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Original Article

Christian feminism? Women Against the Ordination of Women and the St. Hilda Community, 1986–92*

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ABSTRACT

Women who identified as both religious and feminists occupied a liminal space within the women's movement of the late twentieth century. This article explores the activism of two groups at opposite ends of the ordination debate. Women Against the Ordination of Women (W.A.O.W.) were advocates of women's equality, but against imposing secular values onto sacramental matters, whereas the St. Hilda Community championed women's ordination and sought to establish a community for those otherwise ostracized from Anglican life. This article explores the activism of two groups at opposite ends of the Church of England's ordination debate.

Writing in the early 1990s, Monica Furlong, a journalist, novelist, lay woman, vocal advocate for women's ordination and founding member of the St. Hilda Community, speculated on the motivations of women opposed to women priests.[1] She wrote in her book *A Dangerous Delight*:

It is fascinating to try to understand the psychology of those who work to try and lessen the power and opportunities for people of their own kind, i.e. women. What is particularly striking is their way of distancing themselves from their embattled and struggling sisters, and the way they often look upon them with contempt. *They* are not struggling and powerless, *they* are not objects of male scorn and contempt. If they take sides it is with the men – 'look how good we are being', flattering male authority with comforting placebos that *of course* they don't want the vote or ordination or anything else that may cause a moment's unease.[2]

Exemplifying Furlong's provocative writing style, this passage explores several themes that recur throughout her prose: power, desire and sexuality. Hints of her interest in psychoanalysis seep through this excerpt, as she suggests that a fear of disrupting the status quo, or of appearing undesirable or unfeminine to men, underscored much of women's opposition to women priests. While the validity of her claim is certainly debatable the implicit question evident in this passage ('Why did women oppose

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1 For more on Monica's life, see Monica Furlong's autobiography *Bird of Paradise: Glimpses of Living Myth* (London, 1995); and P. Sherlock, 'Monica Furlong (1930–2003): "with love to the church"', in *Anglican Women Novelists: Charlotte Brontë to P.D. James*, ed. J. Maltby and A. Shell (London, 2019), pp. 175–90.

2 M. Furlong, *A Dangerous Delight: Women and Power in the Church* (London, 1991), pp. 56–7 (emphasis in the original).

women's ordination?') is a fruitful one for historical analysis and is one of the research questions that this article seeks to address.

A starting point for addressing this question is Furlong's use of the word 'sisters' in this passage, and the implied reference to a shared sisterhood among women. By proposing the idea that women opposed to women's ordination were betraying their 'sisters', Furlong drew on a long and established tradition of identifying women who opposed reform as 'enemies of feminism'.[3] This was a label frequently applied to women who opposed women's political enfranchisement and there is, as Furlong noted, a fruitful comparison to be made between women who opposed women's ordination and women who opposed women's political enfranchisement.

With this in mind, the first half of this article will seek to build on the work of anti-suffrage historian Julia Bush and her endeavours to liberate women opposed to reform from the label of 'enemies of feminism'.[4] It will be demonstrated that many members of Women Against the Ordination of Women (W.A.O.W.) were advocates of women's equality, while simultaneously challenging what they perceived as a desire to impose secular values onto a sacramental matter. Rather than being governed by a fear of change, a fear of feminism or even a fear of disrupting the status quo, members of W.A.O.W. held profound theological convictions that prohibited them from supporting women priests. By exploring the publications produced by W.A.O.W., this article will seek to provide an insight into these convictions and will argue that activists against women's ordination need to be considered within a longer trajectory of women's oppositional activism. Moreover, by considering the relationship members of W.A.O.W. had with feminism, this article builds on an existing body of literature that undertakes to challenge the assumption that feminism is allied only to leftist movements and political positions.[5]

In addition to W.A.O.W. being of historical interest as a campaigning organization, this article will also suggest that studying oppositional activism is an incredibly useful way of understanding the tactics and methods deployed by those seeking reform. To this end, the second half of this article will examine the activism of a group perhaps best described as being situated at the opposite end of the ordination debate to W.A.O.W.: the St. Hilda Community. Formed in 1987 in Mile End, East London, the St. Hilda Community was a group of radical, predominantly Anglican, men and women frustrated by what they viewed as the church's slow progress on the question of women's ordination. As an act of witness the group invited women ordained in the Anglican Communion to celebrate the Eucharist weekly for the Community while women's ordination remained illegal in the Church of England, as a way of actively demonstrating their commitment to affirming women's priestly ministry.

Part of the rationale for putting these two groups, which seemingly have very little in common, in dialogue emerged from the fact that the two organizations were in consistent communication throughout the late 1980s. Members from both groups appeared on television programmes together to debate the question of women's ordination.[6] W.A.O.W.'s newsletter included various articles about the St. Hilda Community, and members of the Community wrote about members of W.A.O.W. in various forums, including the letters page in the *Church Times* or, as we have seen in Monica Furlong's case, their own publications.[7] Both groups sought to promote Christian feminism, and both groups sought to champion women's ministry – albeit in very different ways. Both those for and those against women's ordination also claimed to represent the majority of so-called 'ordinary' Anglicans. In reality both the hard-line opposition expressed by W.A.O.W. and the radicalism espoused by the St. Hilda

3 The designation of opponents of reform as 'enemies of feminism' by historians is particularly evident in twentieth-century studies of the anti-suffrage movement. See, e.g., V. Colby, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1970), p. 21.

4 J. Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-suffragism in Britain* (Oxford, 2007).

5 *Considering Conservative Women in the Gendering of British Politics*, ed. C. Berthezène and J. V. Gottlieb (London, 2021); N. F. Gullace, 'Afterword: a tale of two centennials: suffrage, suffragettes and the limits of political participation in Britain and America', in *The Politics of Women's Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions*, ed. A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (London, 2021), pp. 353–74; M. Takayanagi, '"Does the Right hon. Gentleman mean equal votes at 21?" Conservative women and equal franchise, 1919–1928', *Women's History Review*, xxviii (2019), 194–214; and D. Swift, 'From "I'm not a feminist, but …" to "Call me an old-fashioned feminist …": Conservative women in Parliament and feminism, 1979–2017', *Women's History Review*, xxviii (2019), 317–36.

