

MOW Annual General Meeting 5th September

Dr Patricia Brennan is best known for her very public role in the height of the debate over women in the Anglican Church in Australia and internationally between 1983 and 1993. What is less well known is that apart from a medical degree she holds a PhD in medical anthropology from the University of Newcastle and a Masters in Forensic Medicine from Monash University. She is currently a Staff Specialist in forensic medicine at RPAH and the Acting Medical Director of the forensic medical Unit in NSW Police, where her passion for addressing the origins of misogyny is unchanged. As feminist theologian, Nicola Slee recently stated, Patricia is working in/and speaking from the crux of violence/ oppression, reminding us of the life and death significance of feminist public theology.

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The advertised topic **Where has all the passion gone? Women in Church and state”**

was chosen originally by Marion Maddox in keeping with her published work on politics and religion in Australia.

While agreeing to take on the same topic, sadly because of Marion Maddox' loss, I must needs confine myself to women and the Church more than women in the state and the political scene. And of course anything said about women has immediate implications for men

One of the most important developments of the last century or so has been the growing realisation that theology or theologies, are human constructs. I can look back at how I was schooled from infancy in the accepted position that theology was a result of divine revelation through a temporal structure, in the case of the Catholic system or a canon of self evident texts exposed by the Reformation which fuels the a growing fundamentalist mind-set.

Any close examination of the multitude of doctrines within Christianity and other scripture based religions, shows individual beliefs reflect the context, age, interest loyalties and biases of those who formulate them, promulgate them and are informed in daily life by them. Under certain political or psychological circumstances, people will die and kill for doctrinal beliefs. Or as Adrienne Rich said, “Commit murders of the mind” --Witness the fate of dissidents in this dioceses. However beliefs are also incredibly evanescent. I read in a poem just yesterday

...my beliefs
are hats
that life sometimes blows away
as I walk through
the changing weather
of myself

There is a tendency for theologians to avoid making their personal origins, situations and beliefs overt in their public talking.

While purporting to be a humble desire not wishing to draw attention to themselves, this biographical anonymity carries an inference that they speak for God rather than for themselves. In the present context I would see it as a methodological necessity that I make my own situation beliefs and therefore blemishes explicit. This leaves a definite space for difference in other perspectives. And difference of perspective manifested itself in the outgoing committee. While accepting nomination to the committee, at the last AGM, the role of Convenor was more thrust upon me than sought. Why did I turn up at a meeting and accept such a throw back to a past. Perhaps it was the friend and long-time MOW comrade who called for my nomination out of the blue. Her silent outrage contrasted with the laughter that broke out in the meeting at such a suggestion, probably sparking a dormant awareness of unfinished business.

But mostly it was the presentation by the guest speaker on the day that provoked me, The historical recording of the ordination of women in the Anglican Church carry little of the inside stories. In the 1970s and 80s it was obscene to put the word woman in front of the word priest. The history of the first woman priested in 1944 Lee Tim Oi had been eradicated from all records. The 1974 Philadelphia 11, three of whom became my close friends were hauled before courts and charged with heresy. Carter Heyward had her hand scratched by a woman she was administering the sacrament to. Alison Cheek and most of her sister priests never had parishes and yet their testimony heralded a remarkable event in the life of the Anglican Church

So where has the passion gone. Its not where it has gone but why is it no longer being generated. I chose to incorporate the Convenors report through this presentation because it tells a tale than needs reflection. Three major events marked 2008/2009 Sydney MOW. The first was the celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Movement for the Ordination of Women outside St Andrew Cathedral in 1983. The images of a multitude of women bishops who gathered at Lambeth were projected onto ST Andrews Cathedral and the Town Hall and reached the evening and morning news. It was followed by a reunion in Chapter House of those involved in the decades of struggle While I have no regrets about what was probably to be the last gasp of public acclamation on the steps of the Town Hall it was important to celebrate what had been achieved by MOW Sydney. However in 2009 for me at least the notion of prophetic leadership was not a

workable proposition either for me or the committee. Two other events marked the year. Chris Albany's brave motion about women priests in the Sydney Synod brought to mind a poem I learned as a child. Called I believe ST Paul It described the crowds he preached to

Slaves who could conquer
Clowns who could be kings'
hearing their one hope with an empty wonder'
Sadly content with the show of things.

The synod crowd's "well done mate!" reminded me of chance comment on me that I heard sitting in the back of a George ST restaurant at the time of synod's teabreak when I was no longer involved. One synodsmen said to the other "Isn't synod boring. They should bring on that Dr Brennan's gave us a good run for our money!"

