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What shapes ambivalence towards ‘feminism’ amongst the clergy? Comparing responses from clergywomen and theologically conservative clergymen in the Church of England.

## **Abstract**

In 1994 the Church of England ordained its first women priests and since 2014 women clergy have been appointed as bishops, a senior role in the Church’s ordained hierarchy. However, their acceptance into these roles has been highly ambivalent. How ambivalence manifests and the role of deeper beliefs about gender in the Church is under-researched, especially in understanding the positions of male clergy who oppose women’s ordination. This article draws on data sets from two separate projects conducting semi-structured interviews with both men and women in the priesthood and compares the ambivalence towards feminism held by female clergy and theologically conservative male clergy. The argument unpacks how institutional and cultural factors intersect with tradition-specific beliefs to generate highly ambivalent views about feminism as a movement. The conclusion suggests ways feminism is mythologised and used to reframe conservative male clergy as vulnerable and as potential victims of misandry.

**Keywords:** Church of England; gender inequality; ordination of women; engaged orthodoxy; irresolute equality reform

## **Introduction**

Women were first ordained into the Church of England (CofE) in 1994 and since 2014 have been appointed as bishops, one of the most senior roles in the Church’s ordained hierarchy (Brown 2014).<sup>1</sup> However, ordained women are still not accepted on the same terms as their male colleagues and there remains a minority from theologically conservative traditions who oppose women’s ordination. The Church facilitates and supports this position by allowing parishes to seek alternative pastoral oversight of a bishop who has not ordained a woman and shares the traditionalist gender outlook in the priesthood (known as Provincial Episcopal Visitors or ‘Flying Bishops’). This dual structure was developed by the General Synod, the Church’s governing body, via the Act of Synod in 1992, to make provision for gender traditionalist clergy and congregations; parishes can pass resolutions that shield them from the ministry of ordained women (Maltby 1998) and this framework has now been updated to take

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors contributed equally to all stages of writing of this article.

account of the introduction of women bishops— traditionalist clergy can also refuse to be ordained by a bishop who also ordains women (Maltby 1998).

The CofE has historically been male dominated, and men have wielded considerable power over women and their roles in the church context (Aldridge 1992). Even though women clergy are now able to rise through the ranks to become bishops, they are nonetheless required to navigate an institutional structure that differentiates them from clergymen. The institution also informally discriminates against women. For example, research shows that women are denied certain training routes (Robbins and Greene 2018) and that the ministry work offered to them has tended to be roles traditionally regarded as feminine (Francis and Robbins 1999). Research has also shown that clergywomen married to clergymen have needed to navigate their spousal identity alongside their vocation whilst feeling pressured into supporting roles (Peyton and Gatrell 2013).

Such inequality has led to controversy in public and institutional discourse, partly because the CofE is exempt from equality legislation (Sarmiento 2010). This controversy is compounded by the clash with wider societal values, despite the established (and thus privileged) position of the CofE (Brown and Woodhead 2016). The relationship between feminism and the CofE is under-researched and whilst Page (2013) notes the ambivalence towards feminism amongst two cohorts of female clergy, and individual reasons for this, more research is needed to understand how this ambivalence manifests more widely in the CofE and the wider social factors shaping such ambivalence.

Addressing this lacuna is work by Jagger and Fry, who collectively note widespread ambivalence of clergy towards feminism, across the CofE's traditions. This article draws on Jagger's and Fry's separate data sets, comparing the ambivalence towards feminism held by both women clergy and theologically conservative male clergy. The authors offer a fresh analysis with a rare comparison between narratives of male clergy who oppose women's ordination and women priests themselves about feminism and unpack how institutional and socio-cultural factors intersect with a pluralism of Church traditions to shape ambivalence amongst both men and women clergy.

## **Literature Review**

## *Women's Ordination in the CofE*

In the nineteenth century, responding to the desire of women to have their vocation recognised, the CofE introduced the role of non-ordained deaconess (Young 2015). Women could become permanent deacons from 1987 (Francis and Robbins 1999), the lowest ordained position in the Church's ordained hierarchy. The restriction on women's ministry meant that views on women's ordination were largely articulated by men (Nason-Clark 1984). It was only in 1992 that the General Synod voted to ordain women as priests. The subsequent Act of Synod created a split structure, simultaneously welcoming women as priests whilst making alternative provisions for opponents of women's ordination, laying an ambivalent foundation (Maltby 1998; Furlong 1998). Though some discuss the campaign for women's ordination in terms of sexist positions within the Church (e.g. Nason-Clark 1987a; 1987b), there is often a reluctance amongst women clergy to name theological arguments as overtly sexist or misogynist (Jagger 2019; Robbins and Greene 2018).

Ten years after women's entry into the priesthood, research found that male clergy who had been opposed to ordaining women as priests were unlikely to have changed their position, though many gender traditionalists had left or taken early retirement (Jones 2004). Women also continued to encounter cultural and structural barriers to feminist-inspired reform in the Church (Bagilhole 2003; 2006) and because of the vocational nature of the priesthood, women are more likely to endure such conditions than explicitly protest (Greene and Robbins 2015; Jagger 2019). Women still encounter discrimination *as* women priests (Robbins and Greene 2018). For example, research shows that those married to male priests have felt forced into supporting roles (Peyton and Gatrell 2013; Gatrell and Peyton 2019).

