

## **WOMEN BISHOPS AND VALID SACRAMENTS**

By Jonathan Clatworthy: August 2010



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### **Abstract:**

The Church of England's current proposal to permit women bishops raises once again the question of theological objections. When the ordination of women to the priesthood was discussed in the 1970s and 1980s, theological claims were made on both sides. This time there has been more emphasis on seeking a system which satisfies as many as possible; it is as though nobody any longer expects resolution of the theological disagreements. Opponents of women priests continue to believe their objections have not been met; supporters still find it difficult to understand them.

This article focuses on a central concern of opponents, the conditions for the validity of the sacraments, expressed for example in Simon Killwick's article in the *Church Times* in July 2010<sup>2</sup>. My aim is to undermine this concern by describing the historical origins and theological weaknesses...

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.clatworthy.org/>

<sup>2</sup> *Church Times* 30 July 2010, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=98261>.

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This article focuses on a central concern of opponents, the conditions for the validity of the sacraments, expressed for example in Simon Killwick's article in the *Church Times* in July 2010<sup>3</sup>. My aim is to undermine this concern by describing the historical origins and theological weaknesses of the idea.

Citing the Thirty-Nine Articles and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, Killwick argues that the Church of England has 'a Catholic doctrine of the sacraments' and that 'We have therefore the assurance that we receive the grace of God in the sacraments, provided that the right conditions are met.'

That phrase 'provided that the right conditions are met' neatly encapsulates the issue as seen by Catholic Anglicans who oppose women priests and bishops. Given that the sacrament achieves something, how do we perform it in such a way that that something does in fact get achieved?

To the contemporary mind the very idea of conditions to ensure the validity of the sacraments, or 'sacramental assurance', seems quite inappropriate. Other Anglicans, let alone non-Christians, find it either absurd or incomprehensible. Perhaps this explains why many Anglicans

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#\\_ftn1](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#_ftn1)

respond to the current debate not by discussing the theological reasoning of the objectors but by treating them as an unchanging minority who have to be accommodated somehow.

We are in this situation because most people's presuppositions about the nature of reality have no place for the concept of conditions for sacramental validity. It had its home within an earlier worldview, characteristic of the nineteenth century religious revivals. My argument will be that we are right to reject that worldview, and conditions for sacramental validity with it.

## **Medieval magic and sacrament**

The nineteenth century revivals reclaimed medieval concepts of the sacraments, concepts which many today, supporters and opponents alike, often describe as magic.

The word 'magic' derives from ancient Persian priests called *magoi*. The magoi believed they could influence the natural world through their knowledge of how it works. A recent summary of the difference between magic and prayer is that whereas prayer requires the assent of a god with an independent will who may choose to deny the request, magic can be effective in one of three ways: either by directly manipulating the regularities of nature, or by the strength of the magician's will, or because the magician believes he or she can command the spiritual beings being addressed<sup>4</sup>. To us today, these seem radically different activities. The first of them is commonplace: all modern technology is based on understanding the regularities of nature and manipulating them for our purposes, and we do not consider it magic. However, nearly all ancients and medievals (the Hebrew scriptures were an exception) believed that they were surrounded not only by observable physical things but also by a countless array of invisible beings who could affect the physical environment. From their point of view, techniques for controlling demons were conceptually similar to techniques for

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#\\_ftn2](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#_ftn2)

controlling physical processes; and they were not entirely mistaken, as some of their demons were what we now call germs and viruses.

The understanding of reality in medieval western Europe was much the same. Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* describes it. A typical village would have a 'wise woman' who was the local expert on a range of skills which have many parallels in other premodern societies. People would seek their help for healing, love potions, information about distant loved ones and recovering lost or stolen property. Their methods included recipes, herbal remedies, incantations and magical rituals.

