BOOKS AND ARTS

Mary, Phoebe, Sophia: the evidence we can't ignore

No Women in Holy Orders?: the women deacons of the early Church
John Wijngaards
Canterbury Press, £9.99
Tablet Bookshop price £9

John Wijngaards (whose real name is Hans) is a Dutch priest who resigned in protest at the Church's current position on women's ordination. Unlike many resigned priests who have slipped out of sight, he has been exercising a more visible and hard-working ministry than ever before, as a theologian specialising in the question of women priests. His contributions to the subject have been exceptionally valuable, not only because of the solidly Catholic nature of his theology, but also because Wijngaards believes in hiding nothing and in enabling the reader to make up her or his own mind.

A year ago Wijngaards published a classic book, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church* (DLT), which argued convincingly that the ban on women's priesthood was a "cuckoo's egg" that did not spring out of Catholic theology but had slipped in as an alien element from secular culture, and particularly from Roman law. It is the best book I know of to date on the subject of women's ordination – clear-headed, well-informed, fair, logical, and thoroughly Catholic. His new book develops a couple of chapters from the previous book, concerned with just one small aspect of the question – the ordination of women deacons in the early Church – but it exhibits Wijngaards's habitual method of comprehensive openness, as well as being extremely readable.

This means that the book does not just present Wijngaards's own view and conclusions, together with the usual critical apparatus of illustrations, glossary, bibliography and notes. It also includes the original texts of all the important documents, in an accurate translation with all the sensitive terms (deacon, deaconess, ordination, etc.) given also in the original Greek. This more than doubles the value of the book, as well as making it much more fun to read, for the reader can make up her or his own mind not only on the answers to the questions but also on what the questions should be.

The question that Wijngaards focuses on is "Were the women deacons of the early Church sacramentally ordained?" He argues: "If the diaconate of women was a true diaconate, if it was one valid expression of the sacrament of holy orders, then women did in fact receive holy orders and the priesthood is open to them." He does not say a great deal to justify the second part of this argument, and I have some doubts about its logical validity.

True, there is a unity among the threefold ministry, in that there is one sacrament of orders and not three. But married priests are not eligible to be ordained to the episcopacy in the Orthodox Church, nor are married permanent deacons in the postconciliar Catholic Church eligible to be ordained to the priesthood. So there is no intrinsic reason why women should have to be eligible for the priesthood if they are eligible for the diaconate. Nor indeed would it follow, if women had not once upon a time been sacramentally ordained to the diaconate, that they should not be admitted to holy orders today. I am not convinced, then, that

> Why will the Vatican not allow women deacons today? (We know why: because it would be the thin end of the wedge)

Wijngaards's question is quite as important as he thinks.

Nor am I as convinced as he is that his question is to be answered by such a thumpingly positive one-hundred-per-cent "yes". From the texts it seems evident that women deacons received an ordination comparable to their male counterparts in the Greek-Byzantine Church of the first millennium, but that there were certain differences both in the words and in the resulting ministries. The woman deacon's ministry was not identical to that of the man deacon's.

What are to be the criteria for "full sacramental ordination"? If it is a matter of being public, solemn and lifelong, with the laying-on of hands, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and the placing of a stole, then clearly women's ordination qualifies. If it is a matter of admitting a woman to a ministry called the diaconate, then again it is clear that women were deacons. But if it is a matter of admitting women to the same ministry as we now mean when we talk about the diaconate, then it is not quite so clear. Why, not even the male deacon's ministry then was the same as it is today, for then they were not allowed to baptise (cf. *Apostolic Constitutions*).

For me there are other important points that emerge from a reading of Wijngaards's sources, relating to patristic awareness of New Testament women. First, I had never registered that Mary of Magdala and other women in the gospels are called "women deacons" in the third-century *Didascalia*. For that scriptural reason, says the *Didascalia*, "the ministry of a woman deacon is especially required and urgent". What does the Vatican have to say to that?

