Perhaps there is no escape from the masculine paradigm in the Christian symbolic.

Some women priests sense the opportunity to circumvent masculinised theological thinking by connecting to body-knowledge. Pauline, an Anglo-Catholic, sees the act of singing as connecting her body to the symbolic: 'it allows you to also use your body because it's a very physical thing, singing, and so it's a kind of prayer that you can inhabit almost'. Denise, a liberal evangelical, talks about how she privileges 'feeling space' over 'thinking space' and Carol, another Anglo-Catholic, at times abandons traditional ways of gathering knowledge, stating: 'I don't have to do any more intellectual theology than being'. For one interviewee, giving birth to her stillborn child was not only about deep personal sorrow, but an event that changed how she saw faith and the symbolic, altering how she related the material, bodily experience to God:

[My faith] changed quite a lot, it changed in terms of having a different understanding about healing, a different understanding about how God works and about how prayer works and all of that. But I suppose also questioning things we'd been told about the role of women in the church. All kinds of stuff really were up for discussion, whereas before, we'd just accepted what we were taught.

A material and bodily sorrow radically changed this interviewee's awareness of how women are expected to experience and consume religion. Her emotions of sadness and loss are part of the sentient experience of the body (Kruks, 2001): emotional knowing is rooted in the body. So, women priests who regard their feeling space as theological space derive some of their knowledge from body-experience and it could be that this is a post-Enlightenment, gynocentric turn being played out in the priesthood. Perhaps women priests are moving away from the masculine paradigmatic thinking and rationalising theology. Melinda is another priest who questions the abstract nature of theological thought: 'if you're writing stuff that has no relevance to how people live in embodied existence, well, it's not good theology anymore. I think women's voices have driven that change'. If Melinda is correct, the presence of women's bodies in the priesthood (and how they speak up about their physicality) may be the catalyst for a blurring of the boundary between body and mind and a challenge to the orthodox androcentric theology that has caused Christian women such pain. The stories above are reminiscent of the 'mindful body', a concept that is designed to replace the Cartesian way of seeing body and mind (Asad,

1997, p.45), which aims to deconstruct the hierarchical, gendered ways bodies are given meaning. The 'mindful body' invokes Irigaray's (1993 [2002b]) 'sensible transcendence' that she proposes allows women to embrace immanence and transcendence simultaneously. Is it possible that female priests are developing an epistemology that establishes the 'mindful body', creating 'sensible transcendence' within the priesthood through their bodily theological explorations?

The development of somatic theology in women's priesthood is an exciting idea, however, I want to inject some caution at this point. Young's (1990) critique of gynocentric feminist theory warns against the reifying of the female body and locking it into reproductive teleology which, I would add, can be used in the 'nasty ideology' (in Pauline's words) of complementarity. A revitalised concept of complementarity is, in some Christian discussions, leading to a discourse that frames women as having a disposition towards 'feeling faith' whilst men have a 'thinking faith' (Bunce, 2018). Gynocentric feminism must subvert the basis of complementarity and it is vital to understand the difference between the two positions, Young's critique notwithstanding. Another drawback is the danger that gynocentric thought draws the attention away from a wider political activism (Evans, 1995) and I wonder if the focus on somatic thinking sustains the female priest in her difference, rather than propelling her into more overtly activist encounters with oppositional priests and oppositional theologies (where, perhaps, humanist feminism connects more readily in supporting equality in the priesthood). It may be though, that female priests as active theologians thinking through their bodies gives rise to the possibility of different epistemologies *because* of their positioning in bodily difference. This is aligned with gynocentric thought in that there is no rush to occupy the transcendent space of the male priest, and instead, space is developed in which female priests see their actualisation.

How might somatic theology be specifically developed through the female body? Karen is a curate who describes herself as middle-of-the road in terms of church tradition and discusses how her own bodily experience of motherhood generates theology that connects her body to the symbolic. Karen's son is disabled, and his traumatic birth and the daily physical challenge his condition presents draws in Karen's own body and becomes part of how she experientially thinks through theology:

That experience of now being so wholly committed to another human being who is absolutely dependent on me and because of his disability always will be, it's not a temporary thing, that has hugely impacted on my experience of

theology [. . .] It's also hugely impacted my experience of the crucifixion [. . .] out of his many disabilities my son has autism, so he is subject to melt downs. Screaming, thrashing, unable to control himself, unable to do anything and just completely overwhelmed by effectively the storm in his head and the storm in his body. And there was one time [. . .] the only possible way I could help him come back to himself was to sit on the floor with my legs in sort of a 'V' position and him sitting between my legs and his back against my chest and my arms crossed, very much in the cross shape across his chest [. . .] I remember being profoundly struck by an image of that being God's encounter of Christ on the cross [. . .]. And you can call that dodgy theology all you like, I'm sure it's incredibly dodgy, but it was such a profound experience for me [. . .] on a daily basis I sacrifice my body for my son [. . .]. So, my theology of the body is now very practical and very earthy and very down to earth, because that's how I live my life. Because I sacrifice myself, my body, with the bruises and the scratches I'm covered with on a regular basis, to protect my son. So, because my lived experience is that physical, my theology has followed. So, I therefore see God and Christ in much more embodied terms than I used to [. . .] And it matters now for my theology as a woman, as a mother.

Karen's account is moving and profound. It reveals how she develops a type of knowing through bodily experience that is not derived from logocentric epistemology or theology. It is only at the end of her story that she grounds this experience in her femaleness and her motherhood, and so it is possible that a male body could experience a similar somatic epiphany. However, there is also a subversion suggested here of the father/son<sup>102</sup> imagery that is at the core of the Christian symbol system. Not only this, she subverts the orientation of the sacrificial symbolism of Christianity – it is not the son, but the mother who sacrifices her body. What is also striking is that she describes her body in the terms of the male Christ, her physical presence being fully representative of the male symbolic. Her arms form a cross which is at once symbolic and material and the bodily sacrifice is for her a direct connection to divine male sacrifice. Her body is textual. Karen calls this 'dodgy' perhaps because she feels she is radically departing from how theology has always been

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<sup>102</sup> The father/son symbolism is critiqued by feminist theologians (for example, Hampson, 2002) to reveal the extent to which the female is externalised. Karen's association of her motherhood, not to Mary, but to the divine Father/Son relationship is profoundly subversive.

developed through androcentric reason, words, and (masculine) tradition. However, whilst Karen may be aware she is thinking outside the masculine tradition of transcendence and intellect, she taps into a history of (rebellious) female somatic expression in Christianity, often seen in the mystics<sup>103</sup> for whom extreme ascetism, stigmata, and female body imagery were ways of using their bodies to spiritual ends (Louth, 1997).<sup>104</sup> Karen is using her position as the immanent other to develop an explicitly female way of accessing the symbolic through her body, as the female mystics did.<sup>105</sup> Louth argues that the female mystics' bodily expressions could mean either the internalisation of the androcentric symbolic, or (and a more favoured interpretation by Louth) the gaining of access to power using their alignment with immanence to their advantage. I see this access to power in Karen's story, as she re-orientates the symbolic to her body, and allows it to be part of theological meaning-making. Karen sees this access to meaning-making as theology of woman and mother, a gynocentric way of generating meaning that she relates to the symbolic.<sup>106</sup>

The access to meaning through the female body is a key strategy to imprint femaleness on to the priesthood. The female priest upsets the binary hierarchy and this in turn is a threat to male control of access to power. Karen's body in her relation to her son's body is a site of knowing that challenges the definition of theology and the guarded access to the symbolic.

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<sup>103</sup> Jantzen (1995) discusses the implications of who is considered a mystic – or in communication with the divine – and that defining mysticism defines institutional and individual power. It matters who is considered a mystic. She examines how the association with women and the privatisation of the spiritual experience worked to contain women in religious institutions – and women mystics seemed more interested in exploring the bodily experience than the male mystic. As the mystical experience evolved inextricably with gender perceptions, the male in religious authority made the rules that augmented male power and diminished that of the female.

<sup>104</sup> Such women, like Catherine of Siena, used physical/mystical phenomena to actually criticise the hierarchical priestly caste (Louth, 2012).

<sup>105</sup> The mystics might be included in Julia Kristeva's concept of the female genius, which subverts the notion of subjectivity and ways of knowing being available only to the male on the right side of a set of binaries. Jasper (2014) states: 'Kristeva describes this female genius as creative not in spite of her body and entanglement with sexuality – traditionally a bar to disembodied masculine genius – but precisely because this maternal position gives birth to an intellectual creativity that is also rooted in embodiment and recognized as such' (p.63). Whilst this 'genius' may not find recognition in the androcentric institutions of Church and State, for Kristeva, there is a need to recognise female creative thinking whilst at the same time acknowledging how their lives are constrained. This allows women's epistemology (though it may be critiqued as essentialist) to be valued outside the masculine normative ways of thinking.

<sup>106</sup> Young points to key theorists that validate this type of maternal and somatic thinking, such as Irigaray and Kristeva, who elevate the female in a corporeal sense. Kristeva (1985) in *Stabat Mater* explores the bodily experience of motherhood and Irigaray (1985) famously re-configures female auto-sexuality to bring it out of masculine definition in *The Sex Which is not One*.

The bodily experience is the epistemology, how she comes to understand and relate to the Christian symbolic, but this epistemology may rely on solidifying embodied difference that keeps women clergy associated with reductive teleology. Biological motherhood is important to Karen's somatic theology, however, there is an argument that the assumption that the reproductive body of the woman can access numinosity essentialises the somatic experience of women (Greene-McCreight, 2000). The reliance on motherhood within the Christian symbolic to differentiate the female experience of the divine is problematic for women clergy who want to disentangle their bodies from the telos and the symbolism of reproduction (which I revisit). On the other hand, Karen's story also begins to explore the possibility that the woman's bodily experience, particularly in the priesthood where they are uniquely in connection to the Christian symbolic, can generate new meaning that allows access to the symbolic through difference. Whilst Karen's somatic approach to theology may be opening and shifting the symbolic to reflect the female body, there remains the question of how the symbolic system impacts the body itself (McGuire, 1990), and the female priest must still contend with the ways in which her body is given meaning as it acts within sacred space. Thinking through the body may not yet match how the female form is phenomenologically differentiated in the priesthood.

### 5.3 Modalities and Phenomenal Space

When I'm in front of the altar I'd probably say I was doing it as a priest who is a woman rather than a woman who is a priest.

Louise, Anglo-Catholic curate.

The interviews reveal collision points between the female priest's body and the priesthood, including how biological and reproductive functions of the female body collide with the ritualistic role of the priest. Women priests perform types of femininity based on how they display or hide the body and the physicality of movements, a combination that Young (1990) calls 'modalities', ways of moving that are invested with feminine meaning. Some of the narratives offered by the interviewees can be understood through phenomenological analysis, and as I focus on activity around the altar, I explore how sacred space forms, and makes meaning for, the female priest in her bodily presence. There are symbiotic interactions between gendered modalities and gendered environments (Young, 1990), in that women priests' bodies are gazed upon, and meaning is generated in situ as they move around and interact with an environment traditionally constructed for the male body. The

phenomenal environment of the priesthood presents the opportunity for women priests to dislocate meaning from the masculine, but it also constantly defines the female body. The question is: does the female body sometimes seem to *intrude* on the priesthood? If so, how do women priests find themselves out of synchrony with the situatedness of the priesthood and does her female body cause her to *feel* liminal?

### 5.3.1 *Touch: a blessing, a violation, and a pollution*

I want to explore in more detail the gendered phenomenological processes that Young proposes, since this is where sex and gender become entangled. Femininity, Young (1990) argues, is a 'set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by women themselves' (p.140 emphasis in the original). So, the female body is channelled, by space and situations, into behaviours that are named feminine. For example, Young sees the female body as trained to be closed, hampered almost, in gestures of self-protection:

[She must] not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus, she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile. (p.153)

This idea of the closed female body leads Young to reason that there is a space around it that women do not push through to the outside world, a reaction to being accessible and touchable. Touch is a significant theme in the interviews, experienced positively and negatively by women priests, revealing the extent to which they push through this protected space around their bodies and the extent to which it is violated. Touch generates contradictions in how the female body in the priesthood is framed – the female priest carries both sexual and maternal meaning that her body accrues, and so is both denigrated and elevated depending on the context in which her body is viewed. With regards to touch, women priests may see themselves as bodily read as pastoral, so they can use touch in ministry in ways not available to the male priest. Yvonne is an Anglo-Catholic with a conservative evangelical background, and she is clear that touch in her ministry is available to her because she is female. Her comments reprise the idea that women see themselves as thinking somatically: 'If someone is in floods of tears, I'll give them a hug and *then* say, "what's the matter?" The comfort comes before the intellect, whereas for a man it would be "what's the matter?"'. The female touch, as related to emotional labour, is seen by Yvonne as the first response, one which a male priest is less likely to make. It is a *bodily*

response where comfort is physical. The ability to use touch is associated with communication, and this becomes something profound when used by some women priests to intensify a ritual experience for people. Fiona, for example, in her effort to personalise the Eucharist, uses people's names, but significantly, she touches their hand as she delivers the bread and wine. The connection made through touch in Yvonne's comforting ministry and the efforts Fiona makes to deepen the spiritual experience for her congregants evoke feminist theological thought that seeks to understand the female 'skin-on-skin engagement' (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007, p.34) as a beyond-sexual, divinely-human intimation of the incarnation that is more readily open to women, elevating the immanence to which women are bound. The female touch in the Eucharist is an attempt at this intimacy, but it also is about communicating. The touch of the female priest generates affective experiences, or encounters (see Liljestrom, 2016).<sup>107</sup> The affective quality is derived from the female priest's public role, which allows her to enhance, or invite, positive spiritual and emotional responses through the intimacy of touch. This affective communication is also a Bourdiesian concept (Willey, 2016) that shows how some people are identified as having affective qualities (and priests might be said to be institutionally endowed with these qualities). In Fiona's account, touch takes over from the words of the Eucharistic blessing, and her desire is to impart emotional and spiritual meaning through bodily touch. Yet women priests may be prone to doubt the propriety of their access to the affective economy and fears that they are acting outside priestly conventions erode confidence.

Wendy tells a story that has bothered her: she kisses a dying man on the cheek and holds his hand and, though she sees this as an intuitive moment, she experiences significant self-doubt. Because she understands this as something a male priest is unlikely, unable even, to do, she is left wondering if she has overstepped a boundary, since the male model of priesthood is normative. This type of bodily intimacy is made radical because it is perceived, by Wendy at least, as female and non-normative. Though the instances of touch and the generation of emotional affect described by some of the interviewees are micro-encounters, these indicate that women priests tap into the power of affect by using physical gestures and touch as both women and *priests* – the latter being the key to

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<sup>107</sup> I want to make note of affect theory, which enables exploration of the connections between the material (the body) and emotion, since I revisit some aspects of affect in the next chapter. My intention is to show that women priests are attuned to both the gendered nature of touch, and its affectivity, because they are priests.

infusing touch with spiritual meaning, yet it may be alien to a male version of the priestly role. The spiritual realm is entered affectively through the material and intimate touch of the female priest, and I wonder if, at some level, this begins to shift the androcentric centre of gravity of the priesthood.

How women priests are associated with receiving touch, though, is sometimes perceived as violating. Wendy, having expressed doubt about the appropriateness of her desire to communicate through touch, goes on to describe how she is hugged readily by parishioners, and this is not always welcome since it punctures the protective space around her body. The kiss planted on her after a service does not have the same spiritual resonance as her kiss offered to the dying man but is a signal of her physical availability as a female priest. And yet, there is ambivalence as Wendy also sees female physical availability as something to be acknowledged as a gift:

Sometimes coming out of church on a Sunday some people give me a hug [. . .] or a kiss [. . .] I don't know whether it's just seen as a bit patronising at times. So, there is a sort of boundary thing. But if you can manage that, there is something special about being a woman and being able to give somebody a hug. [Female colleagues] have said that somebody has come up to them and been really inappropriate and said how much they like them and then tried to give them a hug and then you're like, actually – but you also need a boundary if it really is that sort of permeable thing.

The woman priest must 'manage' touch, yet it is important to Wendy that this is seen as an elevated quality that women possess, turning bodily differentiation into a gift that must be handled with care. The boundary that Wendy is imagining is the space that Young (1990) sees as constructed around women's bodies, a space that simultaneously puts distance between the body and the outside world and keeps their bodies tight and restricted in movement. Women priests may be perceived as not possessing this protective space because the pastoral persona of a female priest is associated with bodily availability, and so protecting their own bodies is complicated by how a female body is read in the priesthood. There are inherent dangers for women priests in being perceived as more available to touch than their male colleagues, in the aftermath of the #metoo movement that implicated the church community as a less than safe place for women (Sherwood, 2017; Jagger, 2017a) and whilst none of the interviewees for this project divulged stories of overt sexual abuse or harassment, other female clergy and laity have publicly highlighted that the

Church as an institution has embedded within it the same issues around sexual power as other institutions (Ozanne, 2017; Ison, 2017<sup>108</sup>). Touch, then, is complicated by perceptions of sexual power, as Wendy explains: ‘Some men withdraw their touch because of the times we are living in, and other women will withdraw their touch because they’re potential victims, I suppose. It’s a strange gendered dynamic with touch’. Here, she recognises there are significant differences between male and female touch in the priesthood (the male as potential perpetrator and the female as potential victim<sup>109</sup>). Whilst there is sublimated sexual power that helps to frame the female as available to touch, there are also expectations that a female priest can be touched because of nurturing traits that are perceived as feminine, and in turn this relates to how women’s bodies are framed as either maternal or sexual.

There is another way of approaching the availability to touch: refusal or willingness to touch configures bodily and social space (Ahmed, 2000). Returning to Alice’s account of how she imagines women are formed as polluting in the ordination process (‘I’m not going to touch you because my hands are filthy from all of the women’, see p.82), the affective nature of touch is revealed as two-way, but takes on a form of pollution emanating from the female, which, whilst symbolically described, is transmitted through physical contact. For some who believe a female cannot ontologically be a priest, a male bishop touching women physically with the laying on of hands in the ritual of ordination is given a communicable polluting quality, captured in the colloquial short hand of ‘taint’ (Shaw, 1998; see also Maltby, 1998, who also highlights the physicality of the laying on of hands in ordination which arouses such fear over sacramental assurance of the tainted bishop). As Furlong (1998) describes, the notion of ‘taint’ can also be harnessed by evangelicals who

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<sup>108</sup> Ison (2017) discusses the term ‘cassock chasers’ which appears to have been coined as part of a discourse that discourages women from complaining about sexual misconduct in male clergy; the ecclesiastical equivalent of victim blaming. One of the interviewees, Sylvia, describes the dynamic of male clergy holding sublimated sexual power: ‘There are clergy groupies if I can use that word. There are, it’s a bit like, you know, women who love a man in uniform and it’s that same sort of thing, there’s a mystique about it. It’s not sexual, it just is a sort of, I think a fact of life that they’re drawn to that and it doesn’t quite work’.

<sup>109</sup> The continuation of the notion of the female as victim (in the wider theological context) is challenged by some feminist theologians (see Slee, 2003), and I wonder if the idea of touch being gendered in terms of perpetrator and victim might be included in the deconstruction of discourses that frame women as inherently possessing a victim status.

refuse to submit to female authority.<sup>110</sup> Ahmed (2000), whilst talking largely about race and its inscription on the skin, sees that non-touching, or the avoidance of touch, frames difference between bodies that creates feelings of revulsion in one body towards another body. In the case of the objections to female ordination, women's bodies are made unassimilable to the priesthood, and by women entering into the ritual situation of ordination abjection around their bodies is generated. The touching of a woman – to make her a priest – is invested with a volatility that separates ontologies, rendering the act of touching a woman ritualistically polluting for the bishop who touches.

Touch, therefore, is part of a complex set of interactions for a female priest. She may regard her availability to touch as both a blessing and an intrusion. She is defined by touch, making her more effective (and affective) in priestly ministry on the one hand, and the object of abjection on the other. Ultimately, whether she sees her femaleness as a gift in ministry or not, she is required to always manage touch, she is vulnerable to self-doubt because she is doing something a male priest could or would not do, and she may understand that her female body, entangled with how the priesthood is constructed (woman-as-priest), generates a new set of perceptions that require negotiation. The phenomenal world of the female priest includes the physical manifestation of the duality with which they live, perceived as bodily maternal or sexual. How women's bodies in the priesthood are subjected to touch, and framed by it, can be both alienating and affirming, but it remains differentiating. The phenomenological account of touch as gendered and sexed is one example of how the female priest's body is situated, with its modalities, in phenomenal space made up of the physical. It is important, then, to give a fuller account of the female body in the priesthood, to ask whether ecclesiastical space itself is gendered and how it impacts on the modalities of the female priest.

### *5.3.2 Space as gendered*

The church building holds signs of gender within its walls, so that areas are identified as feminine and masculine. This accrual of gendered meaning for space and the objects within it is frustrating for the interviewees but is a good example of how Latour's (2005) 'assemblages' include objects as 'actants'. Valerie recounts how a group of men she talked

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<sup>110</sup> Furlong's story of an evangelical ordinand refusing the touch of a female reveals how the issue of headship and male authority morphs into abjection in the context of being touched by a woman in ritual circumstances. For Furlong, the structure established by the Act of Synod legitimises such abjection. As I have argued in Chapter 4, the framing of women priests as symbolically polluting becomes routinised and institutionalised.

to about church spoke pejoratively about the gendered character of the congregational space. When Valerie asked if they would consider coming to a church service, the response of these men reveals how feminine meanings given to space generate a recoiling that borders on disgust:

‘You must be joking, that is just too girly’, and they spoke of doilies where I would talk of purificators, and they spoke of flowers, you know, as being female boudoirs rather than glorifying God the creator or anything like that. And their entire perception of the church building and everything we put in it was feminine. Which I found very interesting given that we had such a patriarchal [structure]. How can we de-genderise the actual building and vestments and everything? Even the pews are female. You know, you just will not get men sitting in rows to learn about God. It just wouldn’t happen. So, everything, pastel coloured service sheets, how do we deal with all of that?

The physical space of the church where religion is consumed passively (as opposed to the space around the altar) is perceived as feminine – ‘even the pews are female’. Recent attempts to attract men to a church in Scotland using toy guns and talks on pornography reveal just how un-masculine church is perceived (Donnelly, 2017), and that for men to occupy this space, a rejection of the feminine is required. Equally, female priests have traversed a defined set of spaces, moving bodily from the feminine pews to the masculinised space in the sanctuary. The altar, traditionally kept consecrated by the actions of male priests, is now vulnerable to the presence of the female body around which revolve discourses and myths of pollution that are ultimately supported by the structure of the Church itself. It is not that women’s bodies are not permitted physically since they have always cleaned and arranged flowers in the sanctuary: ‘holy dusters’ as Petre (1994) calls them in his account of this journey of women into priesthood. Women’s bodies are problematic if they occupy the space ritualistically as priests. In the pews, the female body is unremarkable, executing feminine modalities that are unnoticed. At the altar, the female body is gazed upon, and framed by some as unrepresentative and polluting.

The group of men in Valerie’s story appear to sense, conversely, that their masculine bodies are not simply out of their normal situated place if they sit in the pews but are debased by the femininity associated with the space. The male has the opposite goal to the female in occupying gendered space. Female priests have battled to gain access to the (masculine) sanctuary, whereas men are repelled by the femininity of the space they are asked to

occupy.<sup>111</sup> This raises the question about how masculinity relates to situated embodiment, as there is evidence that women are abandoning the pews themselves (Aune, 2008), which may have ramifications on how the gendered character of church space is perceived in the future – this could usefully be researched further.<sup>112</sup> Valerie accepts that one cannot expect male bodies to sit in female pews to learn about God and that the space must be changed to accommodate masculinity. Female bodies may be perceived as equally incongruous in the masculinised space of the altar and the sanctuary and that at the symbolic level there may need to be an adjustment to receive the female bodily in the sanctuary space. The alternative strategy is for the female priest to minimise her femaleness. The close association of the symbolic to the physical space around the altar allows Young's (1990) notion of the generation of situated gendered modalities to encounter the non-material. The focal point for the priest is the ritual of the Eucharist, where it is possible to see the tensions that the female priest as a fleshy body must negotiate.

### 5.3.3 *Phenomenology at the altar*

There are narratives in the interviews that reveal how women use their bodies to access symbolic power when they are at the altar. There needs to be a distinction made between objective space and lived, phenomenal space, a notion that Young (1990) expounds, suggesting that women learn to curtail their interaction with space, restricting how they project their bodies or perception outwards, seeing themselves as object (looked at) rather than the active subject. 'Feminine motility' writes Young, 'is laden with immanence and inhibited, the body's space is lived as constituted' (p.152). How women priests break out of these feminine modalities is an important element to their ability to define their bodies as subject, as priests. As women partake in a set of choreographed movements at the altar, there is scope for them to use their bodies to generate symbolic meaning, but it may be that women have to also challenge their own learned bodily restrictions. Priestly

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<sup>111</sup> It is this fight to occupy masculinised space that generates criticism of humanist feminisms that attempt to attain all the privileges of the male, sometimes without questioning how those privileges came to be seen as such. Gynocentric feminism may well question why women want to be priests, and to have access to an un-deconstructed set of symbols in an un-deconstructed ecclesiastic space. This is critiqued by Young (1990) however, in that there is a need to understand that the male occupies for himself areas of public life that have value and importance and for women to simply abandon the goal to access these is detrimental to the ultimate fulfilment of feminist aims.

<sup>112</sup> Aune (2008) explores the possible reasons for women leaving church, not least is the influence of feminism, offering alternative views on morality and social life. The suggestion is that it is not the rejection of faith *per se* that is causing women to leave, but rather that the Church frames women in ways that leave them feeling uncomfortable in their bodies.

movements and gestures may work to establish a more outward and intentional use of the space at the altar that is useful to women in establishing their belonging as subject in priestly space. Melinda as an Anglo-Catholic explores how the gestures she makes at the altar are part of how her body expresses her priesthood. She is aware of her body in public moments, and of the space she uses when presiding. She describes how she can access the power of the ritual using her body as her actions become intentional:

I certainly am very conscious when I'm saying or reading a service, I'm quite grounded in my body, I'm quite sort of conscious, like any kind of performance, which it is as well, conscious of the way I'm using the space, you know, you learn the gestures carefully, and all the rest of it. And you practice in front of a mirror [. . .]. And, so yes, the big expansive gestures in the 'Lord be with you' and so on. There's a sort of very embracing feel about that which I hadn't really been able to articulate until I was doing them myself. I sort of feel, yeah, gathering up. I don't like the word 'motherly', but a sort of motherly, feminine thing, way of being. There's something very powerful about being the president and standing there in the centre. Because you do years of diaconry standing on the right and I'm very comfortable in more service type positions but there is something very powerful about actually being the president as well.

There is significance in the physicality of where Melinda stands – not as a deacon, to one side, but as a priest, central as the focal point. Her physical positioning as a priest is not one that she is immediately at ease with, since years of 'standing on the right' in service mode, the auxiliary to the priest, have been comfortable. The occupying of a space that is steeped in meaning is a revelation to her body, feeling 'the embrace' is different to observing others' gestures. A transition needs to be made to front and centre at the altar, the position that is invested with priestly authority. Having physically moved from the right-hand auxiliary position, Melinda now recognises the authority that is attached to the phenomenal space of the priest and is exposing an interesting double-layered interaction with it at the altar. The role of president is a performance (note the stage positionings that are invested with meaning) with accompanying gestures that are consciously undertaken; she *learns* how to occupy a powerful space traditionally reserved for the male. The expansiveness of these gestures and the move from auxiliary positioning to centre-stage may cut against how the female body is conditioned to move and occupy space. The female body is trained in restriction: 'we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the

definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified' (Young, 1990, p.152).<sup>113</sup> Melinda, through the vehicle of the priesthood and through a knowing process is breaking out of the narrowed space of interaction of the female body.

Having learned the (traditionally always masculine) gestures of the presiding priest, there is an interesting twist in Melinda's account, revealing a dimension to the priesthood where female corporeality is finding its way into the symbolic system, something Bingemer (2014) explores from a Catholic perspective. She suggests that in the context of the Eucharist women can 'communicate spiritual experiences which are often more difficult for men' (p.370). Melinda seems to be casting her physical gestures as communication of feminine symbolism, naming movements, albeit reluctantly, as 'motherly'. It is possible that a male priest might invest similar nurturing meaning, however, Melinda chooses to pull this back to the maternal, something that the female priest can more easily inhabit. Melinda's femaleness gives rise to her investing her priestly gestures with feminine meaning and this may be a crucial subversion of the masculinised imagining of the ritual. Burns (2010) discusses how explicitly *feminine* gestures might be integrated into presiding – such as horizontal arm movements that infer a communal rather than hierarchical symbol system, thus enabling the female body to express a feminine approach to presiding. But Melinda does not seem to be reinventing the gestures in quite this conscious manner by changing the choreography to more feminine modalities. Rather, she is investing the traditional movements she has learned with feminine imagery. This brings us to a tension between rescuing the priest's role in the Eucharist from masculine modalities and meanings and the reifying of gendered traits that frame the male as authoritative and hierarchical and the female as collaborative, communal-minded and 'motherly'. To be more nuanced, Melinda is notably hesitant about using a motherly metaphor. There may be a struggle, then, between establishing the female body at the altar and perpetuating gendered traits. Melinda plots a middle path by taking established choreography (so she is not overtly changing how the priestly acts look) and investing them with meaning that might be thought to fit a female body.

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<sup>113</sup> An important caveat that Young applies is that these are generalisations. This makes the theory more enticing as it leads us to ask why women's bodies act out feminine modalities at all, and in what circumstances.

Breaking out of feminine modalities, according to Young (1990), is a form of escape from patriarchal definitions of gender, whether by accident or by design. Emily, from an evangelical tradition, also recognises that bodily movements can be invested deliberately with meaning for the priest, though for her, this disassociates the role from gender: 'I'm always profoundly moved at that moment in the Eucharist when I do raise my arms and I have a sense of turning my palms directly towards the congregation that at that point I think I am genderless'. This is an account of movement shedding gender (and presumably also sex). The raising of the arms and the orientation of the palms is, for Emily, a *priestly* set of gestures that is emptied of femaleness and maleness, contrasting with how the actions of the priest at the altar are theorised as feminine by Melinda. Other interviewees also have a sense of how their bodies communicate something spiritual, as Bingemer (2014) argues women's bodies do. Yvonne, who does not see herself *in persona Christi* when she is presiding, nevertheless adopts ritualistic gestures (whilst her male vicar 'stand[s] doing nothing'), but invests these movements with non-hierarchical (and arguably, feminist) meaning: 'I adopt the orans<sup>114</sup> position, but I've had to explain to them why I do that [. . .]. I'm doing this to say, "we're all in it together. I'm saying the words, but this is on behalf of us all"'. Some women priests divest priestly gestures of their hierarchical meaning, and in turn this challenges aspects of clericalism that are perceived as masculine (see for example, Hampson, 2002). These accounts also speak of representation, not of a male symbol, but of the body of believers. By investing bodily presence and gestures with communal meaning – on behalf of – women priests like Yvonne are exploring how a female body comes to signify all bodies, challenging the universality of the male body.

It is important to note that all the interviewees express excitement, awe, and passion about the role they play in the Eucharist, and it is the central place where their priesthood is fulfilled and legitimised. Louise sees her vocation as intimately tied to the ritual: 'I realised fairly quickly when I felt called to ordination I was really thinking about the Eucharist, presiding at the Eucharist'. Women priests' connection with the symbolic divine and with the congregation is described in both bodily and transcendent terms. In other words, women priests do not necessarily experience their bodies as disruptive, but can experience

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<sup>114</sup> The orans position is a gesture of prayer that originally belonged to the whole laos, though is now associated more with priestly role at the altar. There are movements within the Church to reinstate this posture amongst the laity (see Cocksworth, 2018b). However, in the Catholic tradition this is a gesture that is specifically restricted to presiding clergy (see Izolt, 2016). Yvonne's divestment of this authority by using it as a gesture of togetherness could therefore be considered subversive in Anglo-Catholic contexts, though in other parts of the Church this may find positive reception.

their bodies as frictionless, transparent almost, transcending the congregational gaze and their own conscious thoughts about their bodies occupying physical space. It is this notion of transparency, of disappearing, that I find most interesting as women priests discuss how they see their representative role at the altar. Valerie, an Anglo-Catholic priest, has a vision of herself at the altar as transparent: 'I disappear [. . .] it is because God is doing such amazing stuff that I hope I'm invisible and not getting in anyone's way'. This desire to disappear, or perhaps signpost unobtrusively, rather than being the focal point at the altar may not seem ostensibly gendered, since it may be an attitude adopted by all priests in that moment of ritual climax. However, what cannot be ignored is the idea that the symbolic and physical space at the altar is constructed as masculine and the role of the priest has traditionally been formed as male, through long-established practice as well as through theology (Cones, 2017). As such, Young's (1990) way of seeing how feminine modalities are generated, women's bodies framed to act in ways that emphasise femininity or else to emphasise deviancy, within situations, leads us to ask whether this feeling of disappearing is a *feminine* response to the place where the woman priest stands. Or perhaps, alternatively, it is a deviant abandonment of the feminine, the disarticulation from the congregational gendered gaze, the side-stepping of bodily female sexual presence – as she disappears, the female priest is no longer the object. This is interesting if coupled with Beauvoir's idea of permanent visibility as the foundation for the forming of the feminine (anticipating Foucault's mini-panopticons of the everyday) (see Kruks, 2001). Becoming a non-focal point may be a way for the female priest to subvert the disciplining and feminine-forming power of visibility. The desire to diminish visibility, though, achieves a minimising of the conflict between the symbolic and the female body: if the femaleness of the body is unseen, unnoticed, then there can be no contrast with the maleness of Jesus.<sup>115</sup>

There are several viewpoints from which to interpret the priestly gesture for women priests: priestly gestures begin to lose the masculine modality as women's bodies appropriate them and re-signify them as feminine, women priests are introducing feminine, non-hierarchical bodily movements into the space, or women priests are breaking out of feminine modalities to perform what are perceived as masculine gestures that do not lose their masculine meaning. The significance of how women priests negotiate priestly gestures is that female esteem is generated or diminished through the use of the body in meaning-making. Young (1990) states: 'I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we

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<sup>115</sup> I use the name Jesus here to avoid the theological complications of a gendered cosmic Christ.

frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities, is traceable in part to an original doubt in our body's capacity' (p.155). Women priests may be trying to overcome low confidence levels that arise from how their bodies have been trained as women and their liminality as priests. Accessing power is achieved bodily and is not something the female body is attuned to because of the modalities handed to women, whose bodies are an encumbrance rather than the tool to be used to act out intentions. Melinda, as she practices her priestly gestures, is perhaps sloughing off the restrictions of these feminine modalities and investing her gestures with power and authority usually reserved for masculine ways of directing the body. Melinda is overcoming the feminine doubt, sensing the power that is invested in how her body enacts the priesthood, and more interesting still, she sees this enactment as feminine though the gestures are traditional. The expansive public gestures cut against the modalities that Young discusses, so Melinda's body begins to occupy the space that is hers as a priest. This is complicated by the gaze of the congregation, since the woman's body at the altar is both object and subject and being seen and watched feeds the contradiction. Melinda's own theorising suggests that she consciously recalibrates the gestures at the altar to be in harmony with her femaleness, challenging the external explanations that frame such gestures as masculine. Whilst women express themselves at the altar, acting out the authority of the priest and experimenting with the female body's ability to communicate symbolically, there remain more deeply embedded fears of women's biology that significantly impact upon women's experience of the priesthood. Women priests negotiate these fears as they partake in ritual, but must overcome abjection, manifested unconsciously and consciously, as women stand at the altar.

