

## Navigating the Church of England by the Rev Prof June Boyce-Tillman MBE



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### ABSTRACT

This article will explore autoethnographically how a woman born in the 1940s found a way through the various hierarchies in Anglicanism. Using a combination of social dominance theory (drawing on Thatcher 2021) and Foucauldian social constructionism, it will interrogate the strategies she used to survive the patriarchal dominance that characterised most of the story. Using a crystallization methodology it will use story, poem, hymn and critical analysis to illustrate the story of the Anglican church in particular places from a feminist perspective. It will examine the place of apophatic theology, contemplative practice, musical composition, excursions into other traditions and both Christian and other faith traditions in her route into ordination. It will examine the strategies of various forms of hierarchy over the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the millennium, highlighting issues of gender, class, disability in the journey.

**KEYWORDS** hierarchy, values, gender, music, interfaith dialogue, protest

### ARTICLE

This article will explore the hierarchies of power dominating the church of England. Born into this particular denomination I use an autoethnographic frame to explore my route into the ordained priesthood that I hope can inform other autoethnographic subjugated knowers in other situations (Boyce-Tillman 2000a). It will use a crystallization strategy using poem, story and hymn to illuminate the systemic restrictions within the Church of England:

The scholar draws freely on his or her productions from literary, artistic, and scientific genres, often breaking the boundaries of each of those as well. In these productions, the scholar might have different “takes” on the same topic, what I think of as a postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation. . . In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate, we *crystallize*. . . I propose that the central image for “validity” for postmodern texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. . . Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the

topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (Richardson, 2000: 934, original emphasis)

### **Power and dominance**

Meaning in a society is constructed by having a property of sharedness especially by those who hold positions of authority:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault/Gordon 1980: 131)

There are ways of knowing that are not validated by the dominant culture of the time:

[A] historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz 1973:89)

The trick of the controllers is to make these meanings/values seem fixed and given, when, in fact, they are mere illusions of truth:

[Anthropologists have been] slower to deconstruct or read across the domains of their own cultures. Cultures... is what makes the boundaries of domains seem natural, what gives ideologies power, and what makes hegemonies appear seamless. At the same time, it is what enables us to make compelling claims for connections between supposedly distinct discourses. In other words, it is both what makes jokes funny and what makes possible our reading across domains in prohibited ways. Although cultural domains are culturally specific, they usually come with claims to universality, that are seemingly nature-given and/or God-given and are made real through institutional arrangements and the discourses of everyday life (Bowie 1998: 52-3).

These are the basis of social dominance theories which interrogate the way social hierarchies (Sidanius, Pratto & Devereux 1992: 379) operate like a caste system and the ways in which their dominance is perpetuated and experienced. These are maintained systemically, individually and behaviourally by the myths we live by (Midgley 2003). Sidanius, Devereux and Pratto distinguish between myths which are often in opposition:

- Reciprocal myths which suggest that all are equal
- Paternalistic myths which define others as incapable
- Sacred myths which are supported by religious claims (clearly relevant to the relationship between Church and scripture. (Sidanius & Pratto 1999: 31)

Sidanius et al (1992) suggest that the hierarchies can often be based on age, gender, arbitrary sets such as ethnicities, religion, disability and wealth. A hegemonic group has power and status and others have negative identities which leads to a feeling that has coloured a great deal of my life:

*Han* is not only an experience of women; it is a typical prevailing feeling of the Korean people, for the nation as a whole has endured many defeats and disasters ... *Han* is 'the suppressed, amassed and condensed experience of oppression caused by mischief or misfortune, so that it forms a kind of "lump" in one's spirit' (Kyung 1990: 30). (Kim 2002: 57)

Writers in my lifetime have unearthed the negative cultural impact of missionary and imperial activity on people and cultures. This is Matilda Joslyn Gage remarkable analysis in 1893 in *Woman, Church and State*:

The difference in civilization between Christian Europe and pagan Malabar at the time of its discovery was indeed great. While Europe, with its new art of printing, was struggling against the church for permission to use type – its institutions of learning few; its opportunities for education meager; its terrible inquisition crushing free thought and sending thousands each year to a most painful death; the uncleanness of its cities and the country such as to bring frequent visits of plague; its armies, its navies, with but one exception, imperfect; its women forbidden the right of inheritance, religious, political or household authority; the feminine principle entirely eliminated from divinity; a purely masculine God, the universal object of worship – all was directly opposite in Malabar. Cleanliness, peace, the arts, a just form of government, the recognition of the feminine – were found in Malabar...under the missionaries sent by England to introduce her own barbaric ideas of God and man, this beautiful matriarchal civilization soon retrograded and was lost. (Gage 1893/1998: 7)

At its most extreme, this is seen in the control of women's bodies. This has two effects - the first that birth is not valued so that fewer women are choosing to bear children; and the film *Children of Men* shows the terrifying end of this road where women are no longer fertile. Sophie Drinker sees maleness of God as impinging on every aspect of women's lives:

About 500 BC [sic] there fell on these hopeful civilizations of our earth a kind of creeping blight. It did not come all at once, but slowly in a change here and a change there that may have seemed at first a great improvement in the organization of life or a correction of local abuse ... But the men, in taking over, did it crudely. Their idea of making sure that their children were their own was to shut women up from the moment they could bear a child ... In China they achieved this in the end by so crippling the women that they could not move beyond their homes ... A new theory was persuasively expressed by Aristotle to the effect that *only* men transmitted the spark of life and that women were merely incubators of the male seed. 'The Father alone is Creator; the Mother is but the Nurse.' He even taught that woman was man in arrested development – a deficit of nature ... It was only gradually that the serious consequences of women's altered value to civilization affected women musicians...One of the direct results of the revolution, and one

which profoundly affected women in relation to music, was the twilight of the goddess. (Drinker 1948: 127–42)

Adrian Thatcher (2020) distils some of this thinking in his article on the Trinity into three examples of hierarchy which I shall use to frame my navigation route through Anglicanism. Hierarchies of ‘domination or command’ are those in which ‘those occupying inferior positions are subject to the arbitrary, unaccountable authority of social superiors and thereby made powerless’. Secondly, there are ‘hierarchies of esteem’ in which ‘those occupying inferior positions are stigmatized—subject to publicly authoritative stereotypes that represent them as proper objects of dishonour, contempt, disgust, fear, or hatred on the basis of their group identities and hence properly subject to ridicule, shaming, shunning, segregation, discrimination, persecution, and even violence’. Finally, there are ‘hierarchies of standing’ in which ‘the interests of those occupying superior social positions are given special weight in the deliberations of others and in the normal (habitual, unconscious, often automatic) operation of social institutions. As a result, those of higher rank enjoy greater rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits than their social inferiors.’

### **Singing in the choir**

My earliest experience of hierarchies of domination was aged 7. I was chosen to sing *O Jesus I have promised* in a play in the church hall; but when I offered myself as a chorister for the liturgy, I was told that only boys were allowed to sing in the church. No explanation was offered. I could only assume that a male God preferred the sound of boys’ voices. I was an Anglican from birth with a deeply religious mother and a faith that I had gradually taken and adapted to my own needs with a strong sense of the presence of God and a regular prayer life. I was immersed in the Biblical tradition and had memorised passages from it, a habit which has served me well. I set up my own altar in my own room, which I tended carefully with icons, symbols and flowers. Continually drawn to a deeper experience of God, I wanted to be a religious leader of some kind or at least to be able to sing to honour God.

One of the events I most loved at church as a child was the Passion play organised by Miss Biffin, the Lady Church Worker, where there seemed to be a great number of parts for women around the entombment and resurrection of Christ. They were older women and they moved beautifully to Samuel Barber’s *Adagio* dressed in pastel colours. The memoirs of this are still awakened when I hear this piece, along with a six-year old’s attempts to make sense of how hierarchies operate.

In my teenage years, my family left this church dominated by the traditions of the Oxford Movement for a church where women and girls were welcomed chorally alongside boys and which sang the Victorian repertoire of Anglican music. I was so glad of the opportunity and my heart still lights up at Stanford in Bb and Charles Wood’s *O thou the central orb*. It is the memories of the massivity of the sounds heightened by the organ.