6 The Women's Library (henceforth T.W.L.), 6MOW/24/6, 'WAOW on the box', *Newsletter of Women Against the Ordination of Women*, winter 1988–9.

7 T.W.L., 6MOW/11, 'WAOW take note', *Chrysalis*, Feb. 1987; and T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, 'Her spirit is with us' and 'Is this a Christian Eucharist', *Newsletter of Women Against the Ordination of Women*, winter 1988–9.

Community represented minorities in Anglican life. By putting these two groups in dialogue, this article seeks to demonstrate that Christian feminism in Britain post-1968 was a varied and dynamic movement that encompassed a multiplicity of voices.

Given the vibrancy of the movement, it is notable that the voices of Christian feminists have been conspicuously absent from the historiography associated with post-1968 feminism. The religious 'turn' in gender history has led to a plethora of literature exploring women's religious activism pre-1940.[8] Historians of the religious 'turn' have sought to challenge the one-dimensional readings of women's spiritual agency and have instead examined women's multifaceted interactions with religious institutions, ideas and cultures. A particularly exciting body of literature has emerged surrounding the role religious women played in the suffrage movement, and their use of religious language, iconography and prayer in their activism.[9]

Yet, despite these important developments in the scholarship pre-1940, the historiographies of religion and feminism in the post-war era have remained remarkably separate. Jacqueline de Vries has noted that many second-wave feminist scholars, who undertook the task of writing women into the historical narrative, viewed religion as 'a monolithic site of antifeminist resistance and a potent source of patriarchal oppression'.[10] Hugh McLeod has argued that for the pioneering feminist activists of the 1970s the women's movement provided 'a new faith', bestowing women with an alternative set of guiding principles.[11] This assertion has been echoed by Margaretta Jolly, who has noted that 'honouring the death of activists – and reflecting on their lives of activism – reveals the extent to which feminism can become a sustaining, if not systemic, faith'.[12] The legacy of prominent second-wave feminist thinkers has also been identified by Lucy Delap in her exploration of global feminisms, in which she suggests that historians have 'sometimes portrayed the movement as a rebellion against religion'.[13]

Recently the relationship between faith and activism has been explored by Carmen M. Mangion in her study on the lives of women religious in Britain between 1945 and 1990. Mangion examines Catholic women's participation in the wider social movements of the 1960s, including the Women's Liberation Movement.[14] However, she emphasizes the trepidation she experiences in using the word 'feminism or even feminist consciousness' in relation to the life experiences of women religious.[15] Ruth Lindley, in her recently submitted Ph.D. thesis, explores the lives of British women who formed part of the Goddess movement.[16] Unlike the women religious studied by Mangion, these women actively identified as both spiritual and feminists. These two studies, brilliant as they are, represent a field still very much in its infancy.

Turning to women's ordination more explicitly, the limited, but growing, understanding of the campaign for women's ordination is best exemplified in the work of Brian Heeney, Jacqueline Field-Bibb and Sean Gill.[17] These three books (alongside other publications by Susan Mumm and Jessica Thurlow) adeptly explore the campaign for women's ordination through an institutional, and indeed ecumenical, lens – examining the various debates on women's ministry held in Church Assemblies,

8 This 'turn' was epitomized in the publication of the 2011 *Feminist Review* special issue dedicated to religion and spirituality. See also Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries's foundational edited collection *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940* (London, 2010); J. Haggis and others, *Cosmopolitan Lives on the Cusp of Empire: Interfaith, Cross-cultural and Transnational Networks, 1860–1950* (Cham, 2017); and *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History*, ed. J. de Groot and S. Morgan (Chichester, 2014).

9 R. Saunders, '"A great and holy war": religious routes to women's suffrage, 1909–1914', *English Historical Review*, cxxxiv (2019), 1471–502; L. Jenkins, '"Where the church had refused to perform its duty the women themselves came forward": the prayer campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1913–1914', *Journal of Social History*, xix (2022), 161–84; and C. M. Mangion, 'Religious suffrage societies', in *Women's Suffrage*, ed. K. Cowman, forthcoming.

10 J. de Vries, 'More than paradoxes to offer: feminism, history and religious cultures', in Morgan and de Vries, *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures*, pp. 188–210, at p. 190.

11 H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford 2007), p. 177.

12 M. Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: an Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (New York, 2019), p. 231.

13 L. Delap, *Feminisms: a Global History* (London, 2020), p. 128.

14 C. M. Mangion, *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age: Britain, 1945–90* (Manchester, 2020), esp. ch. 7.

15 Mangion, *Catholic Nuns and Sisters*, p. 232.

16 R. M. Lindley, '"The personal is political is spiritual": feminism and religion in modern Britain' (unpublished University of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, 2020).

17 B. Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1988); J. Field-Bibb, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis* (Cambridge, 1991); and S. Gill, *Women and the Church of England: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1994).

General Synods and Lambeth Conferences.[18] However, the lived experience of women campaigning for, and indeed against, women's ordination is strikingly absent from these accounts.[19] It is this lacuna in the literature that my research seeks to address, and this is in part why oral history has been such an important part of my methodology.[20] While the campaign for women's ordination, and indeed the oppositional activism that developed in response, was only one facet of the Christian feminist movement of the late twentieth century, this article suggests that the campaign provides an important insight into the movement more broadly.

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This article begins with the founding of W.A.O.W. in April 1986, quickly followed by the founding of the St. Hilda Community less than a year later in February 1987. As with many of the manifestations of activism surrounding the campaign for women's ordination, both groups were formed in response to legislative pronouncements from the church's representative bodies. As a result, it is possible to view the campaign for women's ordination within a familiar framework of activist clashing with institutions of authority.[21] For example, the Movement for the Ordination of Women (the main body campaigning for legislative change to enable women to be ordained priests in the Church of England in the post-war period) was formed in response to the failure of the church's representative body, General Synod, to pass legislation for women to be ordained as priests in 1978.[22] Many women attributed their 'Christian feminist awakenings' to the failure of this vote. Vocalizing the frustration of a generation of women Una Kroll, a long-standing supporter of women's ordination, prophetically called down from the gallery of Church House, where she was watching the debate on women's priestly ministry, 'We asked you for bread and you gave us a stone'.[23] Kroll's outburst served as a clarion call to Christian women, who were subsequently galvanized into action.