#### 5.4 Radical Evil and the Eucharist

An ingrained fear and a resentment of the power of women still lingers,  
especially around the practice of ritual sacrifice.

Ali Green (2009b, p.20)

One of the main arguments that causes a juxtaposition for the female body at the altar is the suggestion that women cannot bodily represent the maleness of Jesus/Christ during the ritual of the Eucharist. This belief is well-documented (Baker, 2004; Podmore, 2015; Kirk, 2016; Cones, 2017) and continues to be used to oppose women's priesthood. Since the incarnation is male, it presents obvious problems in situations where bodies are expected

to map onto symbols. The interviewees express a range of thoughts on their bodily representation at the altar, and these are often aligned with traditions to which they belong (an Anglo-Catholic, for instance may engage with the notion of *in persona Christi*). Whilst the question of representation of the male Christ is important to women's status at the altar, I want to focus my discussion on how the female body is perceived and *experienced* at the altar. I am interested in how a woman's bodily presence is problematised, made abject, consciously and unconsciously acted upon, and how a female priest needs to overcome male 'primal fear' (as Polly describes negative reactions to the female in the priesthood). The experiences of some female priests, most significantly when their presidency at the Eucharist is rejected, indicates this male fear is still deeply entrenched within the symbolic structure of the priesthood. Radford Ruether (1983), a feminist with a Catholic background who understands the ritual ontologies that exclude women's bodies, argued at the time the campaign for women's ordination was at its zenith<sup>116</sup> that there is an inbuilt danger for women entering the priesthood: 'priestly traditions also define women's "uncleanness" in religious terms. Female bodiliness is seen as polluting and defiling the sacred' (p.195). Women have entered an un-deconstructed priesthood where there is a 'rejection of woman as maternal flesh' (p.195), and 'women's ordained status thus remains symbolically and socially anomalous' (p.200). Such warnings may make us suspicious of the basis on which women have entered the priesthood: that women must, if they are to satisfy the Augustinian line of spiritual anthropology, be honorary men and spiritually male, yet they are/have female bodies, to which powers of pollution have been attached (Shaw, 1998). For priests, there is an intensified relationship with the Christian symbol system, which, as Turner (1997) argues, accrues meaning around the body in religious ritual, such as the Eucharist: 'the body is central to discourses of power, especially to [. . .] religious traditions which represent the body as a metaphor' (p.38). How the female body is formulated in Christian origin myth – from the rib of Adam's body – and the significance placed on the body of a male saviour that requires representation, are part of a symbolic system that not only frames the woman's body as biologically and symbolically different to that of the male but serves also to denigrate the

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<sup>116</sup> More recently Green and Robbins (2015) argue that the re-animation of the debate, accompanying the entry of women into the episcopate (as bishops), highlights ordained women's continued need to face down their embodied profanity. Women entering the priesthood and the episcopate does not equate to having their bodies accepted on the same terms as men.

female body. The sum of these theological myths is that the female body acting out a priestly ritual generates abjection.

#### 5.4.1 *Abjection*

The stories shared by the interviewees about their experiences of presiding at the altar reveal that women priests are often subject to the process of abjection, whereby they are separated from their priesthood through acts of recoiling, loathing, and disgust. Abjection is a term explored by Kristeva (1982) in seeking to understand the recoiling from the female in a show of the misogynistic fear and I use her examination of how separation from the object is sought as protection from symbolic pollution. In the previous chapter I touched on how some of the interviewees have experienced people refusing to accept the bread and wine from them. This seems to be a common occurrence and I venture that many women priests have experienced this rejection at some point in their careers when presiding.<sup>117</sup> I now want to bring into focus how the female body is the material locus of this act of recoiling from female-blessed symbols. The avoidance of women's sacramental ministry is often quiet, but it is visible. The rejection of the host is a rejection of femaleness as priest and is noticed and felt by Alice:

There's still a resistance [. . .] I can feel it in the way people behave towards me, even kind of unconsciously, not that anyone has been outwardly unkind to me, but there's still a couple of people who don't come to the altar when I'm presiding. They won't receive communion from me. I notice it. Everyone in church comes up and they don't, and I feel it, I notice it.

Alice is describing a general sense of unease about her femaleness that she feels is a background to her ministry, where the reaction to her femaleness is not necessarily consciously acted out but is something she picks up from the social environment. There are also deliberate acts of refusing the host she has blessed. Whilst she balances this behaviour towards her with assurances that people are not 'unkind', she remains aware that she is the

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<sup>117</sup> A recent row at Wakefield Cathedral highlights how women's presidency is routinely avoided. The Cathedral published lists of those due to take services in advance, to allow those who object to female priesthood the opportunity to avoid the service. The practice was stopped by a new Dean, but following complaints, an Independent Review judged that publishing names of celebrants was in the spirit of the Five Guiding Principles and was a matter of courtesy to those who wished to avoid the ministry of women (Davies, 2019). I have also had informal discussions outside this project where women priests reveal the extent to which their sacramental ministry is avoided by both men and women congregants.

subject of an unspoken differentiation, one that leaves her, and her priesthood, as suspect. The abjection for Alice is both in a generalised sense of discomfort and in individual acts of recoiling. Her comments show that even where there is no outward hostility, some women priests feel the weight of abjection that may remain unnamed, but which is as significant as deliberate acts of recoiling. As I discussed in Chapter 4, women priests are sometimes told their presence deconsecrates the altar. In Polly's case, she has absorbed the discomfort that some male clergy display around women priests and now senses that she is seen as a polluting influence that will damage the symbolic purity of the sanctuary space: 'I celebrated the Eucharist, the Forward in Faith people would never set foot in there because I'd tainted the altar. They never said that, but that's what they thought'. Polly's story may not have the certainty of having been *told* she had tainted the altar but experientially – phenomenologically – her understanding of how others interpret her presence at the altar reveals the power of unattributed discourses and makes abjection part of the experience of the female priest. She is separated from her priesthood by the possibility that some can frame her presence at the altar as polluting. I argue that regardless of how male clergy in opposition to female priesthood frame their beliefs and regardless of whether hostility is minimised, women priests are still aware of their abjection. Given that the discourse of powers of deconsecration identified by other interviewees, such as Carol in her job interview (p.84), Polly has good reason to believe she is cast as having such (involuntary) powers of pollution. The idea that the female priest who bodily acts out the role at the altar is able to deconsecrate the space and spoil the bread and wine (whether symbolically or ontologically) is a question of the female body, beneath the theological obfuscation, being viewed by some as polluting.<sup>118</sup> In the same way that the laying on of hands at ordination is seen by some as a physical sign of symbolic pollution, because of the breaking of the Apostolic Succession, rejecting female-blessed symbols and suggesting the female priest deconsecrates the altar is an entanglement between the symbolic and the bodily presence and actions of the female body-as-priest.

The Eucharist is a useful focal point for exploring how women's bodies are part of the tension between belonging as object and belonging as subject in the priesthood. Firstly, it attracts contested gendered theologies that undermine legitimacy of women at the altar and women's ability to perform the ritual with sacramental assurance (see for example,

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<sup>118</sup>Chaves (1997) argues that the stance against ordained women is very particular, and that rejection of the female priest is not a rejection of the woman herself. I disagree – the recoiling from the female priest is fear of femaleness.

Baker, 1998). This notion of female incompatibility with the sacramental is underpinned by the masculine symbols that are foregrounded in the ritual (Shaw, 1998; Cones, 2017). The Eucharistic ritual is at the heart of the belief in the ontology of priesthood (and a focal point for those traditions less ontological in their understanding of the priesthood, but nevertheless, hold that only a priest can perform the ritual). Finally, presiding over the Eucharist is a highly visible role under the gaze of the congregation. There is also a sociological purpose to the ritual, which is disturbed by the female body (Green, 2009b) because it was developed through the understanding of the priesthood as male. Being the cathexis of the arguments in opposition to female priesthood, the Eucharist is the point at which the female priest is most exposed to the symbolic and where her body is most visibly differently aligned. As all these elements combine, the experience of abjection becomes material and real for women priests, rather than an abstract theological discussion. Karen recalls seeing male clergy visibly recoiling from female priestly engagement with the bread and wine:

There is still the dynamic in our curates' training and gatherings where there are some who will not accept the Eucharist if one of the women is presiding. For the most part, they'll consent to be in the room. Some will excuse themselves from the room altogether [. . .] we are all ordained. And I will never forget the point when I saw one of these curates who had a woman on either side who when he was handed the chalice [. . .] chose to communicate himself and then he communicated<sup>119</sup> the woman on his side because he didn't mind communicating it to a woman, but he wouldn't accept it from her. So, he chose to simply receive the chalice and communicate himself and not to allow her to do it. So, it's still alive and well.

The rejection of female-blessed bread and wine ritualises abjection and this helps to distance objecting male clergy from the fundamental separation from the female as they focus their concern on the ontological relationship between the priest and the divine (from which the female is excluded). In other words, women priests are differentiated to the point of abjection, but this abjection is obfuscated by a set of theological arguments. What strikes me about Karen's story is how a theological and ontological understanding of the Eucharist is translated into a bodily show of distaste (which is humiliating in its visibility)

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<sup>119</sup> 'Communicated' means to be offered the bread and wine in the Eucharist ritual.

that frames the women in the ritual situation as the communicators of something polluting. Phenomenologically, this is crucial to understand: whilst there may be internal logic to certain theological positions and, as I showed in the previous chapter, some women clergy are prepared to allow for this integrity, the outcome is that women experience *bodily* abjection. To leave the room is to remove the body from physical contact with the alchemical substance produced by bread, wine and a woman's blessing, as though women carry a communicable symbolic pollution. What do oppositional male clergy believe will happen to them if they are communicated by a woman? Karen sees this rejection as structural as well as personal and measures the intensity of continued prejudice. She concludes: 'it's still alive and well'. The active rejection of female priests, their abjection, continues to generate monstrous difference in women in the priesthood, structurally systematised by the two integrities as I argued in Chapter 4, but also personally and painfully experienced by individual women priests.

What do these types of stories tell us? They reveal that belief in the male ontology of the priesthood results in a material show of abjection of the female in her fleshy presence and of the symbolic food and drink she has blessed. Those who reject the female at the altar also make the bread and the wine she blesses abject, something not to be ingested. Bread and wine, not ontologically changed because a woman is not ontologically a priest, still take on properties because of the active participation of a woman that make them unfit to be consumed.<sup>120</sup> In this sense, the female is given involuntary powers (Douglas, 1966 [2002]) and her bodily presence in the place of the priest turns ordinary bread and wine into something abject, unfit for consumption, and symbolically toxic. I want to borrow Ahmed's (2000) notion of 'bodies out of place',<sup>121</sup> an allusion to Douglas' notion of 'matter out of place'. For Douglas, dirt is matter out of place and similarly Ahmed sees bodies out of place as generating a perception of uncleanness. Because the bodies of priests are perceived to be under constant surveillance (by parishioners and by God) there is an element to the priesthood that demands self-regulation of all priestly bodies, but some bodies are 'out of place' when they stray from the idealisation of a priest, through pregnancy for example (Peyton and Gatrell, 2013). The reaction to female 'bodies out of place' is an act that

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<sup>120</sup> Further research needs to ask what motivations there are in male priests who abstain from the female-blessed host, and even absent themselves. What is happening phenomenologically here?

<sup>121</sup> This is a phrase that is used in Peyton and Gatrell's (2013) account of male and female priesthood, and they extend this beyond sexed bodies to bodies that are not white and are made visible both in ethnicity and in collar and vestments.

humiliates women priests, externalises them both materially and symbolically from the priesthood and creates a negative mystique around the female in priest's clothing. Karen's story describes male priests leaving the room when female priests are blessing the host for the Eucharist. It seems to me that this can only be a recoiling from the physical presence of a woman who is acting as priest. There may be an element of dramatic protest in this gesture, but it nevertheless represents a physical reaction to a visceral fear of pollution<sup>122</sup> that is more than symbolic: it is material. Female clergy bodies are made to be out of place.

Alice, as an Anglo-Catholic, is attuned to specific approaches to the symbolism of the Eucharist and is aware of the pejorative meaning her body attracts within ritual as a source of defilement at the altar. Talking about the controversies of women at the altar and the related notion of tainting bishops at ordination, she is beautifully sarcastic: 'How powerful are we? That by our very presence we can taint. By our very presence. How powerful are we?' Alice is overtly challenging the dynamic built into the symbolic system whereby the female body, as Kristeva (1982) puts it in her discussion of abjection, has 'wily' powers (p.70). Such ideas of defilement are usually centred on the female, and more particularly the mother, enhancing the asymmetrical separation of the sexes with the aim of establishing rights of men over women. Two powers, writes Kristeva, are attempting to divide out social positioning:

One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, wily, uncontrollable power [. . .]. That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. (p.70)

If the woman priest has access to the altar, without a serious attempt to deconstruct the androcentrism of the symbols and the ritual, then the framing of the female priest as bodily different taps into this fear of 'radical evil' acting unchecked within the sanctuary. Douglas' (1966 [2002]) notion of the female body possessing powers that are seen as innate is at play here too. She explores how rituals are used in societies to alleviate pollution, cleansing rituals that purify sex, bodily functions, and women's own 'involuntary witchcraft' (p.130; see Jagger, 2017b). Yet, in the case of the Eucharist, it is the ritual itself, or the symbol

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<sup>122</sup> Ahmed (2000) uses Audrey Lourde's poignant story – where the white woman will not allow her coat to touch that of the black child – to explore abjection and I see parallels in how abjection is acted out when a male priest will not eat the host blessed by a woman or will absent himself from the proceedings.

system from which it is formed, that constructs the female body as profane. Those who do not accept women as priests and see them as unable to deliver the sacraments are in effect attempting to protect the Eucharist from a source of pollution the symbolic system has itself generated. Even though women are no longer entirely excluded from presiding at the Eucharist (although they are still excluded from the altars of many churches), female pollution remains unresolved within the symbolic, and women priests still negotiate a suspicion that their bodies signify profanity. Women who are ordained present a direct challenge to the perception of feminine sacrilege each time they stand behind the altar and preside. The point is, non-ordained women are unable to defy this construction of female pollution on its own terms because they do not claim the ontology (and if not the ontology, then the symbolic authority) of the priesthood. When an *ordained* woman places her body at the altar and performs the ritual of the Eucharist, she is using her body to challenge the basis on which she is made immanent in opposition to male transcendence. Women priests are therefore caught in a tautological cycle whereby ordination hands them polluting powers. Abjection, while it is rooted in the fear of the female generally, is specifically generated within the priesthood itself and manifested through women's presence as priest. But what is it about this ritual that means female bodies are contested at the altar?

There are two ways of approaching the Eucharist as a site that problematises the female body. It could be that the ritual is misconstrued as male through the emphasis on masculine symbols, and this presents an opportunity for the woman priest to re-adjust symbolic meaning to align with her bodily presence. Or it may be that the Eucharist is fundamentally androcentric (and that Christ, in the context of the ritual, is unable to be perceived beyond the male incarnation), in which case, women's bodies are necessarily at odds with the ritual phenomenologically (in how she interacts with, and enacts, the ritual) and symbolically (in that her female body does not map on to the male body of Christ, the male blood, and the male flesh). In answer to the question of why women's bodies are contested at the altar, some commentators argue that the Eucharist *is* deeply androcentric. The theatre and mise-en-scène of the Eucharist, according to Green (2010), is also a window into the masculinisation of the priesthood and the masculinisation of the detail of the ritual itself to the extent that women's bodies destabilise the symbolism that is laid down in the Christian psyche. Green states: 'the male function of sacrifice makes it psychologically just about impossible for female priests to preside at the Eucharist' (p.106), and this is the discomfort that Karen, Polly, and Alice identify as they talk about rejection at the altar as celebrants. The psychological barrier Green examines revolves round what is stored in the symbols of

the Eucharist. Bell's (1992) work on ritual helps to understand the Eucharist as a key site for women's othering. She refers to Geertz's identification of two elements that synchronise in ritual: ethos (moods and motivations) and worldview (religious belief). These are both stored in symbols and so in the Eucharist the symbolic objects (and the accompanying imagery and language) have within them patterns that reveal ethos and worldview, modelling a version of what is played out in social reality. If the ethos and worldview are androcentric, the female priest is problematised. Rituals can be either fluid and open to absorb changes in the social world, or they can be closed and static, becoming at odds with the social world, or else attempting to keep the social world in the same state of stasis (Bell, 1992). Shooter (2014) insinuates the Eucharist is a closed symbolic system and that the changes required to recalibrate the ethos and worldview are outside the theological framework in which the ritual stands. In other words, it remains symbolically masculine, even when attempts are made to introduce feminine meaning that allows the female body to represent and be represented. What is stored in the symbolic and ritualistic is important to how a woman priest occupies the presiding role, since these signs either reveal dispositions in the real world, or they reflect back into the real world (Bell, 1992). If the Eucharist, and the wider symbolic system in Christianity, is unable to store anything but that which is produced by an androcentric worldview, women and their bodies are subjugated both symbolically *and* in the real world, since the two are reflected in each other. If a woman's body is framed as other, being at odds with the ritualistic and symbolic role of the priest, she is also framed as other in the social world. So, whilst I have argued that abjection is generated within the priesthood itself, it is rooted in social attitudes. Taking Bell's argument a step further, women priests experience abjection on behalf of all women.

How the female body is seen in the priestly role at the altar is determined by theological understandings of the Eucharist and such theological positions are vital to how space – symbolic and physical – can be created for a female body. Green (2009b) sees the problematising of the female body at the altar during the Eucharist as derived from the pivotal placing of sacrifice within the symbolic system: this is a male sacrifice, the spilling of (male) blood. The symbolic relationship between women and blood serves to frame woman in opposing terms to the heroic male blood sacrifice. Alice is aware of the symbolic implications of gendered blood and is committed to downplaying this association with the maleness of Jesus and his blood sacrifice: 'I don't think on the cross Jesus was busy bleeding men's blood. I don't think there was any "this is man's blood. None of you dirty women,

this is clean man blood.”” This juxtaposition between the male blood sacrifice as salvific and female suffering and sacrifice as part of the ‘crushing of the very humanity they strive to rejoice in’ (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007, p.85) is part of the feminist dialogue that problematises androcentric Christologies and Alice is challenging how male and female blood are made to symbolise purity and pollution respectively.<sup>123</sup> Alice may wish to challenge the supremacy and the masculinity of the symbol of the blood sacrifice, but this becomes a fundamental question about the ritual of the Eucharist. If women’s bodies are made systemically abject within the ritual it may be problematic for them to develop a subjective belonging. Can female blood provide a way in to the symbolism to free it from stasis and to create room for abjection to be absolved?

The argument could go back to the establishment of a masculinised Jewish, and then Christian, monotheism that was based on a blood covenant with the male, ultimately for Christians by Jesus’ blood covenant (Lerner, 1986; Archer, 1990). The long history is important to acknowledge. Ritual sacrificial activity is an almost exclusively male practice designed to mitigate female pollution manifested in the reproductive functions of the body (Jay, 2001). By putting this together with theories of how feminine divinities were overrun by the male, particularly the monotheism of the Abrahamic faiths,<sup>124</sup> it is possible to build a broad and slowly evolving picture of female exclusion from the sacred (Lerner, 1986; Engelsman, 1994). The sociology of the Eucharist is the maintenance of this male dominance through the ritualisation of male sacrifice: the cosmic and enduring Father/Son continuation (Jay, 2001). But also, psychoanalytical discussions point to the male anxiety about women, also articulated through masculine blood sacrifice (Green, 2009b). Sacrifice upholds the dichotomies of clean/unclean, culture/nature, and male/female. The male monopoly of the ritual enacting male blood sacrifice has been protected through the Apostolic Succession, ensuring that men own the re-enactment of a male death, as conduits for the sacramental and retaining the underlying anxiety of female pollution (Jay, 2001). For Green too, there is a lingering fear and resentment of embodied women focused on the ritual:

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<sup>123</sup> Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007) map the debate about masculine Christologies and highlight how feminists and womanists (black feminist theologians) see the model of Christ’s suffering and sacrifice as legitimising how women carry the burdens of others (white and male), turning suffering into a Christ-like virtue as a way of obfuscating inhumane and exploitative treatment.

<sup>124</sup> The Abrahamic faiths are Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Is sacrifice solely the prerogative of men, an act so intimately associated with the male psyche and with male-dominated society that women neither have place in it, nor should desire to, since it perpetuates the male remedy for having been born of woman and upholds the patriarchal social structure? (Green, 2009b, p.150)

The Eucharist, then, can be seen as a male ritual re-enacting male sacrifice to cleanse the original sin passed down from Eve through women – Eve’s creation being the first mythical act of female bodily subjugation to the male (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998).<sup>125</sup> The male blood sacrifice seated within atonement theology is, according to Shooter (2014), part of a set of discourses that produces violence against the bodies of women: ‘the intimate violence of the cross preached down the centuries has [. . .] wrought damage on the bodies of women and children in the private sphere’ (p.177). So, whilst there are controversies about representation and femininity (to which I return), the fundamental symbolism runs deeper, touching on primal male fears of the female. The difference between the male and female bodily presence is most acute in the framing of male blood as heroic and sacrificial and female blood as polluting.

#### 5.4.2 *The curse*

As a teenager who belonged to the local church, some years before the 1992 vote, I was told by the vicar that women could not be priests because they menstruated. This is more than the negative pathologising of menstruation, or the construction of female debilitation, the reduction of women’s role to reproducers, and the notion of wastage in menstruation attached to the reproductive (Martin, 1997). The vicar from my childhood was not saying women could not be doctors or teachers because they menstruated, but rather the priesthood needed protection from female blood. Within the priesthood, menstruation is given potency and is seen as symbolically dangerous. Menstrual blood is associated with pollution and disorder in religious ritual (Beattie, 2002) whilst male blood is associated with sacrifice (Fahs, 2016; Green, 2009b). This dichotomy is something that women priests experience at the altar. Several interviewees tell stories of menstruation taking on negative symbolic significance specifically in their role as priests. Alice believes the common

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<sup>125</sup> Both the creation myth and the Fall construct the female as bodily secondary and spiritually the source of evil, the reason for the male sacrifice. The myth of Eve being created from Adam’s rib is reminiscent of other myths where a male protagonist appropriates the female act of creation. Braidotti’s discussion of ‘womb envy’ springs to mind in how androcentric myths appropriate the female reproductive function for themselves (Braidotti, 1997).

experience of presiding at the altar whilst menstruating is a feeling of wrongness, that 'we shouldn't be doing this [. . .] I never thought about menstruation so much since starting this process [of becoming a priest]'. It is her role as priest that brings into focus how her female body is problematised against the symbolic she is called to act within and represent. Polly recognises the depth of the fear around women's leaky bodies: 'what they're really scared about, it's really primitive in these blokes, it's about you menstruating in the sanctuary'. Her sense of there being a primeval fear of the female body taps into the notion of evil becoming autonomous, something posed by Kristeva (1982) as she explores the notion of a primitive male fear of the female. Female bodies are associated with uncontrollable negative powers, and women priests such as Polly have a sense of this deeper unarticulated discourse which drives the need to keep the female body in check through social and religious proscriptions. Impurity is what departs from the symbolic order (Douglas, 1966 [2002]), and the symbolic order woven into Christian myth and the very space in which the priesthood resides has its roots in the Temple in the Old Testament and its equivalent, the sanctuary<sup>126</sup> in the Christian church building. Female priests, with bodies that are the source of earthy sexuality made manifest through menstruation, are now performing the ritual intended to cleanse and uphold the symbolic order. As Kristeva (1982) explores in her essay on abjection, the purity laws of the Old Testament are linked to access to the holy parts of the Temple and this systemic purity is extended to the altar and to the Church's most important ritual. That the mythic tearing of the curtain to the Holy of Holies at the death of Christ<sup>127</sup> does not purify the woman's body, especially in her menses, in the Christian sanctuary is suggestive of the alienation that women experience in relation to their place in the salvific symbolic order.

The menstrual taboo in Christianity is in part inherited from the ancient Hebrew purity laws and there is evidence of restrictions on menstruants in the Christian Church from the third century C.E. (Phipps, 1980), underpinning the cultural menstrual taboo in western society

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<sup>126</sup> Where the altar is located.

<sup>127</sup> The gospel account of Jesus' death includes a supernatural tearing of the curtain in the Jewish temple that separated the Holy of Holies (where only the priestly caste could go, and which represented where God resided). The symbolism means that there is now access to God, through Christ, since his death provides sanctification at an individual level. It is ironic that the homologous space in the Church, created by clericalism, remains contested and that women are not unequivocally seen as without inherent pollution. How women have been excluded from the priesthood maintains this boundary symbolically and this has not been fully resolved, meaning women are now present in the sanctuary without the female body being released from its earthy, sexual and reproductive meanings that are framed as polluting.

(Delaney, 1988).<sup>128</sup> Although writing before the inclusion of women in the priesthood in the Church of England, Phipps' discussion reveals doubt around the viability of women's corporeal presence in sacred space. How the female priest's body accrues symbolic meaning that is different to that of the male priest, especially in the biological process of menstruation, is something Melinda, as an Anglo Catholic, suggests is used against the female priest to create an ill-fit at the altar. Since she can discuss the symbolic friction the female body experiences with senior clergy, the discourse of the female body as polluting is not, in her experience, hidden or unconscious, but part of an active understanding of the female body at the altar; women's bodies in the priesthood become public property. Melinda is aware that where menstruation is perceived to spoil the sacraments, it requires disclosure of when female blood is flowing:

In terms of symbolism, I don't know if anyone else has said this to you, but this came up in a conversation with the bishop recently, but there is this symbolism to do with menstruation and blood and the sanctuary. If you ask people who are men who object to women priests, that is still a real sort of stumbling point which is fascinating. This woman priest [. . .] went to do cover somewhere where they'd never had a woman before and just before the service she went into the vestry and found the church warden going through her handbag. She said, 'what do you think you're doing?' or something like that, and he said, 'well, I was just checking to see if you were carrying tampons, because if you're menstruating, I won't be able to take communion from you'. It's quite a good story, isn't it?

Melinda knows this story is potent, it is a 'good' story because it encapsulates the fear, loathing, and abjection that menstruation causes, not simply in everyday circumstances, but specifically in the context of the Eucharist and the ability of the female body to handle sacraments. Here, there is explicit and conscious framing of the female body as disruptive and polluting. The 'stumbling point' of menstruation may be at the core of some of the theological objections to women's priesthood, even if this is no longer an overt part of the argument, yet women priests are the ones who must negotiate the experience of such

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<sup>128</sup> Alice tells the story of menstruating in a mosque where she had to carry a used tampon in her pocket. In the way Alice tells this story, there is a sense of the enormity of the disruption, symbolically, culturally and in highly gendered terms, that she might have unleashed had she pulled this tampon from her pocket. This is a highly embodied and experiential moment that is all about space and place for female blood, a subject taken up by Fahs (2016).

beliefs, unable to overcome this notion of impurity. The anxiety of the church warden in Melinda's story is due to the incurable nature of the pollution of the female body as it menstruates. Again, the Eucharist, rather than perceived as a ritual of cleansing is seen as vulnerable to, and therefore becoming a carrier of, female pollution.

Whilst menstruation may create a specific recoiling from the female priest, there is for some women an opportunity to challenge masculine loathing of female bodily functions. Given the understanding that male blood sacrifice is deeply separated from female bleeding, menstruation may be a site for bodily subversion of the masculine symbolic system. Alice has a rebellious thought as she talks about menstruating at the altar:

We all had the same experience of the first time we had to preside during our period, we felt a kind of 'oh we shouldn't be doing this' which wasn't, no-one said it to me, because I don't go around saying 'right, oh look at the diary, I'm going to wear my white alb<sup>129</sup> and no pants'. Although sometimes, sometimes...When I get on one, what if? But yes, what if?

The first thing to notice is Alice's view of the body as the locus of shared female experience which lays, according to Kruks (2001), the foundations for feminist solidarity.<sup>130</sup> Since Alice's story is a fantasy of menstrual rebellion at the altar, of staining the white alb and white altar cloth, she is articulating this power of resistance with all female priests whose body bleeds. 'What if?' she asks. This is a deliberate invoking of the pollution taboo with the purpose of deconstructing it and balancing the symbolic – female life-giving blood balancing male sacrificial blood. Fahs (2016) sees significance in the menstrual stain, which she explores as a confrontation with death through abjection, but also it disrupts the narrative of women as shades (felt as lack/absence) and reveals a more powerful, violent female presence (Fahs, 2016). It is this symbolic death the menstrual stain represents that disrupts the male blood sacrifice played out on the altar. In asking 'what if?', Alice is provoking a symbolic usurpation of the dominance of male blood. The menstrual stain on the alb and the altar cloth is the answer to the male blood sacrifice on purely female terms, which simultaneously challenges the abjection that women priests experience.

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<sup>129</sup> An alb is a long, white vestment worn by clergy and sometimes assistants at the altar.

<sup>130</sup> This is troubled by trans women, and women who do not bleed, and this requires a wider discussion about what bodily femaleness means.

Blood is also associated with the fecundity of the female: 'it thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality, all come together' (Kristeva, 1982). Some women priests work through the symbolic opportunity presented by the manifestation of fecundity, along Kristevan lines. Alice's fantasy free-bleed could symbolically close the circle of male blood sacrifice as a sign for death and female vital blood as a sign for life. Her vision of bleeding through onto her alb and staining the white altar cloth forces menstrual blood (her violent presence) into the symbolic either to be purified, or to affect the symbolic. However, the rehabilitation of female bleeding is not an easy task. Fahs (2016) sums up Kristeva's discussion thus:

Kristeva ultimately suggests that theorizing about something as abject as menstrual blood and menstrual stains can only lead to terror itself; short of uprooting the patriarchal (and psychoanalytic) claims about women's bodily fluids as an inherent signifier of horror and death, we are left only with partial language, traces, shadows, hauntings, slight possibilities, hints, and suggestions at the margin. (p.39)

It could be that women's bodies are a direct challenge to the symbolism at the altar, yet this challenge is forced to the margins. There are also implications for how a post-menopausal woman is framed and how trans women might be differently articulated bodily with the symbolic.<sup>131</sup> Are these bodies less or more polluting? These are questions that are not clearly addressed in the interviews and it would be valuable to revisit issues around age and bodily changes for women (cis and trans) and whether this has a significant effect on how they are perceived and how they experience the ritualistic role of the priest. Even if there is no *a priori* pollution perceived in menstruation, it is the understanding that a ritual such as the Eucharist creates a boundary that at once defines and projects polluting power on to the female, maintaining the female as different and other. So female bodily functions are part of the narrative that supports the male as transcendent and the female as earthly. Alice tries to find a parallel pollutant from the male body, but as she says, 'there isn't anything comparable. Male priests ejaculate. Wet dreams?' Alice suggests that bodily

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<sup>131</sup> Sometimes 'the body' really means the young, white body (Currie and Raoul, 1992) (and cis body) and that fecund imagery marginalises the post-menopausal (and the non-white) body. I am also aware that trans women may have a different type of bodily experience at the altar, and indeed, trans men who bleed. How the diversity of bodies impacts upon the symbolic is a subject for further research.

pollution at the altar is a profoundly female problem and that male sexuality and emissions are not conceived as symbolic pollution *per se* for a priest. Menstruation and the blood that disrupts the boundary of the material body and the social body is made the sign of sexual difference – and this becomes the element that is so threatening (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva identifies the source of such ideas of pollutions as the fundamental fragility of the symbolic system. This is an important idea, since female priests need to make their bodies fit the symbolic system, and it poses a dilemma. Is it a choice between preserving the symbolic system in its frailty and remaining outside it, or changing the symbolic to make the female belong as subject, risking damage to what is fragile?

Returning to the question of whether female blood can find a place in the symbolic, some interviewees do attempt to turn abjection on its head when they re-assess the symbolic meaning attached to their bodies. It is possible to see that menstruation and the female body bring something symbolically *significant* to the ritual that bolsters its meaning rather than polluting it. Melinda sees this potential for a symbolic rebellion as she weaves together the blood sacrifice that is male and the female blood of menstruation as another form of suffering. She suggests there may be a viable theology that develops Eucharistic symbolism derived from female bleeding:

And there is something strange for me as well, or something meaningful to me celebrating mass whilst I'm menstruating. I've never talked about this to anybody else. But there's something about the whole kind of sense of sacrifice, suffering, blood that sort of links together. I think I noticed as a layperson at mass, that there is something quite powerful and female about that. There's probably feminist theology on this, mass as some sort of menstruation envy – I don't know, but I can imagine there is.