Secondly, I did not realise that so many patristic sources had drawn attention to the fact that the deacon Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) was quite unambiguously a woman. Modern feminists have drawn attention to her, and have rightly objected to the translation of her title as "deaconess" when the Greek is quite clearly "deacon" – the male noun *diakonon* (in the accusative case). Phoebe is explicitly invoked as a model in the Greek-Byzantine ordination rite, and there is a fourth-century tombstone in Jerusalem to "the woman deacon Sophia, the second Phoebe". What is more, the third-century Origen drew a quite explicit lesson: "This text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate." And what does the Vatican have to say to that? Why will it not allow women deacons today? (We know why: because it would be the thin end of the wedge.)

Thirdly, I had no idea that the fourth-century St John Chrysostom had waxed eloquent about the apostle Junia (Rom. 16:7), precisely because she was a woman apostle. (In many translations the name is rendered, possibly wrongly, as "Junias", to make it sound like a man's name.) He says: "To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles – just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They [Andronicus and Junia] were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle!" Now what would the Vatican say to that? If bishops are the successors to the apostles, then according to St John Chrysostom's reading, women could also be bishops.

I have one regret about this work, and that is its final sentence, which speaks of "the final and clinching factor, the factor of historical practice". Historical practice has been too much invoked as a clinching factor in the argument against women priests, as Wijngaards would be the first to admit. The clinching factor, rather, is the way the theology of one particular question fits into the wider pattern of Christian theology – in relationship to key doctrines such as the incarnation and redemption. And for that the reader would be best advised to read Wijngaards's earlier book.

Margaret Hebblethwaite

necessary for the salvation of sinners like me just because the inheritors of collegiality may have failed sufficiently to fight their corner. Life is too short for this nonsense.

(Fr) Edward Butler
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
trentvaleteresa@aol.com

Faith caught and taught

Sir, Clare Watkins's article ("That empty RE book", 5 October) rightly draws attention to the necessary interdependence of experience and teaching in religious education "if the faith is to survive today". The empty RE book referred to is perhaps rather a symptom of poor classroom teaching than a failure of *Here I Am* as a religious education programme. A good tool in untutored or weak hands will not do the job.

"Child-friendly, clear for teachers and parents, and balanced in its approach to the integration of knowledge, experience and spirituality" (Clare Watkins's description of the Catholic Truth Society's programme, *The Way, the Truth and the Life*) seem to me to be elements descriptive rather of teacher and school community than simply of a religious education textbook.

The truths of the faith are lived before they are taught. The mysteries of faith are celebrated before they are studied. We are all therefore in our own way ultimately responsible for the religious education of our children.

(Canon) Peter Humfrey
National Adviser for Catechesis and Religious Education
Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
London SW1
phumfrey@cesew.org.uk

African approaches

Sir, The article by Kristina Cooper entitled "Spiritual Warfare in Africa" (*The Tablet*, 28 September) reports on efforts by Christian Churches to come to grips with African traditional religion. Unfortunately, the encounter is described in terms of confrontation and condemnation rather than dialogue and mutual understanding.

The core of African traditional religion as lived by the Bantu centres around a deep relationship with the ancestors, who are constantly remembered and invoked. This relationship is given expression in prayers, blessings and regular visits to small family shrines where food is offered, sometimes on a daily basis, so as to show that the living have not forgotten those who gave them life, i.e. physical life, inspiration and wisdom. Sad to say, there is little sign so far of a concerted Christian attempt to enter into serious dialogue with the core beliefs and values of African traditional religion, in particular this faith in the benevolent presence of the "living dead", i.e. the tribal, clan and family ancestors.

Contemporary thinking on the presence of the Spirit outside the confines of the Church demands a thoroughgoing reappraisal of African traditional religion. Only when this is translated into meaningful pastoral practice will the Christian faith finally take on an authentically African face.

As Kristina Cooper also says in the article, however, a deep-seated belief in witchcraft is at the root of much suffering in Africa. In the worldview of the Bantu, misfortune, sickness and death may be explained as the consequence of ill-intentioned agents sometimes called witches. These may be family members or fetish-spirits. The belief in the possibility of bewitchment is very strong all over Africa. People commonly have recourse to healers or diviners to obtain protective fetish-spirits, which usually require sacrifices such as a chicken, a goat or even a family member. These same fetish-spirits can also be used to cause economic or physical harm to perceived enemies.