Similarly, the opposition to women's ordination organized more formally and effectively from 1986 onwards as the legislation for women to be ordained deacons made its way through the synodical processes (and indeed the first women were ordained deacons in 1987). The St. Hilda Community, in turn, was formed in response to the failure of the Women Lawfully Ordained Abroad Measure, which would have allowed women ordained in the Anglican Communion to celebrate the Eucharist in the Church of England, just as men ordained in the Anglican Communion were able to do. Members of the Anglican Communion began ordaining women significantly earlier than the Church of England. On 25 January 1944 Deaconess Florence Li Tim-Oi became the first woman to be ordained an Anglican priest.[24] The Anglican churches in Canada and New Zealand began ordaining women in 1976 and 1977, and the Episcopal Church of America began ordaining women initially illegally in 1974 and then legally in 1976.[25] In contrast it was not until November 1992 that the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure received the necessary two-thirds majority in the Houses of Bishops, Clergy and Laity – which eventually led to the first thirty-two women being ordained in Bristol Cathedral in March 1994.

18 J. Thurlow, 'The "great offender": feminists and the campaign for women's ordination', *Women's History Review*, xxiii (2014), 480–99; and S. Mumm, 'Women, priesthood, and the ordained ministry in the Christian tradition', in *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence*, ed. J. Wolffe (Manchester, 2004), pp. 190–216.

19 Accounts have also been produced by activists themselves. See, e.g. M. Webster, *A New Strength, a New Song: the Journey to Women's Priesthood* (London, 1994). Rich as sources like this are, activists are not always the best people to judge the impact of their work. See M. Jolly, 'Assessing the impact of women's movements: sisterhood and after', *Women's Studies International Forum*, xxxv (2012), 150–2.

20 G. Heaton, '"Smashing the stained glass ceiling": an exploration of the campaign for women's ordination in the Church of England, 1968–1992' (unpublished University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, forthcoming).

21 See, e.g., *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt*, ed. R. Gildea, J. Mark and A. Warring (Oxford, 2013).

22 The legislation received support from 65% of the House of Bishops and 53% of the House of Laity but failed in the House of Clergy, wherein only 47% voted in favour (Webster, *A New Strength, a New Song*, p. 46).

23 U. Kroll, 'An eventful journey from Christian feminism to Christian humanism', *Women's History Review*, xxiv (2015), 996–1013, at p. 1009.

24 For more information, see *The Li Tim-Oi Foundation* <https://www.ltof.org.uk/litimoi-story/> [accessed 21 Aug. 2022]. For more on the bishop who ordained her, see M. Chan-Yeung, *The Practical Prophet: Bishop Ronald O. Hall of Hong Kong and His Legacies* (Hong Kong, 2015).

25 Furlong, *Dangerous Delight*, p. 97.

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W.A.O.W. was founded by Margaret Hood and Margaret Brown – two women who were 'fed up with the movement for the ordination of women saying their only opponents were a few senile vicars and male chauvinist pigs'.[26] The group professed to stand for 'what church-going women really feel', noting their views were 'representative although unfashionable'.[27] At its inception the organization set out two aims – first, to combat misplaced feminism in theology and worship, and second to oppose the admission of women to the priesthood.[28]

W.A.O.W. operated at a national and regional level. By 1992 its membership stood at over 6,000 paid female subscribers, and nearly forty of their members, representing twenty-five dioceses, were elected to General Synod in 1990. W.A.O.W. was therefore a sizeable, and indeed influential, minority in the church. It prided itself on the fact that its membership base was not 'a load of stuffy old women', but rather encompassed many young women working as doctors, lawyers, politicians and theologians. Their diverse membership ranged from their youngest member, eleven-year-old Elaine Davie, for whom resistance was a gut reaction, evident in her assertion that 'people are used to seeing a man at the altar. It's wrong to have a woman', to forty-nine-year-old Monica Harrison from Lincolnshire, who explained, 'I gave up my job to help my husband and to bring up my children. I am not a political sort of person but I felt I had to do something about women priests'.[29] Many of W.A.O.W.'s members were married to clergymen and served as the backbone of parish life, editing newsletters, taking Sunday school classes and sitting on deanery synods. While W.A.O.W.'s membership was diverse in terms of age and its mix of professional women and housewives, it is important to note that this was a predominantly white and middle-class movement, as indeed was the St. Hilda Community.

Part of the reason for the broad appeal of W.A.O.W., attracting professional women and housewives alike, was the organization's refusal to align itself along a specific churchmanship line. W.A.O.W. was a broad-church organization, meaning that individual motivations for opposing women's ordination varied significantly. Some held traditionally Anglo-Catholic ideas surrounding the importance of male embodiment in the representation of a priest as an Icon of Christ. Others feared precluding a reunion with Rome or were unconvinced as to whether the Church of England had the authority to make such a momentous decision. Many Anglo-Catholics subscribed to an 'impossibilist' stance on women's ordination, which dictated that men and women were ontologically different (not simply that women ought not be ordained, but that they physically could not be as the ordination simply would not 'take').[30] Geoffrey Kirk, a prominent Lewisham-based clergy member opposed to women's ordination, used medicalized language to articulate this position, comparing it to the idea of a vaccination that just wouldn't 'take'. Other more derogatory comparisons were made, for example that one could no more ordain a woman than one could a pork pie.[31] At the other end of the theological spectrum those of an Evangelical leaning tended to subscribe to a complementarian vision of gender relations, which emphasized the spiritual equality of men and women while maintaining that they had different gifts and roles in relation to home, family and marital life, and indeed religious leadership.[32]

Debates surrounding women's ordination played out extensively in the religious press, and in articles and letters published by the *Church Times* women's ordination was frequently positioned by opponents as a gateway to further liberal reforms. George Austin, archdeacon-designate of York at the time of writing in 1988, viewed the ordination of women as a slippery slope towards 'the right to abortion as contraception', 'single sex marriage' and 'ordination for practising homosexuals'.[33]

26 'Trouble brews behind the church tea urns', *The Sunday Times*, 29 Oct. 1989.
27 'Trouble brews behind the church tea urns'.
28 T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: aims'.
29 'Trouble brews behind the church tea urns'.
30 Webster, *A New Strength, a New Song*, p. 38.
31 J. Maltby, 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism, but two integrities?', in *Act of Synod – Act of Folly: Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993*, ed. M. Furlong (London, 1998), pp. 42–58, at p. 42; and C. Rees, *Voices of This Calling: Experiences of the First Generation of Women Priests* (Canterbury, 2002), p. 20.
32 The productive working relationship between Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals is also evident among those opposed to the Anglican-Methodist reunion (and indeed, a number of the same individuals were involved in both debates; P. Webster, 'Theology, providence and Anglican-Methodist reunion: the case of Michael Ramsey and E.L. Mascall', in *Anglican-Methodist Ecumenism: the Search for Church Unity*, ed. J. Platt and M. Wellings (London, 2021), pp. 101–17).
33 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 8 June 1988, p. 3.