It is possible, then, for women priests to imagine how their bodies are symbolically in harmony with the ritual of the Eucharist<sup>132</sup> outside the masculine paradigm that defines the female body as problematic. This is subversive, and is, as Jay (2001) argues, a 'recognition of the power of sacrifice as a ritual instrument for establishing and maintaining an enduring male-dominated social order' (p.190). Melinda sees the ritual as a sublimation of male envy of fertility in women, and this taps into how myth and art have become ways of imagining

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<sup>132</sup> There are feminist theologians who propose a deep connection with the female body and the Eucharist. For example, the suggestion that the body of Mary, Mother of Jesus, is the first Eucharist, as she nourishes Jesus in her womb (see Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007 for this discussion)

masculine ability to procreate (Braidotti, 1997). This envy may contribute to the fear and sense of danger that is sometimes connected with women's bodies at the altar. If there is power attached to the symbols of fertility and fecundity that women's bodies bring – literally – to the table, then attaching a sense of pollution to women's presence nullifies the source of symbolic power; there is a protection thrown up around the male via the proxy of the ritual of the Eucharist. The ritual and the male are symbolically one in the same. Melinda is retrieving the symbolic power, though, by disrupting the symbol of male blood (and the Father/Son continuation) through reference to her menstrual blood. The rebellion against the menstrual taboo in ritual that both Melinda and Alice discuss may open the symbolic realm to possibilities of meanings that go beyond the androcentric male heroic blood sacrifice. Phipps (1980) argues that the menstrual taboo needs to be eliminated for women to be seen as fit to undertake ritualistic roles in the Church. Since women are now priested and presiding at the altar, it may be that there is no longer a prevailing belief in women's bodies, and their menstrual blood, as having the power to pollute at the altar. And yet, some women priests remain aware of the dubiety placed on their bodies as priests. The stories the women have told me about how they feel about menstruating and how they have experienced the taboo still at work indicate that women priests still carry a projected doubt over their bodily status. Women are still viewed as somatically disconnected from the divine in multiple ways.

## 5.5 Maternal, Sexual, Grotesque

It was bizarre. The first time I put a cassock on and there was  
my head on this vicar body and me going, 'what is that?'

Clare, Anglo-Catholic priest

The quote above from Clare presents a picture of a woman feeling the shock of her body being dressed as a priest. In Chapter 4, I began to speculate about whether women in priest's dress are sometimes positioned as 'drag' priests because of the incongruity that arises in women's priestly outward presentation within a structure that legitimises the denial of their ontological priesthood. In this section, I explore further how the female body is made incongruous in the priesthood through how it is perceived, its presentation, and how its telos differentiates women clergy from the norms within the priesthood. Clare's vignette succinctly raises the prospect that the female body and how the priesthood is constructed may not neatly synchronise when a woman puts on the cassock or the clerical

collar. What is a 'vicar's body' and what does it mean when the vicar's body is female? How women priests present their bodies will move my argument on to how the sexed body becomes the gendered body, and how presentations of femininity that involve the body are received within the priesthood. The 'surface presentation' of femininity (Bordo, 1992) is a paradox for women priests – they seek to make their bodies fit a masculine symbol system, but at the same time some want to present/perform femininity to change what the priesthood looks like and what priesthood means as it is projected on to a woman's body. The priesthood is seen in high heels, make-up, and jewellery, as much as in the black shirt and clerical collar. Some women priests who wear clerical black and take on the title 'Father' eschew the traditional ideal of feminine appearance in favour of the traditional appearance of a priest, yet to do so with a female body can make this subversive, and this may be significant in understanding whether the priesthood is capable of morphing from its male shape to incorporate the undisguised female body.

The choices about presenting the priest's body are significant for women. These are visible choices from which the male priest is exempt. It is the clash between signs of femaleness and signs of priestliness. Women priests may see how they present their bodies as challenge and protest; however, this may involve some collusion with the masculine paradigm (Bordo, 1992). How female bodies are presented as feminine may be determined by the male gaze, and equally, ideas about what a priest looks like have traditionally been shaped around the male body. As Kruks (2001) points out using a Beauvoirian argument, this is not about 'bad faith', but rather signifies how women are 'locked in immanence by the situation the man inflicts upon her' (p.43). The dilemmas of surface presentation are not simply about women being a responsible agent, either colluding or rebelling, but it is the process of bodily praxis that shows us how the woman priest is 'implicated in the matrix of power relations' (Bordo, 1992, p.22). The network of religio-cultural powers weaves around the female body in such complex ways it is difficult for the woman priest to assert her independent bodily subjectivity. When a woman priest makes choices about presenting her body, she must weigh up the impact on her belonging (as object or subject) and on her difference (or sameness) in the priesthood. What, then, does it mean if the female body is visibly contoured beneath the priest's clothing?

#### *5.5.1 Maternal telos of the body*

The visibility of the shape of the female body elicits various reactions amongst the interviewees. Una states: 'some priests say "no, I'm a woman, I've got boobs, get over it"'.

Other women are pleased to be able to hide their bodies under billowy cassocks. Bordo (1992), exploring the extreme end of female bodily protest, senses that some women see breasts as ‘a bovine, unconscious, vulnerable side of the self’ (p.23) and there are times when the interviewees express this vulnerability represented by their breasts because of their visibility and their accrual of meaning that relates only uneasily to the signs of the priesthood. The contours of breasts signify the anchoring of the female body to the nourishing and feeding of others, however, the priesthood takes the physicality of this feeding and turns it over to the symbolic feeding and nourishing from a position of symbolic authority. Where does such appropriation leave women priests? They bring flesh – the real thing – to the space that symbolically replaces them (see Hampson, 2002). So, women priests are left negotiating the teleological assumptions placed on their bodies and under these assumptions must somehow integrate their physicality into the priesthood. Natalie has been ordained for over fifteen years, is single and childfree, and moved from parish work to a chaplaincy job. She recalls how perceptions of her femaleness came to the fore in her duties as a parish priest. She is aware that her body is visibly different to that of the male priest and explains that ‘there is part of me that’s my gender,<sup>133</sup> undoubtedly. That feels different. I look different. It’s the vicar of Dibley thing.<sup>134</sup> These are such a giveaway. Magnificent bosom’. This visible bodily difference in her experience generates perceptions about how the female body connects with notions of what the female body is *for* – there is a teleological difference attached to the visible difference that has implications for the traits that women priests are sometimes associated with. ‘That’s what we do,’ explains Una, connecting the bodily sign of nurturance to its equivalent feminine trait, ‘we nurture, we clutch [children] to our bosoms’. For Yvonne, who is childfree, the reproductive function expands into how the female priest is essentially maternal: ‘I’m not particularly maternal in the sense of having a desperate desire for having children, but there is this, perhaps nurturing is a better word, seeking the other, that seems to be more natural in women than in men’. The perception of the female priest, because she has/is the body that is reproductive, is that she should also deliver the associated trait of nurturing. The body in its teleological state determines the trait.

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<sup>133</sup> Although Natalie uses the word ‘gender’ she is referring to her sexed body in this instance.

<sup>134</sup> The Vicar of Dibley is a TV comedy that depicts a female vicar in an initially resistant country parish. The reference Natalie is making is about the actor’s (Dawn French) physical female appearance. The character’s opening salvo in response to the shock of her being a woman is to point out the clue to her sex, her ‘magnificent bosom’. It should be noted that some of the interviewees disliked this representation of the female priest.

Canvassing views of congregants immediately after the first women entered the priesthood, Wakeman (1996), an ordained woman, found that because of biology many associated women priests with 'innate nurturing and pastoral skills' and Wakeman herself concludes that this is 'in essence woman's work' (p.6). Is there a more nuanced way that women priests look upon their biology? Yvonne understands the connection between perceived traits and how the body naturalises gender. Nurturance, associated with breasts, speaks of the reproductive capability of the female body, and it is on this basis that difference is formed (Wittig, 1997). It is *the* female creative act that comes to define her as categorically different but is appropriated symbolically through baptism (where the priest births the infant into the believing community).<sup>135</sup> A female priest is a reproductive priest because her body is given what Wittig terms 'the mark of gender' (p.310) which may serve to undermine the symbolic role that replaces the biological. Being a priest has not, for Natalie at least, disarticulated her from this mark of the maternal but rather has accentuated it. On the one hand, she explains, she has conversations about breasts and bras with her female church wardens: "I bet you don't have these conversations with [the male vicar] do you?" and they say, "no, strangely enough, we don't". But on the other hand, as well as these female-oriented, light-hearted encounters featuring breasts, Natalie also negotiates how her breasts are given meaning that infuses her priesthood:

Natalie: People used to want me to hold their babies. I don't know whether the men get that, maybe they do, the male vicars.<sup>136</sup> And I know the stuff about baptisms was different for the congregation if there's a woman doing it.

Sharon: Is that a maternal imagery thing?

Natalie: Yes, I suspect so. You know, and there's some physicality in that, isn't there? Having your new baby held on a sort of maternal bosom is very different than having a male vicar who's got different bits.

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<sup>135</sup> Fonts are representations of vaginas; a final symbolic touch in the appropriation (see Hampson, 2002).

<sup>136</sup> One of the interviewees talks about how her male training incumbent enjoys babies and is well known for cradling them in church. This story has a different sense though, a feeling that it is novel, comical almost (she says he 'steals their babies'), that a male priest would be interested in actions associated with maternal nurturance. Natalie's story is about how her body signals a 'natural' connection with babies. This is not novel or comedic.

The female priest enacting the same ritual as the male priest delivers different meaning because her body signals maternity in a corporeal way rather than simply symbolically. Which direction does this meaning-making take? Is it the ritual of baptism – the symbolic delivery of an infant into the body of believers – that generates a set of meanings around the priest's body, or is it her body that changes (perhaps only in subtle ways) meanings around the ritual? Wittig's (1997) 'mark of gender' is given to women as an act of oppression, forming woman as 'natural' reproducers, the creative act that defines the 'myth of woman' (p.310). For Natalie, the priesthood is not free of this 'mark of gender' but mixes with it to perhaps generate a more potent version of her sexed body as she symbolically births a child with a body that signifies the maternal as biology.

The maternal bosom is the teleology that separates the female priest from the male priest. It also separates the female priest from sexuality, since the dichotomy of the breast (sexual/maternal) cannot co-exist at the same time (Young, 1990). This is embedded deeply within the Christian symbolic. The image of the Madonna and Child is an image that costs women their sexuality, as Young discusses in her phenomenological account of the female body. Even though she is not a mother, Natalie understands that her breasts beneath the cassock are not a sexual sign in her priesthood, but rather signal the reproductive function of the female body, where a baby has its rightful, natural, place.<sup>137</sup> If motherhood is a consciously constructed patriarchal institution (Rich, 1976), then the feminised characteristics that flow from this bodily function have locked women into a naturalised femininity expressed through nurturance and selflessness.

Those who are not mothers are made suspect, and this becomes potent for women in the priesthood as a device that alienates them from their vocation as priest as much as it anchors them into a reproductive role. Melinda, also childfree, experienced this double jeopardy when her training incumbent invited her to preach. He told her: "I think it's so good you're preaching on Mothering Sunday because I do find it difficult sometimes and as a childless woman you can really speak to the tragedy of that". Such a statement reveals to Melinda how she is bodily framed, even in her priesthood, as unfulfilled reproductive potential. Yet the reproductive potential does not have the elevated position that Mother and Child are given in the Christian symbol system. After this conversation with her training

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<sup>137</sup> Other studies (Shehan and Wiggins-Frame, 1999, for example) reveal how women clergy experience the gendered expectations of being a motherly version of the priest, bringing the domestic and emotional labour into the profession.

incumbent, Melinda sees that women priests are caught between two denigrated positions: 'ever since, I've had this sense [. . .] that nothing I can do is right because if I were to have children, I'd be a nuisance and if I don't, I'm a tragedy'. The tension for women priests is found in the Christian discourse that encourages women to have a sense of calling to motherhood, accompanied by an idealisation of the family, which, for women priests may produce an intense duality of calling (see for example, Thomans, Batts and Ostman, 2005; Madden, Bailey and Kerr, 2015). As well as amply highlighting how employment as a priest is built around the assumption of a male priest being free of domestic responsibility, this story also signifies how a female priest creates an aberration. Emily, who is a mother, discussed her life choices with a male vicar (opposed to women's ordination) when she was younger: 'he said to me, "Oh [Emily], for goodness' sake go off and have babies"'. The female priest who does not fulfil her bodily reproductive purpose may feel she is constantly negotiating the suspicions, or the shame, projected on to her.

A gynocentric feminist viewpoint proposes that the woman's body and her reproductive function should be elevated out of the false binary generated in the masculine paradigm that humanist feminisms sometimes leave un-deconstructed (Young, 1990). Green (2009a) takes this stance and believes that using a system based on natal/maternal symbols allows the female priest to disarm the masculine sacrificial imagery. She suggests that 'women at the altar symbolise, among other things, the worshipper's experience of God as mother, and hence notions of nurture, connection and sensuality' (p.151). However, the emphasis on the female body as mother may not be helpful for the individual female priest, who may see this imagery as troublesome (and God as mother is no panacea for female belonging, as I discuss later). What Melinda describes, for example, is the lose-lose proposal that women priests are either unfulfilled in their reproductive destiny, defined as lacking in their femaleness, or else they are not enough for the priesthood once they become biological mothers. As a priest without children, Melinda wonders about how she then relates to the symbolic aspect of priesthood:

I wonder if as a woman priest you symbolise motherhood without being able to be a mother. I don't know. But yes, and then all the baggage that goes with that culturally about being a childless woman and being a harridan and being single and all this sort of stuff gets attached to women priests.

So, women priests manage the expectations that their bodies arouse, and the 'baggage' of femaleness that is not reproductively fulfilled. The irony is, as already noted, that the

priesthood does not easily accommodate a woman with children. The employment conundrums are discussed by the interviewees, many of whom are frustrated that the priesthood assumes an unencumbered priest (with a wife). Alice, a single mother, is frustrated about notions of the priesthood and motherhood being incompatible:

I think one of the huge kind of barriers to women is this bizarre idea that a lot of congregations seems to have 'ah well, if you're a woman and you've got children we won't come first'. And it's very specifically if you're a woman and you've got children.

Women priests are burdened with both the expectation that they will be teleologically fulfilled as mothers, and the nurturing needs of congregations who may see themselves in competition with biological dependents of the female priest. Alice is depicting a parent/child relationship between priest and congregation (and this surfaces again in the next chapter). A female priest is at risk of being perceived as insufficient as a priest if she has family commitments, and insufficient as a woman if she does not. Whilst the employment complaints are important, I want to continue to focus on the deeper meanings that are attached to the female body in the priesthood, and how the maternal associations create a different experience of being a priest for women.

Some interviewees are aware of the types of theologies that elevate the female through maternal and natal imagery and language. For example, Pauline, who has children herself, is aware of a gynocentric theological thinking, but the material reality of it is discombobulating:

I gave [a woman] communion while she was breastfeeding, and I could see the theological resonances of that, I feed her she feeds him, etcetera, and yet I think this is profoundly inappropriate, why do I think that? [. . .] I don't want to look down whilst I'm giving communion and see somebody else's tits, thank you.

The assumption that a woman priest will always embrace the gynocentric meanings of the body in ritual and in theology (and I go on to discuss some aspects of this in the next chapter) is challenged by Pauline's viewpoint. She knows that there is a way of articulating the female nurturing body to the theological, but the fleshy, material experience does not align, for Pauline, with attempts to elevate the female reproductive function in the symbolic sense. Maternal imagery can become a personal burden rather than an elevation

of the female body. Natalie has negotiated projections of the maternal on to her body from a deeply personal viewpoint, and such imagery seems to be double-edged for her:

I don't have children but [maternal imagery] does resonate with me. And I think, there's been quite a lot of imagery for me throughout my ministry about things coming into being, things being born, whether that's been about ideas or projects or relationships probably. That imagery I think has been quite powerful for me at times and also quite difficult because not having children hasn't entirely been my choice, just never met the right person and now I'm too old, so it wasn't a lived choice. So, some of that has been quite difficult. You know, the baptisms and weddings have sometimes felt excruciating.

Whilst on one level Natalie can find some edifying aspect from maternal imagery, the resonances in her material world are more painful. Natalie's body as a priest accrues reproductive meanings that when expressed through rituals emphasise for her a state of lack and unfulfilled potential. Some theologians (for example, Green, 2009b) develop the feminine divine within the Christian symbol system through references to the female body as reproductive, and this can be problematic. Some women priests highlight how focusing on the female as reproductive does not enhance their belonging in the priesthood, but rather reifies their difference. Whilst such body theology is seen by some as a necessary way out of oppression for the female (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998), and the crystallising of bodily difference into symbolic difference may serve to represent the female body (in reproduction) in the symbolic, the female priest is faced with her own body being associated reductively with the maternal.

If, as Isherwood and Stuart (1998) argue, the myth of the Fall is the symbolic source of childbirth (and there is no hiding from the biblical text that states women are 'saved' through childbirth),<sup>138</sup> the maternalising of the female priest's body is suggestive of how the Christian symbol system reduces the female body to its reproductive function. Basically put, Eve caused the Fall into sin, and childbirth was both the consequence and the creative act of redemption for women. This tautology means that the body of the female priest is accruing paradoxes: she bodily represents profanity and impurity and the symbolic entanglements with sin and reproduction at the same time as motherhood is sanctified, or as Rich (1976) writes, the female is 'a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil' (p.90).

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<sup>138</sup> 1 Timothy 2:15.

For the female priest this is also complicated by the attempt to fulfil a role that represents both the universal body of believers, the male set of symbols at the Eucharist, and the authority traditionally associated with the Father. A male priest's body cannot accrue this tangle of symbolic meaning in the same way, but a female priest's body tells a story of function and teleology that is 'excruciating' for Natalie. The caveat in this discussion is how the all-male priesthood absorbed the female birthing and feeding function for themselves in the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998), an appropriation that may be problematised with the presence of the female priested body. Whereas the male priest's body is not articulated with the profane, the female priest's body is, and is a reminder of the fleshy business of reproduction, rather than its transcendent symbolic form. Perhaps, then, maternal imagery is counterproductive for the belonging of women priests, and may not help their own bodies to be integrated into the priesthood. Given that some women priests have found that their female bodies complicate how they are viewed, what implications are there for how women priests present their bodies?

#### 5.5.2 *Dressing the female priest's body*

The introduction of women into the priesthood posed practical issues around clerical dress, which left women, certainly in the early years, wearing clothing designed for male bodies. More than two decades have passed and now there is a mini-industry in female priests' clothing (see Oliphant, 2016). Olive, for example, has discovered a tailor who makes 'little black vicar dresses' that are 'cool', and Una is full of admiration for 'pretty' ordination dresses now available that 'look fabulous'. However, there are complaints from women priests that dress remains problematic. Karen finds it difficult to find shirts that fit her frame and in the military there are few options for female padres, leaving Suzanne, a military chaplain, unable to wear her collar because she refuses to wear the men's shirts that are offered to her. There also remains the debate around how women priests are most appropriately presented – women priests discuss amongst themselves the meanings that are telegraphed through pastels, strong colours, clerical black, patterns, dresses and skirts (and their hemlines), trousers, type and colour of shoes, clothes that show flesh, and so the list goes on.<sup>139</sup> Denise contrasts how her ordained mother dresses – in pastels – with her own preference for clerical black, which she interprets as expressing different types of

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<sup>139</sup> A debate took place in the General Synod in 2016 over whether clergy, male and female, should be free to adopt more casual dress rather than being expected to wear formal attire, raising fears that this would create an environment where women would be more harshly judged on appearance, suggesting that standard clerical clothing might be useful to women (Petre, 2016).

femininity. But she worries that wearing pastel colours represents the 'right' kind of femininity, and this is part of what troubles her own sense of belonging. The contention around how women priests dress and how they are subject to different levels of scrutiny to male priests is researched and documented fully elsewhere (for example, Parkins, 2002; Page, 2014; Thorne, 2000). So, I only wish to highlight some of the aspects raised in my interviews that reveal how women priests presents their bodies is associated with how they negotiate their belonging.

In her study of gender in the priesthood, Page (2014) examines clergy dress and associations with femininity and masculinity, suggesting that often women clergy make presentation decisions with the sensibilities of congregations in mind, and my interviewees indicate this can indeed be the case. The debate Page's work highlights is around whether women priests should wear clerical black, considered a more 'neutral' presentation of the priest's body, or whether they should express femininity in more visible ways, and this debate continues to be reflected in the stories of my interviewees. I want to question whether there is a 'neutral' way of presenting the female priest's body. Firstly, the traditional priestly garments might be perceived as feminine in themselves (Walsh, 2001; Page, 2014) in that they are dress-like, sometimes adorned with embroidery and lace, producing 'men in skirts' for the critical feminist observer (Radford Ruether, 1975, p.79). Commentators such as Hampson (2002) argue that the long history of clerical dress is part of a sublimated desire to explore the feminine, and perhaps even to disguise a cross-dressing element of this. Since the priesthood has, for many centuries, been considered a male vocation, the coding of clerical dress is still masculine. When women come to wear priests' garments (from the black shirt and collar to the alb and chasuble) there is likely to be a complexity in the re-coding of dress on the female form, which leads me to be suspicious of claims of gender neutrality in appearance. This neutrality is defined as women moving towards masculine appearance that has already appropriated femininity, rather than men becoming less masculine (or even more feminine?) in appearance. This argument may be moot if male clergy do indeed present themselves as anti-masculine – if by wearing flowing garments they eschew the meanings of masculinity attached to other types of uniform, which would allow women to easily inhabit the costume. I do not believe, however, that vestments are de-masculinised because they are pretty, but have accrued masculine meaning that is associated with types of power and spiritual capital to which women have previously had no access. A female body filling the vestments must necessarily challenge these masculine meanings. Secondly, if, as Kruks (2001) explores, woman is

indistinguishable from her appearance, then the female priest is also unable to achieve a separation between femaleness and the priesthood. In Kruks' words: 'There is no neutral ground here, and one cannot avoid making a statement that refers to and indirectly reconfirms what is "normal" even by wearing "unfeminine" clothing' (p.66). A female body in clerical black is, from this viewpoint, not presenting neutrality but continues to be framed as a sexed body. I do, though, concur with Page's (2014) conclusion that women priests must negotiate a narrow set of conditions, neither erring on being too 'masculine' nor being too 'feminine' in how they present their bodies (the complications I have outlined above notwithstanding).

To present the body as feminine, sometimes in highly visible and bold ways, is for some women priests a strategy to ameliorate the dismissive stereotypes of female priests being man-ish or dowdy in appearance (though, as I go on to argue, the downplaying of feminine appearance is also a strategy). Perhaps the motivation is to be visible, cutting against the desire expressed by some women priests to 'disappear' at the altar. There may also be a fear amongst some women priests that visually fitting in is tantamount to becoming socially invisible (rather than symbolically invisible which is given a spiritual affirmation). If the female body is to be differentiated in the priesthood, then perhaps women can harness this by being a visual sign of positive difference, a challenge to the notion that women priests should minimise their bodily femaleness. Karen, for example, presents a type of fashionable femininity that is about being bold and visible. She tells me that when she first was ordained, she was instantly recognisable to the diocesan bishop, and deliberately courts some notoriety in her efforts to counter the stereotype of the un-feminine female priest (the 'grey ladies', as another interview described some women priests, though she emphasised she did not mean this in an unkind way). The strategy for Karen is not to hide the femaleness of her body, nor downplay the femininity of her gender, but rather to loudly announce both. She suggests that there is controversy around overt displays of some types of femininity in the priesthood: 'they feel it's not appropriate, that we shouldn't wear nail varnish, we shouldn't wear make-up, that it would be a distraction. And we have some quite heated debates over it'. 'They' can mean other female priests as well as a general sense of scrutiny from the congregation. Emily, for example, was told by a colleague that wearing lipstick was sexual and therefore not appropriate for priests. The idea of the female body as distraction as a priest is raised by other interviewees and, as already discussed, may feed the discourse of the desirability of disappearing from the focal point during rituals. At the same time that women's bodies accrue maternal meaning, there is

nevertheless a fear that the female body introduces sexuality into the priesthood (Dowell and Williams, 1994; Wakeman, 1996), and so how the female priest presents her body becomes associated with acceptable and unacceptable versions of femininity.

Strikingly different to Karen, there are women priests who do not wish to draw attention to their bodily femaleness, nor their femininity, and have the option of androgynous presentations made possible by vestments. This clothing can hide the contour of the female body, and the shedding of some markers of femininity, such as make-up and jewellery, though not necessarily all at once, enables some women priests to downplay the femininity they would otherwise display. Yvonne, for example, feels the difference when she is covered up by vestments and when her female form is visible:

I think the robes [. . .] tend to de-gender you [. . .] they take away, they cover everything, so in that sense you're not so aware of your gender [. . .]. I'm most aware actually when I'm presiding as a woman when I'm at a church where we don't robe at all and I'm just in my clericals. Because I'm obviously female.

Yvonne enjoys the traditional ways of presenting her femininity, wearing jewellery and colours, yet the problematising of the visibility of her female body may indicate that it is not the ideal body for the priest. This is an important point: Yvonne exemplifies how some women priests alter, or at least are acutely aware of, the feminine accoutrements taken into the priest's official role, removing jewellery or make-up they would normally enjoy wearing.<sup>140</sup> Being obviously female produces a different experience for her in presiding and it may be that there is an awareness of the gaze that the male priest is not subject to. I also wonder if there is an awareness of the meanings attached to the female body being in collision with the idealised priesthood. In other words, Yvonne's presence as a priest is given different meaning depending on whether her bodily femaleness is covered or visible. Valerie also uses vestments to hide her body, though again, she retains the possibility of including other feminine markers:

I think it's absolutely marvellous that I haven't got a hugely feminine figure actually. So, by the time I get the chasuble on you really couldn't tell, if wasn't

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<sup>140</sup> Pauline told me a story of being told during her training that under no account must red shoes be worn when presiding (though no reason was given why). One day she found herself in a pair of red shoes before officiating and rushed home to change. Although Pauline told this as an amusing story, it raises the question of the extent to which female appearance is policed in the priesthood.

for my hair [ . . . ] whilst I might just look like I'm wearing a sack and I could be male or female, I still make sure my hair is up and I'll often wear lipstick because that is me. And if I don't feel like wearing lipstick that day, I just don't wear it. It's according to who do I wish to be and who I want to be that day.

Valerie's comment is deeply significant and indicative of the perception of the female body being out of place in the priesthood. It is 'absolutely marvellous' that she is not burdened with a 'feminine' figure that will mark her out as a 'different' type of priest, or that attracts opprobrium for being distracting. It is a relief for Valerie that she can hide her female form easily beneath the shapeless vestments. So, it is not the lipstick that she sees as problematic, but rather the corporeal presence of the female body and its visible shape.

Neither Valerie nor Yvonne intend to shed all signs of femininity, yet they have a sense that their female bodies require mitigation. I use these examples because they are not about how women might express femininity differently more generally, but because they indicate how women priests specifically and deliberately want to hide their bodies when they act as priests, altering how they present their bodies *because* they are priests. This again reveals a discomfort with the female body within the priesthood, felt by the women themselves. It may be that women priests still feel they trespass on male territory, and that by hiding the female body there is an attempt being made to 'pass' as a (male) priest, picking up the drag analogy used earlier. However, Tannen (2007), in her exploration of the postmodern female trickster, sees drag as part of a shape-shifting quality of the archetype, and in this sense, women priests may be using presentation to slide through gaps in the symbolic border between woman and priest. This is not an overt attempt to look male, but rather, to look priestly. The trickster quality is needed because maleness and priestliness may still be imaginatively synonymous and there remains the requirement to visually pass as a priest by hiding (or shape-shifting away from) visible femaleness. I wonder if some female priests grapple with the need to appear female (in that they need to retain their difference) but at the same time diminish those parts of their physicality that speak about the female sex.

There are complications for women priests who hope to hide their forms under priest's clothing. The attempt at androgyny may be defeating if it is the attempt at combining two gendered presentations, as Bordo (1997) writes: '[androgyny] ultimately exposes its internal contradiction and becomes a war that tears the subject in two' (p.19). Trying to find ways of holding both a female and a (male) priestly identity through presentation of the body is a signal that the woman's body crashes into a masculine-as-neutral symbol

system, and that her subjectivity as a priest is at odds with her subjectivity as a woman. It is the androgynous body (and by this, I mean the de-emphasising of the female contours and the necessary conformity to presentation traditionally owned by the male priest) that gives the woman an insight into the world of the privileged male, a faux transcendence of sexually defined identity, a relief from the bodily signs of the female. That some women priests feel they ought to de-emphasise femaleness and femininity in ritual situations may be part of a more general ambivalence about difference with which feminists grapple, and perhaps, as Dallery (1992) wonders, there is a fear of sex and gender difference that is articulated with inequality. For some women priests, femaleness and femininity are alienated from the priesthood, and so they find ways for the female body to be unobtrusive. Note from the stories I have highlighted that I am discussing here women who have not eschewed types of femininity outside the priesthood, but who choose to downplay femininity and femaleness when acting in an official capacity as a priest. In Bordo's (1992) discussion, androgyny is a collusive type of escape, since it reinforces the power flows that the male body can access, but which remain denied to the female body, and this may be the dynamic that is occurring in the priesthood, whereby women's bodies are made to be incongruous, either sexually so, or as a reminder of biological, rather than spiritual, reproduction.

Focusing on the female body as requiring androgyny to challenge oppression may also be a distraction from the political struggles against male privilege (Currie and Raoul, 1992) and I wonder whether some female priests emphasise the somatic over the theological when engaging with the opposing integrity. However, to balance this argument, some published personal narratives of women priests have shown that to see a person without a fix on gender is possible (Wakeman, 1996, p.35) and Green (2010) suggests that ignoring the bodily symbols of women (or 'sexual forgetfulness') offers a 'third way' (Green, 2010, p.104) for women priests. And of course, women priests need respite from the impossible conundrum of how to present their bodies appropriately as priests (the right type of femininity, not sexual, neutral without being masculine, and so forth). I am highlighting here the possibility that there is a difference between seeking to achieve a sameness in sex and gender through androgynous appearance as priests, and the act of minimising femaleness because it is seen as either pejorative, or else too different from the idealised male priest's body. Altering the visibility of the female body (and how it is presented) to be taken as a priest is, perhaps, a signal that female clergy are not bodily emancipated and do not have bodily subjectivity in the priesthood. I am not arguing that there is always a

conscious attempt at androgyny for women priests, and there are stereotypes at play that complicate how priestly women appear. For example, Pauline believes ‘there is a certain kind of women priestly style as well [. . .]. And it’s often big earrings and short hair’ (fashion notwithstanding). There is also the stereotype of the woman priest who does not adhere to traditional ways of expressing femininity and who is named pejoratively butch,<sup>141</sup> and some interviewees are keen to present themselves as a challenge to this stereotype. Neither am I suggesting that interviewees who attempt to minimise the feminine signs of their body, particularly at the altar, attempt to be men, or look masculine, but rather they search for a way to make their bodies look *priestly*. I want to trouble this though, by interrogating what possibilities women priests have available to them to establish a neutral way of presenting priesthood.

The male priest might be forgiven for being unaware of the complex and constant scrutiny the female priest must endure regarding her bodily appearance, since the priesthood is made to fit his male body and the (probably limited) masculine ways he presents as a priest. Karen parodies the discussions she sees on the social media group, Clergy Mummies, about the problematics of women priests’ clothing, femininity, and bodies. She asks what the male equivalent of this discussion might look like:

Do any of the male clergy worry about, ‘should I brush my hair neatly or not, should I style it with gel today? Or doesn’t it matter that I look like I’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards? Should I trim my nails or are long yellow nails fine? And should I wear socks with sandals?’ [. . .] I don’t think men have those conversations, but women do all the time.

Karen is highlighting the double standards that exist in the priesthood, and is entertainingly facetious, though there is a serious differentiation at play that makes women priests vulnerable to non-belonging and marginality, as well as to humiliating stereotypes. Karen, who might be considered rebellious in her appearance, understands the male priest is considered the norm, the neutral, or in Braidotti’s (2013) words, the ‘zero degree of difference’ and this is why female bodies, and how they are presented, are so

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<sup>141</sup> This stereotype is genuinely in circulation. For instance, I was recently told of a young male vicar who asked why all female vicars were ‘butch’. There are women priests who bring non-traditional ways of expressing femininity into the priesthood. My interest here lies in women who deliberately change their expression of femininity because of being a priest – what is this telling us about the ideals of priesthood and what a priest should look like?

problematized in the priesthood. The male priest's appearance is of little interest, since he transcends the material. This argument is not simply about earrings or make-up but is more fundamentally about the female body being unable to be seen in terms that allow female priests neutrality in sex and gender.

At this point, I want to use Cones' (2017) exploration of sex and gender being visible at the altar as a foil for troubling the notion of sex- and gender-neutral bodies at the altar. His discussion is wrapped around a plea for both male and female clergy to minimize performed and visible sex and gender for the benefit of those looking on who require a more fluid set of representative signs. Cones, though, assumes that there is a neutrality that can be achieved, or that there is middle ground where male and female priests might meet, a priestly androgyny on which can be projected any representational sign that is required by the congregation. Cones' argument does not emphasize enough the asymmetry between the male and female body at the altar; feminine performance and appearance are made radically more provocative and their elimination is far more diminishing for the female priest. How might a male priest be called upon to mask his masculine performance through his appearance? What does androgyny mean for a male body in priest's clothing? As I have shown, a female priest may decide to take off her earrings and make-up, cut her hair short (or disguise long hair), and wear only the clothing that the male priest wears (as many female priests do), but is this minimizing of femaleness and femininity simply borrowing from the masculine rather than creating it anew as neutral? A male priest cannot reciprocate in this 'third way' androgyny, that Green (2010) argues for, since any shift to the feminine is likely to be interpreted as dangerously transgressive of masculine performativity, even as transvestism. It must always be a shift to the masculine on the part of women priests. Cones argues chasubles can mask embodied gender because of their covering capacity (I highlighted Valerie's delight with this), and this is 'felicitous' (p.142) since it allows members of the congregation to feel represented across difference (presumably by masking difference). Congregants can project their own sense of representation on to de-sexed bodies, Cones suggests. This conjures a picture of male and female bodies of priests being indistinguishable in clerical clothing. Is this neutrality, or is it de-feminising the priesthood? Are female priests, under these conditions, actually fitting their bodies into a male-shaped priesthood?