Modern westerners, looking back on these practices, often think of them as magic. However this can be misleading. In some ways it would be better to think of them as their equivalent of our science and technology. Their practices presupposed, just as modern science and technology does, that the natural environment contains processes which we can harness to solve our problems. Their healing remedies, whatever we now think of their likely success rates, were their equivalent of our medicines. We today may wonder at their gullibility, but those of us who are not medically trained are in the same position: we are given instructions for which we do not know the reason, so we swallow this tablet every morning and chew that one at night, simply because we trust the doctor. We should not therefore laugh too long at medievals who obeyed instructions to pick a particular herb on a saint's day or recite a particular poem while picking it. It was the knowledge available at the time, in a culture which conceived of the world in their own way. The chief effective difference between these medieval practices and modern technology is that they had no good system for testing which procedures worked.

The sacraments fitted seamlessly into this worldview. Most medievals took it for granted that spiritual forces abounded around them and regularly affected the physical world. There was nothing unusual about the idea that bread and wine,

consecrated by a Catholic priest, would be turned into the body and blood of Christ, or that a person who ate the consecrated bread would receive spiritual power. The problem facing church leaders was the opposite one: not to convince people that the sacraments worked, but to distinguish between Christian sacraments and pagan equivalents. The medieval church never established a satisfactory distinction. If an ordained priest recited the Prayer of Consecration over some bread and thereby turned it into the body of Christ, wise women could argue that their practices did much the same kinds of things.

Within this worldview a rich array of benefits could easily be attributed to the sacraments: physical health, warding off demonic influence, preparing for the afterlife. There were conditions: Catholic priests would warn that sacraments administered by heretics would not have the same effects. If we ask how the conditions of validity affected the outcome, two types of explanation were available, both of which are familiar to us from other contexts. We might describe one as the 'insurance policy' explanation. Insurance policies list conditions; if one is broken the contract is invalidated and the insurer is under no obligation to pay. In the same way ancient Roman emperors before Constantine offered sacrifices to the gods, expecting the gods to protect the city in return; but they took great care to get the words and actions just right, in case the gods should consider themselves exonerated. After all, there had been times when Rome had not been protected, and failure to offer proper sacrifices was, to them, a credible explanation.

The other type of explanation is naturalistic. It applies in a great many contexts. The medicines we take will only work if the right ingredients have been added in the right proportions. The computer program will only work if all the bugs have been corrected. The vegetables will only grow if they have good soil, sunshine and rain. These conditions of success are not negotiations with free agents, but manipulations of nature's regularities.

In the medieval worldview both types of explanation were common. There were plenty of angels and demons to negotiate with, but there were also natural regularities to exploit. Much of the time there was no need to distinguish which was which. In both cases, failure to achieve the desired result could be explained as failure to perform the actions correctly. To explain how the sacraments worked, and what effects we should expect from them, was not the problem it was later to become.

## **Modern science**

The rise of modern science was not possible until this worldview changed. Science depends on two presuppositions: that the world operates according to regularities, and that these regularities can be observed by the human mind. Philosophically, physical effects of unpredictable invisible agents had to be decreed impossible. This was best expressed by Descartes' account of reality as two distinct spheres, one physical and observable and the other spiritual and unobservable. Methodologically, Bacon established the idea of extensive accumulation of observed data, from which the laws of nature could be deduced.

This early Enlightenment view split apart magic, science and sacrament. The sacraments became a legitimate part of the spiritual realm outside the remit of science. Science and technology were based on observed physical data. The other medieval practices, invoking the idea that invisible agents could influence physical things, were dismissed as magic, the occult or superstition. Thus the word 'magic' was in effect narrowed. From then on it excluded what we now count as science and technology.

A century later the radical Enlightenment, impressed by the advances of science, treated its methods as the *only* means to knowledge. On this basis they challenged the very existence of the spiritual realm. From the end of the eighteenth century to the 1960s many educated Europeans believed that science would prove, or had already proved, that there is no God.

Everything in reality, including us and our minds, would be shown to be nothing but atoms pushing each other in accordance with eternal, impersonal and automatic laws of nature. All value, purpose, freedom and morality would be shown to be nothing but the fantasies of the human mind. If the workings of the sacraments could not be explained scientifically, they did not work at all.