However, I also discovered the division of the choir in a chancel set apart from the congregation. When I was going on a study weekend, I was told by the organist that this would involve mixing with the congregation and “the choir don’t do that.” The invention of the chancel and robed choir by the Oxford movement had the effect of separating by place, skill and ritual involvement (Rainbow 2001: 3-19). Hierarchies of dominance are often restrictive and divisive. This became even more true in Oxford university music department

where many of the men had come through cathedral choir schools. Within 16 weeks we had to write in the style of Palestrina. For them it was commonplace and familiar; for me Palestrina was a 78rpm recording of the Missa Papae Marcelli played on an old gramophone. I learned the style by copying out Palestrina from the Complete Works until I had grasped the style. Hierarchies of domination had a profound effect on my academic progress.

### Asking questions

In my confirmation class I met hierarchies of standing. My mother did not approve of Sunday school so I had been in adult worship for most of my life. As a deeply religious child now watching Cecil B de Mille's *The Robe* (based on Douglas 1948), by the age of 11 I had many questions, especially about the words that were clearly important in worship but incomprehensible, such as salvation, creation, redemption. The confirmation class, I thought, was my chance to ask about them. What I did not realise was that I had no standing to ask these questions because children had no authority. My mother was asked to stop me from the disrupting the class with my questions. The failure of the church to give any standing to young people and their ideas has resulted in many leaving when the values of school and church so clearly diverge.

Children have often taught me more than adults. As part of my project around my piece *The Healing of the Earth*, I had focus groups of children on their views of God. In a secular school, I had a group of bright nine and ten-year-olds. Three of them started with their atheism. God was an old man in the sky and they did not believe in him. They failed to see the illogicality of their position. When they had explored their position fully, the Muslim girl came in with her contribution: "We do not have any images of God in Islam." This horrified the atheists, who instantly knew that they desperately needed images of God. Under pressure, she thought quickly: "I suppose if we have no images of God we could call God he, she or it." It was the last place where I had expected to find the feminine in God, and I realised how much freer Judaism and Islam were. Suddenly I realised why idolatry was so high in the prohibitions of the Ten Commandments. It is wrong because it excludes people. Christianity has done this very effectively over its history through prayers, images and songs, an idea that bore fruit in *Finding God* below. The failure to consider inclusive language in contemporary worship shows how hierarchies of domination and standing can affect the lives of lay people.

### The Christian Union

At Oxford University I was faced with hierarchies of esteem. Here I was always afraid of being unmasked for the impostor that I thought I really was, coming from a lower middle class artisan family. The academic work was easy compared to the social learning that was necessary. I felt naïve and unskilled in terms of friendships. I tried to join the Christian Union which looked like a good group of friends. Up to that point I thought I was a Christian. They gave me the twelve points of the Intervarsity Declaration of Faith. The next morning. I said I could assent to ten – all except the literal truth of the Bible and the literal Second Coming:

The unique divine inspiration,  
entire trustworthiness  
and authority of the Bible.

The victorious reign and future personal return of Jesus Christ,  
 who will judge all people with justice and mercy,  
 giving over the unrepentant to eternal condemnation  
 but receiving the redeemed into eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

I was told that it was not enough– it was all or nothing. I did not belong. So, I went St Aldate's in its halcyon days under Keith de Berry and the Oxford Pastorate with its evangelical basis:

An hurray Keith de Berry  
 Not even one sherry  
 A good St Aldate's man [sic]!<sup>2</sup>

I remember the packed church and Michael Ramsey with his impressive eyebrows striding down the centre of the undergraduates in a mission activity, as a pianist, I usually got added with the children and a book of CSSM choruses<sup>3</sup>. But the moment came when the guilt inculcated by my Anglican upbringing played in. I was teaching the chorus *The best for God, the best for God, We want to be the very very best for God* to a group of 8 year olds when something inside me snapped and said "If Christianity is about anything at all it is about being the worst for God and still accepted." I left St Aldate's and found Pusey House. I had joined the section of the Church of England my mother hated. She had been brought up in middle-of-the-road rural Anglicanism. The Church we had joined was in this theological/liturgical position until a vicar arrived who had trained at Mirfield wearing a chasuble. "Guess what he has done now?" said my mother one day. "There is a Paschal candle. We shall not go again."

