

Why the Roman Catholic Church is a better home for women than the Church of England



We all know that the Roman Catholic Church is run exclusively by men who jealously guard their own interests. They persist in maintaining an 'equal but different' doctrine according to which women are conveniently made by God to do all the jobs that men would rather not. You can't even discuss the issue of a woman being ordained, for goodness sake. And look at how faithful women who don't tow the official line are being treated - not just women religious in the USA, but Lavinia Byrne and now Tina Beattie. And this despite the fact that women outnumber men in the pews and almost every other area of church life by a factor of about 4:3.

Happily, the Church of England is a much warmer and hospitable place for the female sex. It has been ordaining women as priests for 20 years now. More women than men are coming forward for ordination. Bishops have wives and children. Women can speak their minds. No magisterium or whispering chamber will clip their wings.

That's the received wisdom anyway. I'm pretty sure it's wrong, as a sociologist and as an Anglican, that it's wrong. It reminds me of a classic study of married, working couples by the great sociologist Arlie Hochschild. She was interested in how equally they shared the domestic labour. Her finding was that men who espoused the most appallingly chauvinist sentiments often turned out to be the best round the house and with the children. Whereas the right-on metrosexuals who said all the right things about equality were often happy to sit back and allow their wives to do all the work.

Push beyond the surface of church teaching and superficial appearances and doesn't something similar appear? Let's take Britain as an example. There are a lot of significant Catholic women theologians in this country. They have made and continue to make a very significant contribution to social teaching and other areas. Where are their Anglican equivalents? There are other Catholic women in positions of considerable influence, such as the newly appointed director of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Patricia Chale, and the outgoing and incoming principals of Leeds Trinity University College, professors Freda Bridge and Margaret House.

They are prominent too in many more secular walks of life - in the Westminster Faith Interview tonight Baroness Shirley Williams will be speaking, and after that Delia Smith. I could go on. We didn't set out

to pick Catholic women. You just can't ignore them.

And now we have the Church of England's recent decision on women bishops, which surprised me not all. The really interesting question is why this has happened. And why the Roman Catholic Church, despite appearances, turns out to be a better place for women. I will try to answer that question in my longer article in Saturday December 1's edition of The Tablet.

Linda Woodhead is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University

Linda Woodhead - The Tablet