Echoing these fears, members of W.A.O.W. tended to veer towards moral conservativism, particularly in relation to family life. Margaret Brown, co-founder of W.A.O.W., for example, believed in 'the refusal of marriage in church to divorced persons, condemnation of homosexual practices, and a ban on experiments with embryos'.[34] Moreover, in one of W.A.O.W.'s publications Elaine Bishop declared that 're-marriage after divorce is adultery'.[35] W.A.O.W.'s committee secretary, Cornelia Oddie, who married Dr. William Oddie, a vocal opponent of women's ordination who was based at Pusey House in Oxford for many years, was deputy director of Family and Youth Concern, a pro-marriage, pro-family campaigning group, created in reaction to the perceived rising tide of permissiveness. Like many of the women opposed to women's suffrage, opponents of women's ordination were viewed as 'instinctive conservatives'.[36]

However, as an organization W.A.O.W. resisted the conservative labels frequently ascribed to it. A four-page-long advertising feature, produced and paid for by W.A.O.W. and circulated inside the *Church Times* in June 1986, featured an article by Margaret Hood that boldly declared, 'We are not against change – but we resist revolution'.[37] Hood argued that those in favour of women's ordination frequently dismissed male, and particularly priestly, opposition to women's ordination as men 'protecting their own area of privilege and power'. She noted that the men who supported women's ordination were 'seen as liberal, modern, open-minded and progressive'. In contrast, those who opposed were viewed as 'old-fashioned, reactionary, and muddle-headed or just obstinate'.[38] Hood similarly noted that women who opposed women's ordination were labelled 'anti-feminist', a title she described as 'the ultimate insult in the 1980s'.[39] She elaborated that members of W.A.O.W. were painted as being 'spiritually ossified' and against the advancement of women.[40]

Yet, when the demographics of W.A.O.W.'s membership are examined, a different story is revealed. W.A.O.W. attracted women who excelled in their professional lives, frequently in the realms of academia. Elizabeth Mills, W.A.O.W.'s press officer, was one of only four female liverymen of the Worshipful Company of Grocers in 1989 and was the deputy director of the charity Research Into Ageing.[41] Prominent W.A.O.W. member Margaret Laird was appointed Third Church Estates Commissioner in 1989.[42] After reading medieval history at the University of London, Laird pursued a career in religious and theological education as the head of Religious Studies at an independent girls' school.[43] In many ways her career trajectory echoed that of women opposed to women's suffrage in the early twentieth century, who frequently operated within the sphere of local government, predominately dealing with issues pertaining to education.

The national co-ordinator of W.A.O.W., Dr. Margaret Hewitt, described as the '*grande dame* of General Synod' by the *Church Times*, also had an impressive career in academia.[44] She obtained a doctorate from the London School of Economics and her thesis was later published as *Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry* (1958). In 1952 she was appointed an assistant lecturer in sociology and by 1970 she was a reader at the University of Exeter specializing in women's studies.[45] During an interview with the *Church Times* she noted that throughout her career she had battled institutional sexism. During one memorable staff meeting, in which she requested that women's studies be added to the syllabus, she was asked by the then professor of economics, 'Is there anything to be said about women?', to which she replied: 'You watch!'[46] Hewitt was a supporter of the advancement of women in the church, and secular society, but a stalwart opponent of their ordination to the priesthood. She maintained that Christianity was a patriarchal religion at its inception and should remain so.[47]

34 'The proper occupation for a woman', *Church Times*, 28 Sept. 1990.
35 T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, E. Bishop, 'Man and woman: an appeal to scripture'.
36 B. Harrison, *Separate Spheres: the Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (London, 2013), p. 27.
37 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 27 June 1986, p. 1.
38 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 27 June 1986, p. 1.
39 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 27 June 1986, p. 1.
40 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 27 June 1986, p. 2.
41 'Trouble brews behind the church tea urns'.
42 'Third church commissioner', *Church Times*, 28 Oct. 1988.
43 'Obituary: Margaret Heather Laird', *Church Times*, 23 May 2014.
44 'Sharp-eyed observation from under a hat', *Church Times*, 9 March 1990.
45 'Obituaries, Dr Margaret Hewitt', *The Times*, 12 June 1991.
46 'Sharp-eyed observation from under a hat'.
47 'Obituaries, Dr Margaret Hewitt'.

She argued that 'the theological difficulties are in a different frame of reference from the secular considerations' and cautioned against equating the priesthood with other jobs or professions.[48]

For Anglicans both supportive of and opposed to women's ordination the priesthood occupied a complex space within the labour market. While it is possible to make comparisons between the priesthood and other vocational careers, such as teaching and nursing, a pervasive feeling dominated during the late twentieth century that the priesthood was elevated above the secular professions. Moreover, this was compounded by the Church of England's exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Section 19 of the Act stipulated that

> it does not apply to the employment for purposes of organised religion where the employment is limited to one sex so as to comply with the doctrines of the religion or avoid offending the religious susceptibilities of a significant number of its followers.[49]

Comparisons with women's gains in the professions of medicine, law and higher education were frequently labelled by those opposed as an attempt to impose secular values onto a sacramental matter.[50] Lady Olga Maitland, a Conservative member of parliament, echoed these sentiments in a letter to *The Times*. She explained that 'while I personally take full advantage of equal opportunities for women – hence my recent arrival in the House of Commons – I do not put my Christian faith in the same category'. She criticized those whom she perceived as attempting to 'rewrite the scriptures to suit modern conveniences' and argued against the idea of the priesthood being a 'career' that would 'fall within the ambit of the Equal Opportunities Commission'. For Maitland, fashion, feminism and liberalism were immaterial when it came to 'the salvation of ordinary souls'.[51]

This emphasis on the immateriality of feminism and fashion was directly addressed in W.A.O.W.'s constitution, which stated that the aim of the movement was to combat 'misplaced feminism' in worship and theology.[52] Many members of W.A.O.W. identified as feminists but distanced themselves from what they perceived as the 'radical' feminism that they believed characterized supporters of women's ordination. W.A.O.W. members frequently suggested that those in favour of women's ordination held an erroneous understanding of equality that overlooked the divinely ordained distinction of sex.