At Oxford I found the Paschal candle rather beautiful and initially could not fully understand why it had caused so much ire. I stayed in that tradition for some time. The discovery of sacramental confession was a great blessing after the endless pursuit of guilt in my childhood when a picture of Jesus looked down on me entitled *And the Lord turned and looked on Peter and Peter remembered the word of the Lord*.<sup>4</sup> It was a grim Victorian face that gazed on me all the time from my bedside altar, reminding me not of Peter's guilt but of my own, aided by Cranmer's 1662 prayerbook designed to generate low self-esteem, over-responsibility and guilt (Tholsen 1980). This was a refined way of fixing the hierarchies of esteem not outside but in the depths of one's personality. It met its zenith in the book given to me at my confirmation where I faced five pages of self-examination. Alone in my bedroom I had, I thought, committed most of them, and therefore would receive the Holy Communion unworthily, whereupon I would immediately be hit by some sort of cosmic event that would send me immediately to hell. How I wish I had had just one of the confessors that I found later in life who could easily so easily have set the fears at rest.

Meanwhile, I was organist at my own college, St Hugh's, running the College choir and putting on concerts in the Chapel. For two years, I sang as a paid choral scholar at Queen's College. We were the first two women to replace the boys and it was made clear to us that we were simply the product of economic necessity. David Jenkins was Chaplain at

<sup>1</sup> <https://intervarsity.org/handbooks/large-group/statementofagreement> accessed May 7th 2021

<sup>2</sup> Verse of a parody of Gilbert and Sullivan for a review

<sup>3</sup> CSSM Choruses Nos 1,2 and 3 combined 1964 Scripture Union and CSSM.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Beecroft (1864-1951). Reproduced by the Sunday School Union

Queen's at the time I was fascinated by new ideas following the tide led by John Robinson's (1963) *Honest to God*. I remember attending John Robinson's sermon at the university church when we were so squashed into the pews that the door flew open every time we sat down! It was a time of confusion and excitement. Others were rebelling against the hierarchies.

### Escape

Moving to London, I managed to avoid the hierarchies of the church or at least circumvent some of them by living in an Anglican community but worshipping with Methodists. I came to London to do a PGCE in 1966 and lived in a Christian community in Kensington Church Street which was associated with the Mirfield fathers who had a house locally. I played a Victorian harmonium in chapel and picked up a folk guitar, learned four chords and sang *Blowin' in the Wind* and *We shall overcome*. After 6 months at the local Anglican Church I had spoken only to the verger. When I realised the aristocratic backgrounds of the congregation I could understand why; so I joined the Methodists in Notting Hill, where they were experimenting with liturgy after the race riots. I had never seen poverty on this scale. I had never worked alongside different races before. I became a social activist – sang protest songs and learned the guitar which opened up a whole new world of rate musicking (Boyce-Tillman 2018: xix). I wish I had taken joint membership of the Methodist Church as the Anglican/Methodist conversations were happening then; I was on the leaders' meeting during my time, because Notting Hill Methodists were concerned with ecumenism.

The Ecumenical Centre in Notting Hill brought the churches together under Brian Frost, a prominent and radical Methodist; at the Centre, (Boyce-Tillman 2018: xviii) songs were being written and festivals being organised and I met Ianthe Pratt, a Roman Catholic liturgical innovator, to whom I owe a profound debt for her guidance into the world of feminist theology. This was my first encounter with real liturgical innovation. It could be spontaneous and continually contemporised:

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. (Spolin 1973: 4)

Liturgy was no longer in hard backed books that you had to sing from accurately, but songs, prayers and hymns could be written overnight for the next Sunday morning such as Geoff Ainger's, which was written after a Caribbean woman had given birth in his house:

Born in the night, Mary's Child,  
a long way from your home;  
coming in need, Mary's Child,  
born in a borrowed room.

