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Theological Observer

ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND THE NEW ALLIANCES

From this side of the ocean it is hard to measure the effect of the decision of the Church of England to ordain women ministers (priests). On March 12 thirty-two women were ordained in Bristol, the first of some 1200 in the following three months. Women priests will thus immediately constitute over ten percent of the active clergy of the Church of England. With some 570 priests led by seven bishops heading for Rome, this figure becomes proportionately greater. Just how Rome will receive married clergy in such great numbers remains, however, a question. Statistically the Church of England has been in steady decline and the present active membership is officially placed at 500,000. Claims of newspapers that 1.2 million attend services weekly seem exaggerated. The archdeacon of the diocese of London claims that ninety-nine percent of the worshippers at St. Paul's Cathedral are non-members! The once disenfranchised Roman Catholic church claims 1.3 million in attendance. Royal and governmental additions improve its image further.

Receiving its present liturgical and political form during the Reformation, the Church of England as a self-consciously bridge-church has fostered ecumenical alliances with both Roman Catholics and Protestants and at the center of worldwide Anglican fellowship has maintained an importance far out of proportion to its estimated active membership. With the decision for women's ordination, the Church of England has cast its vote with the American and European Protestants and turned its back on Rome. Eastern Orthodox churches take an even less kindly view of the decision. With the European churches in continued general decline, the decisions and alliances of the Church of England may not carry the weight they once did; but, as a prominent successor to the historic divisions of the Reformation, it cannot be ignored. Ordained women priests may have been the inevitable lot for the Church of England, but the efforts of Dr. George Carey, the present incumbent of the see of Canterbury and a self-professed Evangelical, accelerated it. His accession received favorable attention from such a persuasive Evangelical voice as *Christianity Today*!

The decision of the Church of England to ordain women has been followed by the Archbishop of Canterbury's renewal for full fellowship with Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheran churches and a modest alliance with the German churches as outlined in the Meissen Agreement. With Rome and Constantinople becoming ecclesiastically more remote from Canterbury, Wittenberg becomes an open, unblockaded port giving access to ecumenical commerce with the churches of the Lutheran World Federation. A formal alliance between the Protestant Episcopal Church and the ELCA would be the American counterpart to the European

realignments. While an Episcopal-Lutheran alliance on American shores seemed certain a year ago, the issue of defining a "bishop" threatens a final consummation. With bishops in place since the Reformation, the northern European churches become even more attractive to the Church of England, though these churches of the Lutheran Reformation do not see the Anglican episcopal system as biblically mandated.

While some on this side of the Atlantic were wondering whether the decision of the Church of England to ordain women might open a window of discussion between confessionally minded Lutherans and dissenting Anglicans, such contacts were already under way in England. Though hardly a formalized counter-alliance, discussions have taken place in Europe among Anglicans and Lutherans who agree in their opposition to the ordained women clergy. In Great Britain the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has a sister church in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (ELCE). Two of its pastors, Dr. Jonathan Naumann and the Reverend Paul Williams, who are graduates of this seminary, are participants in theological discussions among Anglicans and Lutherans opposing the practice. Anglicans dissenting from their church's decision to ordain women have aligned themselves in Forward in Faith, a title reminiscent of an LCMS program some years back. Others have joined in the Cost of Conscience Movement. A meeting was held on March 10, 1993, with seventeen participants from the Lutheran churches of Norway and Sweden and dissenting Anglicans belonging to the former movement. On April 22 a second meeting was held. Recognizable names included Bishop Bertil Gartner (Sweden), Father Francis Gardom and Archdeacon David Silk (England), and Professor Dr. Roald Flemstad (Norway). The purpose of the meeting was not to set up a new church-fellowship, but for European Lutherans who have never consented to ordained women as pastors in their churches to share their experiences and to offer counsel and advice to the clergy of the Church of England.

Dissenting Anglicans at the meeting saw three options: (1.) a separate jurisdiction within the Church of England with dissenters having their own bishops; (2.) submitting to Rome, affectionately known as "swimming the Tiber"; (3.) establishing an independent church. Option one has the support of the Archbishop of York. A church suffering significant decline in membership cannot afford forcing additional sheep out of the fold, especially if they are practicing Christians. The coffers of the church have already suffered an 800 million pound loss due to mismanagement. This loss will be exacerbated by fulfilling a promise to provide pensions to a thousand dissenting priests who wish to retire. The estimated cost is

put at 100 million pounds. Though supervised by the government, the Church of England lives off its investments and donations. Dissenting parishes remaining in the Church of England will receive such required episcopal rites as confirmation and ordination from two "flying bishops." To no one's amazement the solution of crossing the water to Rome is supported by the Archbishop of Westminster, the Roman Catholic primate of England. The Duchess of Kent and two under-secretaries of state in the cabinet have chosen this route, and the entire matter has become a *cause celebre*. Some Roman Catholics are wary of a wholesale conversion of Anglicans who until quite recently have had little use for the assumption of the Mary, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, and papal infallibility. Opposition to women priests is not the only cohesive bond of church-fellowship. English Catholics may look a bit more carefully at these gift-horses. Establishing independent jurisdictions has the support of those who have taken this option in other parts of the world, especially in America. Such groups often squabble among themselves, disappearing in the periphery.