And the third event was a brave letter sent to all Australian Bishops and constructed by Christine Middleton, asking for support from outside of Sydney lamenting the state and fate of those who supported women's ordination in Sydney Out of approximately 40 bishops, two replied The Primate Aspinall responded sympathetically but said each diocese was autonomous and therefore there was nothing much to be said. The second was a bishop from eth North East who asked that his name be taken off the mailing list which of course he wasn't on anyway

Other plans fell on non fertile ground or were overcome by the weeds of weariness in well-doing. A high tea planned for April with the Beth Spence the new Voice Chancellor of SU wife never eventuated. Although an ordained priest along with her husband. MOW was probably not an appropriate milieu for entering the Sydney Dioceses as guests and the dinner was cancelled. Similarly there was plan for MOW reps to attend the *Equal But Different* Women's conference in May but in the end there was no stomach for the encounter. The 10th of October was mooted as a forum on *Violence and the Church* leading up to what is described as 'a presence at synod" That is a task or not, for the next Committee

Prophetic and necessarily public discourse in reform is always a touchy issue . Committees motions, by their very nature cannot

produce a John the Baptist or a Monica Furlong. In 1983 when MOW was formed the very notion of prophetic leadership by any woman was contested from within the ranks, a feature of women's lack of self reference and its accompanying resistance to women with self reference. A decision was made by an initial committee of non candidates for the position, to propose there be three co-convenors. The result of the subsequent election--- an Evangelical Marlene Hicken, an Anglo-catholic Colleen O'reilley and myself the theological wild card. Despite having been a missionary in Africa in a conservative mission, I had grown up in a middle Anglican church which was neither high nor low. A good description of our churchmanship under our rector at St Johns Penshurst in the 1950s was rather like the grand old duke of York He marched us up to the top of the hill and marched us down again and When we were up we were up and when we were down we were down and when we only half way up we were neither up nor down.

In this last year as Convenor, a position I was nominated to unanimously in my absence and accepted, I found myself experiencing the sense of being an outsider in a movement I had been the founding public voice of. It has been hard at first to work out why that was so., It had naturally moved under different leaders into another era; one where the national church had moved, with little desire to look back at a small group left isolated where they had once been. The last outpost in a kingdom of male headship.

It wasn't in the end so much the MOW membership or committee that had changed in essence so much as the context we find ourselves in, in both church and society. And this is where the story really begins for me in answering not so much where has the passion gone but where is passion generated and what kills it

If I can be of any use to those who sit by the waters of Babylon, longing for Zion it will be to spend the last opportunity to speak from an official role on what I think the reasons are for the absence of a strong MOW in Sydney.

(1) Firstly at a very practical level, women who wanted to be priests in the Anglican Church in Sydney have steadily and often discreetly been leaving congregations in the Sydney diocese for

two decades, Some of them keen MOW members; but more often than not previously opponents of MOW and the way it put the Church on notice. Indeed it was an advantage in the eyes of most bishops, and even those who supported the ordination of women ,when it came to candidate selection, not to be involved actively in MOW.

This fact, namely the absence of women in Sydney seeking ordination to the priesthood, poses a challenge to the very existence of MOW. If indeed there **are** no women who wish to be priests in the Anglican church in Sydney, why would there be much interest or passion about women being actively excluded from ministry. Women can go to other dioceses and be offered ordination. Indeed one of them Barbara Darling is a bishop. ?

(2) Then there is the matter of the remnant culture. There is a veritable clutch of dissident congregations in this diocese that have the feeling about them that is reminiscent of the Church in the Soviet Union during the height of communism. Where numbers were overwhelmingly with the Marxist government, churches learned to conduct their business for the purposes of co-existence and privatised their survival, many of them convivial in their relationships with their atheist masters. Could the need to survive and be left alone the reason prophetic voices are hardly ever heard in the Sydney diocese?

(3) The Synod The only public forum for debate the Sydney Synod ,has itself settled over the last 15 years or so, to business as usual, as though there aren't 400 plus women priests and 200 women preparing for the priesthood in the Anglican Church in Australia and more women bishops in the wings. They take the trouble to create a welcome place for the isolated voice in favour of women priests --such as that of Chris Albany in synod precisely because a totalitarian regime does not like the reputation of entirely suppressing its opposition. But should Chris Albany have found himself leading a growing number of protesters with views in opposition to the party line, views that were actively promoted in other congregations, be assured his voice would not be so warmly supported by management.

(4) Finally a major change that has taken place progressively over the 50 years is the influence of the Church in Australian society Christianity and in particular Anglicanism is finding itself more and

more marginalised from contemporary life. Society has changed around the Church in the last 50 years at an escalating rate. While criticism of the institutional church has been the bread and butter of most theologians, contemporary critiques are cutting deeper and raising new questions. People like Don Cupitt have argued effectively that the Church is a power structure based on hierarchical dualisms of **Law** over and against **Gospel**; of **Church Order** over and against **freedom of thought**; of **obedience** over and against **expression**; of **hierarchy** –over and against **equality**; of **emotional detachment** over and against **passion**. In a search for communal identity and legitimation the Church is largely engaged in looking backwards exploring tradition, ancient authoritative texts and past reformations, rather than studying matters of contemporary social concern.

Graham Shaw in the *Cost of Authority* (1983) says

Christianity has resorted to being authoritarian, oppressive and divisive in order to secure its own position and significance. It has sought the illusion of permanence, been intolerant of criticism, rejected disturbing experiences from without and suffered from the delusion that it is good and perfect at the expense of having to identify “enemies” from outside to embody that which is feared and hated.