Clear shining light, Mary's Child,  
your face lights up our way;  
light of the world, Mary's Child,  
dawn on our darkened day.

Truth of our life, Mary's Child,  
 you tell us God is good;  
 prove it is true, Mary's Child,  
 go to your cross of wood.

Hope of the world, Mary's Child,  
 you're coming soon to reign;  
 Saviour of all, Mary's Child,  
 walk in our streets again.<sup>5</sup>

I was involved in the Christian Aid festivals in Trafalgar square entitled 1965 Christian Aid *Songs from the Square*<sup>6</sup> The folk in worship movement (Smith 1967) and tape recorded made creativity more widely accessible Brian Frost, and the 'folk in worship' movement. I was recruited to transcribe songs from the tapes into notation. This led to my becoming an associate editor with Stainer and Bell, producing new publications in the area of music for worship and running courses on the use of contemporary songs, such as those of Sydney Carter. I had first encountered his challenges to Christianity while at St Hugh's, when I did a history of English religious music and started with the simple hymn *Nobilis, humilis* and ended with *Lord of the Dance* sung by a cabaret singer. We were worried that the Principal would walk out, because of the radical nature of Sydney's texts. It is difficult now to think of how challenging they were then, when now they appear in hymnbooks and are arranged for King's College, Cambridge. I became aware anew of Carter's radicalism more recently in Romania, when I visited a conservative Baptist university where dancing in chapel was considered highly problematic.

The time was one of belonging. My Christian faith helped my position in an Anglican girls' grammar school in Notting Hill. Here, under the head teacher, Mrs Moore, I fitted perfectly. They were halcyon days with the Inner London Education Authority at its zenith. I was regarded as a successful teacher. I was into protest songs at the time, and found the Pete Seeger song that said that one person cannot tear a prison down but a million might.<sup>5</sup> I was in the heart of the struggles in Notting Hill and I loved the idea of communal action. I took it with great eagerness to her for a song to sing in assembly. She read it carefully and then looked over the top of her glasses and said "But, Miss Boyce, it is an incitement to riot!" She tolerated a great deal of my experimentation, because I could also turn out excellent choirs and orchestras for important occasions such as the annual service in St James' Piccadilly, when we hired a tube train to take all the pupils from Hammersmith to Piccadilly. The community at school was mostly women. I remember the staff meeting when Mrs Moore said: "Ladies, I have decided that you can wear trousers to school, but only with a matching top." My mother made me a smart blue suit, with a top closed by anchor shaped buttons that were connected by small chains. I felt so smart. For one of the few times in my life I felt loved and valued and I produced some of my best pedagogic work.

With one foot in radical Methodism and an Anglican community and school I felt both in and out of the tradition and no longer trapped in the hierarchies.

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<sup>5</sup> Words © 1964 Stainer & Bell (admin. Hope Publishing Company, 380 S Main Pl, Carol Stream, IL 60188)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIL-63F\\_d1E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIL-63F_d1E) Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021

## Prayer

The 1960s was the age of the Beatles and transcendental meditation. For four years I went regularly to meetings and found it helpful but kept quiet about it in Christian circles where some regarded it as the work of the devil. Transcendental meditation taught me the tradition of a repeated mantra. This was originally marketed as secular; but, as I entered more deeply into it, I found more and more quotations from the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. I realised that I was going deeper into Hinduism; only much later, did I learn that the secret mantras that we were given were actually Hindu names for God. Gonville French-Beytagh (1973, 1986) - the ex-Dean of Johannesburg - at the church of St Vedast's alias Foster, near St Paul's Cathedral. and synthesised this with the Christian mystical tradition under the spiritual direction helped me return to my Christian roots.

