

Is it better to be a woman in the Catholic or Anglican church in the UK?

Isabella R. Moyer | Dec. 18, 2012 NCR Today

An interesting conversation is taking place [over at *The Tablet*](#) [1], begun by Linda Woodhead, professor of sociology of religion at Lancaster University. She proposed the counterintuitive argument that, in the United Kingdom, it is better to be a woman in the Catholic church rather than the Anglican church. They may be barred from ordination and silenced from any discussions on the matter, but Catholic women theologians in the UK have made major contributions and wield significant influence in ways that Anglican women have not.

Anna Rowlands, lecturer of theology and ministry in Kings College, London, continues the discussion in an article titled "[In praise of a hidden tradition of Catholic women's empowerment](#) [2]." Careful to avoid "a kind of tasteless Catholic triumphalism," she acknowledges the positive legacy of 1970s, '80s and '90s:

The fruits of an ordinary, local Catholic set of practices are only now becoming apparent: the education and formation of a generation of women confident in their faith, who have now taken their place in the world of work as well as within their families.

Many of these women came from first and second generation migrant backgrounds, had little to lose and much to gain, and found themselves being nurtured through what my colleague Julie Clague, a lecturer at Glasgow, named an 'alternative civil society'. This alternative civil society was built around the matrix of lay, apostolic women's religious orders, the provision of Catholic (state and private) schooling, a 'thick' practice of Catholic parish life (including wide social provision, the presence of Young Christian Workers, St Vincent de Paul, Cafod and other social justice formation groups) and perhaps, too, a determination amongst migrant families to educate their girls.

It is impossible to understate the importance of the work that comprehensive Catholic schools have performed in creating a context for developing the confidence and academic achievement of Catholic women. Here we encountered powerful, articulate women, confident in their faith with a passion for social justice as for Scripture and liturgy. For many their experience of Catholic schooling was their experience of Church - a remarkable kind of Church-in-the-world experience. And it was one protected to a degree from some of the more hostile winds. I have become increasingly convinced that without much fanfare this 'thick' community was nurturing something new in Catholic life in UK -- the powerful, creative, public lay woman. This is a story that I think we have failed to celebrate or see for what it is -- and must still be.

In the midst of seeming regression, we continue to yearn for a church where the gifts of all her daughters and sons are embraced and empowered in a spirit of true equality. It is good to stop, ponder and offer a prayer of gratitude for all the "powerful, creative, public lay women" in our local communities, churches and around the world. Yes, there is a long way to go, but there is also a long way behind us -- and many inspirational footsteps to follow.

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[1] <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/411/17>

[2] <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/424/17>