This was particularly evident in W.A.O.W.'s first manifesto, *Just Testing*, which condemned the type of feminism that 'wants no distinction between men and women'.[53] Within the manifesto the author, Elaine Bishop, sought to emphasize that equality did not mean interchangeability. W.A.O.W. instead sought to promote a version of Christian feminism centred on motherhood and other forms of ministry that operated outside of the priesthood. In this sense the motivation for their activism mimicked opponents of women's political emancipation, who believed that a woman's priority should be to 'fulfil her biological function and her motherly duty'.[54] While these anti-suffrage convictions were forcefully proposed in the context of uncertainties surrounding the future of empire, W.A.O.W.'s sentiments were expressed within a context of the perceived declining importance of the nuclear family and the perceived increase in permissive behaviour particularly in relation to the H.I.V. epidemic.[55] Indeed, drawing on the language of moral decline during a debate in General Synod in 1988, Graham Leonard, the bishop of London, described the ordination of women as 'a virus in the bloodstream which could never be got out'.[56]

In a publication exploring 'Feminism and the Ministry of Women' Jean Oddy, W.A.O.W.'s press officer, highlighted the multifaceted manifestations of women's ministry. She noted that within the church women acted as administrators, church treasurers and representatives on General Synod.

48 'Sharp-eyed observation from under a hat'.
49 Sex Discrimination Act 1975 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/65/enacted> [accessed 24 Aug. 2022].
50 L. Barr and A. Barr, *Jobs for the Boys? Women Who Became Priests* (London, 2001), p. 260.
51 'Women priests', *The Times*, 17 Nov. 1992.
52 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: aims'.
53 T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, E. Bishop, *Just Testing*.
54 M. Faraut, 'Women resisting the vote: a case of anti-feminism?', *Women's History Review*, xii (2003), 605–21, at p. 606.
55 Faraut, 'Women resisting the vote', p. 606; M. Cook, '"Archives of feeling": the AIDS crisis in Britain 1987', *History Workshop Journal*, lxxxiii (2017), 51–78, at p. 53; and V. Berridge, *AIDS in the UK: the Making of a Policy, 1981–1994* (Oxford, 1996).
56 Furlong, *Dangerous Delight*, p. 119.

They were licensed to preach, to teach and to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion. They sang in choirs and served in the sanctuary. They led prayer and bible study groups. They served as organists, churchwardens and vergers. They visited the sick and supported those who were bereaved.[57] In 1989 approximately 63 per cent of the church's membership were women, and an estimated two-thirds of these women were over the age of forty-five, without the informal and unpaid labour of these women the church would have struggled to function.[58] For Oddy the 'blinkered insistence on the office of priest obscure[d] the wider vision of such ministries'.[59] Through highlighting the diverse manifestations of women's ministry members of W.A.O.W. refuted the assertion that the priesthood was a first-class ministry and that all other ministries were second-class and subordinate.[60]

In another of W.A.O.W.'s publications 'What are little girls made of?' Margaret Hood highlighted the complementary nature of the sexes by drawing on incarnation theology. She argued that at the Incarnation God took human form, and that his entire human form was taken from a woman: his mother Mary. At the Incarnation the Word was made flesh, and as a result all womanhood was potentially present in Christ. Hood argued that this redemptive act of love gave women a unique relationship with God; binding her inextricably to creation, but also elevating her above it. Through Mary's act of acquiescence and obedience to the will of God, all womanhood was glorified. For Hood the desire for women to be ordained so that humanity in all its forms would be represented was to fail to understand the full meaning of the Incarnation, noting that secular feminism was encouraging women to be self-centred rather than Christ-centred. For Hood, true Christian feminists did not believe that women needed to be reconsecrated by being made priests because they were already 'set apart' by virtue of their unique relationship with God.[61]

Reaffirming the centrality of Christ's male incarnation, W.A.O.W. member Dr. Caroline Moore, a Fellow of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, challenged the assertion that Jesus' decision to select only male apostles was 'irrelevant' by suggesting that Jesus showed 'little hesitation in flouting other traditional Jewish assumptions' and could have easily transgressed traditional gender conventions.[62] However, for many supporters of women's ordination this argument was deemed unconvincing. Extrapolating further from the arguments centred on the importance of Christ's maleness, one of my interviewees noted that 'all the disciples were Palestinians or Jews … They didn't speak English and none of them were academic'. She questioned why none of these qualities were seen as stumbling blocks to the priestly ministry of twentieth-century white, university-educated males.[63]

Discussions like this played out on televised debates that became increasingly heated as the November 1992 vote on women's ordination to the priesthood drew ever closer. Dr. Margaret Hewitt and Monica Furlong appeared on the debating programme *Heart of the Matter* in November 1988. During the discussion Hewitt argued that the majority of Anglicans 'winced' at the prospect of praying to Our Mother rather than Our Father because it was 'alien to scripture' and 'smacked of the Mother Earth religions against which Christianity distinguished itself'.[64] The type of inclusive language that Margaret Hewitt described wincing at, which sought to use feminine or non-gendered language to speak about God, was a key component of worship at the St. Hilda Community.