I felt deeply cheated that, by then, I had been an Anglican for some thirty years and had not encountered the contemplative traditions. He too offered me names for God – beautiful ones like Unku-unkulu and Tetragrammaton. They had to sound beautiful, as it was the combination of sound and meaning that took me into the liminal space. I bought a special chair for it – a Victorian nursing chair that was low and where my feet could easily reach the floor. I would light a candle before I did it in the morning. One day, I even caught the sleeve of my dressing gown alight – a real outpouring of the Spirit!

With him, I developed a rule of life that involved daily silent meditation and attendance at the Eucharist at least once a week, which I have maintained ever since. This has led to an increasing involvement with silent prayer groups, including The Association of Contemplative Prayer and the Julian meetings; I developed a private practice of regular silent retreats. This drew me into the sapiential theological tradition with a real sense of the mystery of God and a sense of the paradoxes at the heart of my faith. My sense of the spiritual in music, described by Levi-Strauss as “the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable” (Levi-Strauss 1970: 18), helped me in this.

On the advice of Gonville (who was sometimes concerned about my theological explorations in paganism and shamanism), I became associated with a number of religious communities, notably The Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres, the Benedictine Community at West Malling and the Sisters of the Church at Ham in Richmond, Surrey. I went regularly on retreat. I took my children to the kindling of the Easter fire at Ham at daybreak on Easter Sunday. I started writing hymns and liturgical music.

I entered more into the mystery of God – the unknown God. I found Alan Watts at about this time:

What religion calls the vision of God is found in giving up the idea of God. By the same law of reversed effort, we discover the “infinite” and the “absolute”, not by trying to escape the finite and relative and world but by the most acceptance of its limitations. Paradox as it may seem, we likewise find life meaningful only when we have seen that it is without purpose, and now the “mystery of the universe” only when we are convinced that we know nothing about it at all. (Watts 1951: 27)

In one of my (usually failing) attempts to take some holiday, I booked four days in Malta. It was a wonderful hotel with a Jacuzzi overlooking Gozo, where I visited the Goddess temples with their arched roofs and often cylindrical shape. The churches similarly were often huge rounds like the one at Mosta, which had had a wartime shell through its roof and still

survived. I went to Valletta to see the Goddess statues; the holiday became a real pilgrimage to the shrines of the Goddess. I realised that not only had I never seen a female divine figure before, but I had never seen a fat image of the Divine. They had huge hips and pendulous breasts. Their legs were like tree trunks – just like mine. To have an image of the Divine that resembled me blew me away. At last God was like me – I could become Divine (Jantzen 1998):

### **Finding God**

1. A child once loved the story-  
Which angel voices tell -  
How once the King of Glory  
Came down on earth to dwell.
  
2. Now, Father God, I miss you –  
Your beard, your robes, your crown –  
But you have served us badly  
And let us humans down.
  
3. So easy to disprove you  
And doubt your truthfulness;  
For you were just an idol  
That kept Your power suppressed.
  
4. For You are deep within us -  
Revealed within our deeds,  
Incarnate in our living  
And not within our creeds.
  
5. No image cannot hold you;  
And, if to one we hold,  
We keep some from your loving  
And leave them in the cold.
  
6. Excluded groups are legion –  
Disabled, female, gay –  
Old Father of the heavens,  
Your picture moves away.
  
7. Life's processes reveal You -  
In prison, death and war,  
In people who are different,  
In gatherings of the poor.
  
8. For Godding means encounter,  
Gives dignity to all,  
Has every shape and no shape -  
In temple, tree and wall.

9. So we will go a-godding  
 And birth You in our world;  
 In sacrificial loving  
 We find Your strength unfurled.  
 (Boyce-Tillman 2014: 180–1)

I learned at this time that prayer is dwelling in the love of God, as Julian of Norwich writes in her vision of the hazelnut (Warwick 1901: 10). I joined the Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer and Robert Coulson (1956). This took me to the I AM sayings with the notion that this enables the word of God to dwell in me richly. In this tradition, for a long time, I used a new phrase each month. This is what I still use, rather than the Maranatha of the John Main tradition. This word – meaning: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus”- makes God seem further away from me, as I implore the Divine to come. I get the same feel from *As the heart longs for the water brooks so does my soul long for thee, my God*. Again, God seems further and further away, whereas the I AM sayings locate God within me, such as:

I am the way the truth and the life  
 My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you  
 My yoke is easy, my burden is light  
 I am the bread of life  
 You are called by my name, you are mine  
 I have loved you with an everlasting love and with loving kindness have I drawn you

I was clear of the Anglican hierarchies in London by avoiding regular relationships with Anglican churches and I discovered the apophatic tradition the unknowability of God. That was to be an important tool in withstanding the hierarchies when I did return to regular Anglican worship in a parish church.