The charismatic renewal is the first serious effort on the part of the Catholic Church to come to the rescue of victims of witchcraft by exorcising those evil spirits and bringing physical, mental as well as spiritual healing. Here in Uganda, however, evangelical movements in their misguided fervour have attacked local shrines, thereby pushing people to build these further away from their homes.

(Fr) Piet Korse
Jinja
Uganda
mwangu@utlonline.co.ug

Why language matters

Sir, I agree with Sr Kay Rowley's concern (Letters, 28 September) about the male orientation of the text of the Divine Office.

Here in Zambia, and other parts of Africa, the problem is seemingly not as urgent because indigenous languages, such as Bemba, use gender-free terms. So "all men" in "Jesus Christ came to save all men" becomes in Bemba "*ifwe bonse*", that is, "all of us". Further, Tonga and many other languages are generally gender-free. So is the language of the liturgy a non-issue in this part of the world?

Quite the contrary. To unify our liturgical prayer, in a formation house for example, we use English almost exclusively. For the Divine Office we go to the Collins-Dwyer-Talbot compilation produced by the hierarchies of Australia, England, Wales and Ireland. The text and prayers are full of male terms exclusively used. This becomes a serious matter when we are seeking to form young male religious (such as the Franciscans at St Bonaventure College in Lusaka) in wholesome attitudes and gender respect. Even at a subconscious level, a male orientation in liturgical texts could foster a feeling in male clerics of superiority, to the detriment of empowerment of women. If the clergy of the future are trained using exclusive language, will they later have respect for women and stand up for their rights?

(Fr) Donald Halpin OFMConv
Lusaka, Zambia
dhalpin@zamnet.zm

Nevertheless, the archbishop said that he had been disappointed by their failure to unite in fighting against the liberal tide.

Catholic interns for Parliament

Three young Catholic graduates will work as interns alongside Christian MPs in Westminster in a scheme designed by the Church to "encourage future Catholic leaders to fulfil their Christian calling through political and social action".

The scheme, set up by the Catholic bishops' conference, will also arrange for the graduates to visit parish and diocesan projects so as to learn about the work of the Church, and to study Masters-level classes in Catholic social teaching at Heythrop, the Jesuit-run college that is part of London University.

Speaking at the launch of the scheme last Wednesday, Archbishop Peter Smith of East Anglia recalled the emphasis placed in the Catholic bishops' 1996 document *The Common Good* on the involvement of Catholics in the political life of the country.

He said that the scheme was designed to help develop the lay vocations of those taking part, and said he hoped it would also strengthen links between MPs, Parliament and the bishops' conference. "I hope too," he said, "that in establishing this scheme we will be sending a clear signal about the importance the Catholic Church attaches to public service, and to cultivating the next generation of Catholic lay leadership." The purpose of the scheme was not, he said, "to provide lobbyists for the Church". It was a "scheme to develop their learning and education".

He added it was an "important ecumenical feature of our programme" that it sought to place interns with Christian and not only Catholic members.

The pilot scheme, which will run for three years, begins this October and the internships will run for 10 months to July. Graduates have not yet been appointed. The conference is raising money to meet the graduates' living and accommodation expenses and has secured funding for the first two years of the project.

OBITUARY

Monica Furlong

LIKE many who knew Monica, I first encountered her not in person but in print. Her output was prolific and remarkably diverse. She was a novelist for both adults and children; poet; biographer of persons as varied as John Bunyan and Thomas Merton; autobiographer; travel writer; reviewer; compiler of anthologies; devotional essayist; theological controversialist; ecclesiastical satirist. And in common with many others, I first met Monica in person due to her involvement with the Movement for the Ordination of Women in the early Eighties. Her leadership was instrumental in taking the movement out of its debilitating politeness to a place where it could not be ignored or marginalised.

In the months following the successful passage of the 1992 Measure to ordain women as priests, Monica's campaigning zeal was re-fired by the Church of England's hasty enactment of the 1993 Act of Synod. This created so-called flying bishops to provide "clean hands" for those who could no longer accept their own bishop because he ordained women. Monica perceived that theological rigour and integrity had given way to misplaced sentimentality misunderstood as pastoral sensitivity on an institutional scale.