The reaction of the Swedish clerics at the meetings of March and April of 1993 to the first option of a separate jurisdiction for those opposing women clergy was unfavorable. Bishop Gartner claimed that the liberal state-church establishment used the dissenting Lutherans to their advantage and ignored them the rest of the time. Pastor Erik Petran was refused ordination because he opposed women pastors and had to go to the now aged Bishop Gartner. Some years back as a cathedral dean, he had become legendary in Sweden. He locked the cathedral doors to stop the ordination of women priests. Dr. Roald Flemsted reported that a woman would soon be consecrated bishop in Norway. With bishops defining doctrine in the Church of Norway, her support of the marriage of homosexuals and abortion would make aberrant behavior acceptable church practice and, we may add, alter any meaningful doctrine of sanctification. The "synod within a synod" or "a diocese among the dioceses" has not worked in protecting, let alone fostering, confessional theology among Swedish Lutheran churches choosing to ordain women and offers little promise in England. "Swimming the Tiber" (or "popping") is attractive to the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, but separates them from the Evangelical wing which has no use for that idea. Rome's attraction is its size which makes it, according to one archdeacon, "too large a body to be overcome by heresy." A Lutheran responded that Rome's comprehensiveness may be so broad that it risks its own future. He also asked whether Anglo-Catholics with no

deep admiration for Luther might rehabilitate him and his famous "my conscience is captive to the word of God; here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." The Anglo-Catholic chairing the meeting, who had formed the "Forward in Faith" movement, agreed and remarked, "Now is the moment of Luther!"

The LCMS may find itself remote from dissenting European church movements which do not share our fellowship or heritage, but in taking positions similar to our own, a type of bond is established. We have certainly done this in the matter of abortion and informally with the question of biblical authority. Opposition within the Church of England to the ordination of women is not all of one kind, but each may have value in its own right. Anglo-Catholics of the Church of England rely heavily on history and tradition. We may be more comfortable with those Evangelicals whose opposition to ordained women comes from biblical prohibitions. This does not disqualify another approach. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology are quite at home in arguing matters from history and tradition. Martin Chemnitz, a chief composer of the Formula of Concord, in answering the Council of Trent affirmed that Lutherans rather than Roman Catholics preserved ancient tradition and provided the citations. John Gummer, the under-secretary for the environment, sees the ordination of women as an intrusion of secular culture into the church; and, for him, only the Roman Church was resisting in any meaningful way. He had been a lay official in the Church of England. With approximately half of the American Roman clergy and an overwhelming majority of its laity finding no objections to women priests, the under-secretary should be warned that he may have climbed aboard a leaking ship; still it has not sunk. His observation that the ordination of women is an intrusion of *western* culture into the church cannot be ignored. Anglicans in Africa have found it a tough pill to swallow. American newspapers did not fail to catch a German press release of March 10, 1994. The Reverend Anthony Kennedy of Lincolnshire compared female ordinands to those practicing medieval sorcery. Even the least sensitive opponents of women's ordination would take exception to the vicar's heated remarks, although perhaps excusing them, considering the momentous nature of the change. A more rational argument for the same conclusion was offered by a professor of systematic theology in Edinburgh, who was denied ordination in the Church of England and found religious fulfillment in the kind of medieval activity described by the vicar (Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], pp. 111-112).

An opening speech at the meeting of March 1993 between Lutherans and Anglicans called attention to the fact that the current post-Constantinian age has advantages for confessional churches. The European ideal of governmental support or recognition of certain churches may have already come to an end. Churches ordaining women will have to solicit their support without government aid. Without formal support the churches will have to learn again to flex their theologically atrophied muscles, to borrow a phrase from Professor Kurt Marquart. The area formerly known as East Germany (or the German Democratic Republic [DDR]) has no formally recognized church as does the rest of Germany, where taxes are collected for the church. It is not impossible that Scandinavian and English churches will be legally disestablished within a generation or two. Churches supported by the state have become of no advantage to confessional Lutheranism. In the state-supported Lutheran Church of Norway every religious opinion *except the Lutheran one* is allowed a hearing in the public school system, as is noted by Johannes Ulltveit-Moe ("Church and State in Norway," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 7:2 [Summer 1993], pp. 191-212, especially pp. 207-208). This may be a moment of evangelical outreach and doctrinal reaffirmation for Christianity and not the final knell. As for the situation in the Church of England, a year from now it will be back-page news and in five years will merit no attention at all. As the Dean of Winchester said, the ordained women priests have already been serving as deacons. Permission given in ordination to consecrate the sacrament will hardly cause a ripple. It may make the role of our Lutheran church, especially in England, more distinct. Meanwhile boy-choirs, who have traditionally led worshippers at Holy Communion and Evensong since early medieval times, will be replaced by all-girl-choirs at some ordinations. Someone may notice this change.

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