Fry (2019a) argues that, whilst continued opposition to women's priesthood occurs in different traditions, amongst conservative evangelicals<sup>2</sup> specifically, it is shaped by the desire to maintain a privileged position in the Church's hierarchy. He further argues that opposition is less likely amongst charismatic evangelicals because of their closer integration with the wider

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<sup>2</sup> Conservative evangelicalism is found within and beyond the CofE, transcending denominational boundaries. However, in this article, we are concerned with the expression of conservative evangelicalism as it is found within the CofE.

CofE and their historical openness to women's ministry (Fry 2019b; 2023). Fry argues that conservative evangelicals and traditional Anglo-Catholics can deny women clergy the spiritual and social capital necessary for obtaining senior positions in the Church, and that wider societal engagement is a significant factor shaping clergy gender attitudes (Fry 2021a; 2021b). Affirming or rejecting women clergy from both these traditions relates to the aim of bolstering self-esteem among one's own social group (Fry 2019b; 2023).

Ultimately, the competing institutional goals of incorporating women into the priesthood and maintaining unity within the Church has seriously limited the extent to which the institution can foster gender equality. Fry (2021b) frames this as irresolute equality reform. Fry (2019b) has also built on our understanding of the impact of the Church's differentiating structure and the contingent acceptance of women in the priesthood, which hands power to individual male clergy to nullify women's ordained status. Such a structure creates liminality for ordained women (Jagger 2023b) and reveals how gender essentialist theologies undermine women's subjectivity and perpetuate cycles of relational and institutional symbolic violence (Jagger 2021).

### ***Feminism, Spirituality and Christianity***

The term 'feminism' covers a broad spectrum of positions reflecting the diversity of political and personal beliefs amongst those conscious of gender-based oppressions and inequalities (Henley, Meng et al. 1998; Redfern and Aune 2013; Zucker 2003). Zucker, though, argues that theoretical work has neglected the way women self-identify as *not* feminist whilst holding beliefs about gender equality. Moreover, feminist positions are often separated into secular and spiritual camps, limiting the study of religion and spirituality in women's lives (Page 2013).

Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) note that, for some, researching the lives of women of faith is regarded as futile. Post-religious feminists, such as Daphne Hampson (1994, 1996, 2002) express how they have been unable to hold on to both a religious affiliation and a feminist position, at one time sparking debate as to whether feminism will be the death of Christianity (Radford Ruether 1990). Yet, Rosi Braidotti (2008) discusses (and laments) how the feminist movement, particularly in Europe, has followed a secular trajectory, largely cutting itself off from discussions of the faith lives of women. She argues that a seemingly 'natural' alignment with secularism is an unhelpful legacy of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Such a legacy,

Braidotti argues, has overstated the benefits of humanism and the Enlightenment for women. Both sides of the secular/spiritual dichotomy are being presented as contexts that challenge feminism as one-sidedly secular. Echoing Braidotti, Nyhagen (2019), from a European perspective, critiques the boundaries discursively formed that separate secular and religious feminisms. Some scholars have begun to challenge the gendered politics of atheist movements (e.g., Kettell 2013) and some researchers are placing emphasis on how no society can call itself post-religious (Hajjar 2004). As Niamh Reilly (2011) urged, feminists need to blur the secular/spiritual divide along which feminisms have been fragmented to understand the impact of gendered religious symbols and myths from *within* religious groups; to align feminism with secularism is to make invisible the spiritual lives of women and to misread the cultural flow towards post-secularism (Braidotti 2008).

Feminist theology too offers a wide-ranging debate about how gender should be treated. Green (2009; 2010; 2011) draws on Luce Irigaray's (2002) exploration of the feminine divine to challenge the masculine dominance over the symbolic, though, as Jagger (2023a) points out, Irigaray's framework does not easily dovetail with women negotiating their belonging in the priesthood. Daly (1973) and Radford Ruether (1983) critique the androcentrism of Christianity in more stark and radical terms, and Daphne Hampson (2002) works her way out of Christianity altogether, pursuing feminist critiques of masculine monotheism. Nevertheless, women clergy's alignments with feminism are not strong and engagement with feminist theologies is marginal, often locked within academic contexts (see Clark-King 2004).

There is, then, a difficult relationship between Christianity and feminism. The institutionalised form of Christianity has contributed to the backlash against feminism, with complementarian (and essentialist) doctrines being defended against feminist critiques (MacKay 2021) and Christian feminists being viewed as 'challengers' in the Church (Thorne 2000, 112). Moreover, Thorne's study found there is antipathy towards feminism amongst women clergy, despite seeking to change gendered language and practices within the Church, and Page (2013) has noted how some clergywomen have held on to their feminist values less tightly to avoid the discomfort of congregations. Page also highlights that feminisms might be seen as threatening since they work at destabilising categories, constructs, and institutions at a deeper level than achieved by gender equality legislation. Thus, some women clergy are ambivalent to (or disavowing of) forms of feminist discourse, often separating the desire for gender equality from feminism, the latter perceived as unwelcome and unhelpfully militant once women had achieved the goal of being admitted into the priesthood. Catherine Rottenberg (2014) offers an

exploration into the rise of neoliberal feminism, that might explain the ambivalences appearing in the research detailed in this article. The reanimation of liberal feminisms along neoliberal lines develops a type of feminism that is individualistic and self-reliant, taking attention away from the systemic gender oppressions by circumscribing their critique. This form of neoliberal feminism may provide a way of understanding the reluctance in some women priests to name theologies as inherently sexist, preferring instead to develop a private feminist economy. Some of the interviews with women clergy also connect with the debate around post-feminism (see Gill 1994) in the ‘job done’ celebratory discourses that frame deeper feminist critiques as ‘radical’, a shorthand discussed later.