I see Cones' (2017) argument as about hiding *women's* bodies, their breasts, their hair and their voice. He extends this to performativity, stating:

This possibility demands self-critical reflection on the part of presiders of all genders, including bringing to awareness the particular and sometimes subtle ways presiders 'perform' their gender in and through their liturgical ministry, from body language to tone of voice, facial hair and make-up, jewellery and hairstyle. (p.142)

Whilst the male presider may be moved to shave his face (what other options are there? And a clean-shaven male face can hardly be said to minimise maleness or masculinity), what we are left with is the annihilation of the feminine way of presenting and using the body as priests. There is no neutral performance, since this is always a masculine performance. The *male* body is the neutral body (Gatens, 1997) and it is feminine performativity as well as the female body contour that is eradicated through the use of the term 'neutral' (to be fair, Cones does see possibilities in using bodily signs, such as pregnancy in a presider, to access other aspects of the symbolic). What is not taken into account in Cones' discussion is the accrual of masculine meaning on vestments because of the centuries of women's exclusion from wearing them. The expectation is that women tame their female bodies to make them more aligned with a (masculine) priesthood.

The double standard applied to bodies in the priesthood is for Alice part of the problem of sexual differentiation for women clergy. She is clear that she will not experience a shift in this differentiation 'until I can go into church with my cassock on and not be told I look beautiful or that my boss gets told he looks lovely today as well. You know, what's going on there?' Alice clearly feels that there is a perpetuation of the notion that women bring something sexual to the priesthood, something that arouses fear in the male (Dowell and Williams, 1994). It may also explain why Una, when she wants to wear earrings, is told (by her female vicar) she must not wear them in the sanctuary. Una is also aware of the inscribing surface that her body presents:

People seem to think that it's much more acceptable to comment on my appearance and my weight and whether I've got my earrings in or whether I wear make-up or not [. . .] they don't do that with the men. [. . .] my appearance is somehow fair game, in my limited experience, not the same way as a male priest.

Whilst this double standard is felt by women generally, in the priesthood it is used to make women anomalous in fundamental ways that revolve around the unacceptable nature of

female sexuality. Female and feminine markers are suspect. Una poses the question I wish to pose: what masculine markers are male clergy asked to leave outside the sanctuary? She knows that the male priest's body is not scrutinised in the same way as her body because she is object, 'fair game' to be gazed upon, and this complicates her subjectivity. Since the congregational gaze is itself gendered, a woman presiding is attempting to establish her subjectivity at the same time as being object (Young, 1990). If the male priest has nothing to leave outside the sanctuary that signifies his masculinity, this suggests that the priesthood, and the situated space around the altar, is masculine, and the male body is crafted for a perfect fit whilst the female body is anomalous. I have touched on how some interviewees recognise that how they are made bodily anomalous is often framed in pejorative and humiliating ways. Women clergy are often overtly sexualised, or they are portrayed as the female grotesque.

### *5.5.3 The humiliated and grotesque female priest*

Women clergy know they can be sexualised, even fetishised, when they juxtapose the clerical collar with the female body and certain types of feminine performance. Melinda, a curate in a major city, told me she stopped wearing her collar outside church after finding that looking like a priest drew attention to her which made her feel uncomfortable. She believes the collar is fetishised for both male and female priests, however, there is a sexual association that women priests contend with. Some, though, are more playful, as Melinda explained:

I've got one woman vicar friend who is quite attractive and plays on that a bit, not in a sort of really unprofessional way, but she's also very keen on horse riding so she's been known to walk down the high street in a dog collar carrying a riding whip, getting quite a following [. . .]. She was invited to a vicars and tarts party and she said, 'which one shall I come as?'

Such overt and determined rebelliousness may be uncommon, but less extreme forms of attention are experienced by those women priests who choose not to dilute their femaleness/femininity. Olive brings a 'Goth' look to the clerical black. Karen finds her appearance generates attention because the collar does not fit the way she presents herself as colourful: she goes to some lengths to ensure she is able to express herself through hairstyle, tattoos, red high heels, and accessories. For Natalie, the ability for women priests to play with the juxtaposition between the priest's collar and types of femininity lit her faith. A female priest she met 'was very appealing because she was young

[. . .] she used to wear a little short skirt with a leather waistcoat, and a dog collar, and stripy tights, and doc martin boots. So, she was a bit of a sight'. Women priests can harness sex and gender incongruity; however, this may not mitigate the more humiliating ways female priests are bodily framed.

After Natalie discussed her breasts and the signs she recognises are attached to her, she told me she felt that the female body is problematised in even more oppressive ways: 'I think we can be humiliated about our physicality all the time as women'. The specific ways women are humiliated because of their body may be discursive (that is, delivered through descriptions of how others see a person) but it is viscerally experienced. For women, their bodies are the focus of humiliating discourse which is in turn felt within the body: 'she feels herself become an object in response' (Kruks, 2001, p.147). The objectification of the female priest is not always about her as sexual or being told she is 'beautiful' as Alice describes. Sylvia, an Anglo-Catholic in her 60s, discussing the days of the first women to be ordained, recounts how one colleague was treated because of her appearance:

She was a large woman with a great mop of bright red hair and when she was first ordained people were, 'that's an abomination, look at the state of her, why doesn't she tidy herself up?' I mean that could have happened with a man as well I suppose but she was very outspoken, very kind of well, you know 'get out of my way 'cos I'm coming through'. You had to have people like that to make their mark and to actually knock down those barriers.

Sylvia identifies how women priests are denigrated both because of their appearance and their deviation from traditional feminine modalities (Young, 1990). What Sylvia is describing is almost the female grotesque – the caricatured woman who is large, outspoken, and unconventional in her femininity. She takes up space physically and verbally and is seen as 'an abomination'. Russo (1997) explores the danger of all women becoming an inadvertent 'spectacle', with the misuse of clothing, the shrillness of the voice and the overexposed flesh. For the woman priest, this danger is made manifold since she – the woman making a spectacle of herself – has multiple boundaries to consider, those that separate her from the symbolic, how spiritual capital is forged and formed are additional doxa (Bourdieu, 1984 [2010]) that become broken by the female spectacle.

Perhaps the priesthood accentuates – and creates the spectacle of – how women priests are physically (and verbally) unruly. If I am permitted to see homology<sup>142</sup> between the carnivalesque and the priesthood (with its costume, ritual, and spectacle), Russo's (1997) discussion takes us to the unruly woman who is the version of the female grotesque – refusing discipline for her spectacle and not kept in her place. For Sylvia, this is the unruly woman who is required to break into the (male) priesthood. Going back to Hyde's (1998 [2008]) trickster analogy, the deviant woman – the female grotesque, the unruly woman – is framed here as heroic and trickster in terms of the priesthood *because* she does not conform to rules of feminine performativity. The woman-as-spectacle is often at the forefront of social upheaval (Russo, 1997): women entering the priesthood *is about* social upheaval. This can be seen even in the smallest of rebellious gestures. Julia tells a story of when she was a deacon. She was not permitted to wear her collar and so she wore her clerical shirt collarless: 'people knew what it was I was doing'. This may not be the most disruptive of gestures, but for Julia, it meant she was at the vanguard of the *coup d'église*. Women priests see these connections in how they bodily present themselves and that performing unruliness in appearance, whether through aping a sexualised version of the priesthood, by being highly visibly and overtly feminine, or by being idiosyncratic in appearance, is a way of taking control of their own belonging as subject.

#### 5.5.4 *Pitching from a female voice*

While women priests have agency in how they present their bodies, the female voice holds fewer options for disguise and marks the female priest out as different. There is, as Julia notes, feminine meaning attached to the timbre of a woman's voice: 'I think this is all at a sort of [. . .] below the consciousness level, that I mean, when I'm celebrating the Eucharist I say the words of Christ in my feminine voice and I give a blessing and absolution in the name of the holy trinity in my feminine voice'. The suggestion here is that femaleness is overlaid onto the symbolic through the voice; a male voice does not jar since he is speaking the words of a male saviour. Winkett (2010) though, argues that hearing a female voice chanting or speaking frees the congregation from such literalism, and I revisit this idea in the next chapter as women priests reclaim meanings of words by using female voice and

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<sup>142</sup> Whilst I say the carnival and the religious pageantry is homologous, Bakhtin, the authority on carnival as social instrument, deliberately contrasted the seriousness of the religious ritual against the parody and humour of the carnival. I think though, if a more abstract approach is taken, these are two sides of the same social coin. Historically and etymologically carnival has close connections with Christianity and its ritual rhythms.

presence as juxtaposition to the masculinity of the text. However, Olive's story reveals that this is not necessarily a concept readily taken to by congregations. Olive is an Anglo-Catholic and a trained singer who is called on to sing and chant as she leads worship. She experienced objections about the quality of her voice, and it was suggested to her that its pitch rendered her inaudible. Olive has found that 'people can actually be quite nasty to women singers [. . .] they want a man. I think it's a traditional thing'.<sup>143</sup> The woman priest (as with other women in leadership) is faced with a set of meanings that are laid down aurally. As Olive describes the detail of her experiences, she wonders if there is a bias towards the sound of a male voice, which is masked by complaints about her being inaudible:

You will get some elderly people who will say things like, 'I can't hear if it's a woman speaking'. And actually, some of that might not be them being funny because when you're in a church which has a lot of elderly people in, and again those sort of traditional musical churches do and actually it's those upper registers of their hearing that go first. So, in some cases they can actually genuinely hear better if it's a deeper voice.

Olive is generous in her assessment of why some older congregants may not hear her voice clearly, however, she uses a microphone and she does go on to reveal the level of hurt she felt by a campaign against her voice. As we talk over the details of the episode, Olive begins to theorise that her female voice is not only cast as inadequate, but that this event reveals an underlying discomfort with a female embodying the priestly position.

After lobbying from the congregation, which Olive describes as 'nasty', she was sent to elocution and singing lessons, something she feels aggrieved about (though she enjoyed the singing lessons), since she takes pride in her ability to speak and sing in public and has never encountered this type of complaint previously:

It's one of my best things. So, to have a complaint about one of my best things was actually a bit outrageous. To send someone who is normally regarded as being excellent at delivery of readings for elocution lessons was actually racist as well as sexist.

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<sup>143</sup> The tradition of the privileging of the masculine voice goes back through long history, according to Beard (2017), and has been associated with authority.

The elocution lessons, Olive feels, were designed to eradicate her regional accent as well as restructure the sound of her voice. There is a sense of humiliation in this story in the way Olive's female body is framed as inadequate. Olive assesses the injustice of portraying the sound of a female voice as something alien to the traditional environment: 'we are singing an octave above the men, so it is a different thing, but just as beautiful, just as valid [. . .] in the convents they, it's not a new thing having women chanting'. Olive is required to justify the register of the female voice, to assure herself of its parity in beauty and having a place in traditional church music. There is, as Olive points out, a strong tradition of the female voice in church music, and Winkett (2010) affirms the history of the female voice in rituals and worship settings. But Winkett also underlines the novelty of a female voice in contemporary church leadership, particularly in the sung Eucharist, suggesting that the female voice has not held its currency in traditional church worship. Winkett acknowledges the bias towards the male voice but argues that women's voices do not mature from puberty as men's voices do and that women should learn to sing 'not as a child, a young girl or a pre-pubescent boy – but as the mature women we are' (p.97). I wonder if this argument would sit easily with Olive's experience. The flaw in Winkett's premise is that there is a presumption that the voice of the male priest has a 'natural' authority and maturity that needs no training, leaving the female voice in its untrained state as childlike and lacking. Whilst there may be an argument that dovetails with Young's (1990) modalities – that girls are encouraged not to let loose their vocal chords – this is not the same as claiming women's voices do not develop out of the girlish tones after puberty.<sup>144</sup>

Olive feels like she is in pioneering territory where her female-sounding voice is heard as inferior to a male voice, in strength, in audibility and in comprehension:

It's not just the music, it's been the speaking. Women do have higher pitched voices on the whole. And it's interesting how much do you kick against it and say 'no, this is sexist' and how much you say there's an element here of disability, we need to address in some way. So that's where the tension and the conflict comes because you don't want to just slap people down if actually they just can't hear and you want to help them hear. But it would be nice if a way to facilitate that could happen by people not having to speak like a man,

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<sup>144</sup> I wonder what is meant by a 'mature' voice in a woman. Does this not contribute to the bias against the higher registers of a female voice, claiming that women with high pitched 'girlish' voices cannot be considered authoritarian and mature?

but actually keep their tone, by electronic means that the hearing loops are configured correctly. And the church PA is done in such a way that they can hear. The other aspect of it, how much of a particular complaint is genuine and how much is it people playing silly beggars.

Olive does suspect there is a proxy conflict happening that focuses on her voice and that this is linked to how some of her more innovative work is not universally well-received. Her ability to challenge and resist this is compromised by her need to be altruistic towards those with genuine hearing difficulties, which creates two narratives in Olive's story. One is the recognition of the alienation of the female voice because it sounds different and inferior to that of a man, and the other is a need to solve hearing problems. The accommodation of the congregation comes at a high cost to Olive's sense of dignity as she is required to alter her voice in the face of an ambivalent message about its female quality. Olive has faced this in other situations. Visiting male choirs have claimed they cannot pitch from a female voice, for example, and this leads her to wonder if there is a more general bias against the female voice in ecclesiastical performance: '[you] have to work harder, or you have to lower your voice. Isn't that a bit like saying, "you have to be a man?"' Ultimately, this experience for Olive indicates there are issues about how women can bodily fit in such environments and that the strong reaction to her female voice can be interpreted as a reaction against her femaleness. There is no appeal here to theology or doctrine from the complainants but is a direct undermining of the female body and what it does. Olive has no argument to counter this, since it is an overt reaction to her vocal chords.

The perceived inadequacy of the female voice may point to a more amorphous disjuncture between the female body and the body of the Church. Gatens' (1997) discussion about the body politic, useful for thinking about the Church body, suggests that by indulging in the fantasy of a unified body (there cannot be two or three bodies), the voices of the ones who do not quite fit what this body represents become inaudible:

If what one is fascinated by is the image of one body, one voice, one reason, any deviation takes the form of gibberish. If woman speaks from her body with her voice, who can hear? Who can decipher the language of an hysteric, the

wails of a hyena,<sup>145</sup> the jabbering of a savage – apart from other hyenas, and savages? (p.86)

This, for me, resonates deeply with the discourse of a unified Church body that I have already raised. For the woman's voice to be heard from a body that is unrepresented in the symbolic system is difficult and using Gatens' argument, the woman priest is speaking from the potentiality of a second body, perhaps an insubstantial or embryonic body, but a secondary, auxiliary body, nonetheless.

In this chapter, I show how the female body is differentiated, made abject and an ill-fit in the priesthood; bodily differentiation goes beyond the theological arguments about whether the female form can be mapped on to the male symbolism of Christ at the altar. The two integrities may be structurally justified by theologies that alienate the female body from the symbolic, however, in a much wider sense, the female body, and how it is made (in)visible, and upon which types of femininity are presented, is anomalous in an un-deconstructed priesthood built around the body of the male. The experiences of women priests that focus on their bodies indicate that they are perceived as maternal, sexual, and sometimes grotesque, as other. What is rarely expressed in the stories of the interviewees is that their female bodies, and how they choose to present their female bodies, are considered priestly in themselves. Women priests seem to either feel they need to mitigate their femaleness and femininity to maximise their belonging, or else they feel by simply allowing their bodies to speak in feminine ways they are rebellious within the priesthood. In other words, women priests either conform to the maleness of the priesthood, or they give their femaleness and femininity free-reign in oppositional terms to the priesthood. This discussion continues to suggest that the priesthood is male-shaped, and that women's bodies disrupt the symbolic and the material, leaving them ill-fitting and belonging as object, but not as subject.

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<sup>145</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft was named a 'hyena in petticoats' by Walpole (Midgely, 1997) and as I discussed in Chapter 4 women priests who protested did so with 'screams of pain' (Ashenden, 2017).

# Transcription Poem

## On Mothering Sunday

I've never thought my dad sees me as less

The image of me sat

On my dad's knee - God as Father

Comfortable with that

I might be deluding myself

There's unconscious stuff

God as mother is more problematic

And I'm not brave enough

Beatrice, middle-of-the-road vicar of five parishes

## Chapter 6 Words Become Flesh

### 6.1 Introduction: The Dominant and the Muted

For me, it is a priority to find out how patriarchy functions [. . .]. This means finding out how the rules for making sense of the world are encoded and used [. . .] and this means finding out about language for it is a major and crucial part of the process.

Dale Spender (1985, p.3)

Discomfort around androcentric language is expressed in the interviews to varying degrees and in various guises. The interviews reveal that responses to how language is used in the Church are made complex because whilst the use of androcentric language on the one hand creates alienation from ecclesiastical and biblical text, feminine language is perceived as radical and particularised, problematised because it does not represent universally. How do women clergy belong in the linguistic landscape of the priesthood? In this chapter, I examine how women priests experience androcentric language and imagery and whether they seek to influence how words are used and the meaning they accrue. Understanding the impact of words and images on women's experience of the priesthood requires seeing the material and the discursive as entangled (Hekman, 2008), that words and their meanings help to create the environment in which women priests live. I begin with the premise that words and imagery in the Church have traditionally reflected and supported a male hegemony (Daly 1973 [1995]; Radford Ruether, 1983; Ramshaw, 1995) and have assumed a male readership (see Slee, 1996). I use Spender's (1985) discussion about the maleness of language to help me interrogate the experiences of women priests as they negotiate and engage with liturgy, biblical text, and imagery. Weaving together some of the foundational principles of feminist approaches to language, Spender offers a distilled set of ideas that speak to the language-related themes raised by the interviewees. Her approach sees discursive power in words themselves, rather than words being simply tools used by the 'dominant' over the 'muted', but she also explores the possibilities of active interventions to change androcentric meanings and uses of words to bring about social change. It should be noted, however, that the notion that changing language brings about social change is contested (Lakoff, 1973). There are differences in how women priests

negotiate gendered words and the question is whether their experience of belonging as subject is influenced by whether the feminine is represented in text and in the symbolic.

The interviewees discussed how gendered words are part of their everyday experience of the priesthood and from these stories I identify three sites of meaning-making that are associated with sex and gender differentiation in the Church environment: the fixed and authorised text of the liturgy (and I include hymns as a secondary site), priestly titles, and words attached to the symbolic. The interviewees' stories about words tap into the debate around whether sexist language flows from hegemony or whether sexist language generates and perpetuates male dominance. The social impact of language and how the Church environment should reflect changing social attitudes around gender and inclusivity is seen as important by Beatrice: 'if we have any hope of making the church relevant to [young people] we have to treat women and men equally, which includes in the language that we use in services'. For Beatrice, it is the cultural lagging behind of Church language that requires attention, and in this sense, the Church is seen as neither driving wider cultural attitudes, nor responding adequately to social change. Beatrice's comment suggests an understanding that changing language influences social processes; equality can be achieved by ensuring equality in language. Melinda, on the other hand, suggests that social change outside the Church is far more influential on attitudes towards women than ecclesiastical language, which she sees as having a diminished role in forming attitudes. She explains: 'all the male images and un-inclusive language doesn't do that much damage because people don't really notice it', a comment that challenges whether there is value in consciously changing language to minimise 'masculine generics' (Weatherall, 2002). For Melinda, the impact of using inclusive or exclusive language in public worship is minimal and so language use responds to shifts in social attitudes rather than it being a causation of change. Research into preaching styles using inclusive language in church settings (Green and Rubin, 1991) suggests conscious word-activism has little effect on attitudes to women's place in the Church. In other words, inclusive language does not *improve* the belonging of women. If this is the case, changing language does not precipitate social change, though social change may cause language to shift to be aligned with new attitudes (Lakoff, 1973). If women clergy like Melinda are unconvinced that androcentric language generates masculine domination, they are unlikely to see inclusive language and feminine imagery as part of a strategy to improve female belonging as subject in the priesthood. This is only part of the story and there are complexities around power in meaning-making that need to be explored to understand how words shape the belonging of the female priest.

Having listened to the stories of how women priests are impacted by words, I lean towards the feminist perspective that sees androcentric language as supporting male dominance and constructing female exclusion (see for example Spender, 1985; Weatherall, 2002) and therefore requiring conscious actions to change words and the meanings attached to them. There is evidence that women priests partake in myriad small acts of linguistic resistances which might shift the ethos embedded in the symbolic – altering Geertz’s ‘moods and motivations’ (Bell, 1992) which I discussed in the previous chapter. There are clues in the experiences recounted by the interviewees that the use of words is part of how women priests both challenge the male hegemony of the Church and bolster their sense of belonging as subject. Ironically, the strategy of accessing meaning-making power may lead to marginalisation (although as I discussed in Chapter 4, there are benefits to occupying marginal space). Some of the stories I highlight in this chapter show how women priests are aware that the maleness of the priesthood continues to be supported by sexist language and that each has her way of disrupting or resisting the meaning-making process. Since language is part of establishing personhood and constructing what is regarded as real (Kruks, 2001), stories about how women priests name themselves are amongst the most profoundly revealing of how the priesthood is constructed and how a female priest belongs (can a woman priest be called ‘Father’?). How women see themselves represented in text and the symbolic is important to how they structurally belong (since male imagery of the divine is used to underpin female exclusion from the priesthood), how they symbolically belong (whether women see themselves reflected in the symbol system in parity with male colleagues), and how women *feel* they belong to the priesthood (the extent to which they are linguistically differentiated). So, given its importance to belonging, how do women priests actively intervene in the meaning-making process to establish female ownership over language of the priesthood?

## 6.2 Beauty and Rhythm: Words that are fixed

If you just suddenly change all the liturgy to use female words instead of male, your church, your congregation, will just leave. You won’t have a congregation.

Carol, Anglo-Catholic priest.

Clergy work within a specific institutional context that values authorised text,<sup>146</sup> and one body of this text is known as liturgy and is a significant part of the public ritual role. Without fixed text no authority can be acquired or challenged and as Bell (1992) argues:

The dynamic interaction of texts and rites, reading and changing, the word fixed and the word preached are practices [. . .]. As practices they continually play off each other to renegotiate tradition, authority, and the hegemonic order. As practices they invite and expect the strategic counterplay. (p.140)

The question is: how much of this renegotiation of tradition is occurring in the practices of women clergy and are they, by resisting androcentric language, challenging the androcentrism of the Church? In her research on women priests, Robbins (2002) discusses the expectations attached to women as they first entered the priesthood, suggesting that ‘there seems to be an underlying assumption that clergywomen will support gender inclusive language and that as a group these women will advocate the introduction of gender inclusive language in all areas of church life’ (p.406). To explore whether women priests act on this expectation, I first focus on their activism with the fixed texts of liturgy and hymns. This is one of the most public ways women clergy can challenge and change androcentric language and meaning.

The masculine character of some versions of this text is something many (but not all) women priests suggest requires continual scrutiny and change, albeit often in quiet and unobtrusive ways. Writers like Ramshaw (1995) propose changing sexist Church text has political value, and whilst there is disagreement amongst the interviewees about how much intervention should take place, some notice and are aware on a personal level of not being represented in text as female. Tracy, who describes herself as middle-of-the-road, makes light of masculine language, but explains how she is impacted by it:

We used to have midweek communion and it was always Order 2<sup>147</sup> and it used to make me giggle when we got to ‘us men’ and I’d look behind me and

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<sup>146</sup> The Bible is significant as fixed text; however, feminist hermeneutics provides a way of being free from its literalness (and there is a broad set of attitudes within the Church about the nature of biblical text). I do not focus on this type of text as I am interested the action-oriented text of the liturgy.

<sup>147</sup> Clergy are able to make choices about which versions of liturgy are used, some use traditional language, and some are modernised and minimise masculine generics. The choice, though, is often bound to the sensibilities and preferences of congregations.

think 'no'. So, we'll just go for 'us and for our salvation' when everyone else said 'men'. It's bizarre to talk about 'mankind'.

Tracy notices the times in fixed text when she is externalised by language that treats the male as universal. Her description of looking behind her is a humorous vignette – as though caricaturing how male language makes her and the females in the congregation invisible – but this also emphasises the alienation she is describing as she refuses to say 'men'. How the male is imagined when masculine words are used is explored by Spender (1985), who also wonders whether women are always consciously aware of their exclusion. Tracy's story is one of a number in the interviews that point to a raised consciousness that allows them to see, notice, and feel their exclusion. (Interestingly, Spender cites research that suggests men tend to see only themselves in the he/man language and so in the imagination 'man' is not incorporating woman<sup>148</sup>). Tracy's account shows that masculine language does have an impact on women priests, and even though it may be downplayed by some, it does not go unnoticed. Masculine generics have the power to generate masculine meaning, yet the extent to which women priests are prepared to engage in daily acts of subversion to disrupt this meaning is variable and is complicated by how they see their priestly role and how they relate ecclesialogically to the ontology invested in some texts.

There appear to be two competing forces at work as women negotiate the liturgy. To belong in one sense for the woman as a priest is to be invested in hierarchically authorised text that serves to anchor the role of the priesthood in ritual, but at the same time the masculine orientation of the text is exclusionary. Some interviewees explained they were attracted to a ministry in the Church of England precisely because of its liturgical tradition, and as I discussed in Chapter 4, the sharing of such a tradition brings its own belonging capital as a priest. Carol, whilst hinting there may be more liberal environments to be found in the Church, sums up the context:

If you're in the kind of Church of England church who take seriously the fact that you have authorised liturgy there's only so much you can do with the liturgy before it becomes unauthorised [. . .]. Freedom isn't necessarily yours to mess too much.

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<sup>148</sup> Spender offers examples of this from thirty years ago, however, very recently Lord Ashcroft said, on a UK national radio news programme 'the voter and his family'. This is an example of how men sometimes only envisage the male in masculine generics.

It is the authority invested in liturgy by the Church hierarchy that fixes the words and the images that accrue masculine meaning. However, this same authorising power can also call into being modern text that is deliberately inclusive. Drawing again on Bourdieu (1984 [2010]), the process of infusing text with legitimacy is tied to ownership of 'doxa' – the rules of belonging. At the same time, it is the very existence of liturgical authority that attracts some of the interviewees to the Church of England and with this comes the acceptance that the power to change its use of language lies within the hierarchy of the Church and not with women (or male) clergy themselves. To 'mess' with liturgy is not necessarily seen by women priests as a positive intervention and its authorised nature competes with the notion of actively changing exclusive language. Because of the power invested in liturgy's role in delivering, in ritual, certain affirmations and ontological changes, there is a reluctance to deviate from the given text. Louise points this out, stating that it would be dangerous to alter *ad hoc* the baptismal liturgy, for example, as it would allow the validity of the baptism to be questioned. So, there are some circumstances where actively intervening to change fixed text is seen as risky and could undermine other ways in which women priests establish their belonging in the delivery of authorised ritualistic words.

As an organisation of words, liturgy fulfils a purpose in the creation of social processes – institutionally sanctioned words make things happen (Turner, 2013).<sup>149</sup> This has a deeper impact upon meaning-making than the words of hymns or even biblical text (which can be hermeneutically mitigated). As Turner argues, liturgical words used in ritual act to solidify meanings in social processes. This is problematic for those who are excluded by how words accrue meaning. If authorised words make things happen, then it is vital who and what is represented by those words. Carol, being in a civil partnership with another female priest, highlights how words that have legal status are formed to manifest a social process and social meaning in heterosexual marriage, reifying her own exclusion. There is little freedom to object, even when this social process damages her own belonging:

The preface to the weddings, that you have to legally read, as in it's not a legal wedding if you don't read it out, is all about men and women and it's very gendered and it's kind of the purpose of marriage is procreation and it's very gendered even for a straight couple who are getting married. But when you're

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<sup>149</sup> I wonder if Turner is narrowing the epistemological gap between the discursive and the ontological, a 'settlement' between the two, as Hekman (2008) describes such work. In sacramental ritual words are seen to carry the power to generate ontologies.

then aware of who else might be in the congregation and you've already got this kind of social sense that people have that the Church is homophobic and all the rest of it, and now marriage in this country isn't just for a man and woman, so, but that can't be changed, it has to be read.

Carol highlights how organised words are about organised power and as I argued in Chapter 4, there is another liminality in the making for Carol in the privileging of heterosexual marriage presented as a sacrament (since she is Anglo-Catholic, this is her understanding of the marriage ritual). How liturgy can construct inclusion and exclusion through the formation of social practice represents (male) power. Liturgical power within a ritual context makes words matter; the connection between who utters authorised text within ritual context is at the centre of the meaning given to the priesthood. Changing liturgical wording because of individual conscience is a subversive act but is subject to authoritarian control because of how liturgical language 'brings things about' (Turner, 2013, p.288). Liturgy is perceived to have the power to create a state of being (Kruks, 2001), to achieve something ontological, and this runs alongside how liturgical language actively establishes a norm that acts as gatekeeper to subjectivity within the Christian symbol system. For Carol, liturgy and her inability to deviate from it continues to prop up and legitimise heteronormativity and she raises the point that inclusive language is only one part of challenging fixed text; discourses are supported and fed by authorised words in liturgy. A recent proposal to Synod for a liturgy of welcome for trans people (Davies, 2018b)<sup>150</sup> suggests that some clergy are alive to this sociological (and spiritual) process built into liturgical words. The potential for liturgical words to provide subjectivity is recognised by those who lobby for change. Power over such fixed words, however, resides within the hierarchy of the Church. The effect that Church-sanctioned language has on what people believe about sex and gender is recognised by Ramshaw (1995) who explores the public and private religious expression in the body of believers. She writes: 'Not only might the words, whether a millennium old or coined yesterday, be inappropriate, unhelpful, or even heretical, but classic formulations, ingrained deeper than critical thought, may prove to be no longer acceptable' (p.2). Words repeated multiple times lay down ideas about gender at deep levels that often defy conscious scrutiny. Women priests can begin to agitate for

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<sup>150</sup> In 2015 a proposal was submitted to Synod that liturgy be formulated to confirm gender identity of trans people (Davies, 2015b). Whilst Synod overwhelmingly favoured this idea, it was rejected by the House of Bishops (Davies, 2018b). This reveals that collective pressure is a complex dynamic, despite the democratic governance arrangements of the Church. (The solution was the drawing up of new guidance for the use of existing renewal of baptismal vows for trans people).

change in the fixed language, though the desire to do so is made complicated by a broad range of attitudes to liturgy and individual acts of resistance may be curtailed by the relationship with congregations.

### *6.2.1 Personal and public activism*

Women priests who express a personal conviction to change androcentric language in liturgy are often conflicted about the lengths to which they might go to publicly engage with campaigning for inclusive language. Such reticence has been a topic of research. Robbins (2001), for example, reviews studies from the 1980s and 1990s in the US and UK that suggest women clergy were likely to privately support a change in written language used by the Church but were cautious about, and protective of, congregations who are traditionally-minded. In my research, several interviewees talked about the private ways they change words, editing the masculine language in hymns as they sing along in church, a form of personal resistance enacted in public but avoiding being seen to demand action from others. Beatrice told me, 'I'll sing at the top of my voice the female equivalent, but mostly I just say, let people sing what they want to sing'. The nature of the priesthood requires a pastoral approach, though it may also be that women priests feel reluctant to publicly pursue language change if it is seen as a female complaint, and association with feminist agendas, as I discussed in Chapter 4, raises suspicions. I wonder whether concerns about androcentric language are framed as secondary female complaints and that efforts to produce woman-centred liturgies and symbols are still marginalised because of an unacknowledged literalness and timelessness in liturgical and ecclesiastical language that provides safety (Morley, 1988).

Morley's (1988) essay on liturgy and danger uses the real-life scenarios of the Greenham Common women's protest and the illegal Eucharist services in England presided over by women ordained abroad to explore how female ownership of liturgical practices both expresses and generates the risk of female marginalisation. The context for women priests today is different because they have a (partial) mandate to perform liturgy reserved for priests, and yet many women priests still express a sense of risk in challenging androcentric language and imagery publicly and often put their discomfort with masculine language to one side in ministry. Tracy, for instance, would 'love to be more radical', but takes her cue from her congregation. She does add though, that 'maybe we're too compliant'. There is evidence of desire to intervene in how the Church uses language, but the ability to effect change is muted by external forces. Valerie explains: 'at the end of the day I have to lay

aside according to what [the congregation] want' and this sentiment is echoed by several interviewees. Even where a woman priest has strong views these are mitigated by the authority of the text and the needs of the congregation, as Rachel, an Anglo-Catholic priest, states: 'I shouldn't be in your face. So, I sort of subsume that, but try as far as I can to work with integrity, respecting my views, what's written on the page, and what they're expecting'. Where this text is at variance with women's need for representation, the authority of the institution and the desire to be faithful to the wants and needs of congregations work against the political actions a woman priest might take to ensure she is represented on the written page.