### **Motherhood**

After various excursions, I returned to the local parish church, as I wished my children to be involved. Here I was in tune with the church hierarchies (Hunt 2005). I did what was and had been expected of me since my birth, through cultural conditioning and expectations. I gave up teaching to care for home, family and aging/dying grandparents. I ran the Sunday Scholl and the junior choir, wrote songs for plays for Christmas and other festivals. I initiated a music hall and a series of pantomimes for all the congregation and visited and tended pastoral needs. I did enjoy most of these and it assuaged some of the guilt of previous years. Women are supposed to be good wives and mothers and initiate children into the faith. However, I already had real sympathy with more changing adolescents who increasingly saw the church as embracing very different value systems from the school. I did introduce some new hymns and an organist who knew about the growing feminism in my heart saw fit to ridicule this position in front of the young choristers.

**Letter to a misogynist**  
 There is no need to be afraid –  
 Unless

Your truth is based on denying mine,  
 Your strength is only present in fighting me,  
 Your power can only be expressed by dominating me,  
 Your hope is in my annihilation.  
 There is no need to be afraid –

What I seek is  
 A space to realize my own truth  
 Without the charge of aggression or stridency;  
 An acknowledgement of my strength  
 Without doubts of my femininity;  
 An acceptance of my power  
 Without the accusation of domination;  
 A hope that is not in  
 A reversal of your pattern of oppression.  
 There is no need to be afraid.

My truth need not deny yours.  
 My strength need not threaten yours.  
 My power need not diminish yours.  
 My hope is not for an empire.  
 There is no need to be afraid;

Rather, let us  
 Pool our experience to reach a truth that is greater than both of us;  
 Unite our strengths to move mountains of injustice;  
 Use our combined power to make a new world  
 In which all are free  
 To be true to a vision  
 That transcends the humanity  
 Of any single person  
 Or group  
 And is inclusive of everyone.<sup>6</sup>  
 ( March 1993 printed in Boyce-Tillman 2018: 87)

But I was living two lives – one within and approved of by the hierarchy and the other secret and hidden outside it. I was worshipping in women's groups (Ruether 1985), and gradually discovering the feminist theological circles where I had my first really safe sense of belonging. I am so grateful to organisations like the Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology with Lisa Isherwood for their role in this journey. I remember the gathering singing my hymn about our foremothers and everyone taking off their scarves and waving them like a football crowd while sitting on barstools. I performed some of the one-woman performances for the first time at their conferences. I remember being invited to give my first theological keynote lecture on *Unconventional Wisdom* (2007) . I remember long intense discussions over coffee and wine late into the night. I will carry on recalling them all with gratitude for the re-remembering of myself that they initiated. There were a number of

feminist groups (McEwan et al 2001) that I joined – a group met in Wimbledon and there was the Catholic Women’s Network for whom I wrote this:

### **Networking**

1. The hope goes round,  
 And the strength goes round,  
 And the power goes round,  
 And the love goes round;  
 And hands are joined,  
 And our hearts are joined,  
 And the Spirit is flowing between us.  
 Wind circles that will encircle  
 The earth, the sky and the deep abyss;  
 Find loving entwined in networking,  
 Claiming the strength that’s our birthright.