## **Methodology**

### ***Female Clergy***

Jagger interviewed twenty-six clergywomen in the CofE, at various vocational stages and in various geographical areas in England. The cohort included non-stipendiary (unpaid) and part-time and full-time parish priests, curates, chaplains, and retirees. Some were mothers, married or single, and some were child-free. Some participants were fluent in arguments about their gendered place within the Church and gendered tropes within theological propositions, though their positioning was not uniform.

Half the cohort identified as Anglo-Catholic and the rest identified as either evangelical or middle-of-the-road.<sup>3</sup> For those from the Anglo-Catholic tradition, the nature of gendered experiences and relationships tended to revolve around the structural accommodation the Church makes for male clergy who oppose women priests for reasons of tradition and ontology.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the theological positions of the participants are highly

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<sup>3</sup> There is blurring of the lines between middle-of-the-road and evangelical identities. Jagger (2019) has worked with how women have self-identified without attempting to substantiate positions.

<sup>4</sup> Within conservative evangelical discourse, objections to women’s ministry are based on plain-meaning biblical interpretations of male authority and headship. For traditional Anglo-Catholics, the objections are to do with the belief that only the Roman Catholic Church has the authority to change

individualistic and, in some cases, only loosely aligned with theologies represented by traditions.

Thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke 2006), with subthemes coded and cross referenced. This exercise revealed correlations, such as the strong alignment between tradition and contact with male clergy who reject female priesthood, but a weak alignment between tradition and engagement with feminist theology. Three broad themes were prevalent: relationships with opposing male clergy and the institution; embodied practices; and language and imagery. The interview questions aimed to draw out those stories that explored the ways women priests negotiated both the institutional structure and the relationships with male clergy who do not accept women's ordination. Based on the premise that the campaign for women's ordination had close associations with broader women's movements (see Gill 1994), one of the research areas revolved around the relationship women clergy have with feminism as a label and with explicitly feminist theologies. Discussions with participants focused on whether they saw themselves as feminist and how this impacted on their ministry and their relationships with colleagues who disagreed with women's priesthood. This line of questioning revealed a complex picture of how feminism is defined and the extent to which feminist theology is perceived as an adequate expression of various approaches to feminism. Though definitions and meanings around the term 'feminism' were sometimes imprecise, the relationship with feminist theological literature was a way for participants to position themselves.

### ***Male Clergy***

Fry conducted semi-structured interviews with forty-one male clergy from theologically conservative traditions within the CofE. The cohorts included full-time and retired clergymen, those in parish ministry and those with cathedral posts, and a spread of ages from thirties to eighties. Fourteen participants self-identified as conservative evangelical, reflecting Bebbington's (1989) evangelical quadrilateral whereby participants: hold the Bible as their ultimate authority for theology; stress the atoning work of Christ's death; emphasise personal conversion; and seek to proclaim the Gospel throughout society. All but one were members of

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doctrine and particular beliefs about the divinely ordained maleness of the priesthood (see Jagger 2019a, 2019b, 2023).



Reform, an evangelical group formed in protest to women's ordination in the early 1990s (Jones 2004). The remaining conservative evangelical was considering membership. All but one rejected the appropriateness of ordaining women as priests. Thirteen participants were charismatic evangelical, additionally emphasising the Holy Spirit supernaturally communicating revelation from God to individuals. However, many of these had also incorporated spiritualities, practices and theology from other Christian traditions, making them theologically broader than other charismatic evangelical groups. All but two from this group affirmed women's ordination. Thirteen participants were Anglo-Catholic, emphasising the CofE's unity with the Roman Catholic Church and incorporated much of its theology and liturgy. Eleven of this group were traditional Anglo-Catholic, holding to traditional Roman Catholic beliefs around gender and two were affirming of women's priesthood. Clergy from these traditions were selected because they were most likely to possess traditional gender attitudes in line with their conservative theological beliefs (Fry 2019b; 2023). Nevertheless, it was anticipated that some of the charismatic evangelicals would have more affirming attitudes towards women's ordination, since this tradition has historically been so (Guest, Olson and Wolffe 2012).

Participants were recruited from a particular diocese in the south of England because it is large, providing a significant pool of potential participants, and because it is diverse with respect to CofE traditions, affording a more representative exploration of gender attitudes amongst theologically conservative clergy. In fact, the diocese in question has urban, suburban and rural areas, further representing the different geographical landscapes of parishes across England. Participants were recruited via invitations, snowballing and gatekeepers. Participants steered the conversation, and had opportunity to answer in-depth, limiting the risk of assumptions being made (see Burman 1994). The researcher also asked participants to unpack any tradition-specific language so that participants' beliefs, ideas and concepts were more thoroughly defined by them. This research complied with Durham University's Research Ethics Policy.