## **The nineteenth century revivals of sacramentalism**

This was the context of the nineteenth century religious revivals. The main threat to Christianity was the atheism of the educated classes. Churches were therefore in a defensive mood, anxious to establish the existence of spiritual phenomena outside the scope of science. More people reported miracles, ghosts and visions of the saints and the Virgin Mary. Modern spiritualism began, with its clairvoyance and clairaudience. As meaning, value and purpose were increasingly expelled from the physical world, church leaders were determined to give them a new home in a distinct spiritual realm with a rich array of ideas and experiences. The revival of sacramentalism was part of this movement. There was a renewed conviction that the priest really does have powers unavailable to lay people, that the Prayer of Consecration, uttered by a priest, really can turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and that the consecrated sacrament really can affect the spiritual condition of the Christian communicant.

This sacramentalism is in a sense a revival of medieval magic. There is the same affirmation that if the right person performs the right act, the expected result will happen. In another sense it is not. For the medievals, the bread and wine were consecrated in a world conceived as full of spiritual forces performing unobserved acts, and the priest's actions were part of that picture. For nineteenth century sacramentalists, on the other hand, the very idea of changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ was a *defiance* of contemporary views of reality, a determination to insist on an alternative

world beyond the reach of science. To this extent they were returning not to the holistic, enchanted world of the Middle Ages but to early Enlightenment dualism, according to which radically different processes took place in a radically different spiritual realm. It was within that world - of spiritual phenomena which science cannot explain - that nineteenth century catholics sought to establish a complete and coherent system for the workings of the sacraments, to set against the materialist paradigm of modern society.

This fitted the modern, narrower understanding of magic better than its medieval ancestor had done. Magic tends to be more formulaic than prayer because, whether it seeks divine intervention or manipulation of occult natural processes, the emphasis is on precise actions rather than personal relationship with a divinity. Furthermore the conditions of validity took on a new role. In an ordinary medieval village there was never a hard and fast theoretical distinction between what the priest meant when he said that by eating the consecrated bread you were strengthened against the Devil, and what the wise woman meant when she said that by eating blackcurrants you were strengthened against catching a cold. Perhaps the cold was a demon, perhaps not, but blackcurrants seemed to work. Today the judgement would be made on the basis of incomparably greater quantities of evidence, but even then it was possible to believe that evidence was available. Sacraments, by contrast, have gone in the other direction. Because the whole point of the nineteenth century revival was to establish the reality of the spiritual realm on its own terms, without subordinating it to scientific examination, they avoided resorting to measurable physical evidence.

The belief that the sacrament, to be valid, must be consecrated by a validly ordained priest therefore became purely a matter of dogma, disconnected from any practical experience. The disconnection was accentuated by the fact that it applied all the way along the line: that there are sacraments at all, that they have any effect at all, that they

have conditions, that there is any difference between valid and invalid sacraments - all was dogma, in principle disconnected from observable evidence. The conditions of validity ceased to be a way of explaining failures, and became instead the *only* way of knowing that a sacramental act had been successfully performed. It was at this stage, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that the most precise instructions for administering sacraments were laid down: the priest must hold his hands just so, and recite exactly the words in the book.

Thus the nineteenth century theories produced a network of mutually supporting but evidence-free claims about who can be a priest, what constitutes a valid mass, which ingredients are essential to consecratable bread and wine, who can receive it and what effect it can have. What made these ideas popular a hundred years ago was precisely what makes them unconvincing today: that they offered a separate world, a radical alternative to the world being described by scientists.

## **The limits of science**

The conviction that science would produce complete and certain knowledge unravelled during the twentieth century. The universe has proved far more complex. The human mind cannot know all about it, or indeed know anything about it with absolute certainty. It has many physical features which are unobservable, and established laws of nature are only ever approximations to the exact truth. There will always be processes which science has not yet observed, and others which it has observed but not explained. Science cannot disprove the existence of God. There is no longer any need to separate the physical from the spiritual. Both belong in the same world, and perhaps can after all influence each other. This is the worldview which characterises the more educated segments of western society today.