Some of the anxiety around words and how women are represented in liturgical text may have diminished because of the introduction of inclusive language in modern versions of the liturgy.<sup>151</sup> Efforts to eliminate the more obviously sexist language in official liturgies (Francis and Robbins, 1999; Walsh, 2001) indicate the discourse of inclusive language is finding reception in the institution, due largely, some argue, to feminist consciousness-raising both inside and outside the Church (Furlong, 1991; Burns, 2010). However, the thread that weaves through the stories of the women I interviewed is the fear that some congregations are sensitive – even hostile – to changes in language. Carol, now a chaplain but with parish experience, suggests noticeable change is unlikely to be received well in some places: 'if you just suddenly change all the liturgy to use female words instead of male, your church, your congregation, will just leave'. There is a perceived resistance from congregations that acts as a barrier to women priests to act out and play with ideas of what being female in the Christian linguistic economy can look like. This of course may be less an objection to feminine representation in text than a feeling of insecurity if traditional authorised text is used as a site to introduce ideological ideas. Melinda's story typifies the sorts of resistances women clergy face if attempts are made to introduced even gentle change:

There was a big row in the church [. . .] the vicar changed to a new inclusive language version of hymns. And we had to have a sort of public meeting about

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<sup>151</sup> The *Book of Common Prayer* was first published in 1549 and remains, for some churches, the main set text for services – this is the only permanent authorised liturgy of the Church. After experimenting with modern liturgies, the *Alternative Service Book* was introduced in 1980 and replaced in 2000 with *Common Worship*. Revisions to the modern services are authorised by the House of Bishops submitting proposals to Synod and two thirds of each House (Bishops, Clergy, Laity) must agree (Church of England, n.d). *Common Worship* has given the Liturgical Commission (the internal body responsible for drafting liturgical text) an opportunity to adopt inclusive language.

it and in the end, she came up with a compromise [ . . . ]. Just occasionally it's very, very hard to inclusivise something.

This story reveals the fears of women priests about generating conflict over language change. Melinda's scenario features the hymnal, which is not subject to the same strictures as liturgy, nor does it have the same ritual purpose as liturgy (though hymns do have a ritualistic role), but there is comfort and security in the familiar and the traditional. Louise recognises the difficulty in pursuing change: 'I think people's spirituality becomes very bound up in the forms they know and there's been a long period in the Church, mucking about with things. Which I think can be quite unsettling for people. So, it's tricky'. There are risks for women priests in being seen to impose changes in gendered language on congregations and women priests are inclined to see resisting androcentric language as a personal agenda rather than a public one. As in Melinda's account, those women who do pursue language change as a matter of ministry are sometimes required to negotiate the dreaded church row. The institutional imperative to keep and grow congregations, coupled with the pastoral and servanthood tropes that are associated with priesthood, mitigate against assertive action on the part of women priests who seek to publicly challenge androcentric language.

### *6.2.2 Liturgy as a cultural object*

Congregations with strong connections to tradition and heritage of the Church often favour the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), which retains the masculinised language that modern liturgies attempt to eliminate. Whilst some interviewees prefer not to use the BCP because of the masculine generics it contains, there is a fondness for the traditional liturgy amongst many 'committed Anglicans' (Francis, Robbins and Astley, 2005), who feel that the familiar, but archaic, format assists in their spiritual experience of the church service. Turner (2013) examines how the BCP was forged in the crucibles of the Reformation and the English Civil War and so is imbued with a collectivised sense of Protestantism and Englishness. For Turner, its history suggests that the BCP is 'the product of a struggle within the symbolic field for authority' (pp.291-292), making it a cultural object that has meaning attached to it beyond the arrangement of the words. The perceived need for its preservation means that its universalising masculine language is also preserved. As a historical liturgical text, the BCP contributes to a deeply-felt sense of identity for congregations, held together by the nostalgia of heritage and tradition. As Bell (1992) states: 'disagreements over ritual can be as fierce or as casual as those over honour or artistic beauty' (p.80). Some women priests

are also attached to the BCP for the same reasons, making allowances for its masculine language. Julia, for example, is interested in the aesthetic of liturgy:

I'm aware of the fact that there are some situations where total inclusive language is difficult to incorporate [. . .] if I have to choose between totally inclusive language and beauty, rhythm, and poetry, I will go for the rhythm and poetry.

Julia is expressing an idea that appears in other interviews, that modern liturgy does not offer the same aesthetic as the 'beauty' of the BCP: masculine semantic dominance becomes moot. Olive is a musician and compares the conserving of traditional liturgy to that of cathedral buildings – to modernise the BCP is to lose an inherent aesthetic. For her, 'the vocal settings are [. . .] beautiful musical entities in themselves and that's why that liturgy hasn't changed [. . .] you can't really mess with that. Well, if we do, we wreck the poetry'. Clare, who has charge of five parishes, two of which are committed to using the BCP, identifies an association with traditional language with spirituality: 'it's just that they like the poetry of it and that's almost like that's how it was written by God'. This comment reveals there is a cultural dynamic that divides her churches that can be interpreted as aligning modern, inclusive language with the unpoetic and less spiritual, and archaic language (though 'ridiculously gendered' in Clare's words) as poetic and spiritual; historical *androcentric* language is perceived as an active ingredient in spirituality. Disrupting this dynamic for the purposes of allowing fuller representation turns the debate into an equation that pitches female subjectivity against what is spiritual. On the surface, these alignments may not be about gendered language, however, at a deeper level attachment to this liturgy represents attachment to the dualisms that construct male transcendence and female immanence. Inclusive language (that intends to allow representation of the female, though I critique this notion shortly) is a worldly, unspiritual concern and androcentric language (because of its historical nature) is the language of the transcendent. For some interviewees, then, forms of liturgy are cultural objects not open to change and scrutiny as other texts might be and belonging to a tradition generates additional sites of meaning-making that complicate issues around changing masculine language.

The historical context in which the BCP sits allows some women priests to see masculine language as having weaker meaning than it would in modern language; its archaic nature allows its androcentric meaning to be placed in the past. This leaves room for meaning to

be influenced through how it is delivered, and by whom. Alice, for example, enjoys using the BCP and cares about how it is delivered:

The thing about BCP is that lots of people do it, but people don't do it properly. That sounds arrogant, but just in the sense that if you look at the liturgy, and if you studied it like we do at college then you realise what a dog's dinner people make of it [ . . . ] I don't find it particularly helpful to change language, and I also think: where are our markers then? How can you tell how far you've come if you don't know where you've been? I think that's an important thing as well. To be able to say I can cope with this language because I know where it belongs and I know where we are now so I'm looking back from a place of strength and able to say that this is a part of our Church, a part of our tradition that I'm not going to ignore but not going to allow to have any negative effect [ . . . ] people were shocked that I did the straight BCP communion, as a woman. I think, good! Because they look at me and they hear that, and they see that and then they see me, and I think that's good for people. I belong here in all of it, in the past and the present and the future. I belong in the past as well, I'm almost reclaiming that.

Alice exerts control over masculine language and expresses a sense that her femaleness subverts meaning as she draws attention to the androcentric tone of liturgy. This allows the meaning to become fluid without it being perceived as an act of conscious protest. The crux of this story is that Alice belongs in all of it – the tradition, the priesthood, and in the masculine language. She can place this language into historical context, a context that she owns despite the long exclusion of women, and this also gives her the opportunity to contrast it with today's progress in attitudes towards inclusive language. The 'shock' that her allegiance to the BCP causes in others is a misunderstanding of her approach, which is not a collusion with androcentric thought, but a subversion of it. The BCP is not alienating for Alice since it allows her to emphasise her belonging, even as she is highlighting her exclusion in the language the liturgy employs. She is resistant to the impact masculine language might have on her but expects the sight and sound of her femaleness handling masculine language to have an impact on those present. She does not fear masculine language, she controls it, and changing the language would weaken her position. There is also evidence here of the double-edged nature of women priests' relationship to liturgy. Alice is rebellious in her use of the BCP because she is female, and she resists the expectation that she will actively reject its sexist tone. On the other hand, Alice's

congregations may also hold her to account for her choice of liturgy where promoting inclusive language becomes inappropriately political. Alice refuses these discourses but uses the BCP to strengthen her position in the tradition and her position as a woman who is a priest. I see much of what Alice says here as an act of subversion: she is rebellious by embracing the BCP and she is rebellious by using it to assert her belonging in the priesthood as a woman.

What is striking about Alice's account is that she understands she brings a different set of meanings, a 'register' as Spender (1985) calls it, to the speaking of the liturgy. Feminist examination of how language is part of a systemic androcentric construction of meaning includes the notion of a male 'register' in public discourse – that is, 'meaning and the form in which the meaning is expressed [. . .] has been encoded by men' (Spender, 1985, p.78). This dovetails with Olive's story of being told to elocute her voice (p.174): Alice is demanding listeners obtain their pitch from the female voice. The idea that public speech is owned by men means that women bring meaning-making to their delivery of androcentric text because they are women. Since women have traditionally been excluded from the development of Church text (and theological discourse in general) it is formed from the worldview of men and as Spender elucidates, this gives an androcentric wash to an entire symbol system. A woman priest reading the same text as a male does not deliver the same meaning. Alice knows this intuitively and uses this difference in 'register' to highlight the androcentric nature of the text and her own place in the Church. This is her subversive act.

### *6.2.3 Neutrality in language*

Looking more closely at the interviewees' stories about language, the inclusive wording of the modern liturgy tends to de-emphasise the masculine and use 'neutral' vocabulary, a smoothing over of difference. There is a distinction between the attempt to find neutrality and the introduction of feminine language as a balancing device. If she/woman language were to be used as universal (to include men), Spender (1985) explains, this would be in such violation of deeply embedded, yet sexist, semantic rules that it would simply not make sense. It is the very semantic basis of androcentric language that renders women invisible: 'for women to become visible, it is necessary that they become linguistically visible' (Spender, 1985, p.162). Female inclusion in liturgy using gender-neutral words adds more subtle shades to masculine language that represent the female only obliquely and mask the differences some women clergy are attempting to explore. In using neutral language, women are represented through linguistic absence. 'Inclusive' language only represents the

male subject and that without the feminine grammar being explicitly used, the only way the female is representable is as 'Other of the Same', as Irigaray (1993 [2002b]) postulates women become in the masculine paradigm. Karen is a priest who enjoys her feminine performativity and being visible as a mother. She sees that difference is to be revealed, not diminished, and it is not a question of minimising the masculine as universal but about introducing the feminine. She states: 'I look at gender as created by God [. . .] so I think our language should reflect the duality in which we were created'. This is a significant position, since Karen not only sees difference as binary and divinely ordained, but also sees the need to have this difference reflected in language. She does not see the neutralising of gendered language as the end goal of semantic activism:

I don't believe we should avoid gendered language as in to always use neutral, but I think we should be in a place where we can quite naturally use female imagery as well as male imagery [. . .] but I think gendered language is good so long as we use them both. It's not good if we use one and decide the other is not acceptable. But I don't think we should go for neutral all the time because human beings aren't neutral.

Karen wants to *reveal* gender difference in language. Sameness, promoted by so-called neutral language, misrepresents what she perceives as human sex and gender difference. This is inextricably linked to the symbolic for Karen. Whether she is conscious of difference being constituted as Other of the Same is a deeper question that is difficult to answer, however, this view of being inclusive through binary gendered language, rather than minimising masculine language, is an interesting contrast to the notion that inclusive language and gender-neutral language are one and the same. Karen's position is close to that of Spender (1985) and Radford Ruether (1983) who challenge whether the visibility of women in the words that are used can be achieved by simply declaring words as neutral. Karen's views have implications for how inclusive liturgy is received. That language can be de-gendered and made neutral is currently a dominant approach, but Karen's comments indicate some women priests wish their sex and gender to be linguistically visible, not masked by neutrality.

### 6.3 'What Are We Going to Call You?': Words That Are 'Sticky'

We are priests, but we are other [. . .] Priest unspecified. Priest female.

Suzanne, Chaplain.

I am interested in how 'sticky' words and images become when used by women priests in their attempt to rebalance gendered asymmetry in language. Here, I am borrowing from Ahmed's (2004) theory of how words and meanings circulate to become 'sticky signs' (p.91), which gain their adhesiveness through repeated use in certain contexts. Words belonging to the priesthood have traditionally circulated amongst men and only recently are they being applied to women. Hearing the words 'Reverend', 'Vicar', and 'Father' evokes varying degrees of masculine meaning in the imagination, relating to Spender's (1985) description of the male conjured in the imagination by masculine generics. The entry of women into the episcopate challenges the use of the title 'Father in God' for bishops, and as this is written in Church canon, Podmore (2015, p.xiii) argues, this language creates female bishops as anomalous rather than their existence contributing to a changing set of meanings for the title. The sense of the unchanging meaning of the word 'Father' is a good example of the process that Ahmed (2004) explores: the more words are part of a chain of meaning-making, the more they may come to 'stick' and bind meaning. In the case of 'Father in God', commentators such as Podmore argue that the meaning cannot be shifted to include the female as bishop. Similar issues arise in the stories of women priests, indicating that this 'stickiness' is yet to occur in their naming. The repetitive circulation of words and the patterns of meaning-making that cause adhesion to people and things also cause blockage, according to Ahmed, preventing a shift in meaning. This is the case with some of the titles women priests explore as they seek ways of gaining parity with male priests through how they are named. Words like 'Father' and 'Mother' are examples of Ahmed's 'sticky signs' that may not easily be unbound from masculine and feminine meanings, or from the transcendent and the immanent, respectively. In the previous chapter, I explored how female bodies interact with signs and symbols and in considering 'sticky signs' there is also a relationship with the body – can a female body make the word 'Father' stick? Can a male body make the word 'Mother' stick? When women priests are faced with the question 'what are we going to call you?' they are faced also with resistances and solid adhesions of meaning that make their own naming a complex process. The question 'what are we going to call you?' for a woman priest is gendered, political, and ideological.

How women priests in the Anglo-Catholic tradition negotiate titles – such as ‘Father’ – is a language debate I had not considered before it was raised in the interviews. It is an important part of the hailing process I discussed in Chapter 4 and is also entangled with gendered meanings that accrue around titles in the priesthood. Women priests sometimes invest in the title ‘Reverend’ to establish gender neutrality, seeing it as a useful title that does not mark them out as female. Alice, for example, sees value in the ability to avoid the Mrs/Miss/Ms titles that differentiate: ‘I like that title [Reverend] because it’s gender-neutral and I enjoy it in a shop or on the phone or something’. However, words such as ‘Reverend’ still retain the power to conjure the male in the imagination and some interviewees have experienced the surprise that a female Reverend elicits. This word belongs to the ‘positive semantic space’ of the male, a notion that Spender (1985) discusses as a way of maintaining the linguistic invisibility of women, who are given ‘negative semantic space’. ‘Reverend’ may retain masculine meaning even though it is not grammatically male. The negative semantic space of women gives rise to linguistic impertinences. Pauline, for example, has been called ‘vicaress’ when ‘people didn’t know what to call you’ and Olive jokes that she has been called ‘vicarette’ when her title was uncertain. Both these words use a suffix which has a ‘weakening, diminishing and trivialising effect’ (Weatherall, 2002, p.24) and such language-play is rooted in resistance to shifting meaning away from the male. ‘Vicar’ is imaginatively male, and a ‘vicaress’ is a differentiating term that prevents women from inhabiting masculine semantic space. C.S. Lewis (1948) in his opposition to women’s ordination saw ‘priestesses’ as dangerous and belonging to a different religion (see footnote 17) which reveals how words can be ideologically masculine to the detriment of women.

So, certain titles are dogged by masculine meaning and there are times when language is used to diminish the female priest. What my research reveals is that women clergy do not always have access to the same meanings and status attached to titles: they do not occupy the same semantic space. Some women priests seek to deconstruct this semantic disparity. Priests in the Anglo-Catholic tradition are often called ‘Father’<sup>152</sup> in the Church of England and how women priests in the same tradition relate to this type of nomenclature may provide clues to how much the priesthood is formed around the gendered meaning of certain words. The title of ‘Father’ is part of a historical male priesthood and it is in such language, according to Turner (2013), that a collective understanding of social roles is

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<sup>152</sup> In other traditions in the Church of England Father is not generally used as a title.

stored; if the word is given male meaning, then the perception of the role is entangled with this male meaning. In other words, if 'Father' means male, then the meaning of priesthood attached to it is male. If women priests can successfully re-designate meaning attached to the title of 'Father' and own it for themselves, this may indicate the symbolic life of the priesthood is pliable and fluid enough to overcome the liminal status that I have argued is generated by the structural life of the Church. Una has a female colleague who she believes is consciously troubling the gendered nature of titles:

She insists on being called 'Father'. Now, I've never come across it before, and I have to say to be honest it freaks me out a bit. But I've got used to it now and if that's what she wants to be called, I'll call her that. She's been a priest for quite a long time, but she has very interesting views on gender and things which we've only just begun to explore.

Though she sees the appropriation of the male title as unusual, Una has come to see it as a way of challenging existing notions of gender in the priesthood. Her colleague is politically ahead of her time, since explorations of gender are at the early stages in the Church. What is interesting about Una's story, though, is that the use of the title 'Father' by women priests generates a disturbance in meaning and is seen as a political act; the debate around gender is still in its infancy but is being stimulated by female priests consciously and actively challenging the meanings attached to priestly titles.

Women are at a semantic disadvantage, a 'minus male' in language (Spender, 1985). The scenarios presented by the interviewees suggest that any choice made by a woman priest in how she is addressed, whether it be 'Mother', 'Father'<sup>153</sup> or first name, can generate contradictory meaning. A woman being referred to as 'Father' decouples the title from its masculine meaning and from the exclusive ownership of the male priest, but she may be open to the criticism of assimilation, of being the honorary male. If the woman priest adopts 'Mother' as a title, she may be compromising her parity by using a hierarchically weaker gendered word – one that is not strongly associated with the priesthood<sup>154</sup> but is

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<sup>153</sup> One of the interviewees is a military chaplain and explained that she technically should be called Padre. However, she offers people a choice between her first name, ma'am and Padre to alleviate any embarrassment where there may be some uncertainty and hesitation. As these are military-specific terms I have put this to one side for this part of my discussion.

<sup>154</sup> 'Mother' is associated with being a nun, and this does put some women priests off using the title. Karen, with good humour, resists this association; 'there's one member of our choir who insists on calling me Reverend Mother. And I will laugh and say, "I'm not a nun, you know"'.

associated with reproduction and the maternal. Using 'Mother' recognises sexual difference in the Irigarayan sense where it is derived from meanings *outside* the masculine paradigm, allowing 'Mother' to accrue meaning that establishes parity with its masculine counterpart. It is the binary nature of these gendered titles that creates ambiguity in meaning for women priests. It is not only the choice of titles that women clergy must confront, but also whether they 'stick' (Ahmed,2004). The power to *allow* a title to adhere can be dispersed amongst others who may decide what titles may or may not be used for a woman priest.

### 6.3.1 *On first name terms*

Before exploring further how women choose 'Father' or 'Mother' as titles, I want to examine how women priests (especially those in the Anglo-Catholic tradition where titles are more common) circumvent this choice and decide to be addressed by their first name. Julia, for example, an Anglo-Catholic, refuses to use a title, avoiding the binary choice, and in doing so there is a subversion of the clerical hierarchy. She arrived at a new parish and needed to negotiate the use of titles: 'They struggled with what they were going to call me because they were used to calling their male clergy "Father"'. I insisted that they call me by my Christian name. They struggled with that'. This comment reveals how congregations are sometimes ill at ease with how women priests semantically fit. In Julia's case there is further resistance over the use of her first name. Whilst this may be an issue of overcoming familiarity with tradition, Julia is using the opportunity to reject a formal title. Her stance is revealing and taps into a (potentially feminist) distaste for hierarchy. The option to reject a gendered title and fall back on first names is also a response to the confusion caused by the female priest confronting the rigid, blocked meaning of 'Father'. Rachel, like Julia, found herself dealing with disapproval that she was female which compounded the semantic disruption she created:

The wife of the previous vicar, who didn't approve, she said, 'but what are we going to call you?' So, I said 'you can call me "Mother" if you want'. 'We can't call you "Father,"' she said. 'Well, you can call me "Mother" if you want, but I would rather you call me Rachel'.

The explicit refusal by others to confer the masculine title on Rachel is not the crux of her story, though it is a punitive use of language by someone who 'didn't approve' even though Rachel had not asked for the title of 'Father'. What is significant is Rachel's rejection of any

gendered title and, as with Julia, the insistence on the use of the first name subverts the hierarchical character of priestly titles.

The question 'what are we going to call you?' in Rachel's story is highly indicative of the androcentric shape of the priesthood (we know what to call a male priest, but we do not know what to call a female priest), that has not been deconstructed in preparation for women's entry into the clergy. There has been no systemic cultural shift and each woman priest must negotiate the naming language in her own context. This question – 'what do we call you?' – frames the woman as anomalous. Without an obvious identity, she is anonymous and differentiated from the male priest. The title 'Father' has a masculine history, which does not seem to be easily given over to women. Is there a fear that a female Father will drain the word of its authority? Is it the linguistic equivalent of female presence weakening the institutional status of the priesthood? Given the asymmetry of power built into the masculine titles in the priesthood insisting on the use of the first name by women priests is a subversive act. They are setting their priesthood on a different footing that refuses the binary and hierarchical title, decoupling their authority as priest from the language framework that creates women as interlopers.

One interviewee is more explicit about wanting to disrupt the hierarchy of titles. She has the title of Canon,<sup>155</sup> which frees her from the debate over gendered titles, however she is intent on challenging hierarchical naming:

I insist on being called [first name]. As I'm a Canon, when I started working in [place name] parish, the vicar was pretty high church, and he was very glad I got the Canon handle because he wanted to be called 'Father', his curate was called 'Father'. He was very pleased he could say 'you can ask Canon [first name]'. [. . .] I don't tend to use 'Father' for priests who like it. I will use it for the Archbishop.

These comments are about challenging the structural arrangement that is embedded in the naming system. This interviewee disrupts this system by refusing to use 'Father' for male priests (reserving it only for the highest office) and her insistence on the use of her first name is to resist the semantic difficulties involved in naming female priests. The male priest in this story fears that his title of 'Father' will be compromised by the presence of a female

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<sup>155</sup> A Canon is a title that is conferred on priests if they become members of a chapter (group), usually belonging to a cathedral.

priest and he resists giving up his title because he assumes it cannot be conferred on a female. There is here a sense of the male fearing the loss of something in the semantic disruption a female priest presents and relief that the title of Canon provides an alternative that does not disrupt the meaning of 'Father'.

The practice of using first names is, though, on the negative side of a power asymmetry. Whilst some women priests eschew titles to disavow hierarchy, they may struggle to separate this from an existing form of asymmetrical power that is expressed semantically. Contrary to the use of first names as an act that displays personal power, Melinda's story suggests that this can be about the *lack* of access to power. In her case, a priestly title refuses to adhere to her – it is not 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2017) – and this means there develops an asymmetry of power in the use of her first name as she works alongside male clergy who have access to the title 'Father':

There is a difference because my vicar is 'Father' [name] and I'm [Melinda] and I don't really mind but I do notice it. I heard of one church, it was lovely, they had their first female curate with a male vicar, and he put a notice in the notice sheet when she arrived saying he was no longer to be known as 'Father', but to be on first names and so was she, which was really nice.

Whilst there is a structural power asymmetry between curate and vicar, Melinda is also highlighting the gendered power that comes with entitlement. She may not outwardly mind, but she notes the Father/first name hierarchy that is directly associated with her being female. Her female colleague experiences the kindly and ostensibly egalitarian act of her male incumbent giving up his title of 'Father' to redress the asymmetry. What does this act reveal? Not only does it suggest women clergy do not have the same access to titles as male clergy, the male incumbent is able to access power that allows him to give up his title. I am unconvinced that giving up the title of 'Father', whilst it shows goodwill, mitigates the differentiation that is revealed in semantics. I wonder whether this shows that, as Weatherall (2002) argues, the power of sexist language goes beyond the actual words and enters into social processes. The act of a male priest giving up the title 'Father' to be 'equal' with a female colleague does not solve the semantic sexism but highlights it. Whilst a male priest can give up the title of 'Father', he cannot shed the androcentric meaning that the

word connotes. This act of sacrifice, whilst losing one type of symbolic capital,<sup>156</sup> gains another type: he becomes an ally to the marginalised, a rescuer, and a man who 'leans out'<sup>157</sup> (see Winkler, 2015). The act of solidarity is itself an asymmetrical act. A female incumbent could not have done this same shedding of the title (since two women clergy would have access to the same titles). First names are connected to a hierarchy of meaning in naming, so the act of giving up a title can be perceived as an act of lowering to the level at which the female resides in the semantic hierarchy. This act does nothing to enable belonging of the female curate, since she remains without access to the same meaning-making. The title 'Father' still *belongs* to the male priest, just as the male priest inherently belongs in the priesthood. Melinda sees this as an act of kindness (and no doubt the male incumbent's motivations were kindly), yet this story describes how gendered meaning attached to a title is aligned with gendered power which goes beyond the word 'Father'. This argument begins to veer towards Lakoff's (1973) conclusion that changing language does not change the social arrangement, but there remains a gendered difference in access to power even when a male priest gives up a meaningful title.

### 6.3.2 *Titles and power*

Whilst some women priests use their first names to protest against the hierarchical character of the priesthood, other women see problems in being without a title. Alice is unhappy with the asymmetry that using a first name suggests:

I was very uncomfortable with 'Father' being the title and then me kind of tacked on without a title [. . .] that doesn't give me the same sort of equal status [. . .]. And I think because it's an equality thing, but not in an equal rights way, but what am I doing here in my role, what position do I need to hold in order to function as a priest with this congregation because I am in a parental role over you.

Alice recognises the hierarchy embedded in the titles that priests use and she, as a priest, requires to be seen in the same esteem as a male with a title. If she were not to take on

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<sup>156</sup> Symbolic capital is a Bourdiesian term, used to good effect by Mary Douglas (1992) in her discussion of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. She argues that symbolic capital in the priesthood is considered extremely valuable and is the currency on which the priesthood is based.

<sup>157</sup> To 'lean out' is a phrase that is currently in circulation to describe the actions of men who recognise and give up their male privilege. This still speaks of structural power and ultimately means women rely on men to resist using it against them. What happens if men decide not to 'lean out'?

'Father' or 'Mother' she realises her status is undermined. Her need for a title that suggests a 'parental' role not only reveals the nature of the priesthood for her, but also the differences in the meanings accrued by 'Father' and 'Mother'. The use of a first name renders Alice to the position of 'child' since the power of the parent-priest resides (partially) in the use of titles. For Alice, to be without priestly title undermines her priestly function. The contrast between Alice's views and those of other women priests who eschew the hierarchy of entitled priesthood is interesting; not all women priests seek to subvert clericalism or level out hierarchies.

Some women priests fall back on first name terms because 'Father' does not 'stick' to their femaleness and 'Mother' does not 'stick' to their priestliness, to return to Ahmed's (2004) discussion. What sticks to a person or a sign is bound up with emotion (particularly in Ahmed's account). In the case of women priests, it is the converse of stickiness that is underpinned by unconscious negative emotion when a woman priest finds titles sliding away from her. Melinda does not seem to have a choice about which titles stick to her and which do not:

I've already been introduced as Mother [Melinda]. I hate it to be honest [. . .]. It's not part of my self-image because I've never had children and don't intend to and actually find it quite hard. 'Father' for a priest has so much more tradition behind it and is so much more a neutral term, I think. Whereas 'Mother' is [. . .] I know a few women who have tried to get themselves called 'Father' instead which I think I prefer but it doesn't tend to stick. People don't use it. 'Mother' I don't like, so I always say, 'just call me [Melinda]'.

Since 'Father' refuses to stick to her as a female priest, it is not the neutral word she wishes it could be. The Anglo-Catholic tradition in which Melinda is invested has produced a priestly title that gains gendered value in the 'affective economy' (Ahmed, 2004) and it does not seem to be easily re-circulated to adapt to female priests. A woman called 'Father' is a direct challenge to the ecclesiologies that circulate in the opposing integrity, used to establish the masculine nature of the Apostolic Succession (Podmore, 2015), and this discourse may be the engine of meaning-making in the Anglo-Catholic tradition that creates ambiguity for women priests adopting 'Father' as a title.

The second aspect of Melinda's story is that the title 'Mother' is perceived to have gendered meaning that is reduced to reproduction and is exclusively tied to the female, and

for Melinda this signifies only the female who is a biological mother. The problems with 'Mother' as a priestly title are highlighted by other interviewees. For example, Sylvia, who does have children, also sees 'Mother' as suggesting meaning that is outside the priesthood: 'people will say to me, "what do we call you?" and I will say, "Anything but Mother. My children call me Mother when they're upset with me"'. For Sylvia, 'Mother' cannot be disconnected from its social and biological meanings. To allow women priests to explore their difference through titles without risking hierarchical disadvantage, 'Mother' must accrue meaning in parity with 'Father', which is not anchored to the biological reproductive function of the male. Melinda finds though, that 'Father' does not easily adhere and so she falls back on 'just call me Melinda', a sign of resignation that the priestly title to which she feels entitled by tradition is not accessible to her as a woman, rather than a deliberate decision.

Some women priests experiment with the title of 'Mother', attempting to invest it with priestly meaning. Returning to Alice's story, she is uncomfortable being without a title but does not want to inhabit the word 'Father', so she chooses to be known as 'Mother'. This runs the risk of not achieving parity because of the highly gendered set of meanings attached to the word, though Alice, who is a mother, understands the nuances embedded in this choice:

I suppose I can see why people do struggle with 'Mother'. I have a friend and she doesn't have children, she's single and a bit older than me and she will not be called 'Mother'. She doesn't want it because she thinks it's almost attributing to her something which she doesn't have and can't have, and somehow from that, I think that's painful for her. I have another friend who is married and they're unable to have children and she won't be called 'Mother'. There's still that sense of, even though we call plenty of priests 'Father', Roman Catholic priests who will never have children and they're 'Father'. And I think what needs to happen is a kind of widening of the meaning of 'Mother', an accepted widening of it, because it's happening.

Alice identifies the disparity between the two titles and that 'Mother' needs to be loosened from the social and biological meaning it carries if it is to be useful to women in the priesthood. There is a poignancy in Alice's description, where female pain is associated with the word 'Mother' because it is so tightly bound to motherhood itself. Not only is 'Mother' something that some women associate with pain, it also reveals the immanence attributed

to the female in contrast to the transcendent nature of 'Father' for the male priest who is not tied to embodied, physical parenthood. The 'sticky sign' (Ahmed, 2004) of the mother (biological, domestic, fleshy, and immanent) contrasts with the 'sticky sign' of the father (spiritual, symbolic, priestly, and transcendent). Alice is proposing that the meaning of the word 'Mother' needs to change, to be disconnected from the biological and reproductive and to be invested with symbolic value in the priesthood in the same way that 'Father' is. So, the use of 'Mother' for priested women is contentious: some interviewees encourage use of the title to divest it of unhelpful meanings, whereas others refuse it as a title because of the gender hierarchy it represents.

Clare, an Anglo-Catholic priest, reveals the crux of the semantic issues around titles. She has handed over the decision-making to her congregation to ensure there is 'stickiness'. She is, though, aware of what the differences are between gendered titles:

One of the community groups was a bit confused so it took upon itself to have a little meeting to decide what they were going to call me, and they decided 'Father' [Clare] was what I was going to be called. And I thought, 'Well, that's democracy'. It made sense because that was my tradition and my tradition, if women had been ordained sort of all along, I would have been Mother [Clare]. In the way that that developed. But I've never felt maternal particularly and I've never seen myself as 'Mother', I've never seen myself as 'Father' either, but it made sense if that's what you call your priest, then that's what I'm called. I mean now I'm just called 'Reverend'. That's what I would take, but I wasn't going to argue with that community, figuring that they needed to call me something and that was what it was going to be.

Clare manages to find adherence in the title 'Father' (although she seems to be more comfortable with the title of 'Reverend' and is not seeking the same parental meaning as Alice). She concurs with other interviewees that the title 'Mother' is too burdened with maternal meanings. The interesting argument Clare presents, though, is that had the priesthood always been owned and developed by both women and men, the title 'Mother' would have developed symbolic meaning in the same way as the title 'Father'. This brings us to a central argument: that the priesthood, and the language of the priesthood, has been developed according to masculine meanings and a masculine worldview. Women entering the priesthood are faced with the task of puncturing the positive semantic space of the male to adjust the meanings that have accrued around certain words. There are difficulties

in shifting away from androcentric meaning-making since the priesthood is locked into the Christian symbolic. How God is named is more contentious than how priests are named. There are deep connections between how the Christian symbolic is expressed in gendered terms and the organisation of gendered semantic space within the priesthood. Are women priests part of a process of disrupting masculinised meanings that have accrued around God as 'He'? Can God as 'She' deliver semantic and symbolic belonging for women in the priesthood?

## 6.4 The Word Becomes She

Sometimes [symbols] have an unrecognised power. Power hidden that we don't know about, but we react to.

Helen, non-stipendiary priest.

When the first female bishops were appointed in 2014 there were calls for the mainstream acceptance of feminine names and pronouns for God (Bingham, 2015; Khomami, 2015), which became a topic of informal discussions at senior levels in the Church (Thackray, 2015). Hilary Cotton, as Chair of Women and the Church (WATCH), added to the discussion, suggesting that the introduction of female bishops will have an impact upon women's lives in the Church 'only if God is she as often as she is he - because this is such a formative aspect of our church life, and a real bastion of sexism' (Davies, 2015a). Does this call for a shift in gendered language resonate with women priests? A survey undertaken at the time when women were first entering the priesthood in 1994 asked respondents about their attitudes to inclusive language referring to people and to God (Francis and Robbins, 1999). Whilst the majority were in favour of introducing inclusive language into liturgy and hymns, only a third felt feminine language to describe God was appropriate (p.189). The public debate may have moved on since 1994, but it does remain on the WATCH agenda (WATCH, 2015a). The interviewees for this project present a more complex set of attitudes to God-language. Arguing that the masculine hegemony of the Christian symbolic requires change to facilitate the full inclusion of women, Ramshaw (1995) suggests that such change is driven by 'prestigious speakers' and that 'not only articulate feminists, but also bishops, male theologians, prominent speakers and popular religious writers must abandon the divine *he*' (p.32, italics in original). In other words, she is proposing that there are those who have access to power over language that constitutes the divine, but also there are those whose voices can influence more than others: conversely, there are those who do not

have access to such power and whose voices are less influential. Are women priests amongst those who can influence religious discourse and the naming of the divine? The male monopoly of the meaning-making in the Christian symbolic is discussed in detail by numerous feminist commentators who argue that the feminine has been strategically overwritten in Judeo-Christian history (for example, Daly, 1973 [1995]; Spender, 1985; Engelsman, 1994; Slee, 2003). Feminine representation in the symbol system would establish a deeper and more symbolically justified belonging for women in the priesthood. However, do women clergy, in fact, have a desire to call God 'She'? Studies of attitudes to imagery and language have found evidence of a correlation between the masculinised Christian symbol system and the lowering of self-esteem in women who belong to a church (Aldredge-Clanton, 1992; Cartledge, 2009.<sup>158</sup>) By scrutinising the words they employ in relation to the symbol system, women priests may be at the vanguard of a process of dismantling the ways the female is denigrated through androcentric language, meaning, and symbols (Spender, 1985).