Thematic narrative analysis was employed with the premise that people interpret their life experiences through narrative (Riessman 2005). By asking participants questions about their life experience in chronological order, it was easier to piece together how such experiences came to shape their gender attitudes. As Maxwell argues (2004), phenomena (including beliefs and attitudes) are shaped by one event flowing into another. The themes were identified, and

questions asked, in chronological order of participants' lives, because it is recognised that individuals construct narratives out of their life experience (see Fry 2019b; 2023). Thematic analysis reveals patterns across a data set (Braun and Clarke n.d., para. 5; 2006) and enables judgements to be made about what represents the whole cohort as well as the similarities and differences between the Anglo-Catholic, conservative evangelical, and charismatic evangelical groups. During the interviews, participants were asked how they personally respond to the feminist movement. The question of feminism was juxtaposed alongside broader questions around changing social values that have occurred since the mid-twentieth century and the interplay between these and participants' experience of CofE ministry. Discussed below is the theme 'Ambivalence towards feminism,' split into subthemes of 'Positives' and 'Negatives' of feminism.

### ***Taking the Data Together: Female Clergy and Male Clergy***

'Feminism' was left undefined in the studies to enable participants to articulate their own understanding of feminism and to avoid the imposing of the researcher's own assumptions in this domain. Nevertheless, Jagger and Fry understand it as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to equality that resist essentialism and seek emancipation (see Fry, 2019b; 2023; Jagger 2019; Page 2010). Offering a precise operationalization of feminism for this analysis would be problematic, given that a cornerstone of qualitative research is to capture the nuances and complexities of the social world as it is experienced. Prescribing a top-down definition of feminism would not only quash analysis of participants' attitudes towards feminism, but significantly risk overlooking how it is understood in the ecclesial sphere, an important domain for understanding gender.

There is a strength in combining the datasets. It enables a more panoramic picture of clergy attitudes towards feminism than is otherwise possible. This has been enabled by the shared method of thematic analysis across the two projects. Whereas one project takes a narrative approach and the other does not, being able to sequentially identify how gender attitudes have emerged is inconsequential to a comparison of gender attitudes between clergymen and clergywomen when the concern focuses on the content of their attitudes rather than their biographical genesis (as is the case for the purposes of this paper). Moreover, the study involving clergywomen evidently captures participants' experiences narratively as they often reflect on feminism in chronological order.

Moreover, one study interviewed participants across England and another focused in one region. Nevertheless, this poses no methodological barrier in this comparative work for two reasons. First, the region-focused study, as aforementioned, was chosen in part for its ability to represent much of the wider CofE. Second, and relatedly, the ways in which participants' ambivalence towards feminism, detailed below, dovetail is indicative of their attitudes being formed in the same wider milieu.

Also, whereas the first project presents the themes across traditions, the second does so within each tradition. This reflects the fact that the former had significant similarities regarding themes and thematic details across traditions, whereas the latter found important differences between traditions. Hence, the presentation of both studies differently captures the unique contexts of each with intellectual honesty rather than quashing the lived realities of those interviewed. This presentation also helps facilitate a further insight, namely that ambivalence towards feminism manifests differently, depending on tradition for men more so than for women.

Notwithstanding, there are limitations to both these projects. The cohorts are predominantly white; womanism is not featured in the discussions. There are also limitations regarding other intersections, such as class, and we are aware that approaches to feminism may differ, for instance, for working-class clergywomen (most participants were middle class). However, because of the breadth of traditions and regions covered in the research with clergywomen, and the representative nature of the diocese for the research with clergymen, there is very good reason to believe that the findings unpacked in due course do reflect the dominant attitudes of clergywomen and theologically conservative clergymen in the CofE. Of course, it ought to be recognised that this will be influenced by the comparatively few clergy of Global Majority Heritage (e.g., Stone 2022). There is clearly more research to be done for the diverse and marginal voices in the CofE to be heard and understood.

## **Findings: Female Clergy**

### ***Rejection of, and Ambivalence Towards, Feminisms***

Whilst many of the women interviewed in Jagger's research are deeply angry about the Church's unequal gendered arrangements, some are reticent about recounting stories that bring

the Church into disrepute. Many also express ambivalence towards feminism; even those who felt more positive were unable to unequivocally align with the label 'feminist.' Additionally, there is little evidence of collective activism or peer discussion about feminist topics in this research. Some clergywomen see feminism as irrelevant. Bella<sup>5</sup>, for example, an evangelical in her twenties, is not engaged with feminist theology, nor is she concerned by masculine language and symbols. Fiona, describing herself belonging to the middle-of-the-road tradition, is the most emphatic in her dismissal of feminism, which she sees as 'not helping because we're all priests now,' and as the preserve of women clergy who were once part of the campaign for women's ordination and clergy who are lesbians. Whilst Fiona is 'grateful' for the success of the campaign, she believes that feminism does not have a place in the priesthood.

One major factor that leads to the outright avoidance of feminism as a label is the negative stereotype of feminists as man-hating radicals (Zucker 2003). Denise, who calls herself a liberal evangelical curate (meaning she does not align herself to the conservative evangelical wing in matters such as sexuality, for example), is extremely cautious about calling herself feminist because she sees it as having a history of being an anti-male movement:

I used to call myself a feminist because that was where I fit. But now I would only say I was a feminist in that I'm for women. I think 'feminism' is such a bad word  
[...] I possibly wouldn't call myself a feminist, I'm hoping it's now as it should be, everybody supporting men and women, men as well. Because I think men are sometimes put down.