From this more modest scientific perspective, is it once again possible that consecrated bread and wine can have an observable beneficial effect on the communicant? Yes, but it

means something different. I have described two ways in which the idea of conditional validity can be explained. In one, the performance of a sacramental act is part of a contract with God: we do our bit, God does God's bit. God will withhold the benefits Holy Communion from a congregation whenever any one condition of validity fails. This idea made sense to ancient and medieval pagans because gods and humans were on a more even footing. Both wanted something from the other, and the contract only worked if both sides delivered. In the context of the omnipotent and benign Christian God, however, it makes no sense at all. God does not need our ritual actions. What we receive from God has been given to us, not sold. In all the traditional Christian theologies of God, there is no doctrine which would naturally lead us to expect that God offers us particular blessings through the sacraments but chooses to withhold them if the performer is a woman or the correct words are not said.

The other explanation of conditional validity is the naturalistic one. On this account we would have to believe that God has so created the world that validly performed sacraments automatically produce their benefits, just as sunshine produces warmth. Here the problem is that, being naturalistic, it is a proper subject for scientific examination. We observe the effects, conduct experiments to work out exactly when the effects are produced and when they are not, and when we have built up a large quantity of data we then develop hypotheses about the process and its conditions. Yet we have not begun this process. We do not have observed effects of valid sacraments which can be distinguished from observed effects of invalid sacraments.

Within today's worldview, neither of these theories is necessary. The nineteenth-century idea of a self-contained spiritual world with its own self-justifying processes seems pointless. We have no more reason to believe in it than to believe in unicorns. The idea of conditions for sacramental assurance disappears with it.

Sacraments persist, but conceived differently. Because we

now have permission to think of a holistic world where the spiritual, mental and physical once again affect each other, it comes easily to us to imagine the sacraments being effective in a variety of different ways. This is not the place to develop an account of sacraments which fits the current worldview, but a few illustrations will indicate what I mean. By coming together to remember Jesus and partake in his meal, we strengthen our mutual commitment to him. By performing meaningful liturgical acts we express our relationship with God and each other. By sharing a meal we partake in a universally recognised act of hospitality, a giving and receiving which strengthens our roles as receivers of God's gifts and givers to those in need.

To generalise from these examples, sacraments as understood within the current worldview are not magic: they are neither a contract with God nor occult technology. They are an ordinary part of the way the world works. They have effects, and we know what effects to expect. We can observe for ourselves the occasions on which the effects are achieved well, or not so well. We can therefore work out the conditions for successful sacraments in our local communities as we try different approaches. Such conditions abound: a room with a visual focus and a minimum of distractions, making sure everyone can see and hear clearly, suitable music at the right moments, giving the children an activity while the adults are listening to the sermon. To some, of course, to describe such banalities as conditions for valid sacraments is to miss the point; but these are the matters on which clergy expend effort when preparing services, and they do so because in their experience these are the things which make them work well. Whatever they may say about their beliefs, the way they prepare and conduct services in practice indicates that the overwhelming majority of clergy are taking for granted the current worldview.

The striking thing about these generalisations is that every one of them presents the current understanding of sacraments as similar to the medieval understanding, but quite different from the nineteenth century understanding. Why? Because

once again, after many centuries of religious stress, our host society has a worldview in which Christianity can sit comfortably. No longer do we need to defy the latest scientific ideas. We do not even need to demand special dispensation for religious belief. The sacraments change us, but in ordinary ways which make sense to ordinary people.

From this perspective there is no place for a sharp dividing line between valid and invalid sacraments. Instead there are shades of grey: they work better in some circumstances than others and some people are better than others at performing them. There are conditions, but they are conditions of best practice rather than essential to having a sacrament at all, and they can be worked out as we go along. Among such conditions, one we will not find - except among those determined to put it there - is that the priest and bishop must be male.

## **Postmodern incommensurability**

Defenders of nineteenth century dogmatic versions of Christianity often appeal to postmodernism, especially its theory of incommensurability. The idea is that there is no single universal system of rationality. Instead, different traditions have different systems of rationality and reach different conclusions about the nature of reality. There is no neutral vantage point from which to measure one against another and judge which is the better. Therefore we each opt for our own system of rationality and accept that our picture of reality is incommensurable with alternatives.