Two strategies for feminine representation in the symbolic are revealed by comments from two female bishops. Rachel Treweek, consecrated in 2015, calls for the elimination of all gendered pronouns for God, suggesting a search for gender neutrality in the symbolic (Sherwood, 2015; Grant, 2015). Libby Lane, consecrated in 2014, favours the use of feminine pronouns when referring to God (Bingham, 2015), highlighting the feminine in the divine and the need for positive feminine representation. Whilst there may be a good deal of overlap in the theology on which these approaches draw, they ask for different imaginings of the divine: one minimises gender difference but still challenges the dominance of the masculine, whilst the other aims to re-balance the gendered meanings within the symbolic divine by introducing feminine language. The latter makes the feminine visible, but it may also lead to the apotheosis of gender difference that is anchored to essentialist notions (Snively, 2003). Minimising gendered language may seem a way of minimising gender difference, however, feminist theologian Radford Ruether (1983) warns that gender neutral language and imagery is not neutral but perpetuates the male images that remain deeply embedded in the Christian imagination. This is echoed by Spender (1985), who argues that masculine meaning accrues around words such as 'God' so that language becomes imaginatively male, until femaleness is grammatically made visible.

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<sup>158</sup> Cartledge cites studies that found people who were more inclined to use inclusive God-language were more likely to be supportive of women priests. Could the corollary of this be that exclusively masculine language encourages the framing of women as unfit for the priesthood?

Although the official Christian doctrine is that God has no gender (Slee, 2003), 'He' is nevertheless, in language and imagery, couched in male terms and given attributes that are largely masculine (Spender, 1985; Cawley, 1992). The masculine language used to describe the deity (even if subconsciously) forms literal images of maleness (Slee, 2003). If the concept of neutrality in language is problematic, is referring to God as 'She' the only viable way for women priests to begin to break down the masculine dominance over meaning in the Christian symbolic?

#### 6.4.1 *Uncoupling meaning*

It may be possible to uncouple meaning from language. Words such as 'Father' in the divine sense may be open to new meaning-making, something which for Soskice (2007) is imperative:

As for feminists, myself among them, who find they cannot leave Christianity, must we accept the language of God's fatherhood? Is there not another way, a way in which the language of divine fatherhood may be detached from the male idol of a patriarchal religion? (p.73)

As in the act of women priests naming themselves as 'Father', Soskice is suggesting there can be a disarticulation of words from masculine meaning. Some interviewees explore language-use along these lines, though not always seeking to actively minimise masculine language within the symbol system. Olive, who identifies as charismatic Catholic, an unusual blend of traditions, is unenthusiastic about the use of feminine God-language:

What we don't want to do is have a denial of masculinity either, we don't want to list the ship too much to the other side, and I'm still wary, for example, of using 'she' as a pronoun for God.

Olive does, however, re-think the meanings attached to masculine taxonomy. Her trajectory *away* from feminised language for God, which she had embraced in her 20s, has led her to see the notion of calling God 'Father' as radical, viewing it as an intimate title, emphasised, in her view, when a *female* priest speaks it in public worship: 'I don't want to lose that [intimacy], I think it's important. I think there are other ways to make sure that women are included and perhaps having a woman up there saying "Father" helps'. Whilst Olive does not necessarily attempt to change the gendered meaning of the title, she is attempting some female public ownership of it and that the contrast of her femaleness

with the masculine image of God is a *positive* force rather than an exclusionary one – similar to Alice’s approach to the female priest publicly uttering masculine language in the liturgy. In Chapter 4 (p.111), Olive’s story showed how she easily traversed ecclesiological boundaries and I see her employing the same fleet-footedness in her approach to the language of the symbolic. God is ‘Father’, yet she believes the masculinisation of the title is disrupted to some extent by her priestly femaleness.

The attachment to ‘Father’ and male imagery for God is not uncommon amongst the interviewees. Melinda also sees ‘Father’ as an important title to use:

‘Father’ is in some way a privileged way of talking about God. I mean a very important way of talking about God. It might be that ideas about fatherhood need to change. But I wouldn’t want to make ‘Father’ into ‘Mother’ or ‘Parent’ in the Lord’s prayer, for instance.

The hint that it is the accrual of meaning on to the word ‘Father’ is important. Melinda is unwilling to simply replace masculine words for God but is interested in whether their meanings can be changed, what fatherhood means can be made more accessible to the female. How this might be achieved is unclear; however, the clues that Olive and Alice present are in the female presence in the priesthood, that is, a woman speaking the words publicly may influence how they are made to carry meaning. Denise is more explicit in how she distances ‘Father’ from exclusive masculine meaning: ‘I see ‘Father’ as male and female I suppose. I’ve always seen God the Father as male and female’. Whether this is a conscious decision to ensure ‘Father’ does not produce only the masculine in her imagination, or whether Denise de-masculinises the word on a less conscious level is difficult to tell. Declaring this as her understanding, though, is an outward resistance to male ownership of meaning, in similar ways to women priests being called ‘Father’.

There is no uniform belief amongst women priests that there is an imperative to change masculine God-language. Julia told me: ‘I’ve never had any problems with God being male’ and expressing in these terms gives God a gender. Beatrice is also comfortable with masculine nomenclature, although she is aware this is about familiarity. She explains: ‘I’ve always heard God talked about as “He” and always been quite comfortable with that, there probably is something in there that just lives with that and doesn’t question it’. Beatrice is conscious that a question *could* be asked but her lived experience has not produced such a question. She has discovered there are ways to de-emphasise gender in God-language, but

this is currently a personal exploration which she feels would not be wholly edifying for the congregation:

Where I heard 'Godself' being used, I quite like that, I liked that. That is a suggested way. Again, at the moment I think it would just, within the parishes I think it would draw attention when it's not necessarily that's what you want them to focus on. I think that also comes down to your own experience though.

There is a reprise of the theme of how the needs and attitudes of the congregation are placed before revealing personal explorations for many women priests, and what they privately consider may not be publicly aired. In Beatrice's case, she is lukewarm about whether masculine God-language requires constant challenge, a common position amongst the interviewees. The call from women bishops to trouble the androcentric language around the divine is not necessarily reflected in the views of women priests.

#### *6.4.2 Toxicity of the Father and the universal womb*

The rehabilitation of masculine language is not enough for some women priests and positive female words and images are required to allow women representation in the symbolic on more equal terms to the male. Feminist theologians have been attracted to Irigaray's exploration of the feminine divine to establish subjectivity for women, instead of operating within the masculine paradigm which imagines God in male terms. This calls for a more definite injection of words with feminine meaning. Green (2009b) argues there is a possibility that the patriarchal symbol system of Christianity could be, not the site of forgetfulness of the feminine, but the site of re-discovering sexual difference (see Armour, 2003, for further discussion). The need for women to have a separate subjectivity reflected in a symbolic feminine divine is elucidated by Irigaray, who argues, 'as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image, she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own' (Irigaray, 1993 [2002b], p.43). So, for theologians such as Green, who lean on Irigarayan ideas of sexual difference, the purpose of re-imagining the Christian God as feminine means that 'nature, corporeality, emotion and sexuality, all traditionally associated with the feminine, are affirmed in their sacramental significance, and can no longer be ignored or undervalued as less godlike' (Green, 2009b, p.48). This proposes that characteristics that have been traditionally handed to women be harnessed and reflected in the divine. There are issues with the binarisation of traits, and Irigaray's work on the feminine divine might be read as essentialist, but despite these problems, as Spender

(1985) argues, it may be worth risking the essentialist trap to make the feminine visible in language. The interviewees, however, suggest that the use of explicitly female words and images for the divine is fraught with inner conflicts and external pressures. Whilst some women priests express interest in exploring feminine imagery and feminine language to see if this makes a difference to how they see themselves in the priesthood, and as women in Christianity generally, there is little evidence of concerted action to publicly embrace God as 'She', as Bishop Lane hopes might be the case. There are, though, micro-interactions and everyday thoughts that create slippages in meaning that might become a cumulative influence.

Some interviewees have definite misgivings about masculine God-language. Alice objects to the hyperbole of male language for God: 'I think we need to move away from a masculine pronoun for God [. . .] we're going to have to open it up so we're not saying, "God is He". A capitalised "He" is not acceptable'. To invest 'He' with meaning as a name for the divine is marked out here as a damaging apotheosis of the male. 'He' with a capital is the ultimate in the male's elevation. It is this maleness within a pronoun-made-name that some interviewees see as potentially toxic for women. Pauline, for example, feels that freedom is needed to avoid male titles, such as 'Father': 'I was quite excited by almost the permission to use different language for God, that no, God doesn't have to be a father, that was liberating because my father wasn't much use'. The permission for women to be able to explore non-masculine terms seems ephemeral: who gives this permission? Female bishops may provide some freeing discourse, but I wonder whether this permission is generated amongst women clergy themselves. From wherever this permission is perceived to emanate, Pauline sees it as being freed from a toxic male title. Beatrice takes this idea of toxicity further:

For people whose experience of men is difficult, for people whose experience of father is difficult I can see absolutely how it's helpful and why you might want to change it. In my personal experience you know I always had a very good relationship with my dad, for me talking about God as Father is a helpful thing. I'm well aware for some people it isn't [. . .] And particularly if I was in a one-to-one situation with someone who found God as Father difficult, I would encourage them to think in different ways. I don't know how helpful I find it personally. I think for me personally God as Mother is more problematic for me. Because of my own personal experience. Although maybe for me as a

mother not so much. When I think about me as a mother. But I suppose I tend to think more in terms of parent rather than mother.

Whilst Beatrice begins talking about how the masculine title of 'Father' represents something damaging for some, she also applies this to her own experience, which leaves her with confused feelings about what the title 'Mother' has to offer. Beatrice begins to penetrate to the core questions about God-language and imagery, what purpose it serves and how it is connected to lived experience. This way of thinking about words and imagery leads to the recognition that the symbol system needs to be fluid and open to variation in meaning, which is achieved by making multiple words and images available to describe the symbolic. Beatrice herself is comfortable with Father as a title, but she understands that its meaning is neither universally understood in the same way, nor is it universally edifying. There is also a division suggested here between public and private discourse. Beatrice is 'not brave enough' to use liturgy that calls God 'She' in public, though she brings into play a dynamic openness in individual encounters to ensure words and imagery meet certain needs. In these circumstances, gendered language can be fluid. This may suggest permissions are not publicly and hierarchically available, but an individual woman priest may be quietly influential in her own micro-rebellions.

Wendy is consciously aware that masculine God-language can carry toxic meanings, though she believes using feminine titles for God is too radical:

I am conscious as someone who is leading worship, so when it's Mothering Sunday or whether we're talking about Father, actually to be sensitive to those issues with people who are [. . .] I think it's more of a consciousness for the people that I am leading worship for [. . .] if people struggle with it.

Wendy understands that masculine imagery and language is not always helpful, but she remains reluctant to use feminine equivalents. This is not uncommon amongst the interviewees, and there is a sense that they are trapped between meanings that words carry. On the one hand there is an awareness that masculine authoritative language can connote control and abuse, but on the other hand women priests often feel unable to use feminine language in its stead. Is there a sense that not only should masculine language be rehabilitated, but that feminine language also needs to be freed from the negative meanings that, as Spender (1985) argues, have been generated by patriarchal control over meaning in the Christian symbol system?

Una pinpoints the problems that arise in using female words such as 'Mother' and maternal imagery: 'it is a lovely image, but it just concerns me that we get so much of, it's the mother aspect of it and there's so much more to being female.' She is concerned that reifying the maternal reduces the female to the reproductive function. I suspect the ambivalence expressed by Una, and other interviewees, lies in the understanding that 'Mother' is not the symmetrical opposite to 'Father' and that such terminology may be as damaging and toxic as asking women to relate to a divine paternal persona. Motherhood, as Rich (1976) maintains, is a patriarchal institution that has not encouraged female actualisation, and Hampson (2002)<sup>159</sup> underscores the psychic baggage that the dominant notion of motherhood hands to women. God as 'Mother' does not necessarily offer a way into subjectivity, or a healthy relation to the divine, and this makes some women priests suspicious of the attempt to introduce a balancing set of images and metaphors that are based around the Mother. Una, whilst seeking to open the symbolic system, has experienced how difficult this exploration is for some and that the toxicity of 'Father' is matched by the unacceptable connotations of 'Mother':

We once did a Bible study on the Lord's Prayer<sup>160</sup> and it took us a long time to get past the first two words, because, not to put too fine a point on it, all hell broke out because there were people there that could not understand that 'Our Father' is really difficult for some people. But they were offended by the suggestion of praying the lord's prayer as 'Our Mother'.

The difficulty Una describes here is a distaste for the notion of feminising God by using 'Mother' as a name, rather than a protest over the issues a patriarchally formed notion of motherhood poses for women's subjectivity. This story illustrates the attachment to gendered taxonomy and how this reveals a great deal about human parental imagery and how this is related to the divine. 'Father' and 'Mother' have different connotations,

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<sup>159</sup> I use Hampson as an exemplar of feminist critique of motherhood as problematic for women's subjectivity because she embeds her discussion within a critique of the Christian context. Granted, Hampson rejects Christianity, but she does offer a detailed explanation of how all anthropomorphic language for God is damaging for women, since it encourages heteronomous relationships with the divine – something which does not contribute to women's subjectivity.

<sup>160</sup> This is the prayer that Jesus is said to have taught the disciples and is routinely used as part of Christian worship. Hampson (2002) builds an argument that, like the concept of monotheism itself, this prayer is patriarchal and hierarchical. Whether 'Mother' replaces 'Father' may be moot if one considers that the prayer, for Hampson at least, does nothing to contribute to self-actualisation or build human connections, but establishes the Kantian requirement for heteronomy.

asymmetrical in power (though both might be damaging to women's subjectivity), and just as some people are unable to connect in the intended way to 'Father' (the subtext being male abuse),<sup>161</sup> others are unable to countenance a 'Mother' as God. 'Mother' is not simply untraditional, it is offensive. There is also a recoiling from the notion that God could be feminised. Women priests, who may already be suspicious that 'Mother' is a dead end for female belonging in the Church, also face the abjection of the Mother as divine.

It is not simply the term 'Mother' that bothers some women priests, but also the associated reproductive imagery. Pauline, who is not a mother herself, sees the essentialist pitfalls in using maternal imagery to reflect femaleness in the Christian experience:

When I was living in the all-female community for a bit, we experimented with different liturgies that were written by women for women, used feminine language for God [. . .] to me it stopped being freeing and became constricting in the other way. This is the way we look on the experience of being female in the Church. And I wanted to be able to explore what it meant to me and it was just confining to have language about God being a mother [. . .] there was one particular psalm that we used that had a lot of womb imagery in it. And I have known since as, as far back as I can remember, that I have no interest in having children at all. Ever. And so, womb imagery is somewhere between meaningless and offensive as far as I'm concerned.

Pauline's comments take us back to the discussion in Chapter 5 which explored how the mapping of the female body imagery onto the divine symbolic system poses problems if the symbol is masculine. There may be a way of re-calibrating the symbolic so that the female body is fully representative and represented. Yet Pauline and Una raise the significant critique that maternal imagery is reductive and does not represent those women who are not mothers. The universalising of the womb is not, for Pauline, a cogent way of seeing the feminine in the divine but is rather a constricting and oppressive reification of the reproductive telos of the female body. Louise is also childfree and reluctant to use mother imagery. She believes 'motherhood's a bit dicey. Particularly as someone who isn't a mother biologically-speaking. And of course, the trouble with rich symbols is that they also

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<sup>161</sup> Hampson (2002) explores, anecdotally, how the Father-based concept of the deity in Christianity weakens the resistance (in both women as victims, and clergy as counsellors) to male domestic violence and abuse in the family. In this sense, the toxicity of the heteronomous relationship to God as 'Father' is clear.

pick up all kinds of very unhelpful baggage'. The interviewees are sensitive to the different sets of meanings attached to masculine and feminine parental language and imagery and some discuss this at length. What is clear is that the symbolic is not a set of abstract characteristics, but that 'Mother' and 'Father' have resonances within the women's own lived experiences.

#### 6.4.3 *Feminine – the authorised version*

Despite the problems associated with using feminine language and imagery to describe the symbolic divine, many interviewees feel able to use the maternal imagery that is validated in both biblical and liturgical text: that of a mother hen looking after her chicks.<sup>162</sup> Most of the interviewees reach for this imagery, phrased as a simile, since it is already part of the narrative available to them. This, as Hampson (2002) postulates, is the trick of theology, in that female/maternal traits are taken up into the (male) God, so that a 'motherly Father' is acceptable, whereas a 'fatherly Mother' is disavowed (p.177). Hampson goes on to state: 'The male God has appropriated to himself the characteristics of both sexes' (p.178). The need to have justification for female imagery that does not insinuate that God is female restricts the everyday use of the feminine and there is a general sense of ambivalence expressed by several interviewees. Louise relates to this point:

I don't know what would happen if I tried doing it every Sunday. I think in specific contexts it's OK. It's not really been a massive thing for me I'm afraid. I use Anselm's prayer about Jesus as a mother hen on occasion. I mean you can say what you like at Evensong. I don't think anyone would notice. Sometimes tempting to see how far you can push it.

Louise moves between rebelliousness and insouciance in her language activism, but she is aware that to make her pedagogical aims obvious and regular may attract unwelcome criticism. Although no-one notices what is said at Evensong, and this can be interpreted as a joke, this could be a buffer against public opprobrium; there are times and places where language activism can take place, but undetected. I wonder if the mother hen imagery is more accessible to women clergy because it is a simile and avoids the more radical notion that gendered characteristics are fused on to the Godhead; acting as a mother is not the

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<sup>162</sup> This is a biblical story (Matthew 23:37) where Jesus says he wishes to gather up the children of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks.

same as saying the divine *is* Mother and so whilst heavily relied on it does not satisfy the question of whether there is femaleness represented in the symbolic.

Such feminine symbolism that is external to the Godhead does not necessarily penetrate the core of the androcentrism of the symbolic. There remains the gendered imagining of the first person of the Trinity – God the Father. Alice, whilst she is comfortable with mixing masculine and feminine imagery, is experimenting with ‘Godself’ as drawing attention away from gendered characteristics, though she feels this is a clumsy way of linguistically framing the divine as non-gendered. Alice’s position is intriguing because she believes the symbolic already incorporates the feminine, arguing that this is obscured through masculine language and dominance in theological discourse. From Alice’s point of view, a She-God is not an insertion into the symbolic but a re-revealing. She sees women as already being on the *inside* of the symbolic system and works to bend language to reflect this: ‘because women are not outside of [the symbol system], but the way in which we express it suggested that women are outside it.’ She explores how God can be expressed using non-androcentric language and is willing to do this in public worship. Alice is one of the few interviewees to talk about an active strategy of publicly introducing ‘Godself’ and ‘She.’ This is a revealing position, since language and imagery are perceived as revelatory rather than constructing something new and from this Alice generates legitimacy in using feminine imagery and language. If the linguistic pool can be expanded, then a more complete, or a corrected, vision of the divine becomes accessible. This is the position Snavelly (2003) takes as she discusses how feminine language might be employed when building a picture of God. As an advocate of inclusive language, Snavelly seeks to make the Christian symbolic accessible to women, rather than reject it as a closed masculine system. By perceiving language, not as *constructing* a preferable symbolic, but as *revealing* (but never completely) what is *a priori* in the symbolic (the feminine), this is a defence against the fear of the feminine being a separate religious system and against the fear of public rejection of the feminine. I interpret Alice’s position in a similar way. The female is obfuscated in the development of Christian (male-dominated) theological language as opposed to a symbolic system that is constructed around the male excluding the female. This is important for women priests in their project to belong since it allows them protection from the notion of a closed androcentric system (see Hampson, 1996, for example), which permanently excludes them and keeps them in psychic, as well as structural, liminality. It may be that those women clergy who do wish to elevate female difference are more likely to invest in changes to the symbolic than those women who claim sameness.

#### 6.4.4 *The gender-neutral God*

Some women clergy express ambivalence towards introducing (or re-revealing) the feminine within the Christian symbol system and the preference may be to minimise masculine imagery and language that accrues gendered meaning. Tracy, for example, sees a non-gendered God as a radical and exciting project, but imaginatively challenging:

To make it genderless? Is it possible to imagine? We anthropomorphise God. We have to imagine something, God has personhood in a much more magnified way than we can possibly imagine. So, we stick a gender on there, because I imagine in pictures, I think most people do. I imagine, not necessarily a face, but a presence. Would it feel radical to de-gender? Yes, I think it would and I think it would be refreshing. Interesting to see where that led.

Tracy pinpoints the issue that women priests face, in that for them God has a 'personhood' that requires expression. Yet, for Tracy, this could be expressed without gender. The possibility of imagining personhood without gender is difficult. Butler (1990 [2007]) suggests there is a limit on what we can imagine in terms of gender, that there are constraints formed by cultural hegemony. I wonder if the symbolic divine generates the brakes on the imagination, since it is part of a symbolic system that helps to construct meanings around gender, the binary of male and female. Tracy recognises these constraints which make it difficult for the religious imagination to disarticulate gender from the relational aspects of how Christians perceive the divine. This allows language that describes the symbolic to remain laden with gendered meanings, particularly those with relational connotations, like 'Father'. Tracy prefaces this discussion by wondering how her lived experience both forms and is formed by the symbolic:

There's God and there's women? Do I feel othered? I've never yet come up against being shunted out because I'm a woman. I do imagine God as Father. Maybe I should spend more time thinking about what difference it would make thinking about God as Mother. That's going to be shaped by your own experiences and ideals.

Tracy realises the deep question to ask is whether the androcentric character of the Christian symbol system has a direct impact on whether she is othered as a woman and whether women are externalised. Although she has not experienced alienation because she is female, she asks: 'There's God and there's women?' Is this the same as asking: 'there's

the male and there's women?' Tracy is asking whether (the male) God acts as a pole for the masculine compass and altering the pole would alter how the compass of gender is aligned. Her reply to her own question reveals that she recognises there are strong links between experience and how the divine is imagined. She imagines God as Father but wonders how different the symbolic would be experienced if imagined as Mother, something she ties in to 'ideals'. Are these ideals of motherhood? Or of femininity? Is this the tension between masculine transcendence and feminine immanence being worked out through a female priest's everyday experience?

Whilst Tracy is open to exploring non-gendered imagery and mother imagery, there remains a reticence around language. Having discussed in the interview the need to be linguistically inclusive in human-language, she circumvents this same shift in language for the divine:

Saying 'He' or 'She' or 'He and She', it's just a mouthful, so I normally say 'Father'. It's just distracting if you keep trying to make a point. You know, I could make a point about all sorts of other things. Let's get on with the business of worshipping God. You may be imagining a guy with a big fluffy beard, or you may not. It doesn't matter, let's just get on with it. I try not to make a big thing out of it.

At the same time as wondering about the connections between experience and imagining the divine, Tracy is reluctant to engage with the messiness of language and ultimately decides the imagined masculinity of God 'doesn't matter' and she does not draw attention to it nor attempt to propagate other types of non-masculine imagery through the use of language. Perhaps Wittig's (1985) claim that gender only belongs to women is correct and so the male and his divine symbols provide the background to a single gender. Tracy is not seeing maleness in the symbolic, but rather the norm against which her femaleness is defined. If 'it doesn't matter' that the divine is imagined as masculine, does Tracy see the transcendence only and the non-gendered male? Zoe, a middle-of-the-road non-stipendiary priest, takes a similar position to Tracy and expresses some frustration that she is required to consider the God-language question:

Although I think it's important to try not to 'he' and 'she' too much [. . .]. I just wonder sometimes whether we've created a problem that didn't exist in the first place and actually what it does is agitates the pool and people get very

polarised about whether it should be, should we say 'he' or should we say 'she' [. . .]. And actually, all that does is that it ties all these people up in knots discussing things that I'm sure are really important but actually takes away from the work that we should be doing.

How God is referred to in gendered language is relegated to a minor question for both Zoe and Tracy. They do not appear to attach their own sense of subjectivity to God-language, nor do they see themselves as alienated as priests because of masculine imagery and words. Zoe believes a problem is being created by emphasising the gendered language used for God. The binary nature of gendered language is seen as not only unhelpful but as a distraction.

Some women clergy, like Tracy, separate their ideas about human gendered language (inclusive and neutral) from how the symbolic is constructed through masculinised language. Perhaps to use feminine language feels *too* gendered. I wonder if the acceptance of how God is imagined as masculine is on some level an acceptance that the male is universal and that the female must somehow fit. In language terms, this situation of not 'seeing' maleness in pronouns for God is part of Spender's (1985) argument that the male owns positive semantic space, whilst the female occupies negative semantic space. 'The male is the unmarked form' she writes, 'the assumption is that the world is male unless proven otherwise' (p.20). The positive semantic space of the masculine allows 'He' to glide through speech and the imagination unchecked, whereas 'She' is marked as specifically gendered, evoking Wittig's (1985) concept that gender is only given to the female, constructed as a *result* of oppression, not the cause of it. Tracy's comments reveal that it takes some effort, on a pragmatic level, to work with feminine words. If this is not as important as other activities such efforts will fall by the wayside. It is not simply about the opportunity and the freedom to explore non-masculine vocabulary and imagery, but it must be accompanied by a perceived *need* for women priests to work through the stuttering process of saying 'She'. Tracy may enjoy the thought-experiment of God as Mother, but she does not see her belonging as a priest as dependent on it.

Non-gendered language and imagery for God is a challenge worth pursuing for Valerie, who is not attempting to find feminine alternatives:

I personally try to avoid giving God a gender, but I know I slip into it [. . .] what I don't do is address God publicly as Mother God. As much as I really shouldn't use Father God, I don't try to do Mother God either.

Valerie's theology is liberal, which means she is freer in her exploration of what text and tradition offer and she sees Biblical texts as fallible and androcentric. Yet, referring to God in feminine terms feels 'too radical' for her and she prefers to avoid gendered language where possible. The issue this highlights, and is a common theme amongst the interviewees, is the lack of linguistic options for non-gendered God-talk. For instance, Sylvia reveals, in similar terms as Tracy, how anthropomorphic language and imagery are fundamental to the imagining of a personal deity: 'there is no way on this earth I'm going to call God "it."' <sup>163</sup> Beatrice also wrestles with the impersonal option. She recognises that for part of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, there is an acceptable use of the impersonal pronoun. Yet this still troubles her sense of the Godhead having personhood:

You hear people say 'it' and I remember years ago actually pointing out to people it shouldn't be 'it', it should be 'He'. And now I wonder whether that's a way of getting round it, but it sounds so impersonal. So, I would quite like to say 'She' for the Holy Spirit but I'm generally not brave enough.

This reveals two important dilemmas for women clergy. There is a long theological history of the third person of the trinity (the Holy Spirit) being referred to in the feminine (Engelsman, 1994), <sup>164</sup> and this is potentially one legitimate way for the feminine to be represented in the Godhead without employing radical notions of Mother God, or Christa – the female version of Christ. To employ the impersonal pronoun is to miss the opportunity and Beatrice senses this. However, she also feels the public use of the feminine pronoun even in this scenario requires a level of courage she feels she lacks. Why is there a sense of trepidation with the public use of the feminine? Part of the answer is the sense of needing to avoid opprobrium of congregations. However, if the androcentric nature of Christian religious imagery is designed to exclude the female – the foundation of deep cultural

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<sup>163</sup> Gail Ramshaw (1995) discusses how some feminists of faith will embrace the use of 'it' as a way of avoiding gendered pronouns, however, none of the interviewees seemed to be comfortable with this.

<sup>164</sup> There is a tradition that the Spirit is feminine, though this is explored in depth from a feminist viewpoint by Engelsman (1994) who argues that the feminine divine, via the Wisdom tradition, has been restricted to an auxiliary part of the Godhead.

misogyny (Jonte-Pace, 1992) – then the masculine language generates discomfort for women, but simultaneously the use of externalised feminine language produces a public awkwardness for women clergy.

Based on the stories of the interviewees, ‘She’ and other feminine names and attributes for God do not adhere easily to the sign, which already has accrued overwhelming value in the ‘affective economy’ (Ahmed, 2004) in the masculine form. As words, images, and assumed histories become chained together to gather meaning, I want to briefly extend this argument to include the ‘sticky sign’ of the figure of Mary Magdalene. More than any other female figure in the Christian narrative, the negative meaning accrued around Mary Magdalene has had a deleterious effect on women’s access to the hierarchy of the Church. I have already discussed how I asked the interviewees to participate in a thought experiment and to imagine what the Church might have looked like for women had Mary Magdalene been attributed the title of ‘Apostle’ rather than ‘prostitute’ (which most of the interviewees suggest was the erasure of the female line of authority in the Church). The alternative tradition of Mary being the Apostle to the apostles – that is, at the centre of leadership – was raised initially by Emily, who speculated how different life would have been for women had this tradition survived.<sup>165</sup> As I carried this idea into other interviews, I began to understand the deep significance such meaning-accruing symbols had for women priests. Beatrice, having become emotional about the loss she connected with the erasure of Mary Magdalene’s leadership, described a memory of how the female is framed as auxiliary: ‘I can actually remember the time as a child when I realised that boys were more important than girls’. Whilst a different set of meanings placed on a figure such as Mary Magdalene might have bolstered Beatrice’s self-actualisation as a girl, Carol remains unconvinced that rehabilitating the story of Mary Magdalene will loosen the androcentric meanings within the priesthood and the Church:

[Mary Magdalene is] there in scripture, she was there in the early church, women were there in the early church, house churches providing, because the household was the woman’s domain. And yet somehow it had all gone to pot. Globally everything is so weighted towards men. It’s very hard to imagine even

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<sup>165</sup> It is interesting to note that the denigration of Mary Magdalene was acknowledged in the sermon preached at the consecration of Rachel Treweek and Sarah Mullaly in 2015, who were among the first women to become bishops (see WATCH, 2015b). The process of undoing the mythology has begun, and there is some acknowledgement of the damage to women’s status in Christianity.

if Mary Magdalene had been left in there and acknowledged that that would have changed anything very much.

For Carol, her perception of the rigidity of meaning in the Church leads to a pessimistic view that work done to re-align meanings may have marginal effect on the androcentric character of the Church. The reframing of Mary Magdalene as a significant disciple figure is an act of 'cutting' through the 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2004) of meaning and the rehabilitation of what this figure means is of wider cultural value, generating interest outside the Church<sup>166</sup> (Bernstein and Scharf, 2018). It may be the beginnings of a process of unbinding meanings that could boost the belonging of women in the priesthood.

In her exploration of how the feminine has been systematically overwritten in the Judeo-Christian narrative, Spender (1985) wonders about the effect masculine ownership of text, of naming, and of history has had:

One can only fantasise on what females might have produced if the names they had provided had ever been taken into account [ . . . ] Many of the demeaning images of the female can be traced back to the names and meanings which were consigned to them by some of the Biblical writers/editors/translators. It is a very necessary task to try and change those images. (p.171)

To fantasise about the 'what ifs' is part of consciousness-raising and to foreground how the female has been erased in the context of the priesthood is how some women priests resist the overwriting of female leadership and authority. To have foremothers is to mend the broken chain of meaning manipulated by the male owners of the Christian narrative. Female sexuality is used as method of legitimising the erasure of Mary Magdalene as an apostle, or high-status disciple, a patriarchal practice that Spender (1982) suggests is at play across the generations as the voices of individual women are diminished through association with sexual activity. In her restorative work on the disappeared women of ideas she argues that the patriarchal tactics of discrediting women have been effective:

They work by initially discrediting and helping to remove her from the mainstream, they work by becoming the basis for any future discussion about

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<sup>166</sup> Though the debate around the figure of Mary Magdalene is not new, her sexual reputation has proved more 'sticky' than her rehabilitated reputation as a high-ranking disciple.

her, and they work by keeping future generations of women away from her.

(p.32)

For the interviewees, this is precisely what they feel has happened to the female figure who might have been the source of a female apostolic line. The mythology around Mary Magdalene's status as a prostitute, even if this were the case, is used to eclipse any leadership model she might confer on to women of the Church as it developed in the earliest years of Christianity. In other words, following Spender's argument about the disappearance of women from history, the sexual reputation of a woman alone is used to de-legitimise her contribution and silence her voice (whether or not the stories of her sexual life are true or invented). This thought experiment underlines the value that the myth of Mary Magdalene as 'whore' (a word with a strong 'sticky' quality) had accrued in the 'affective economy' (Ahmed, 2004), and in another way, it reveals how women priests are active in diminishing the potency of the myth that had contributed to their exclusion from the ordained ministry for centuries.