The fear of being stereotyped as anti-male and aggressive also appears in Una's account. Describing her tradition as middle-of-the-road, she has begun to think about the viability of feminine symbols in Christianity, but is cautious because of how feminist discourse is interpreted:

I think these things have to be challenged sensitively because I don't want to be  
[...] the stereotypical woman priest with the boomer boots [...] Because that's another aspect of what some priests have to put up with, the assumption that we are all raving

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<sup>5</sup> All names for participants are pseudonyms throughout.

lesbian feminists. Not that there's anything wrong with being a lesbian feminist. But I think it's that gentleness of, let's just think about this.

Una's story illustrates how some women priests seek to avoid entanglement with negative and caricatured perceptions of feminism that circulate in the Church. Whilst Una and Denise describe barriers that stop women aligning to feminism, Denise in particular leaves herself open to the possibility that feminism can accrue other meanings. However, more fundamentally, she wishes to deconstruct the concept of gender itself, but does not necessarily recognise this as a feminist aim:

From an early age I thought 'Well, why can't women do that? Why do women have to be like this? Why do you have to put brackets round it?' And that's why I struggle with gender, the theology of gender [...] Why are we saying that, actually, even to the extent that women have got to wear skirts?

In a similar vein, Valerie, an Anglo-Catholic curate (i.e., assistant minister), found it difficult to engage with feminist theology at college because it seems to reproduce the gender binary:

What I felt about feminist theology though was that [...] rather than finding the middle ground that said shall we just wipe gender out the way and see everyone as individuals, actually it pushed more towards the feminine [...] And so when we're trying to undo all those years of masculine and patriarchal influence it almost felt [...] it was saying too much the other way.

For both Valerie and Denise, feminism is read in narrow terms. This creates a difficulty in engaging with feminist theological work because it appears to reify a gendered binary rather than equipping Christianity with tools to deconstruct it.

Beatrice is, likewise, cautious to identify with feminism and avoids underpinning her preaching and teaching role with feminist commentary:

[Feminist theology is] marginal for me now. When I was at college [...] I dipped into it now and then [...] I don't approach each [biblical] text thinking, right well how can

I get a feminist point across here? [...] sometimes I will be very up front in challenging the text, other times I might just allude to it in passing [...] it's not my mission to have people think about it all the time [...] it's not front and centre in my mind.

Beatrice is not rejecting feminist theology outright but considers it a marginal perspective. Like several other participants, her exposure to feminist theology at theological college was minimal. Indeed, the overall impression from the interviews is that feminist theology is generally perceived as a narrow specialism not always for mainstream teaching for congregations, even for those participants who are more inclined to engage with feminist theology.

Several women believe there is a fear of feminist ideas in the Church. Una explains the caution women clergy feel: 'if someone said are you are feminist theologian or a radical feminist I would always go, no not really.' Whilst she is not engaged with 'cuckoo' ideas about the female Christ and feminine Holy Spirit, she does have an interest in exploring women's experiences and female biblical stories. However, such topics 'are not being discussed through our sermons, through our Bible studies, through our home groups because you're frightened, I think, of it becoming a feminist debate'; Una did report that at one Bible study she 'did manage to sneak in a bit of feminist theology.'

### ***Women Clergy and Engagement with Feminisms***

Only eight participants indicated they were explicitly engaged with feminisms, albeit with nuances in these positions. Natalie, a university chaplain, presents the most integrated position. When she became a Christian, she had feminist clergy role models, and she connects her faith-based feminism to secular feminist movements, which was rare in the interviews. Those who engage with feminism share a view with clergywomen like Denise quoted above, that feminism is perceived as threatening to men. For example, Polly, an evangelical, calls herself a feminist, but prefers to keep that position low-key, since she wants to avoid positions that are destabilising and overly challenging for her male colleagues.

The tendency to temper feminist positions is also illustrated by Alice, an Anglo-Catholic priest, who is often in contact with male colleagues who doubt her ordained status. She is angry about

how her vocation is undermined because of gendered beliefs in the Church and strongly opposes their accommodation. Despite this, she does not regard herself as radically feminist: 'I've got colleagues who would call themselves radical feminists [...] I've got other colleagues who are Forward in Faith and don't believe that I'm a priest and I don't feel like I can comfortably sit in either of those places.' This suggests there are more openly feminist women in the priesthood, but some women clergy express a desire to occupy the middle ground between two opposing beliefs which may be a more 'comfortable' positioning.

Rachel, also an Anglo-Catholic priest, describes herself in strongly feminist terms, but sees this label as a barrier to being heard when she raises issues about gender. Her answer is to encourage male allies to partake in feminist labour: 'They know I'm an ardent feminist anyway, so in some sense we need the men to do the gentle nurturing language, because they'll just think 'it's Rachel,' won't they? I'm aware of that.' Rachel often intervenes and speaks up when she sees sexism and misogyny, but the context of the priesthood tempers her activism: 'when one is functioning in the priestly role, particularly in leading worship, we've got to be very careful.' Again, what is being expressed is the notion that feminism is a powerful, but potentially dangerous, tool that is not entirely compatible with the priestly vocation.