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Founded in February 1987, the St. Hilda Community of East London was formed in the wake of a General Synod ruling in July 1986 that refused to allow women 'lawfully ordained abroad' to celebrate the Eucharist in Britain. Monica Furlong described the failure of this vote as 'one blow too many' and she was galvanized into action, co-founding the St. Hilda Community.[65] In a press

57 T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, J. Oddy, *Feminism and the Ministry of Women*.
58 'Trouble brews behind the church tea urns'.
59 Oddy, *Feminism and the Ministry of Women*.
60 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 27 June 1986, p. 3.
61 T.W.L., 6MOW/24/6, M. Hood, *What Are Little Girls Made Of?*
62 'Women Against the Ordination of Women: advertising feature', *Church Times*, 10 July 1992, p. 2.
63 R. Rutherford, interview.
64 'WAOW on the box'.
65 M. Furlong, 'The St Hilda Community', *Ecumenical Review*, liii (2001), 82–5, at p. 82.

release the Community stated that its main concern was 'the degree of prejudice against women in the Church of England' and suggested that this prejudice was 'driving many out of the Church'.[66] The Community therefore sought to cater for the pastoral needs of those who were otherwise ostracized from the Anglican life. The two aims of the Community were set out at the group's first meeting, which attracted eighteen people. First, it sought to hold what the group termed 'non-sexist' services, which experimented with non-hierarchical forms of worship and inclusive language. Second, the Community sought to affirm the ministry of women priests by inviting women ordained within the Anglican Communion to celebrate at the Community's weekly Sunday evening service. Inspired by the authors of *Redefining Christian Britain*, the second half of this article will suggest that these aims emerged from a desire to find a way of worshipping that felt authentic and affirming.[67] Moreover, it will be highlighted that the non-sexist and anti-hierarchical structure of the St. Hilda Community shared strong commonalities with the ethos of the secular Women's Liberation Movement – thereby offering a radically different vision of Christian feminism to that championed by W.A.O.W.

From the late 1970s onwards women ordained within the Anglican Communion had been celebrating private house Eucharists throughout England. Intermittently news of these communions entered into the public domain, and on one occasion the bishop of London, Graham Leonard, rebuked the dean of St. Paul's, Alan Webster, for holding such a celebration in his home in Amen Court.[68] Many members of the St. Hilda Community were used to secretly attending celebrations by visiting women, however after the Synod ruling the initial eighteen members decided that they would, as an act of witness, openly invite women priests visiting England to minister to them, even advertising their services in the *Church Times*.[69]

By Easter Sunday 1987 the Community had grown to around 100 people, attracting students, clergy members and local residents alike.[70] Unlike W.A.O.W. there was no formal membership of the Community, and members were fond of saying that whoever turned up to a service was a member for that evening. Describing the demographic of Community members during an oral history interview, Peter Francis, the Anglican chaplain at St. Benet's, where the Community was based, explained:

> We were united in this desire for the ordination of women, but also out of the woodwork came other people who had been pushed aside or ignored by the institutional church … so quite a lot of gay people. And others, perhaps people with disabilities and so on, who just found it a very sort of conducive welcoming thing, and it grew very rapidly.[71]

It is also notable that unlike other prayer groups meeting in the late 1980s, and indeed other secular conscious-raising groups, the St. Hilda Community consciously decided to not be a women-only group. Part of the rationale for this was that the Community wanted to devise a model of worshipping that was based on men and women working collaboratively together.

The Community met at St. Benet's, the ecumenical chapel of Queen Mary College, located on Mile End Road. This was a lively location that formed part of the route that many protests followed during the late 1980s, from marches against the Falklands War to demonstrations in support of the miners. The chaplaincy itself also regularly hosted talks by individuals like Bruce Kent, the Catholic priest who headed the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and Richard Kirker of the Gay Christian Movement. For Peter Francis one of the most compelling speakers hosted by the chaplaincy was Irene Brennan, a Roman Catholic nun, who was also general secretary of the British Communist Party.[72] The radicalism of the community already established at the chaplaincy, and the fact that Methodist women regularly celebrated there, provided the perfect home for the St. Hilda Community.[73]

66 T.W.L., 6MOW/19/2, 'Press release'.
67 *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives*, ed. J. Garnett and others (London, 2007), p. 12.
68 Furlong, 'The St Hilda Community', p. 82.
69 See, e.g. *Church Times*, 20 March 1987, p. 15; 30 Oct. 1987, p. 18; 25 Nov. 1988, p. 14.
70 P. Francis, *The Widening Circle of Us: a Theological Memoir* (Chester, 2021), p. 70.
71 P. Francis, interview.
72 Francis, *Widening Circle of Us*, p. 64.
73 The Methodist Church began ordaining women in 1974.

Figure 1. The chapel of St. Benet's, Queen Mary University. Photo credit: Ella Sharples

The physical shape of the small round chapel was also particularly effective for the type of non-hierarchical worship undertaken by the Community (Figure 1.). One member described entering the chapel as 'like going into a womb', implying the space had a strong sense of female spirituality.[74] Unlike traditional church spaces, in which the sacred areas are often clearly demarcated from the areas occupied by the laity, St. Benet's allowed the Community to sit together in a circle, and reflecting the informality of their worship members often chose to sit on the floor.[75] The liturgy, a form of worship, tended to be spoken either in unison or by going around the circle with one person at a time speaking a paragraph or a sentence. The leadership of the liturgy was shared among members on a week-by-week basis. It was felt that this style of worship allowed all members to feel equally included and valued. Moreover, instead of a priest giving absolution, Peter Francis explained that 'we did it in a circle to each other', further challenging the hierarchical nature of Anglican worship.[76]

For these services Community members frequently wrote their own prayers and liturgies using inclusive language.[77] During worship titles such as 'Father', 'Lord' and 'Master' were often exchanged for 'Mother', 'Daughter' and 'Sister', or sometimes 'Beloved' or 'Redeemer'. Where male titles were used, they often appeared in conjunction with female titles; for example, the Community rewrote the Lord's Prayer to begin, 'Beloved, our Father and Mother, in whom is heaven'.[78] These experimentations with inclusive language formed part of the Community's commitment to holding 'non-sexist' services.

74 St. Hilda Community, *The New Women Included: a Book of Services and Prayers: With New Introductions and Prayer* (London, 1996), p. 12.

75 The gendering of spatial dynamics of sacred spaces is best explored in T. W. Jones, '"Unduly conscious of her sex": priesthood, female bodies, and sacred space in the Church of England', *Women's History Review*, xxi (2012), 639–55. See also R. Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale, 2003).

76 Francis, interview.

77 Members were particularly inspired by Janet Morley's book *All Desires Known* (London, 1988): a collection of liturgies, prayers, psalms, confessions, prose and songs, written using inclusive language. Eventually the Community produced their own book of worship material (*Women Included: a Book of Services and Prayers* (London, 1991)).