This theory has been used by Radical Orthodox and Barthian theologians to reject the dominant worldview of their host society and insist instead on their own, while refusing to defend their choices rationally. Recently religious leaders have also appealed to the idea: UK church leaders, for example, have sought and gained exemption from equal opportunities legislation, not by convincing the Government of flaws in the legislation, but by claiming that religious traditions have their own distinctive systems of belief.

To claim that Anglican Catholics have their own distinctive rationality, with its own account of sacramental validity, would be entirely in keeping with this theory. The logical implication, however, would be that their beliefs are incommensurable with the beliefs of other Anglicans. In that case the only realistic solution would be to have their own church with its own rules, and abandon the attempt to explain their position to the rest of us. So far most opponents of women's ministry have not gone this far, as they seek to remain within the church.

## **Conclusion**

When opponents of women's ministry claim that it does not, or may not, meet the conditions of valid sacraments, they presuppose an understanding of what sacraments are, and how they work, which was developed in the nineteenth century and which most people no longer share. To say that an otherwise valid sacrament is invalidated by the female gender of the performer is to make a hard and fast distinction between valid and invalid sacraments, and postulate a benefit which only occurs when all the conditions of validity are met. This objection to women as priests and bishops has its place within a larger set of conditions: consecration of Holy Communion will also be invalidated if red wine is not used, or if a valid Prayer of Consecration is not said, and ordination will also be invalidated if the bishop is not in direct line of apostolic succession.

As the Church of England discusses, in its various synods and committees, whether and how to consecrate women bishops, most of us do not share that view of sacramental validity. The temptation is to leave it alone, as it is, and seek organisational ways to allow for it instead of engaging with it theologically.

I do not think we should leave it alone theologically. There are major theological issues, and the two sides cannot both be right. We need to challenge them to justify their concept of conditions for sacramental validity. If they do so successfully, we will become better informed; at the very least we shall be

better placed to understand what the conditions are, and why. If, on the other hand, they cannot justify it, then General Synod would be well advised to treat it as a relic of a bygone age.

To ask them to justify it is to ask four questions.

Question 1. How did you find out what the conditions for sacramental validity are? Killwick's article cites the Thirty-Nine Articles and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer; but these were written long before the nineteenth century revivals, and show no interest in conditions for sacramental validity. They do lay down conditions for administering the sacraments, but for reasons of discipline and decency, not validity. The same is true of Canon Law.

Question 2. What are the conditions of validity? This should be an easier question. The priest must be a validly ordained male, the Prayer of Consecration must include an anamnesis and epiclesis, and so on. For those of us who do not share that nineteenth century sacramentalism, the main problem is that because we have not received a convincing answer to Question 1, the list of conditions seems to us entirely arbitrary; as far as we can see, Anglo-Catholics have over time promoted their normal practices to the rank of validity conditions without any theological justification.

Question 3. What are the effects of valid sacraments? What real difference is there between the effect of a valid sacrament and an invalid one? If I receive Communion from an invalid eucharist, and you from a valid one, what will happen to you which does not happen to me? When a woman priest pronounces an absolution, does God withhold forgiveness? If so, why does God so act? If not, what real difference is there between valid and invalid?

Question 4. How were the conditions of validity established? Are they imposed by God - in which case, what theology of God do we have which would explain why God is so picky? Alternatively, are they imposed by the created order of nature - in which case, what is the evidence for them? A third

possibility, which Killwick also affirms in his article, is that they are established by 'the universal church' of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in concert. I have discussed this theory elsewhere<sup>5</sup>; it is so difficult to reconcile with the very notion of sacramental validity that it deserves separate treatment.

Our minds are fuzzy about what sacraments are, what conditions are needed to make them work, what effects they have, and how we would know whether the effects have been achieved. A century ago these questions were coherently answered within a worldview which few today accept. Today we live in a society with a very different worldview. From the perspective of Christianity it is the best one western society has produced for many centuries. We do not know how long it will last, but why not make the most of it? We no longer need the strained, counter-cultural special pleading which we once needed to defend our faith. Life is full of sacramental processes. We can afford to spend less time defining them, more celebrating them.

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[http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#\\_ftn1](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-4.htm#_ftn1)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.modernchurch.org.uk/resources/clatworthy/2010-5.htm>