Several insights can be drawn from these stories. Participants' understanding of definitions of feminisms is sometimes limited and often the marginalising of feminist theology throughout education and training does not provide a solid basis for women clergy. The formation process, through which all clergy go as part of their ministerial training, is a way of maintaining a cultural status quo, so clergy seeking to develop feminist approaches to their understanding of Christianity, their ministry, and their politics, are required to deviate from the usual acculturation parameters and become comfortable with marginality, or being seen as dissenting and deviating from what are considered mainstream theological stances. In a context where women are already differentiated in the priesthood, this means the project of belonging is unlikely to be supported by publicly aligning to feminism. There are also several drag factors on women's feminist activism and discourse, such as prioritising the needs of congregations who are perceived as infertile ground for feminist teaching, the fear of being thought of as anti-men, and being associated with negative stereotypes of feminism and feminists.

### **Findings: Male Clergy**

### ***Reform—Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Feminism: Positives of Feminism and Negatives of Feminism***

Fry asked participants who were members of Reform about their understanding of feminism. They expressed negative attitudes towards certain aspects of feminism as they were perceived. For example, Stephen said, ‘I think there are branches within [feminism—] one of seeking to affirm women and be constructive and creative, and one that becomes over militant and becomes denigrating of men [...], over-asserting women over men.’ Joshua stated, ‘Radical feminism that moves beyond [...] trying to raise up the rights of women [...] to promoting a [...] feminine alternative as being stronger than the prevailing masculine reality [...] is something I take real issue with.’ These types of responses were given in seven of the fourteen conservative evangelical narratives. The remaining seven contained similar sentiments, though less explicit, using language such as ‘angry’ or ‘militant’ to describe feminism.

Conservative evangelicals then, had mixed feelings towards feminism. Responses mirror the postfeminist endorsement of some aspects of feminism whilst critiquing other perceived aspects with some preference for traditional gender roles. This pattern of interpreting feminism is noticed by Aune (2006) amongst British evangelicals in non-denominational contexts, something that has been discussed in relation to the CofE by Fry (2021b). Moreover, Aune (2006) has noted how this is not atypical of religious spheres but reflects wider societal postfeminist discourse.

It is also noteworthy that—as will be seen with the other groups discussed below—Reform participants were unable to articulate feminism in depth or with the nuance and complexity found within the feminist movement, indicative of a misunderstanding of feminism also in wider societal discourse (e.g., Faludi 1991). Consequently, participants critique a caricature and their depictions of feminism lack knowledge and detail about who articulates any given strand of feminism or the differences between feminist positions (see also Fry 2023). It is fair to say that a degree of nuance is implicit in their perception that two feminist discourses exist, but this does little to add texture to their sweeping statements. All in all, this group of participants evince attitudes to feminism commonly found in wider society.

### ***Charismatic Evangelicals—Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Feminism: Positives of Feminism and Negatives of Feminism***



Turning to the charismatic evangelicals, when asked about his response to the feminist movement during the interview, Matt said:

Most of [feminism] I'm really happy with. When it gets shrill and demonising men, I get stropky about it and disagree [...] I don't agree with that, and I feel there's an imbalance in [that] view, which actually is very similar to the way that some men— in a chauvinistic way— talk about women.

Whilst this group recognised the necessity of feminism for tackling the historical effects of patriarchy, ten participants believed that feminism could overreach itself. This is fewer than in the Reform narratives (where this idea was universal). This difference is likely shaped by the history of British charismatic evangelicalism, which has tended to afford women opportunities in leadership roles, given that it was initially found beyond the constraints of institutional church structures (Guest, Olson and Wolffe 2012). In other words, this tradition is rooted in a culture that has tended to be less resistant to some of the challenges to traditional patterns of gender emerging during the twentieth century (e.g., Brown 2001). It is therefore unsurprising that there is less critique of feminist challenge to gender traditionalism in this group. In fact, as has been noted elsewhere (Fry 2019b; 2023), charismatic evangelicals within the CofE have inherited a comparatively liberal expression of evangelicalism that is more willing to engage with change in wider society, shaping a softer approach to gender developments emerging from second-wave feminism.

This, however, does not amount to a full embrace of feminist values given the ambivalence expressed; evangelicalism evidences a simultaneous engagement with and resistance towards changing attitudes in wider society (Fry 2021b; Guest 2007; Smith et al. 1998). Additionally, as with the Reform cohort, there is a conception of feminism that does not engage with the nuances and sophistication of feminist beliefs and values; it is presented by participants in two-dimensional terms.

### ***Anglo-Catholics—Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Feminism: Positives of Feminism and Negatives of Feminism***

When asked about his thoughts on feminism, Peter, from the Anglo-Catholic tradition, responded:

I'm not really sure what feminism is all about [...] because it strikes me that [women are] desperately trying to do away with what it is to be feminine. They're trying to equate themselves [with men] [...] And that is really an outpouring of the spirit of the present age, which will evaporate.

Statements such as this are juxtaposed with sharper statements such as 'Fuck feminism. Fuck everybody,' articulated by Adrian, a dejected gay priest who was particularly frustrated at the sexuality inequality found within the CofE at a time when the equal rights of women, in his perception, were obviously manifest. Edward, giving a more reserved response to the question about feminism, stated that '[Feminism is] a good thing in so much as it's about where women have been downtrodden in society or denied access to vocation and jobs and where they're particularly held down in poverty and so on.' Nevertheless, he also expressed dissatisfaction that people do not understand that women have apparently often wielded power 'in matriarchies and so on.'