78 Francis, *Widening Circle of Us*, p. 73.

Indeed, it was these types of experimentations with religious language that exemplified the 'misplaced feminism' condemned by W.A.O.W.[79]

For those raised in communities in which God was spoken about in exclusively male terms inclusive language could be a revelation. However, while certain alterations to religious language were easily implemented, such as swapping 'mankind' to 'humankind', changing the language used to speak about God was a complicated task.[80] For many women, disrupting entrenched ideas surrounding the maleness of God proved to be exceedingly difficult. While it was understood that theologically God transcended human concepts of gender, the emotional reliance on images of God as a man were deeply ingrained. Community member Rachel Carr explained that 'using female language as a metaphor for God didn't mean I had ceased to imagine God in my head as a man with a white beard'.[81] Many advocates of inclusive language also spoke honestly about the inelegance and awkwardness that resulted in attempting to remove gender from religious language. In 1991 Furlong commented, 'I should hate to see "God rest ye merry, gentlemen" modernized to some ideologically sound equivalent'.[82] For many members of the Community using feminine language to speak about God, with all its difficulties and complexities, demonstrated that all language for God was ultimately inadequate and could only hope to point to what was ineffable. They concluded that traditionally unchallenged masculine language for God merely presented the illusion of adequacy.[83]

Alongside spoken devotion, bodily expressions of religiosity were also a key component of worship used by the St. Hilda Community. Circle dancing – or sacred dancing, as it was often referred to – was a frequently used medium for performing religious devotion among members of the Community who were searching for ways of worshipping that felt authentic and affirming. Circle dancing was used by both secular and religious consciousness-raising groups throughout the late twentieth century. One of my interviewees, feminist theologian Nicola Slee, suggested the supportive and non-hierarchical nature of circle dancing embodied the values of feminism. She explained, 'Everybody has a place in the circle, the circle can be as small or as large as there are people there, there's no leader, and the energy is passed around the circle'.[84] Community members felt that this form of bodily worship was a way of demonstrating that 'bodies cannot be ignored on our journey with God'.[85]

In addition to being a form of performative religious devotion, circle dance imbued members of the Community with a sense of freedom from the constraints of having to perform worship 'correctly'. Rachel Carr explained, 'I particularly enjoy experiencing liturgy as a dance that changes its steps, and its course of direction, and comes into being in the process of its enactment rather than as something requiring a fixed set of responses'.[86] This rejection of perfectionism, and of finding new ways to worship within the Christian tradition, was at the core of the ethos of the Community. Moreover, in considering these bodily expressions of religious devotion through the lens of women's liberation, it is possible to view the St. Hilda Community as a space in which women endeavoured to explore self-actualization through reclaiming their bodies.[87]

Another method members of the St. Hilda Community used to find authenticity in their worship was to organize and attend Eucharists celebrated by a woman. Initially the Community invited any women priests visiting London from the Anglican Communion to celebrate the Eucharist for their

79 Male opponents to women's ordination also wrote about inclusive language (G. Leonard, P. Toon and I. M. MacKenzie, *Let God Be God* (London, 1989)).

80 Discussion surrounding 'inclusive language' forms part of wider debates about liturgical reform – from the publication of the *Alternative Service Book* (1980) to present-day discussions about challenging language that unwittingly permits ablism and racism. Current discussions are best exemplified in the April 2021 symposium 'Dismantling whiteness: critical white theology', hosted by Regent's Park College, University of Oxford. See also A. Harris, '"The prayer in syntax"? The Roman Missal, the Book of Common Prayer and changes in liturgical language, 1945–80', in Garnett and others, *Redefining Christian Britain*, pp. 36–49.

81 St. Hilda Community, *New Women Included*, p. 20.

82 Furlong, *Dangerous Delight*, p. 85.

83 G. Heaton, '"The male God blessed the male patriarchy": language, ritual and the history of women's ordination', *Crucible*, Apr. 2020, pp. 14–25.

84 N. Slee, interview.

85 St. Hilda Community, *New Women Included*, p. 22.

86 St. Hilda Community, *New Women Included*, p. 20.

87 For an exploration of these ideas in relation to health and sexuality, see Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves* (London, 1978).

Sunday evening services, but soon the Reverend Suzanne Fageol became the Community's regular priest. Having been ordained in the Diocese of Chicago in 1978, Fageol moved to England to pursue a doctorate on religious pluralism in the African Christian church.[88] Her celebrations at the St. Hilda Community quickly caught the attention of the press and on the 16 October 1988 Charles Oulton published an article in *The Sunday Times* that accused the Community of 'defying' the Church of England by holding 'illegal' Eucharists.[89] Far from shying away from the publicity, Furlong explained that 'what made the Community different from other Christian feminist groups at the time was that, almost from the outset, and without apology, we were engaged in public controversy'.[90]

Having had his attention publicly called to the activities of the Community, Graham Leonard, the bishop of London, wrote a personally signed letter to Suzanne Fageol stating that he 'requested and expected' her to 'desist from presiding at Communion services in both the chapel and the Chaplaincy building', which had in the past been consecrated.[91] The Community did not believe that the bishop of London had any jurisdiction over Queen Mary College and continued to celebrate in the chapel, placing a note on the chaplaincy door that declared, 'The St. Hilda Community is alive and well'.[92] Queen Mary College itself had no objections to the Community's presence as St. Benet's was part of an ecumenical centre and it was common for Methodist women ministers to celebrate Communion there. However, the London Diocesan Fund discovered they owned the land on which the chapel stood, and the Community were sent a stern letter from the lawyers of the diocese stating that the Community were committing trespass. This exchange led Furlong to drily observe that 'plainly the bishop was not into forgiving our trespasses'.[93]

Holy Trinity, Bow, a Methodist-Anglican church close to St. Benet's offered the Community a new home as the land on which Holy Trinity stood was owned by the Methodists and therefore the Anglican bishop of London could not intervene. The Community decided it would be more dignified to leave of its own accord, rather than being forced out. They decided to celebrate one final Eucharist in November 1988 in the car park of St. Benet's chapel, using a folding table as an altar.[94] The Community publicized this event and the service gained a plethora of media attention, with television cameras from Spain and Italy capturing the evening's events. The level of attention led to the police being summoned. When one member asked why the police had been summoned an officer replied, 'In case there's any fighting … But don't worry, dear, we'll protect you'. Furlong reflected, 'Far from worrying, we were enchanted that they did not seem to grasp that *we* were the supposed trouble makers'.[95] Furlong's recollections reinforced the notion that the typical image of an activist by the late 1980s was still entwined with images of student activism in 1968. The non-violent activism undertaken by these middle-aged Christian women therefore offers a fascinating transgression of this typical image.[96]

The publicity continued after the service and 'who held communion in a car park and why' even appeared as a question on a radio quiz show. Members of the Community were hounded by the right-wing press. Fageol's front garden was filled with photographers, which rendered her a 'prisoner in her own house'.[97] For providing the St. Hilda Community with a home Peter Francis received a death

88 'Anglican Church bars U.S.-ordained woman', *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1988; and 'Feminist missionary in Canterbury's court', *The Witness*, lxxii (1989), 20–1.