Her ability to see deeply into the nature of others and institutions came out of her own hard won self-understanding. In the Eighties she underwent an extended period of intense psycho-analysis and this experience informed her understanding of the Christian Gospel and the Church which proclaims it, as much as her vast reading in the tradition.

What motivated Monica as a campaigner was her passionate love for the Church – even for the old, easy to have a go at Church of England. One of her last books, *CofE: the state it's in* (2000), is a testimony to the way she could combine criticism with love and commitment. Her passion for justice in the Church came about because she knew that its proclamation of the Gospel to the world was severely impaired when its own life was disordered. She had a temper, as those closest to her knew, and she had little patience for clergy, especially women clergy, who refused to put their heads over the parapet of controversy due to timidity or ambition.

Her reputation went beyond Britain. She played a key role in the formation of Australia MOW and was awarded a DD from the General Theological Seminary in New York in 1986. When visiting her in the hospice last summer with another priest to discuss her funeral arrangements (needless to say, Monica had very clear ideas), one of the staff popped into her room and said, "Sorry to interrupt, but are you *the* Monica Furlong?" She brightened and with both obvious pleasure and a sense of the irony of the situation said, "Well, yes, I *am*!"

Monica's understanding of Christ tells us a great deal about her. She told me once she was disappointed in her work as a poet, but I have over the years found her poetry to be a source of insight. It seems right to leave the last word with her.

Jesus, what an ironist you were.
All your best stories were exaggeration
And your best heroes crooks,
To teach us how to live.
What was it that you knew
That made the cripples walk
The blind to see?
That death's the only way to get to birth,
And brokenness the only road to grace?

Judith Maltby

Shirley du Boulay writes: I met Monica Furlong in the early Seventies, when her first books, *With Love to the Church* (1965), *Travelling In* (1971), *Contemplating Now* (1971), *The End of Our Exploring* (1973), and *Christian Uncertainties* (1975) were appearing. It would be a great pity if the importance of these books were to be overshadowed by her later prodigious output and by her important and unflagging work for the ordination of women.

In these books Monica showed herself to be that little bit ahead of the rest of us, a quality which is the hallmark of the prophet. While it could be argued that she did not say anything entirely new, she certainly articulated a voice that was whispering in the hearts of many, exciting some and worrying others, for it was not the generally accepted thinking of the time.

"How does one live with religious emotion in the twentieth century?" is one of the questions she asked in *Contemplating Now*. The Sixties had opened a whole generation to the idea that the Christian Church did not have a monopoly of meaning and wholeness, which could be sought through Eastern meditation, through other religions, through psychoanalysis, even through drugs. Nor did the search have to be articulated in the language of sin, guilt and the confessional. Monica knew, from her own experience, how wounds can open the doors of consciousness and how sometimes the language of psychology is best fitted to explore these depths. By approaching such issues in the context of contemplation, which she described as the struggle to reflect the face of God, she was also encouraging that most precious of gifts, the ability to live in the present moment, whatever it may bring.

Just as she was at home on the borders of religion and psychology, so she was instinctively ecumenical at a time when Radio Four's *Thought for the Day* rarely considered giving airtime to a non-Christian voice. How refreshing it was, then, to find her linking the essence of St John of the Cross, Lao Tzu, Zen meditation, sexual ecstasy and prayer without even drawing attention to what was then an unusual juxtaposition. She was writing about life in its wholeness, so whether truth came in aboriginal garb or in church robes was simply not an issue.

She sometimes wrote of "struggling" to express herself, as in speech her stammer could cause her to struggle to say a word. It is this sense of struggle that was so moving. She struggled and she shared the struggle, whether joyous or painful.

If what she wrote 30 years ago has today become common currency, let us never forget it was the courage of people like Monica Furlong that helped to make it so.

Eric James writes: When I last talked to Monica – on the telephone, a few days before she died – in the country, in the loving care of her family, she said: "I want you to know I am happy." It was not a word I expected her to use – or one I am used to hearing from those on their deathbed; but with Monica it rang true. All her life she had been "in pilgrimage"; now she had all but arrived.

The existence of Monica Furlong was to me as good a proof of the existence of God as any I knew. She radiated the creating, redeeming power of God.