This chapter highlights how words and images accrue meanings that are held within the priesthood and I have suggested that these meanings are androcentric. The interviewees identify an authorised set of feminine metaphors which are readily available and often used by women priests. There is, though, more ambivalence towards practices that seek to deconstruct masculine meaning at a more fundamental level, particularly in the public role of the priest. I found there was no strong appetite for a systematic approach to replacing masculine God-language for feminine, although there is an acknowledgement amongst several interviewees that the masculine taxonomy within the symbolic raises issues for some women and that there is a toxicity around the heavy reliance on titles such as 'Father' to name and describe the divine. The language used to build the symbolic system is, of course, an important indicator of how the female and the feminine are perceived and constructed within the priesthood. What I have found more interesting in this research, however, are the intricacies in the flows of power involved in the naming of female priests. Some women priests may have no issues in choosing how they are to be referred to, however, for many, especially in traditions that place value in titles, parity and authority are at stake. The stickiness of titles is a specifically female problem. For women priests to have an unhindered access to the symbols of the priesthood, they need access to the meaning-making that is embedded in how priests are named. Women either have to divest meaning from the masculine titles, or they must bolster the meaning associated with the feminine. There are titles that are less burdened by gender, however, as I have argued, there are

residual masculine meanings that women priests encounter. The inclusivity of language may have had its sting drawn by the gradual introduction of more modern liturgies, but the interviewees raise the interesting suggestion that modern liturgies are not invested with the same gravitas as traditional ones, and I wonder if the associations with a political feminist agenda are on some level creating a distaste for language activism. The interviewees present a picture of wide and varying attitudes to gendered language, but many do not prioritise activism above the sensibilities of their congregations. Belonging as subject is not significantly fulfilled through aligning language and imagery to female representation and the differences in the approaches taken by women priests suggest there is nothing straightforward about challenging androcentric words and images. Whilst women do remain external to the linguistic landscape of the priesthood there are complexities around revealing sexual difference and influencing meaning-making. Belonging as subject is not necessarily yoked to re-configuring the symbolic and calling the Christian God 'She', whilst it has echoes of Irigarayan feminine subjectivity, is not a route to belonging in the priesthood.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion: The Dialectic of Belonging

Because I'm called, I've got to fit in. That's what I feel.

Denise, evangelical curate.

On 12<sup>th</sup> March 2019, the Church of England celebrated 25 years of women's ordination with services and events held across the country. Manchester Cathedral marked the anniversary with a conference entitled 'Knowing Our Place?' (Church of England, 2019); it is telling that such a question remains in the minds of women priests and my intention has been to contribute to the understanding of women's 'place' in the priesthood. My starting point for this project was to ask how women priests are effecting change in the institution of the Church of England. After listening to the stories of 26 ordained women, a more fundamental question emerged, that of how women *belong* in the priesthood that has been traditionally constructed around the male. I am not ordained, and I am only loosely connected to the Church of England, but I found the celebrations of 25 years of women in the priesthood bittersweet and poignant: women's entry into the priesthood was entry into structural liminality that is a manifestation of how differentiated women priests are from their male colleagues. Developing an answer to the question of belonging involves understanding this constructed difference, how women negotiate a structure that separates them from parts of the Church that reject their ordained status, and what resistances and subversions of power are part of women's everyday experience of the priesthood. I have spoken informally to male clergy who remain opposed to women's ordination, who have explained their theological position, their inner conflicts and anxieties about being perceived as misogynist and there is clearly another story to be revealed about masculinities and the belief in the God-ordained maleness of the priesthood. What I have attempted to show in this thesis is how this male positioning is worked out in the lives of women priests and throughout I have argued that whilst such theology may have an internal logic, it is experienced by women clergy in terms of abjection, structural liminality, and material and symbolic differentiation. Since women clergy are responding to masculinities and androcentric theologies, research into the experiences of the two integrities of male clergy is required to build a fuller picture of the sex and gender constructions that the Church structure supports.

Change to the institution (and to the Christian symbol system) is part of the story of women's priesthood. The introduction of women bishops has been a major institutional event and women priests hope this will be the catalyst for their more integrated belonging. But women clergy interviewed for this project do not tell stories of collective access to power for the purpose of institutional change. Whilst I have shown that some women priests enact conscious challenges to masculine hegemony, such as how they negotiate their naming, what is more pertinent in the lives of women priests is their positioning and how they belong. Denise's quote above suggests an imperative is attached to belonging, that their 'call' is as much about fitting into to the priesthood as it is about exercising their ministry. When that call is denied, it follows that the belonging is also denied. I have learned from the women's stories that there is, rather than direct agitation for institutional and symbolic change, a continual dialectic between the Church's efforts to shape female belonging as object and women clergy's own project of belonging as subject. In the Introduction, Melinda's story sets the scene, as institutional forces act upon women priests who are structurally, culturally, and symbolically differentiated: *belonging* is therefore differentiated. However, as women establish ways of belonging subjectively in the priesthood, profound changes can be detected. It is not that women's presence in the priesthood precipitates change, but that their work on the dialectic of belonging, as subject and as object, produces change as a by-product of this dialectic. I also began this thesis by suggesting the presence of women priests is normalised. Whilst there may be less novelty in seeing a woman in a clerical collar, what has emerged from this research is that women are not normalised in the priesthood, irrespective of their numbers or visibility. Women priests are made abject, their bodies are made to be teleologically at odds with the symbolic, and people do not know what to call them. Using Braidotti's (1997) term, women priests are constructed in 'monstrous' difference and suspended in structural liminality by the two integrities. The dialectic between belonging as (monstrous) object and belonging as subject is not restricted to women in the priesthood. By exploring stories of women priests, I have come to understand my own experience of the Church of England, and Christianity, and I can now name the nagging discomfort that contributed to my eventual departure as the problem of belonging as female.

The notion of female belonging in the priesthood being shaped by institutionally legitimised discourses emerges in Chapter 4, and I have argued that women priests are 'threshold people' (Turner, 1969 [2008]), at the boundary of the two integrities, a constructed boundary that prevents the same transition into the priesthood as male priests. This

ambiguity in status is perpetuated by the split powers of interpellation in the institution and power is granted to parts of the Church to hail ordained women as non-priests. Liminality is combined with powerful discourses of good disagreement and mutual flourishing of the two integrities, and so female protest is framed as inappropriate whilst those who reject female priesthood are framed as vulnerable and requiring protection. Not only is access to different forms of power controlled by such discourses, the development of an economy of nurture means that the emotional labour of women priests becomes entangled with their negotiation of the structural boundary of the two integrities. I have argued that 'ambivalent sexism' (Glick and Friske, 2011) generates both hostile and benign discourses, leaving female priests confused about their status amongst male clergy who reject women's ordination. At the hostile end of the scale of ambivalent sexism women are subject to abjection – a recoiling from the Eucharistic symbols blessed by women and the problematising of the female body which is juxtaposed against the masculine symbol system, which I discussed in Chapter 5. At the same time, women priests experience warmth and support from those who dismantle the ontology of female priesthood: some male clergy can both affirm a woman's call personally whilst denying the legitimacy of female priesthood. I named this type of relational experience as 'gentling' and argued that it is a strategy for shaping women's belonging in the priesthood based on a nurturing economy that is constructed to sooth male pain. I want to emphasise the damaging effects of the forces that shape female belonging as object. I quoted Carol's lament (p.96), highlighting a balance sheet of which some women priests are conscious, measuring belonging against harm caused to them by institutional discourses, which I argue in Chapter 4, emphasise *male* discomfort and pain. The discourses of doubt and reception continue to generate an undercurrent of precarity for women in the priesthood. So, belonging as object of institutional practices and discourses is belonging *differently* to the priesthood. Women priests, placed in structural liminality, are vulnerable to the quelling motions of institutional discipline, as they carry disproportionate responsibility for the emotional labour of peace-making. These factors lean towards the goal of ameliorating male pain: female belonging in the priesthood is formulated around being both the cause and soothers of this pain.

Stories of resistance to, and subversion of, these parameters of belonging begin to build an alternative picture of how women achieve belonging as subject. As a metaphor, the trickster priest helps to understand the resistances that women priests have introduced into their everyday negotiations with the institution and with male clergy who reject female priesthood. As tricksters, women priests sometimes place themselves outside of orthodoxy,

building on heterodoxy as a way of subverting the access to power over religious discourse: heresy is a wilful and feminist act (Ahmed, 2017). This alignment with heterodoxy also subverts the structural liminality in which the institution places women priests. Some find ways of rejecting their liminal status by rejecting orthodoxy and by being unwilling to be aggregated into the whole. Such resistances are not solutions to structural liminality, but as I have argued in Chapter 4, there are ways in which women priests are able and prepared to split their femaleness and priesthood into characters or facets of their identities in trickster fashion (Tannen, 2007) to find gaps in the boundary. Priests like Louise can belong within a strongly bonded group in the Church as 'one of the boys', and Olive is able to suspend her priestly identity to operate across the boundary. I have called these contingent acts of belonging 'boundary-play' to give a sense of female agency. These acts do not disrupt the structural liminality of women priests, but they do facilitate forays across the boundary through disguise and shape-shifting. Rather than always operating as 'threshold people' (Turner, 1969 [2008]), there are opportunities taken by women to invest in marginal, rather than liminal, belonging, where rhizomatic voices are not aligned to a central hub of power-over discourse. Priests like Denise tell me there is value being created in these marginal places that harnesses the compromised status that women are structurally given by the Church. Marginal places are made holy and prophetic and thus they become an alternative to structural liminality. Yet marginal spaces are not always comfortable, and some women priests, like Carol, may prefer that the gender and sexuality facets of their identities did not have to find fruition at the margins, where there is still a sense of institutional precarity.

As women priests negotiate at the boundary between the two integrities, the forces that shape their differentiated belonging are revealed. Women priests invest in the nurturing economy to varying degrees, but there are resistances within many of the interviewees' methods of managing relationships with male clergy who do not accept female priesthood. Some women clergy offer a mutuality of integrity. If a male priest is perceived to hold anti-women's ordination views because of deeply held and thought-through theological beliefs he becomes eligible for emotional labour. I have found some of these stories difficult to interpret at times, and my feminist standpoint is a tricky place from which to explore how women priests are often reluctant to name positions as sexist. However, I see that there is a trade-off for women in that their position also must be given integrity as a *quid pro quo* act of mutuality. Belonging slips into another gear of subjectivity. Although the institutional discourse of mutual flourishing works against women's access to power, some women

priests recalibrate the notion of mutuality to provide a platform on which to demand their own integrity as women in the priesthood. As Wendy's comments in Chapter 4 (p.101) reveal about how wounded she is when her calling is denied, the relational strategies can break down.

Beyond the institutionally defined parameters of belonging as object, women priests must also negotiate the more fundamental ways in which they are cast in difference. In Chapter 5, I argued that female bodies are 'bodies out of place' (Ahmed, 2000) in the priesthood. Many of the interviewees relate stories about female-blessed bread and wine being rejected in acts of abjection that are rooted in primal fear of the polluting powers of the female. Some of this abjection is expressed in cultural terms, such as the perpetuation of menstrual shame, but it is in the ritualised expression of abjection where the female is most profoundly bodily alienated from the priesthood. Teleological discourses around the female priest's body set up a tension of difference, painful for some, whereby women priests are framed in terms of lack (since their bodies cannot represent the masculine in the symbolic), or in terms of reductive reproduction. These are strong bodily tropes that work against the subjectivity of women in the priesthood, since the immanent/transcendent dichotomy is a device that anchors the female to the flesh and relates the male to the symbolic divine. I explored how bodily difference impacts upon women's everyday experience of the priesthood, such as the ambivalence of congregations towards the female voice, the debates around displays of femininity, and the visibility or invisibility of the female body. I challenged the notion of neutrality of presentation and argued that the female priest's body travels towards the masculine in search of freedom from female teleology, rather than there being a notion of gender neutrality that can be matched by the male.

Examining the bodily experiences of women in the priesthood as part of how sex and gender difference is constructed becomes a significant factor for women's belonging. Women priests may need to overcome biology, as argued by Beauvoir (1949 [2009]), to break down the barriers to belonging in the same way as male clergy belong to the priesthood. However, some women priests are exploring gynocentric ways of thinking which invest in their bodily difference. Karen's story in Chapter 5 entangles her female body, her motherhood, and her physical connections to her son in distress with a theological story that puts the Mother at the centre of the symbolic. It is in these moments of connection with sexual difference for women priests that begin to challenge differentiation based on women being Other of the same, to use the Irigarayan notion. In this sense, subjectively belonging to the priesthood is focused on revealing sexual

difference, which Karen seeks to do both bodily and through semantics. Similarly, women clergy like Alice and Melinda imply the female priest introduces subversions to the symbolic ('mass as menstruation envy') and that subjective belonging reaches into the heart of the symbolic.

The public calls for changing how the symbolic is formed through language – calling God 'She' – is not a call that resonates for many women priests and belonging as subject is not fulfilled by identifying semantically with an Irigarayan feminine divine, proposed by theologians such as Green (2009b). There are efforts to use authorised versions of femaleness in the divine, such as the imagery of the mother hen, but more radical approaches are muted. Whilst some women priests are uncomfortable with calling God 'She', there is an inexorable movement towards the feminine divine wherever subjective belonging for women in the priesthood is being formed, and this is revealed more through the stories about women's bodies in the priesthood than through engagement with how words form the feminine in the divine. This is because women priests do not have access to power over language in the way that they are able to access subjectivity (if only fleetingly at times) through how they relate their bodies to the priesthood. Phenomenologically, women priests are adapting to, but also changing, the space of the priesthood. Though the symbolic life of the priest constructs the female body as problematic – and some women priests want to downplay their femaleness because of the pejoration to which the female form is subjected – women priests negotiate belonging with their bodies. The use of affect through touch is juxtaposed against the accessibility of the female, but this juxtaposition presents a dialectical spark, revealing that women's bodies access power even as they are made to represent immanence in opposition to male transcendence. The inherited traditions of priestly gesture and movement are being invested with new egalitarian meaning by women priests, and this arises out of the troubling of representation that the female body signifies. The changing direction of representation – away from the male body of Christ and towards humanity – is manifested through movement undertaken by women's bodies (a sign of 'gathering up' in Melinda's words). This conscious activity is challenging the male as universal: a *female* body is standing as universal representative.

Difference is not only experienced bodily by women priests, but also through semantic access to power. Being priests with no name, 'unspecified' in Suzanne's words, and the 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2017) of meaning reveals another frontline of belonging for women. Whilst women priests are reluctant to take congregations through a process of semantic upheaval, especially in relation to imagery and nomenclature of the divine, some women

priests do engage in challenging the meaning-making power of titles. Women priests understand that words make things happen (Turner, 2013), and that liturgy is a nexus of meaning-making. Such fixed text can, and does, alienate women priests, as I argue in Chapter 6, however, the most subversive strategy to counter this alienation is not in agitating for inclusive language, but rather in resilience in insisting on inclusion in the ownership of tradition. Alice teaches how, without changing words, she can belong to the tradition and own the text for herself by speaking masculine generics in her female voice. This insistence on ownership is in response to her fury at how the two integrities legitimises positions that externalise women from ownership of the tradition. Rather than changing the tradition through a modern approach to inclusive language, she steps in to take ownership of its provenance. Resistances, therefore, do not always follow obvious patterns, and whilst some women priests quietly resist the masculine language of fixed text, others resist the *alienation itself* generated by such language. This strategy is highlighted in Chapter 5 by Olive, who recalibrates what it means for a woman to use masculine names for the divine. Whilst not universally used as a strategy, significant numbers of interviewees are more interested in changing approaches to meaning making than in changing words themselves. The subjective belonging of the female in the priesthood is not necessarily being invested in feminine words and imagery but in the ownership of the means of producing meaning.

This research has uncovered strategies of belonging as subject devised and enacted by women priests in a variety of contexts. It should be noted that subjective belonging and belonging as object are entangled: sometimes women priests are willing participants of the nurturing economy and sometimes the same women are resistant to institutionally legitimised discourses. The subversive strategies undertaken by women priests to forge a subjective belonging can be found in how they negotiate at the boundary of the two integrities, trickster-style shape-shifting and atomising aspects of how they identify. Subversions are to be found in how women priests negotiate ownership over the process of meaning-making, not simply exchanging male pronouns for female ones, but uncoupling masculine meaning from words and imagery. Some women priests are gynocentric in their approach to theology and use their bodies to challenge the androcentric character of the Christian symbol system. Brought together these individual resistances and subversions amount to one half of a belonging dialectic that asks questions of the institutionally shaped belonging as object. The dialectic of belonging for women priests is a conversation between two sets of discourses. One set seeks to establish women priests' belonging as object, since

they are constructed in difference both structurally and symbolically, and the other set of discourses is generated by the women themselves, through which they craft subjectivity. Whilst women priests engage with the institutionally shaped belonging, they are also highlighting the metaphysical contradictions that their constructed difference generates. The antithetical nature of female priesthood, and the institutional reaction against it, gives rise to subjectivity for women priests found in their heterodoxy, the possibilities of gynocentric theological thinking, and in their resistances to the ways in which institutional discourses seek to shape their belonging based on the female as other of the same. The subjective ways of belonging for women are in opposition to the androcentric shape of the priesthood. The fears of men like C.S. Lewis (1948) are well-founded, in that the female proto-priest is fashioning a religiosity outside the conditions that construct her belonging as object. Equally, Alice's determination to make tradition belong to her, and her to it, is a direct challenge to belonging as object, as she seeks to own the heritage that has excluded women for so long. Whilst I hope the two integrities will be dismantled and thus dissolve the structural liminality of female clergy, this is only part of the story of belonging for women in the priesthood. If belonging is dialectically negotiated, then the 'truth' – the synthesis – that is being sought is that of unconditional female subjectivity within the Church of England, within its priesthood, and within the Christian symbol system.

The potential impact of this research should begin with the structural arrangements of the Church; based on the lived experience of the women I have interviewed, there is a strong (and I would argue, ethical) case for swiftly dismantling the two integrities. Since I have argued that women clergy are (and feel they are) silenced in terms of protesting against their liminality and the abjection such a position facilitates, those voices need to be projected through research such as mine. As a proxy voice for the anonymous women I have interviewed, this thesis strongly challenges the structural arrangements of the Church and the discourses designed to underpin male privilege. This project has shown the fundamental damage to women's material, symbolic and emotional belonging within the priesthood, which by extension damages the status and actualisation within the Christian symbol system and the institution of the Church of lay women also. Whilst some of the discussion has focused on how women are differentiated specifically within and through the priesthood, I have also highlighted how women more generally are framed by the institution and by versions of the Christian symbol system. What is clear to me is that there can be no institutional claim to a supportive environment for women priests in the Church of England whilst there are officially sanctioned areas within the Church structure where

women cannot be priests and this thesis should be considered a call for the dismantling of the two integrities. I have argued that the attempt to create parity between theological positions supports and legitimises deeply sexist beliefs, and whilst these beliefs will not necessarily be changed by abandoning the two integrities, they will at least cease to be the basis on which the Church organises its structure.

I have also argued, however, that the two integrities by no means ringfences differentiation between male and female priests. Discourses propagated at institutional level are experienced differently by women priests, affecting their ability to protest openly in situations where they feel aggrieved at their differentiation, which discourages collectivised approaches for women. My research does suggest, though, that some women priests might be disinclined to be activist, either in lobbying for a change in structure or in general areas such as masculinised language. My hope is, by revealing the connections between the stories of women priests, this thesis might provide a basis for renewed conversation about the compromised status of female priesthood in particular. Whilst women clergy themselves may wrestle with models of ministry that squeeze out activism, protest and conscious change, those within the hierarchy of the institution of the Church of England are required to scrutinise the discourses that have male bias embedded within them, a recommendation that builds on work already focusing on the messages that circulate officially and unofficially that undermine female belonging in the priesthood and as lay women (see Walsh, 2000, 2001).

My research suggests, building on work by Clark-King (2004), that there is a lag between feminist theologies and the lived experience of women priests. Whilst individual women priests are often comfortable with ideas and thinking that are considered marginal, engagement with feminist theologies is patchy. I propose that as women clergy study and teach feminist theological ideas, the masculine bias within the symbol system, and therefore ultimately within the institution that seeks to be a material manifestation of the symbolic, will be more thoroughly challenged. Some of the women I interviewed understandably are unenthusiastic about engaging in theological debate with those who deny women's priesthood, and perhaps this is the wisest course to take. I argue, though, that actively engaging with a feminist body of theological work would provide hooks that can be used by women clergy to anchor their belonging as subject. There is a suspicion of such (worldly) female-oriented philosophy within the Church, but perhaps women clergy should propagate and encourage a feminist wind to blow through the institution at all

levels, from congregation, to Synod and the Episcopacy– to the benefit of all women who seek belonging in the Church and in the Christian faith.

Finally, I return to the discussion around power. It seems to me that women clergy work in a silo environment where collective power is difficult to access. My research suggests that whilst there are individualistic approaches to beliefs, theology, and how much the symbolic should be subject to change, there are points at which women clergy from different traditions might connect. The common experience of being rejected as presidents of the Eucharist is on such nexus at which women clergy might meet, to provide energy to lobby against the structural and cultural facilitation of such acts of abjection. Whilst women clergy may be reinvigorated to access the power-with discussed in this thesis, this conclusion is oriented towards the Church as an institution; the need to ameliorate male pain has overridden notions of equality and gender justice and, as I have argued in this thesis, has left the female half of the priesthood in a state of permanent liminality, culturally and symbolically differentiated.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Biographical Information

The biographical information is presented here in amalgamated form and not as a list of individual interviewees to protect their identities. Given that numbers of female clergy are still relatively small, the combination of location, job type, age, and tradition taken together with some of the personal details offered in the stories told may compromise the anonymity of the individuals. Whilst some personal details have been important to the narrative of the thesis, these have been kept to a minimum. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

#### **Age groups**

5 interviewees are aged between 20-40

18 interviewees are aged between 40-60

3 interviewees are aged over 60

#### **Employment status**

2 interviewees are non-stipendiary

2 interviewees are retired

11 interviewees were curates at the time of the interviews

7 interviewees are vicars in a parish

4 interviewees are chaplains in institutions outside the Church

1 interviewee was a deacon waiting to be fully ordained

1 interviewee was also a canon, and 1 was a precentor

#### **Relationships and family**

1 interviewee is in a civil partnership.

16 interviewees are biological mothers and 10 have not had children.

19 interviewees are in a heterosexual marriage.

5 interviewees are single, two with children.

2 interviewees are divorced, one remaining single, and one re-married.

#### **Length of career**

13 interviewees were ordained within the last 5 years.

13 interviewees have been ordained for more than 5 years.

### **Church tradition**

Traditions are not easily categorised, and some interviewees wish to trouble these categories (such as 'charismatic Catholic' and 'liberal evangelical'). For the purposes of this thesis, I use three main groupings to establish whether such groups are part of a belonging strategy for women priests.

13 interviewees are Anglo-Catholic, or Catholic-leaning

9 interviewees are middle-of-the-road

4 interviewees are evangelical, or evangelical-leaning

### **Faith background**

I have included the background to faith, though information was not explicitly asked for; some of this type of detail was included in the women's stories. The overwhelming majority of interviewees talked about having had regular contact with a church as children, or slightly later in teenage years. This lifelong association with Christianity may be significant in terms of how a call to the vocation is perceived, familiarity with church life, or confidence in a religious identity. I have not included this in the analysis, however, it may be useful to note for future research.

24 interviewees were churchgoers as children or during teenage years

2 no information on faith background

## Appendix 2: Transcription Poem

This poem uses the interviewees' words as they talk about menstruation in their role as priests. This formed the basis of a performance piece that subverted the ritual of the Eucharist, acting out the imaginings of women priests who allow their bodies, their material presence, to challenge the masculine symbols of the ritual. This performance not only amplifies the voices of the interviewees but allows people to re-engage with a latent faith within a feminist context, for those who feel they are unable to partake in the Church authorised Eucharist. This poem and the performance piece it generated is now part of a research collaboration and is the basis of a research strand *Feminism, Art and Ritual*, for undergraduates at York St. John University.

We all had the same experience the first time we had to preside during our period

Oh. We shouldn't be doing this

What they're really scared about is you menstruating in the sanctuary

But I don't go around saying, 'oh look at the diary, I'm going to wear my white alb and no pants'

Although sometimes, sometimes... What if?

Men produce stuff as well. Men bleed as well

We went to a mosque for Friday prayers, it was a huge deal

We wore our cassocks and scapulars

We covered up our hair and went into Friday prayers

And I had my period

I was so aware of it, thinking 'I wonder if they know'

It was like we were smuggling in tampons

Right. I'm going to have to improvise here

I've got a used tampon in my pocket

Extraordinary

I never thought about menstruation so much

That whole sense of taint comes out

The dirtiness

Impurity on ritual impurity

Weakness

'Oh, have you got your period, love? Well, why don't you just sit down

Because I know you're going to cry'

They were saying 'have you ever said communion while you were menstruating?'

Of course I have

It was a sort of shock for them to process this

Menstruation and blood and the sanctuary – a real stumbling point

They'd never had a woman before

She went into the vestry and found the churchwarden going through her handbag

'What do you think you're doing?'

He said 'well, I was just checking to see if you were carrying tampons

because if you're menstruating

I won't be able to take communion from you'

Imagine I pulled out a used tampon

You just bring it and put it on the table at the Mass and just offer it all  
It somehow becomes linked with Christ's sacrifice  
And there is something strange for me  
Something meaningful to me celebrating Mass whilst I'm menstruating  
The whole of sense of sacrifice, suffering, blood  
There is something quite powerful and female about that

Mass as menstruation envy

Beginning of puberty and periods and things and flows of blood from women  
asking how Jesus is reacting to all this  
The symbolism of the Eucharist  
'It's my body' and there's blood  
You drink blood from the chalice

That Wise Wound

'Let's all celebrate our menstrual cycle'  
Let's not do that. Let's be glad that one day they'll stop  
And then it's like, oh, he's going to think I'm a crazy menopausal woman

## Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

Because of the conversational nature of my approach, each interview ran its own course, however, I attempted to cover as much of the same ground as possible in each. How these questions were asked and in what order varied with each interview and questions received varying levels of attention and detail. As detailed in the methodology, a further question about Mary Magdalene as the Apostle to the apostles was introduced as a thought experiment, which is not documented on the original schedule.

### **Biographical information**

When were you ordained? And roughly (!) what is your age?

What is your current job title? Stipend/non-stipend, part time/full time

Do you identify with a particular group within the Church – evangelical, Anglo-Catholic etc.

How do you identify in terms of ethnicity? And in terms of sexuality?

Do you have any children?

Interview structure:

I would like to cover a number of topics in the following way: your ordination ‘story’, career path and structure of the Church, ideas about male and female clergy, ideas around language, ritual and symbols, and finally theology.

### **Your ordination story:**

Tell me briefly why you decided to be ordained.

What elements of the priesthood attracted you most?

Were there any struggles involved getting ordained?

### **Church structure and career path:**

What career path have you taken? Has this been a planned career path?

Have there been opportunities or barriers that you would put down to being a woman?

How has the ‘two integrities’ of the Church affected you, if at all? Have you come across ‘no go’ areas?

What other issues are there facing ordained women in the Church at the moment?

Do you think ordained women have parity with ordained men? Or is this question irrelevant? Has the Church changed sufficiently?

Do women priests discuss and debate their acceptance?

**Sex difference/sameness:**

Are there differences, do you think, in men's and women's ministries? Do you believe there are masculine/feminine traits?

If so, how would you explain these differences? Do they shape men's and women's ministries in ways that affect you as an ordained woman? Do other people treat you as different to a male priest?

Does your theological position emphasise 'sexual difference' – created differently, or 'in Christ there is no male or female' i.e men and women's ministries are not built on being male or female?

What place does Biblical text play in your thinking about men's and women's ministry?

**Language, ritual and symbols:**

What are your thoughts on inclusive language in liturgy and speech within the Church? Do you think language and symbols are important to the position of women in the Church?

What are your thoughts on changes in language referring to God/Christ/Spirit? Do you think of God as male?

Have you developed any practices that consciously introduce changes in gendered language?

For you, are there any symbols and metaphors that help or hinder women's position in the Church? (for example, the Church described in terms of 'bride')

Talk me through some of the rituals you perform. Does being a woman impact on the ritual, yourself, other participants?

**Theology:**

Do you think changes in doctrine, theology and language and practice that aim to de-emphasise the masculine ways of doing and talking, are becoming more mainstream or does it still feel marginal?

What's your view on women's representation in the Bible? How do you deal with passages like 1 Corinthians 14 – women being silent in Church?

Do you engage with feminist theologies? What are your thoughts on women's position in theology?

(examples)

Do you consider yourself, or ordained women more generally, as having changed the Church? In what ways? Do you aspire to change any part of the Church, its doctrine and theology?

Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important?

Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix 4: Example transcription

**This is the transcription of the first interview. Some of the information has been redacted to protect Sylvia's real identity. Before the recording begins, there has been some 'getting to know you' talk.**

[Pseudonym – Sylvia]

SH: We'll just warm up if that's alright. Can you just give me a potted history of your journey to ordination? Which I'm sure isn't potted [laughs].

S: [laughs]. So, I was ordained in [month] in [year] and pre-ordination when we had the selection process, it's one of the things they ask you: where did your journey start on this? And I certainly found going back, you could go back and say, OK, well since I finished my Reader training, I've been doing this for three years and realised actually perhaps God wants me to do something else. And then I'd go back and say well, while I was in [place name] before I moved up North would I, did I feel God was calling me to something? Well yes, but I didn't do anything about it. I had young children, couldn't do it. And I went right back to when I was seven. And when I was seven, I joined the Brownies and at Brownies you had to go to Church Parade once a month and being a nosey little girl I wanted to know what happened the other times, you know; what happens. So, it's hard to know where your journey starts really, you know. It's fascinating. Trained as a Reader and I was doing a placement at the parish church in [place name] and I was almost, it was only about two weeks, no five, six weeks before I was going to be licensed and just doing this placement I was serving at the altar and it was almost like there was a voice went, 'you're doing very well my girl. I'm pleased with you but I want you to take another step'. And it was, 'you're kidding me, you're kidding me, Lord'. But apparently he wasn't. So, there you go. So, three years ordination training at the [course name] and then I did curacy at a church just up the road from here actually. Then I was parish priest in [place name] diocese for five and half years thinking I was probably going to stay there until I retired, 'cos I'm in my 60s now. And fifteen months ago, I saw an advert for the post at [place name] parish church. And I thought, well ok, we'll go for this. If they appoint me then that's where God wants me to be and if they don't appoint me, He wants me to stay here. And here I am the [title] at [place name] Parish Church.

SH: Just as a technical thing what's the difference with the titles?

S: Right, it's a very technical thing. [Redacted].

SH: Could I dive straight in? It was [year] you were ordained, is that right? Did it occur to you, was it at all on the radar that you being a woman was still needing to be unpacked, still might have repercussions, even though it's been since 1992, you know, or is it a non-issue, or was it a non-issue?

S: Yes and no. It obviously was an issue because I said going back through time there's always this very quiet sense in the back of my mind God had some sort of plan for me, but of course for a while that wasn't...ordination wasn't possible. Especially, I grew up and still my heart really is in the Anglo- Catholic wing of the church, so even more so it just, it wasn't a consideration. Going through selection, selection process, even to be recommended for training is a two-year process, it's a long, long process and you're taken apart and put back

together in sometimes different orders several times. It's a tough thing. All the way through that process I sort of expected at each stage someone to say 'well thank you, but no thanks'. Whether that, but the gender issue in a way doesn't come into it. I'm the eldest of [number] children, I've got [number] brothers, so I grew up in a very male orientated world. I'm a mathematician, at school I studied physics, chemistry and A-levels, and mathematics for A-levels. At university I took maths, I was a computer programmer so I've always lived sort of in a male dominated world, but I don't think of gender. I went to a mixed school, I went to the only mixed grammar school where I lived and we had friends who were boys and friends who were girls but you didn't...boyfriends was different to friends who were boys, so it's never, I don't actually see that gender difference. In any walk of life, I believe there are people who... there are things we can do and things that we can't do. Not because we are a man or a woman.

SH: Can I just pin you down on that? That is a really interesting thing that you've just said. Do you consider there not therefore there to be a typical man's type of ministry and a woman's type of ministry? If we start talking about the dog collar, do you think women bring something different and specific because they are women?

S: No. I believe that some women bring something cos they're... but then all of us bring... there is one priestly ministry and we all bring to it, whoever we are, and therefore it doesn't... I mean I've met some very wonderful, very compassionate, very female-trait male vicars, I suppose. And I've met some women Rottweilers. We come to it with, we bring to it whatever we have and that includes whatever experience we've got in life.

SH: That's really interesting. How have you processed the type of doctrines, where the arguments were that women couldn't represent Christ at the Eucharist for example? Have you needed to process that and somehow reformulate how it's seen or has the path been made smooth?

S: For my path, for me personally, it's not been an issue because when I stand at the table, I'm not representing Christ, I'm standing there as Christ's instrument. And therefore who I am, what matters is that I have been called and ordained as a priest. And therefore it doesn't...male or female doesn't come into it. I never see myself as representing Christ, I'm doing what Christ told us to do which was to do this in remembrance of me. But I have had to process it from the point of view of some of my female colleagues and some of my male colleagues in terms of having to process their views and how they work, so it's I suppose for me it's more of a generic sort of processing rather than a personal one. If that makes sense.

SH: Can I just ask you to unpack that little bit, so other people come at it from a difference place then do you think? Men and women have they somehow making more of the gender issue?

S: For some of my female colleagues especially those who were in the first tranche or maybe the second tranche of being ordained because these were people who felt called to priestly ministry for a long time, so these were people who had battled with maybe ten or fifteen years of people saying 'don't be silly'. And therefore there was a real personal hurt for them and it will be hard for them to ever completely to lay that aside so that if for example, just talking about thinking about inclusive language, it irritates me no end when I hear very traditional hymns, hymns that I've known all my life and somebody changes a word in them, 'cos I'm, well for goodness sake, to me man includes me as a female man.

But for them it's a much deeper issue because all those years whenever they've done that it's almost like someone is sticking another knife in their back. And so I've almost become more conscious of it because of sharing that, you know, hearing what they say about things. Yes, it's interesting how we thought twenty years ago when women were ordained as priests we thought this would go away. And for most people it's sort of, they don't think anything of it. But actually for people who are particularly involved it's deeply entrenched and that therefore spreads its way into other people's consciousness as well.