This group of clergymen had the widest spectrum of ambivalence towards feminism, ranging from a mixture of confusion and outright rejection to an appreciation of its ability to challenge patriarchy whilst (in participants' view) being blind to expressions of female power. What was ubiquitous across this group, though, was the caricaturing of feminism that was being critiqued. As with the Reform and charismatic evangelical narratives, there was a criticism of a 'straw woman'. Indeed, despite perceiving a dual feminist discourse, participants across all three groups tended to assume that feminists were women (Fry 2023).

## **Discussion**

Bringing together two sets of narratives from opposing gendered positions on doctrine and theology offers a rare opportunity to explore the dynamic between the two. Participants from both cohorts often articulated something of the liberative potential of feminism, but more emphasis was placed on critiques and potential threats of feminism than affirming it as a movement that labours for gender equality and justice. In both cohorts the concept of 'radical feminism' is used as a way of describing a particular affect of feminist views, rather than distinguishing between political positions within feminism (see Mackay 2021). 'Radical' in the contexts of these conversations gives a sense of the limits to what are perceived as acceptable or palatable feminist beliefs and practices for priests to publicly espouse. Such shorthand

indicates a distaste for forceful expression of strong views and a fear for some that feminism can go too far. The findings also underscore the different ways men and women clergy arrive at ambivalent attitudes towards feminism. Women clergy are required to navigate both vocational and gendered identities in the service of others in an institution that creates barriers for women (see Page 2013) and who carry the burden of negative stereotyping. They filter their approach to feminisms through a complex context. Women priests are held in structural liminality, whereby their ordinations are only partially recognised, keeping them institutionally (though not necessarily on a personal level) from fully stepping into the status of the priest (see Turner 2008). Women priests bear the weight of schismatic guilt (Jagger 2019); they are blamed for the potential splitting of the Church (see Furlong 1998) which blunts the tool of feminist critique. There is a fear expressed by both sets of clergy that feminism has the potential to denigrate men, a discourse which has underpinned waves of backlash against feminism in wider society (see Faludi 1991).

Ambivalence towards feminism, whilst appearing similar on the surface, has very different internal working for the two groups. Both groups articulate fear of the impact of the same negative caricatures; women fear the reputational impact of association, whilst men believe their position is under threat from ‘man-hating’ feminist activism, an idea found in wider society and which can be explained via the assimilation of postfeminist attitudes found within conservative Protestantism in the UK (see Aune 2006; Fry 2021a; 2023) and neoliberal feminism as discussed by Rottenberg (2014). This picture renders the woman, whether she is overtly feminist or not, as the (potential) perpetrator of a form of symbolic violence, obfuscating the material and cultural reality of the inequalities faced by women in the priesthood. This might be seen as a subversion of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence (see Burawoy 2019), where oppression is enacted through cordial relationships and is therefore misrecognised. Neoliberal and ambivalent forms of feminism hollow out the systemic politics, diverting attention towards the private sphere as a form of denial of the structural oppression. A fantasy form of feminism is circulating in the priesthood, derived from fears of some male clergy that their position will be destabilised and from fears of women clergy that they are blamed for the destabilising. In other words, the male is recast as victim within a structure that negates *women’s* priesthood.

So, seeing Jagger's and Fry's research juxtaposed indicates that male fear of the 'radical' feminist significantly impacts the willingness of women clergy to align themselves openly to the feminist label, tempering women's voices and eroding the ability to challenge the Church's structural inequality. Women clergy are victimised twice; through structural oppression and through a process of disarmament. Whilst male clergy may use attitudes towards feminism to generate belonging capital, the converse is true for women clergy; to take on the feminist label is to risk being negatively received by others. This fear of the negative stereotyping of feminism has been shown to lead women to compromise their challenge of gender inequality (Rios, Case et al. 2021; Roy, Weibust et al. 2007), and in the research discussed here, many women explicitly described how they took care not to teach or minister through a feminist lens.

The two data sets highlight the dynamics at play within the different traditions of the Church and this brings us to the argument that the narratives shared by participants should be seen as systemic utterances (i.e., they are shaped by systemic factors), rather than simply individualised life journeys (thus stretching the method of narrative analysis into the realms of the structural). A major factor that gives us a structural perspective is the allegiances to groupings within the Church. More specifically, Fry (2019b; 2021b; 2023) has shown that British evangelical Anglican and traditional Anglo-Catholic clergymen exhibit engaged orthodoxy. This is Smith et al.'s (1998) framework that explains how US evangelicals draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and wider society, simultaneously engaging with and resisting wider societal developments, leading to a rearticulation (rather than abandonment) of traditional Protestant beliefs (see also Guest 2007). In this paradigm, conservative Protestants selectively incorporate ideas about gender found within wider culture to re-affirm, even if also somewhat soften, articulations of traditionalist gender values, including critiques of feminism (see Fry 2019b; 2021b; 2023). This is reflected in the partial appreciation of feminism and partial rejection of it.

In Jagger's work (2019; 2021; 2023a), the relationship to tradition directly impacts the experiences of gendered barriers in the priesthood. Moreover, assimilating to a tradition (even if it means being 'one of the boys') is an important part of belonging for women in the priesthood. There are indications that for Anglo-Catholic women, tradition is prioritised over feminist theology, though several participants pointed to the potential feminist currency of European and British medieval women mystics. Evangelicals have also inherited a historical

tradition that comes to shape how they think about social phenomena in the present (see Vasey-Saunders 2015). However, unlike the narratives offered by male clergy, attitudes to feminism do not correlate with these traditions for women priests; positive and negative attitudes to feminism appear across the Anglican spectrum. Engaged orthodoxy, therefore, is unlikely to be the process shaping the ambivalence towards feminism for women.