SECULARISM

MOW was perceived in Sydney as the ‘enemy from outside’ whenever it used the discourse of feminism in church circles. Given women’s liberation movement, feminism was seen as secular rather than Christian. But orthodox theology has always managed to cover up the fact that many of its better ideas and methods are derived from disciplines other than theology itself. As though the institutional church would ever have initiated the freeing of slaves, the vote for women, access to contraception, the rights of sex workers to the protection of the law, without the persistent efforts of those deemed to be “enemies”

PERSONAL

Speaking personally I experienced marginalisation within MOW; which itself took up the tools of the religious institution, as redemptive political act. While initially happy to have a public voice reaching people through the media, feminist perspectives on the

relationship between headship in the bible and the abuse of women's bodies was felt to be counterproductive to the success of the debate. In particular some sought to canvass support from the Church hierarchy by any means that might result in MOW being seen in a better light as faithful Anglicans, rather than secular feminists.

The two issues that loom large when it comes to quantitative shifts in social values and that have generated passion in society and the Church are each associated with sexuality and gender ; namely the full acceptance of women and gays as fully human. The experience of the abuses directed towards them, resulted in reform movements that were marked by celebration, affirmation, intellectual creativity reconciliation and true community. As Stephen Pattison says

They summoned the institutional church to come forth from its sepulchre and to discover the form of resurrection in relation to life and death.¹

And what happens when it doesn't come forth? Some of those who stay in the hope of changing it from within, may run the risk of tasting the death of passion. I was not prepared to. When the retired Donald Robinson agreed to an ABC interview by me, he asked me what congregation I attended I said as a doctor I *visited* institutions for the sick. Although I was aware of my own spiritual needs, the Church in Sydney had become a health hazard for me because of what I understand of spiritual freedom and justice.

Finally friends let me leave you with two matters for thought

The first is what I predict will happen in this diocese in respect to women's ministry and is already happening Any glance at the faces of ministry in the Sydney Anglican website will show for the first time and almost imperceptibly , a woman as an Archdeacon who appears alongside the five bishops as a spiritual leader in the dioceses Of course the public discourse of a woman is in keeping with the biblical injunction that she has no authority over men but only women, yet preaches regularly and authoritatively around the diocese. When I heard the Rev Narelle Jarrett speak against the

¹ Patterson p 199

priesting of women at the last Synod, the irony of female authority being used to exercise the control of men did not escape me. I thought of the lines from Macbeth by the three witches. "When the hurley burleys done when the battles lost and won". At last a woman, a single women who was not required to learn in silence from her husband at home , nor usurp his place in the congregation was being promoted as a leader and given a voice, albeit a voice that calls for the continuing submission of women to men under God as the condition for an acceptable ministry. And all this against the far- reaching transformation of society as a result of gender reform in the 20th century,

By this means I predict women, even married, will progressively acquire full ministry in the Sydney diocese but via the stage door. Slipped in to the chorus initially, there will be a natural progression to understudying the principal's roles , but so gradually that by slight of hand it will not openly challenge Headship. Headship as a doctrine used to exclude women from education, contraception, competitive sport, the medical and ,legal professions, political port folios, equal pay has never worked as a doctrine in marriage where it was supposedly instituted by God. It is a sad joke at the Church's experience that has been hallowed *only* by strenuous efforts of standing committees, nervous clergy and intellectually bankrupt for of fundamentalism, peculiar to Sydney, the Bush era and the third world miss ionised bishops.

Ivone IBARA

But in danger of running close to the wind in just smugly criticising this diocese --- let the last words be the warnings of Yvonne Gerbera in her courageous book "*Out of the depths* by. A Brazilian nun from the order of Notre Dame she courageously identifies the evil borne by women' in the name of submission across the globe

My daily business as a forensic physician is to touch and handle both the victims and offenders of what is often terrible violence perpetrated by men and very occasionally women on their intimate partners and their children. This is the obvious evil. What Ivone speaks of is a different kind of evil that women in a place like Sydney allow to continue unabated She says The evil I want to speak about is not the evil we do—but the evil we suffer and endure... something not chosen but the 'the kind of evil present in institutions and social structures that accommodate it, even

facilitate it. Evil of this sort is often beyond recognition. One lives with it daily one endures it without naming it as evil—so mixed in with our existence that cease taking account of it as evil

If MOW Sydney cannot name this evil, the evil that feeds domination and abuses, or play an active prophetic role, then maybe better we vacate the stage, free up the potential for protest in those men and women currently caught up in the interests of the dominant culture in Sydney. But who will one day name the problem for themselves.

If you occupy the place of prophesy, but do not prophesy, you are stifling passion. While ever MOW is there but not presenting any danger to the dominant regime, women who may otherwise wake up to the misogyny embedded in headship will see MOW out there as enemy that they must from loyalty to the Institution, and be distracted by the wrong target.

What happens to a dream deferred
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore and then run?
Does it begin to smell like rotten meat
Or crust and sugar over, like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it sags like a heavy load
Or does it just explode.²

² Langston Hughes