89 'Woman priest defies bishop', *Sunday Times*, 16 Oct. 1988.

90 St. Hilda Community, *New Women Included*, p. 12.

91 'Women priest in "provocative" Easter service', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Apr. 1987.

92 'Women priest in "provocative" Easter service'.

93 Furlong, *Dangerous Delight*, p. 84. Humour underscored much of the activism undertaken by those in favour of women's ordination. Witty one-liners such as 'God is an equal opportunities employer – Pity about the Church' or 'A Woman's Place is in the House of Bishops' frequently appeared on merchandise produced by supporters. Parallels can be drawn with the ways in which humour was used by other activist organizations. See, e.g., L. Power, *No Bath But Plenty of Bubbles: an Oral History of the Gay Liberation Front, 1970–73* (London, 1995), esp. ch. 11.

94 'Anglican Church bars U.S.-ordained woman'.

95 Furlong, 'The St. Hilda Community', p. 84. Original emphasis.

96 C. Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester, 2015); *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt*, ed. R. Gildea, J. Mark and A. Warring (Oxford, 2013); and *Political Activism Across the Life Course*, ed. S.-M. Nolas, C. Varvantakis and V. Aruldoss (Abingdon, 2019).

97 Furlong, 'The St. Hilda Community', p. 85.

threat, which declared, 'You're despicable, you're going to hell'.[98] The hate mail directed at Francis and the media attention that surrounded the Community demonstrated the depth of feeling the issue of women's ministry elicited.[99]

After the car park Eucharist the Community continued worshipping in their new home and the question was raised as to whether the Community should appoint Fageol as their permanent chaplain. True to the Community's democratic ethos they devoted many sessions to discussing this question, even bringing in a facilitator to guide the discussion. Community member Ann Clarke recalled making the unpopular suggestion that the Community was going 'down the path of substituting a Daddy with a Mummy' aping the very institution many members had sought to distance themselves from.[100] The issue was never successfully satisfied and eventually Fageol's visa expired and she returned to the U.S. The East End Community naturally came to an end as the 1990s progressed. However, the Community continued in a slightly different form in West London throughout the 1990s and sharing a meal became the central rite.

Other members of the Community sought to disseminate what they had learnt from worshipping at St. Benet's within the wider Christian community. This was a particularly important endeavour for Ann Clarke, who believed that 'if the St Hilda experience could not effect change or have something important to say to the main stream church, then it was nothing more than an esoteric club'. She began sharing liturgies created by members of the St. Hilda Community with a small prayer group associated with her parish church, St. Mary of Eton, Hackney Wick. She described these liturgies as being 'well received and no big deal' further explaining that the majority of people in her parish had no idea 'what all the fuss is about'. As one parishioner put it, 'I'm not worried when I come in on a Sunday who's up there doing it, whether its Duncan (the Vicar), Philippa (the curate) or you [Ann Clarke]'.[101]

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This article has sought to provide an insight into the Christian feminist movement operating in the late twentieth century by examining the activism of two groups at opposite ends of the ordination debate. It has sought to demonstrate that the Christian feminist movement encompassed a multiplicity of voices and included individuals who vastly disagreed on fundamental issues (like women's ordination). The first half of this article explored the vision of Christian feminism proposed by W.A.O.W., which centred on fulfilling one's motherly duties and celebrated versions of ministry that existed outside the priesthood. It attempted to escape the narrow labels that have condemned these women as palatable mouthpieces for misogyny and instead sought to emphasize the importance of understanding how these women made sense of their own lives and activism. The second half of this article explored a very different manifestation of Christian feminism, one centred around experimenting with ways of seeking religious authenticity – be that through inclusive language, circle dancing or celebrating with a female priest.

The title of this article included a question mark after the words 'Christian feminism'. Part of the reason for using a question mark was to reflect the sense of surprise or disbelief exhibited by many individuals in the late twentieth century at the idea of a 'Christian feminist'. Women who identified as both religious and feminists occupied a liminal space within the women's movement of the late twentieth century. In their book exploring the debate surrounding women's ordination in the Church of England, clergy wives Susan Dowell and Jane Williams explained that religious women frequently 'operated as closet feminists in the Church and closet Christians in the women's movement'.[102] While 'the Church was busy dismissing feminists as incompatible with – or irrelevant to – good Christian

98 Francis, interview.
99 Other members of the Community also received hate mail for their public support of women's ordination. Nerissa Jones, a deacon at St. Botolph's Aldgate, received death threats and a stream of hate mail that threatened her with decapitation. See '"Death threat" in the war over women priests', *Daily Mail*, 9 Nov. 1992.
100 T.W.L., 6MOW/11, 'Out of the frying-pan into the fire', *Chrysalis*, July 1994.
101 'Out of the frying-pan into the fire'.
102 S. Dowell and J. Williams, *Bread, Wine and Women: Ordination Debate in the Church of England* (London, 1994), p. 54.

womanhood', the authors suggested that the women's movement 'was seriously doubting whether Christians could be feminists at all!'[103] Challenging these assumptions, this article has sought to provide an insight into the vibrancy of Christian feminist activism in the late twentieth century. While the article has focused on women's ordination, there are many other facets of the Christian feminist movement that are in desperate need of exploration, from Christian women's presence at Greenham Common to the relationship between Christian feminists and the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement.[104]

103 Dowell and Williams, *Bread, Wine and Women*, pp. 54–5.

104 T.W.L. hosts a wealth of literature relating to the Christian feminist movement, which would be a good starting point for further studies.