The CofE as a whole does not draw symbolic boundaries between itself and wider society; but this happens amongst specific wings of the CofE when there is a threat to that faction's identity, usually from significant social change, as has been observed amongst male conservative evangelicals and traditional Anglo-Catholics (see Fry 2019b; 2023). Fry (2019b; 2023) has shown wider British culture has a dominant influence, shaping the gender values within the CofE since the latter half of the twentieth century as Church affiliation has declined. This means that apparently similar attitudes towards feminism are the outworking of distinct, if overlapping, social processes. For clergymen from more conservative traditions, it is shaped by the process of engaged orthodoxy, where wider societal gender norms are simultaneously embraced and resisted selectively. In the case of clergywomen, the correlations between tradition and attitudes to feminism are weak, but Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical contexts do generate qualitatively different experiences of gender inequalities and oppressions.

Moreover, the CofE seeks to serve the entirety of England, meaning that female clergy minister to people who culturally may have misgivings about the feminist label. Hence, those clergywomen who desire equality often find themselves needing to seek it outside of an explicitly feminist framework. This arms-length engagement with elements of feminism is in the context of women navigating their identity as women and often as mothers, frequently with insubstantial levels of support (see Greene and Robbins 2015; Page 2011). Feminism then, rather being than a political boon, is one more discourse to navigate that potentially threatens belonging. As outlined in the introduction, the basis on which women are accepted into the priesthood is fundamentally unequal, with women differentiated on material, cultural and symbolic levels in ways that are justified and sanctioned by the Church. Navigating this environment requires significant amounts of emotional labour (Jagger 2019). Tensions created by disagreements within one's social group (as members of a particular tradition within the CofE, or as members of a specific congregation etc) fosters emotions of apprehension and dejection (Sani 2005). This is in addition to the emotional labour required of those in pastoral

ministry (Bagilhole 2006) and in addition to the emotional labour of resisting ecclesial patriarchy (Greene and Robbins 2015).

## **Conclusion**

An aim of this research is to break down the barriers between secular and spiritual feminisms. We highlight patchy engagement amongst women clergy; feminism does not appear to offer what women clergy need within an androcentric religious environment and is, regardless of the feminist support for the campaign for women's ordination, largely seen as irrelevant to the lives of women priests. We raise the question of why this is so and suggest that more research is required to understand how feminist theory and praxis might radically support ordained women. We offer some clues; there is a lack of serious engagement with feminist literature during theological training, but we are also led to ask whether feminist theory and praxis can be better tailored to meet the requirements of women (and nonbinary and trans persons) in the priesthood as they navigate a complex and at times hostile institutional environment.

Moreover, we have argued that an imagined misandry-as-feminism is leveraged to protect the position of male clergy opposed to women's ordination, a process supported by the framing of feminist knowledge as specialist and marginal. The ability to dismantle the 'straw women' arguments and establish a more honest discussion about the material, cultural and spiritual oppressions faced by women in the priesthood relies on a deeper understanding of feminism as an illuminating lens as well as a set of political tools. Given that gender inequality is bolstered by the culture and the formal processes of the CofE, it is important that the narratives around feminism are addressed. Indeed, the findings are supportive of Fry's (2021b) theory of irresolute equality reform. Women clergy's ambivalence towards feminism is influenced by the fact that the institution in which they express their vocation is self-limiting in its attempts to facilitate women's ministry in the Church's hierarchy because of a project of appeasement of those who object to such developments. Consequently, women clergy must contend with potential straightjackets on their calling, the result of the structures and culture stemming from irresolute equality reform. Brought together, Jagger's and Fry's research suggests that discourses around feminism are employed to ameliorate the challenge to those who do not accept women as priests. In other words, feminism as a critical lens is actively dislocated from the priesthood by the distorting claims of misandry.

Fry (2021a) has also argued that the weakening of symbolic boundaries requires intensified interaction between traditions whose gender values contribute to inequality. He has also specified the need for changes in the training and selection of clergy to tackle gender inequality in the CofE (Fry 2021b; 2023). However, the evidence from women priests above affords additional insights. The need for greater appreciation and accessibility of feminist theology is clear and that theological training should break away from reproducing a theological canon (not unlike efforts to decolonise knowledge in other academic contexts). Using Jagger's and Fry's work as a springboard, the argument presented here is that feminist theology and discourse should be drawn into the mainstream learning and teaching culture of the Church, including the formal education undertaken by those in training and the teaching and pastoral ministry delivered to congregations and communities.

There are caveats to the above discussion. The perceived need amongst women priests to keep feminist discourse low key makes room for the potential of 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990), that is, women clergy may rebel and subvert in invisible ways not requiring overt alignment to political forms of feminism, a theme which will be pursued in further work by Jagger. However, the quiet approach to feminism is not a ubiquitous one; recent research by Jagger and Fry with Tyndall (2023) explores class in the priesthood. Initial findings suggest that White working-class women clergy may be more inclined to be overtly politically feminist. Further work is required to understand the feminist perspectives of Global Majority Heritage clergy, but there are tantalising clues as to how intersections come to shape attitudes to feminism and willingness to allow the label of feminist to shape external perceptions.

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