SH: As you've mentioned it can I pick up on the inclusive language thing, Libby Lane had said when she was consecrated about isn't it time we started referring to God as 'She' as well, possibly being quite headline-y and provocative. Where do you stand on that, have you got strong feelings?

S: No, I haven't. Well yes, I have got fairly strong feelings that says that God has always been 'He' and 'Father' and Jesus Christ was a man. We have to assume with a penis attached. And so God...I see God as in terms of language as 'He'. But then it doesn't...I can't imagine talking about God as our Mother or calling God 'She' because that doesn't make any sense in my mind at all. On the other hand, when I talk about God as Father and God as 'He' I'm not thinking of that as only representing half of human kind. I have to say as well my Dad is, my Dad was 90 a little while ago and is the rock of my creation, I... we both have terrible tempers, we've both had our rows and our arguments over the years, but my Dad, if one of us when we were small, if one of us needed help or something he was just as likely to be the one to change the nappy or clear up the vomit or whatever it was. So to me calling God 'Father' is, to me Father is someone who cares and someone who would, I know my Dad would walk over hot coals for me if he had to as I would for him. Therefore calling God 'Father' and using that male language is not an issue. But also I'm very conscious that for someone for example who has had a very abusive father or very negligent father that's a whole different ball game. God is very separate from humanity but on the other hand we can only understand things in terms of humanity so it wouldn't feel right for me to change the language just because I've had 60 years of using certain language and it doesn't make any sense to go any further with that. But then it's not an issue using the male language to me. As it is for other people.

SH: Does that include inclusive language talking about human beings then? If you were writing a new worship song for instance, would you not worry about that or would you make a point of saying humankind or anything like that?

S: Not if it felt artificial. I would say I'm a child of God rather than talking about a son or a daughter of God. And there are lots of issues. If we can in a song if we can talk about 'us' or 'people' or whatever, if we can find a way of being gender neutral in language then that works perfectly well. We can't get away from he or she and I struggle with that one because there is no way on this earth I'm going to call God 'it', so we have to go one way or the other. But I mean, for example, I don't mind being called 'chair' of a committee and I'm quite happy to be chairman, chairwoman just sounds, it's almost emphasising, it's the old feminist thing, kind of, I'm as good as you. Well....

SH: Can I move on to the symbol then? Because you've talked about language and how you use it, I just want to talk about the imagination, so if you're thinking of God, does He, because we're using the word 'He' and 'Father', does He have, for you in your imagination,

do you picture Him as being or having masculine traits, or do you have a much wider imaginative kind of scope for that? I've articulated that so badly... [laughs]

S: No, I suppose if I think hard about it I don't have such a clear definition of what are masculine traits and what are feminine traits and that partly goes back to, as I say with my dad caring and also the fact that I sort of walked a, what would have been seen as a fairly masculine academic path, in terms of doing physics, chemistry and maths, I was in a mixed school but there would be a class, in the 6<sup>th</sup> form I think, 15 boys and 3 girls. But I don't see being a scientist or being an engineer or whatever as a masculine trait. I was quite shocked myself probably 30 years ago, 40 years ago maybe, of coming out of the London underground station and waiting for the bus and thinking 'that's a woman driving the bus' and it was just the fact that I'd noticed it, not that, it's only in years since then I've gone back and it wasn't that I didn't think a woman wasn't capable of driving a bus, it was just that bus drivers were men and just seeing somebody with long hair and realising it was a woman...

SH: Do you think congregations have had that same experience with yourself or are people really getting used to it? Have you been the first woman anywhere?

S: I was certainly the first woman priest in charge where I was in [place name]. And looking at the parish profile when I was first asked to look at the parish as I came out of curacy, the parish profile said something along the lines of 'we are a fairly traditional high church and we are looking for a priest who will continue that tradition' out of my cohort of curates I was the one that absolutely fitted what they said, exactly. I realised very quickly, maybe within a day or two and actually meeting people there that that was short hand for 'we want a man'. And therefore it wasn't quite the Vicar of Dibley thing, but now for the vast majority of people there, I don't think they thought anything, I don't think they really sort of thought about it, obviously I was different. The difference probably more was that I was five foot two and not six foot one or whatever. But there were a couple of people in the congregations and I would say if I'd met people who are not comfortable with women priests anywhere it's the laity. I mean you know, we all know there are certain priests that will accept us as people but don't actually see us as priests. But the people that find it difficult sometimes and make their feelings known in peculiar ways are very often the laity and very often women.

SH: That's interesting

S: I've never, I had one man in my congregation here who only comes and takes communion from me on rare occasions. I haven't actually asked him. It may be that he doesn't take communion every week anyway or it may be because I'm a woman and it may be the times when he comes and takes it he either feels that God is particularly calling him or he forgets it's me. But yes, the people who have trouble with it very often are women.

SH: Why do you think that is, have you got a theory?

S: Yes I do really. There are clergy groupies, if I can use that word. There are, it's a bit like, you know, women who love a man in uniform and it's that same sort of thing, there's a mystique about it. It's not sexual, it just is a sort of, I think a fact of life that they're drawn to that and it doesn't quite work. The other thing that I was very interested in when I first

came to [place name] when I was first ordained and probably still in the days of catching myself in my reflection in a shop window and thinking 'oh goodness that's me wearing a dog collar' was that if I was walking through town sometimes somebody would come very often out of a pub or out of a shop or something and you'd hear them say 'good morn...oh' and then they'd say 'what do we call you?' you know, and you know what they were going to say was 'good morning, Father' and they don't know what to say. And that's a bit tantamount to me with this lady bus driver. It is the fact that they see the collar first and then they realise that Father probably isn't appropriate and it just is...

SH: So do you have people call you 'Mother'? Is that a thing?

S: Not twice [laughs]. No, people will say to me 'what do we call you?' and I will say 'anything but Mother, my children call me mother when they're upset with me'. But now I will say 'call me [Sylvia] or call me Reverend', it just depends what the context is. I think people genuinely don't think to call you Mother unless, if they call you Mother, they're being facetious. But there is sometimes this 'what do we call you?' But again, it depends on the tradition, if they come from high church tradition then the vicar is always Father and that's how it goes. You break the mould, but I've certainly worked, before I was ordained, I worked with female curates in parishes where I know, or they visited neighbouring parishes and hadn't really been welcomed or went with certain trepidation but apart from the places that almost make a point of making sure that the fence doesn't get breached once people experience a woman's ministry they will begin to twig that actually, there is no such thing as a women's priestly ministry or a woman priest, you are a priest. And they will realise that for some of these women their forte will be the pastoral thing, for some of them their forte will be their depth of prayer or their spiritual depth or whatever. And then hopefully they then twig that actually there is a great variety in the men as well. It's like anything else, if you, you have the general, you kind of put a barrier up against it, it's very difficult to actually put that sort of stereotype on an individual cos inevitably none of us fit that mould.

SH: That's fascinating how you really don't buy into the male ministry and female ministry. My understanding is the Church went along this path assuming that there was a male and a female ministry and the two halves would come together and the church would be more fulfilled as a result. Do you find that working in the Church of England you are expected to fit some sort of female ministry mould or is it not that obvious?

S: I've never been conscious of it. But in this diocese, I don't know what the proportion is but there are a lot of women priests in this diocese. May be occasionally, or certainly we're surrounded by, just north of here is [place name] diocese, which is a very much still the territory of Forward in Faith thinking. And whether some women come to this diocese 'cos they know they are welcomed. I'm not conscious of a difference certainly from the organisation's point of view if there's an expectation I think that's more in congregations than you know from any sort of organisational point of view.

SH: It sounds like thinking or culture has moved on a bit then from the early 90s.

S: I don't know what it was like here in, I came up to [place name] in 1996, so I don't know what the culture was like before that. There was a big shock to me from coming from [place name] diocese to [place name] diocese, but maybe the calling to ordination kind of backed up that shock because again it was the personal thing, but if you speak to almost any priest they will have gone through that 'No! Are you sure? Really? Not at this moment, not at this

time, maybe I'll think about it'. I mean, everybody I think, nearly every priest has gone through that 'woah' moment of realisation so... and we've got some good trailblazers here. [Female name] is one of the [title] and she was one of the first women to be ordained, but is now [title] prolocutor of the [place name], very high profile. And as you say Libby Lane came from this part and there was a certain amount of 'oh we've got the first' – have you interviewed Libby? 'Cos her husband is also a priest, chaplain at Manchester Airport and quite a number of the clergy here you have husband and wife who are both ordained. In fact, my colleague as well, his wife is ordained, was ordained before he was and she was one of the first to be ordained, so it's just much more a fact of life here I think, maybe, whether there was a conscious moving away from that or whether it was just the way it happened.

SH: So, there might be pockets elsewhere that where it perhaps it's not as accommodating if that's the right word. My overarching question and this might be very difficult to answer, I'm asking whether 20 years of having women as priests, whether you could call yourselves agents of change, whether you can put your finger on things that have changed because the gates have been opened to women, and I'm more interested in the symbolic level, but that needs some looking at and scrutiny really. I'm just wondering off the top of your head whether you have feelings about whether women either individually or en masse have kind of chipped away at something, or changed something about the church or about the symbolism of Christianity.

S: Within the confines of this room I would say probably society has dragged the church along. If you go back to, and I was born in [year] so in the 60s and 70s when I was growing up that's when Women's Lib was really trying to break down barriers and barriers that as a teenager I was never really aware of. It would never have occurred to me that a woman couldn't be a soldier or a policeman or a fireman or, and I use that language. [Redacted]. It just didn't occur to me that there was that issue. And Women's Lib, I also went to a University where the male female relationship, ration was ten to one so you just lived in that world. Society moved ahead partly because of Women's Lib really, it was kind of dragged into a whole different mould of life. And the Church was a long way behind that, it took a long time to do it. Partly because there are people who hold very well formed theological differences and it's not like... I did hear in the, when we were still looking at when the Church was being pushed gradually to this line of 'yes we can ordain women' there was a lot of talk then about women's liberation and all this and I don't think that in the Church there will inevitably in the 60s and 70s there would have been some people there, men, who would have been 'over my dead body', but I think for a lot of people it was just not, it wasn't thought of, it's only the same as in the 1960s I suppose when you started having women GPs. Because your doctor was going to be a man, your lawyer if you had to have a solicitor was going to be a man, it's just how society was. And if you are going to have the vicar it was going to be a man, it was a change of consciousness. And whether... my personal feeling is that women's ordination was kind of as a result of that as opposed to being an agent of change. It was... the balance tipped to the point that not allowing women was seen as the weird thing. Some of those women who were first ordained, in any kind of pioneering situation you have to have rhinoceroses, you have to have people who will just put their heads down and go and bang on the wall until the wall knocks down. So some of the first women, I had, there was one when I was still down in [place name] who was ordained and she was a large woman with a great mop of bright red hair and when she was first ordained people were 'that's an abomination, look at the state of her, why doesn't she

tidy herself up and things'. I mean, that could have happened with a man as well I suppose but she was very outspoken, very kind of well you know 'get out of my way cos I'm coming through'. You had to have people like that to make their mark and to actually knock down those barriers. They didn't really do the cause a lot of good. I was thrilled when the BBC announced that they were going to have a series about a woman vicar and after two episodes of the Vicar of Dibley I was screaming at it. Going 'no, no, no' because it was the stereotypical thing. So I think that it polarised the church a little bit when women, when it was passed in General Synod that women could be ordained as deacons there were people then saying 'well this is ordination to the priesthood by backdoor means' and everyone was 'no it's not, this is something different' and of course as soon as those women were ordained deacons and then a year on their male colleagues were ordained as priests then they started 'this isn't right, we've got to do this, so those people who said it's backdoor means were right. And some of those people then polarised and pulled themselves into this 'we won't have anything to do with these women in case we're tainted by it'.

SH: What do you think about that, the doctrine of taint? Is it a real minority view or do you think it's a solid chunk of theology that has survived women's ordination?

S: I don't even know how much of it is theology. But it's to do with ecclesiology I suppose. I've already said I come from the Catholic wing of the church and I very firmly believe that only a priest can consecrate the Eucharist, can absolve sins, can grant a blessing and that ... oh and can ordain. So, I was ordained by the Bishop, there is nothing in the Bible that says anything much about what women can do and what women can't. Yes, Jesus chose twelve men but actually he chose twelve Jews, so do all priests have to be Jews, and you can follow that line a long way along. The fact that it's only men that have been priests for so long in the Anglican church and in the Roman Catholic Church and the orthodox churches as well is a human invention and therefore if that's a human invention then there can be human interventions to change. So I don't see it as a theology. But then as I say I will always see myself...when I give a blessing, when I baptise a child I'm offering myself as a channel for God. I say to parents when I'm preparing them for baptism, 'your child is going to be any different, they won't look any different, they won't behave any differently, there'll be no material change.' There's no material change at the Eucharist. This wafer is unconsecrated, this wafer that's consecrated, there is no physical difference in them. There is no chemical analysis that's going to change it. I can't tell if you put a consecrated wafer and an unconsecrated wafer side by side I don't know which is which. All those things are channels for God to work through. And therefore God is quite capable of sorting out, if I give the sacrament to somebody who's not confirmed – and again my tradition says to receive communion you must be confirmed, or the very least admitted to communion with the assumption you'll be confirmed – if I give the sacrament to somebody who's not entitled to receive it, whatever that means, God's quite capable of sorting that out. If in God's eyes this person is not entitled to receive it all they are receiving is a wafer and a sip of wine. There is a great difference to me, I look at it and I'm thinking, having been in a church where I saw a church warden pour the remnants of the consecrated wine back into the bottle and gone 'no, no, no, no, you can't do that'. You know that's, there is a difference to me. But I can't tell you what it is.

SH: Is it operating on a symbolic level, that's probably too shallow a word, for you within the spiritual, I'm just using my imagination now, the spiritual realm rather than in the material world, there's a difference between the two. That might be too metaphysical...

S: Yeah I don't... it's really hard to quite articulate quite how this works. I don't, as I say, it is this idea of being a channel and you offer yourself to God and God will actually do whatever God feels needs to be done. You could say the same in terms of well ok why does someone need to be ordained? What does ordination mean? It's a terribly hurtful thing when we have things like Week of Christian Prayer for Unity like in my last parish, each church would host a service of unity, we didn't have a one in the week, but each night one of the churches would host something. The Roman Catholic Church would always say 'well you know, we have a regular mass on Friday nights so we'll make that a week of prayer for Christian unity'. Great. So, we walked in and the first thing the priest did when he welcomed everybody was to say, 'it's lovely to see members of other denominations and I'm terribly sorry but I won't be able to give you the communion because you're not a Catholic'. So that was really hurtful, and it wasn't anything to do with gender, but it was to do with that definition of a catholic and a non-Catholic. I will look and say, 'well, there are very good reasons I know the history I know why the church of England and the Roman Catholic church split but actually your priest is consecrating communion and giving it to those people can have it and I can't.' Are they more Christian than I am? So it's that... and because of that interdenominational thing because I know how hurt I feel I can then understand the hurt that men feel about women priests if they feel they are changing things. Most of these things are human defined but then I'm arguing against myself in some ways by saying you know that you have to be ordained to do something because anybody, I can take this off and put it on you and say 'there you are' – I assume you're not ordained – but I can put this on you and say 'ok' so where's the difference there, you know?

SH: so there clearly is a difference but it maybe a blurry, if you talk in those terms...

S: Because what I've just said, God is big enough to sort it out and therefore if you said the words and put your hands over the bread and wine and said all the right words and things I would say knowing that you're not ordained then that's not a consecrated sacrament. If I didn't know, if you'd come in here in a black shirt and a white collar and I hadn't asked and I didn't know and all that, you know, would it have been any different? And if God is big enough to sort it out then he could make the difference. So, I'm arguing... I can't see the logic. I'm a logician and I can't quite see the logic of that argument and yet it's deeply entrenched and I trained with Methodist colleagues and in the Methodist church they would have communion but they're not ordained. And so from our perspective that's lay presidency. So it's not a sacrament.

SH: Do you think ordination then is something that assuming as humans we need it in order to have a kind of imagination to the cosmic, some kind of link so it's not a free for all basically? Do you think that, not saying it's not approved by God but that it's better for human beings to have that, some kind of official....

S: Some kind of law of order. Yes. Yes I do but I also believe very firmly that God has called me to do what I'm doing. I have no idea why out of all the millions of people in this world why He looked at me and went 'it's you'. But I do believe that it's what God called me to be a priest.

SH: Do you think that theology has subtly changed then? Focussing on the gender aspect for a minute, or do you think the framework theologically has always been there to allow women in but it's maybe been intransigence in terms of men who have kept it to themselves? So what I'm asking is as women being allowed to be ordained has there been

a subtle shift in how people use theology or what they kind of sign up to across the traditions really?

S: It's yes and no again because people are different. There will be some people whose theology has shifted. There will be some people whose theology will never shift whatever that theology is just because they're entrenched in their...I don't see it as intransigence in that the same way, I don't know whether it makes a lot of sense, I look at something like slavery for example. And say in our... from our perspective you look and think that can never have been right. Certainly when people were branded and there was an absolute firm believe in whatever the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century that black people didn't feel pain in the same sense that white people. We can't understand it now. We can say how can there possibly be a difference? But I think they were seen as another species and therefore it's hard for us really to be able to look at the world then and now we'd look and say it was absolutely wicked that people went into the West Indies and into Africa and things and they just took people as slaves and treated them as commodities. For us it's way, way beyond humanity but I don't think it was a conscious thing then, I think it was a different understanding. And I've been feeling very much in the last couple of days the same with just having got the verdict from the Hillsborough enquiry that we now are looking at our understanding of where we are now and looking back nearly 30 years ago and saying it was appalling that certain things happened. But you can never remove yourself entirely from the understanding and the society that you're in. So I don't see this as intransigence in terms of a conscious thing that the church was all male. But then as I say my personal theology has never seen me standing in the place of Christ and I see that as an arrogance to even think that you can stand in the place of Christ because you can't. So...

SH: Is that a slight departure from an Anglo-Catholic perspective then?

S: I don't, yeah, I think there will be some people in the Anglo-Catholic wing who would see themselves as standing in Christ's place. I would say that is an arrogance that says you can't possibly be standing in Christ's place, it's a bit like a child who puts on their mum's shoes and does the thing that kind of says you can't. I wouldn't dream even of the Archbishop of Canterbury saying that he can stand in the place of Christ because nobody can stand in the place of Christ. So...

SH: So symbolically and theologically for you there isn't that issue with the maleness around that then. I'm a bit locked into what I've read so forgive me if it's a bit text book-y...

S: You might be better, more, you might understand it better than I do.

SH: It's only somebody's interpretation.

S: That's somebody's version.

SH: ....arguments against from an Anglo-Catholic school is the sense that being female was, it was not possible to preside for instance because absolutely because you were female so we're not imago dei...or being in the place of Christ. So a type of theology used as an argument against women's ordination. Just wondering if that has softened or moved on. Clearly you don't see it like that.

S: In some Anglo-Catholic parishes, you know the fairy-tale about the, it's sleeping beauty isn't it, where everything went to sleep for a hundred years and the forest grew up all around and actually people forgot that there was a castle there 'cos all they saw were these

trees. So in some parishes they will work very hard to perpetuate that line of this is a terrible thing and we keep it out there. I don't think, when you join a church most of us join a particular church by accident really cos it's the one where our parents go or where in my case where my friends went to Brownies or it's the one that's across the road or it's the one that's associated with your school or whatever. So most of us end up in a certain church by accident. Some people move round but there's not a vast amount of moving. I mean I'm in a much more central church now than I was as an Anglo-Catholic. I'm still Anglo-Catholic from having fairly black and white lines of how we do things and what things are and I mean that includes this idea of pouring the consecrated wine back in with the unconsecrated wine because it just was a line too far for me, whereas a lot of people are kind of well wine's wine. I was brought up that you consume whatever is left because I've already said physically it hasn't changed but it is different. So if I'm going to an old people's home and I give a wafer to somebody with dementia and they put it in their mouth and then take it out and give it back to me I'd eat it. And everybody, it goes, 'you do what?' but that's how I've been brought up. So it's hard to actually set aside all those things but it never ever occurred to me in all the years when I was growing up until the old arguments came up it never occurred to me to think that the priest was being standing in the place of Jesus. It was always he was doing what Jesus told us to do. So I would say in a lot of those Anglo-Catholic parishes, and the parish we grew up in down in [place name] is still a resolution A and B parish, won't have anything to do with women priests, a lot of the people there they accept what they're told. 'We don't do this'. When I was ordained I'd already moved away but we were still connect. My mother in law was the church warden in the church at the time. And we still used to go down there whilst she was alive, we would sometimes go to the church. And I used to wear my collar when I went to church because that's what I do. And it's who I am. And people down there who'd known me since I was a little girl used to say 'when are we going to hear you preaching? When are you going to come here? When are we going to see you at the altar?' and they had no concept at all that I wasn't allowed. And it's the general and the particular again, we don't have women priests but actually you're one of ours. And they don't sort of stop and think of you as a woman priest, it's just 'oh it's [name] and it would be lovely to have her there'. So, it is sort of, it is diluting over the years as people see things and what becomes more the norm. But I think that the gender difference in all walks of life is more sort of particularly held in individual minds than exists. But perhaps I've, I've been fortunate I've never hit this even as a programmer, when I went into programming, at that point most of them were men, but it never occurred to me, it was just what I was good at so it was what I wanted to do. Have I ever been discriminated again by being paid less? Well not that I'm aware of. But then different people were paid different amounts. Perhaps I'm blind to a big difference that's there and I just haven't actually fallen into yet. Dunno.

SH: Could I, I won't take up much more of your time, just to round off how you feel emotionally about the symbolic side of things. I don't know whether you came across the statue The Christa – a female version of Christ on the cross. And since then of course artists have done similar sort of things. How does that make you feel having Christ represented as a woman, especially being crucified?

S: It makes me feel very strange. Because we know that Christ was a man. As I say it's coming back to the fact that human beings, I mean we're in a world at the moment where the differentiation between male and female is being certainly sort of, I would say attacked. And perhaps I shouldn't say that but just looking on television now the number of gay

relationships is just seems to be in your face, you know, you're looking and you're thinking well actually people are male or female. Yes there are people who are transgender and I understand all that but there is a physical distinctiveness and I think that while the edges are blurred sometimes on the whole we are as we are made, we are male and we are female, we're complementary but we're different. Physically in that sense. And Jesus was a man. And therefore to see a woman up there on the cross is, would be very strange to me. I don't know how I would view it if I went and saw a blonde blue eyed Jesus nailed on the cross either because... or a Chinese Jesus because that's not what we've been brought up to. We know that not only that Jesus was a man but that he was born in Palestine or whatever politically whatever you'd want to call it. He was born in the Middle East and he grew up there. So we know certain things physically about him. Should that matter? Well, if you're going to, I mean lots and lots of other people have been crucified over the years so it wasn't only – and this is what Christians sometimes still are shocked when you sort of say, well it wasn't anything special for Jesus, it was only, the only, well I can't say the only difference was that he'd never done anything wrong, because I'm sure that a lot of people have been crucified and executed over the years wrongly innocently. So, it would feel wrong to me because when I see a crucifix that is a representation of Jesus and therefore, I can't sort of say, I mean Jesus represented humanity. But actually I can sort of, I struggle to get away from this idea this is more or less what Jesus looked like, you know. That is more or less what Jesus looked like – is that his face? Is that his...? You know it's that sort of thing. And I also feel that actually by putting a woman on the cross or by putting somebody who looks Chinese or anything else that's making a statement, a deliberate statement. This isn't saying this is the light of the world on the cross. It's a deliberate statement say, well you know that Jesus was crucified for me and therefore I put myself in that sort of situation.

SH: You don't see it as bad particularly, or blasphemous?

S: No. I see it as a strange thing to do. I don't see it as blasphemous because, I mean God chose to be born as a male child in the Middle East. Why did God chose not to be born a female child in, well I mean in those days a female child wouldn't have, it wouldn't have been possible. It's all very well saying it would have been possible for God, but actually it wouldn't have been possible for humanity. But no, I don't see it as blasphemous I just find it a strange thing to do.

SH: This might be a too deep a theological question...after Jesus is transfigured and went to heaven, in your imagination and mind and theology, did he retain his maleness, so is there a part of the Godhead that retains the human maleness of Jesus, or has it transcended that, do you think?

S: It's something that didn't occur to me until, it was when the, you know the novel 'The Shack' came out, and that's longer ago than I like to think about now, it was only when 'The Shack' came out and people said 'oh you must read this', and I read it. In that you've got the Mama is the sort of the God the Father figure. And this is a big black woman, huge embracing woman. But they talked about Jesus who is still carrying his carpenter's bag and dressed in jeans and a checked shirt and things. And it was only then when I really stopped and thought about it because I've, I mean I do firmly believe in the ascension because without the ascension the resurrection doesn't make sense. Jesus came back to life, well what happened then? So the ascension was Jesus was lifted up as he was and therefore in some sense I don't know, I don't see heaven, I don't see Jesus walking around in heaven and all the other people walking round in heaven and God sitting on the throne in that

sense. My physical picture of heaven is a place with lots of screwed up pieces of paper all over the place, you know when you chuck everything out, and that's because in my life every time I think I know where I'm going I suddenly find I'm over there. So, God I think takes my plans and all the time goes, 'no I've got a much better plan than that'. Sorry, that's a by the by. But I do believe that Jesus is still somehow in that same physical sense because he was just lifted up to heaven in his physical body. So yes, I still see that as maleness. I have no issue at all, I know when I talk about the trinity I often will talk about God the Father, we have God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost. The Father is 'He', Jesus is 'He', the Holy Spirit very often is 'She'. So, I do have that sort of, that you know, that image in my mind or in my unconscious mind, but we have to use some sort of language and so that maleness is entrenched there and as I say, as far as Jesus is concerned, he's still got that same physical body. I've no idea where that physical body is. But you know if he's got that physical body we don't do the corrective surgery. And I hope that God will one of these days when I go and knock on the door of heaven just as he will come and say, 'you know all those times when you said "God doesn't mind" well I did'. He may also say you know 'how dare you talk about it in that sense' but God who is almighty and immense and bigger than anything we can ever imagine is also very close by and very always wanting to understand and, I mean he chose me, he knows what I'm like, he doesn't want to transform my personality and make me somebody different, 'cos if he wanted somebody different he would have chosen somebody different in the first place. So we'll find out one day.

SH: Do you engage with feminist theologies at all, or is it not a mainstream thing, I'm thinking of not so much Daphne Hampson... but Elizabeth Fiorenza Schussler, women who deliberately set out to write theologically from a feminist point of view, Ali Green, she wrote a theology of women's priesthood which talked about, really subverted some of the more masculine symbols, so very feminist but intending to remain within the mainstream and be real and relevant to people within the Christian framework. How much do you engage with that, or is it seen as kind of a separate stream of thought for you?

S: I don't really engage with it. I engage with it from the point of view of the people who are writing those things are very engaged and as I say the same way that people like [name] are very much you know very positive about women's ministry. I just don't, I don't really sort of think that difference, I don't as I say, I don't see it as amorphic and all the same, I see us all as very different so I don't see women's priestly ministry because there isn't a men's priestly ministry. It's the same with liberation theology and all these different theologies they're all exploring, and they are all picking up on bits, but we all need to be exploring. None of us really know those answers there. Maybe I'm just blind to an awful lot of differences and things that I ought to see. But as I say, if you take ten women priests, you take ten mixed men and women priest, you take ten men priests, you've actually got ten individuals there so they're all different. And our God is a God who encompasses everybody and takes them as they are. Works through them, changes them in whatever way he does. But actually chooses each one of us for who we are. And understand each one of us as we are, you know he's made us, he's made however many billion people in the world, every one of them different. So, yes...

SH: What you've presented is a very straightforward view actually and that's really good.

S: Naive...

SH: Not at all, I've been thinking in terms of sexual difference and how that plays out symbolically and theologically or even on a day to day level, so actually for you to present something that is almost the polar opposite of that, human beings have parity, I believe that's what you're saying, there's a parity in humanness and gender is, especially as a priest, gender is very much subsumed...

S: There's a parity but also a disparity because as I say that you know all of us can do, there are things that we can do very well and things that we do appallingly and I was not in the queue when they gave out the gift of flower arranging. I am absolutely stunned when people do things, but I could spend the entire day doing it and it still looks like I've chucked them. I just haven't got that skill so you know, I don't see that you're good at making cakes because you're a woman or you're good at caring for a baby because you're a woman, it just doesn't quite work in my world. That says... but I do appreciate that people who are good, fabulously good at flower arranging, making cakes, woodworking, whatever it is because that's who we are particularly. So it's a parity but it's also a disparity that says every single one of us is different and it's not, obviously if, how you're physically built, what strength you've got, how good your voice is, how good your humour approaches to people is what makes, is what matters, and I don't see any of those as, obviously we tend to think women are better at looking after children or more naturally orientated toward doing that thing, but a lot of that is society, you know that nursing is what women do and doctoring is what men do and all that sort of stuff, that's gradually being... and I don't see it as chipped away but it is a bit, it's being watered down and things moulding much more and fit as they do. When I first contacted you I was, there was a bit of me saying, actually I'm not going to be very good for your study 'cos I'm going to be sitting here, no I don't see gender, I don't see a difference here when all the clergy get together I don't, I'm not conscious of it. I did, when I first arrived here as a new curate we had an ecumenical meeting and the lovely Roman Catholic priest round the corner whose church we were at that day, his first thing, 'Oh it's lovely to meet you and I'm so pleased to meet you' and we had a nice chat and then he said 'can you just come with me a minute. There's something I want to ask you' so I went out thinking 'oh he's going to ask me something' and he took me into the kitchen and he said 'how many teabags do you think I need in there, or could you make...?' So the next time I went he said 'could you make the tea?' So I said to him 'yes, course I will but not because I'm a woman but because yes I'll help you make the tea' and it was stuff like that...but then bless him a Roman Catholic priest was surrounded by housekeepers and women who did everything for him and it was just, it was an entirely and unconscious thing. The feminists will say what we've got to do is break down that unconscious barrier. But we've all got it to some extent whether we are aware of this or not, so...

SH: That's really fascinating and completely so hit the nail on the head because you've offered something that is very different to the literature that I've been reading so that is so useful, so don't think it's not...

S: Well, it's a balance as well that says, you know I'm quite sure there are some very, people who will see very, very striking differences but it's a bit of a balance that kind of says, again we all see it differently we all experience it differently and we take it as it comes.

SH: Just to some up to make sure I've got the gist of what your position is, you don't particularly feel the need to change rituals and language unless it lends itself, you're not consciously attempting to change metaphors and call God mother or anything like that, so

what you have to work with in terms of what the church has provided in liturgy, ritual seems to you to be completely fitting for you as a woman and for women in the congregation?

S: Yeah. Yes, it's physical things like the fact that with the robes for example, I have to have everything made for me cos everything is just too big. There's no...but that's a practical thing, it's not institutionalised in any sort of sense. And the other side of it says that there certainly is something like funeral ministry I've had people who consciously will, not go looking for a woman, but will say you know, 'we're so glad we've got you' and certainly when I marry people, people will often say 'I'm so glad it's you that's doing it'.

SH: because you're a woman?

S: yeah.

SH: So people project on to you a thing about your maybe more caring or more understanding or more sympathetic even because you're a woman.

S: Yes. I don't know whether they sort of thing of it that way and you know for some of them they are probably just, they're responding to me as an individual because I'm not typical of any... what is typical of ....

SH: Absolutely, so it's in their head...

S: But it is, it's a personal relationship that you build with people and again going, if you want to go back to the gender thing, it is assumed that women are good at making personal relationships, connections and men aren't. But it's a nonsense, in the academic world it's no different. You know you will know when you come across women who are really sort of armour plated and you're not quite sure where the warmth is in them. So, it's each of us as we are. And perhaps I'm very fortunate, I'm certainly very blessed. I mean God... I'm a [place name] girl I really didn't want to come to [Northern town]. I came up here kicking and screaming because my husband's job was being moved up here, but you know I probably found, I mean God has probably given me a much better path up here than he would have done if I was still in [Southern town] because I don't know, it might have changed in 20 years but it would have been, I would have needed a lot stronger armour down there.

SH: That's really interesting. That God has in your journey you think, you believe, God has taken that into account actually that people in a certain place may not be as receptive or give you a harder time which messes up what you're supposed to be doing and so has put you on a different path. It's linking that God kind of knows what's going on with people and if they're not going to be receptive to you because you're a woman I'm going to put you somewhere else where you will flourish.

S: But it may be, I don't know whether that was other people being receptive or maybe it was just kind of, well actually you're not listening, and I'll put you in a place where perhaps you can see it differently. He gets us where he wants us to be somehow. No matter how much we kind of 'no, no, I can't hear you'. But it's again with baptism things I'll say to people when you've got your small child when you call them do, they immediately respond to you? And most parents will laugh about this. And I'll say 'sometimes when you call your child they'll immediately go, yes mother what...' and sometimes they will be so engrossed in what they're doing that they won't hear you, but other times not quite physically but

metaphorically it's kind of 'can't hear you' you see from their eyes...well that's how we all are with God as well, that you know there's times when we're open to him, there's times when we think we understand but there's definitely times when it's no I'm far too busy doing something out to worry about that.

SH: Is there anything that is buzzing at the back of your mind that you haven't mentioned that I haven't asked about that you think might be important to this idea of whether women priests are agents of change?

S: No, I suppose the one thing I want to say we are not 'women priests' we are priests who are women.

SH: That's a leitmotif through my writing and I need to really clarify that, 'cos obviously objectionable, that's divided into men's...

S: It's not objectionable but I'm a priest who happens to be a woman. There are some people who will make a big thing about I am a woman priest and will see women priests as not separate but certainly different. But then as I say the world I live in in all sorts of other things, there are huge differences that are far more important between people than gender. Which isn't to say that gender is irrelevant but in this sense it is. That's a really good word 'transcends' it says it's not important.

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