2. For God, our God  
 Is a hoping God,  
 And a strength’ning God,  
 An empow’ring God;  
 And God, our God  
 Is a woven God,  
 And the warp and the weft of creation.  
 Dance joy in a cosmic circle,  
 A toughened strand in the cloth of God;  
 Weave shapes of a true integrity;  
 This is the stuff of creation.<sup>7</sup>  
 (Boyce-Tillman 2006 p. 67)

These were wonderfully inclusive liturgies. I decided that I could have a role writing songs and hymns for these groups encapsulating feminist and liberation theology into musical shapes. I wrote chants for the monthly vigils of Catholic Women’s Ordination around the Westminster Cathedral piazza. At Noddfa in North Wales, I led retreats and the Catholic Women’s Network Easters gave me cause for great rejoicing. I went to the beautiful Roman Catholic Chapel just opposite the convent; just once, I was invited to receive communion by the priest, who had been at my course. “You are one of us.” he said. I felt I really did belong in a different Christian tradition.

### **Ecumenical hymn**

1. We gather here together  
 From different ways of faith.  
 Your Myst’ry calls us forward  
 Into to the heart of grace.  
 We know Your Truth is wider

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<sup>7</sup> To the tune Greensleeves. Copyright Stainer and Bell

Than all we can expect;  
So here we seek communion  
In love and with respect.

2. We own our faith in Jesus  
Who made Your essence known;  
And hope we have been faithful  
To what we have been shown.  
We share our partial insights  
And find You are our rest.  
And so become empowered  
With love and with respect.

3. Your Spirit flows between us  
And makes Your Being clear.  
Diversely reuniting  
We sense Your presence here;  
And so Your Church can mirror  
The world You resurrect,  
As gently we draw nearer  
In love and in respect.  
(Boyce-Tillman 2006: 76)<sup>8</sup>

Then there was a Wild Women group that we formed in London to help us through the menopause. We were a diverse group – single, celibate, married and divorced women. We reflected on our lives and even did a liturgy to deal with an abortion that had happened very early in one of the women's lives. We gave birth to the child, named her and sent her away by blowing bubbles in the back garden.

There were a number of these groups all over the country and in touch with similar groups in North America and New Zealand when discussion arose about splitting the church as those against women's ordination threatened to leave. The real question which was never really heard was which way it would split. It felt like a new Reformation and that if the vote went against them, these groups would split away to form a new denomination.

Through these groups I discovered the cost of hierarchical domination in areas such as self-esteem and efficacy. God was male. I had learned that from the beginning of my childhood – pictures, texts and hymns all called him Father. God remained male for me for thirty years – until I found feminism and the possibility of Mother God, Sister God and midwife God. A deeply religious child, I did not realise what the maleness of God had done to me. It had been so internalised that patriarchy did not seem to be imposed but a given. It was a neat way to make women subject to men, to accept the status quo submissively and unquestioningly. Christianity has developed a patriarchal tradition in all its structures, its language and its theology despite the variety of the early traditions (Lindley 1885) . It took me a long time to realise what this idolatrous position had done to my own self-esteem in

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<sup>8</sup> Copyright Stainer and Bell. To the tune Thornbury usually used for *The Church's one foundation* and written originally at the request of my good friend, the RC priest Robert Kaggwa.

my interior world. It has shown me the exclusivism generated by the use of a few heavily gendered images of God. In the feminist groups, I found companions in my anger and realised that it was not only born personally but culturally. The private became socially shared. Anger and justice joined forces in my interiority and produced new strategies (Boyce-Tillman 2018). I had to rename God to find my own power and realise what patriarchal theology had done, not only to my religion but to my entire life – how I had tried to be a good wife in a gendered way.

We developed inclusive language:

### **Count me in**

1. On a day when all were counted,  
Mary found no place to rest,  
Pressing forward with her burden,  
Sharing in our homelessness.

2. Jesus, born of exiled mother,  
Healer, friend of all the oppressed,  
Be with all who feel excluded  
From the circles of the blessed.

3. You were also once at variance  
With the custom of your day,  
Breaking bonds of race and gender  
In your friends along the way.

4. Sister, brother, wife and mother  
Could these all be names for you?  
Counsellor of ancient Wisdom,  
We would to ourselves be true.<sup>9</sup>  
(Boyce-Tillman 2006: 57)

Where will these debates go (Wren 1989) ? I love Julian of Norwich's image of 'My Sweet Mother Jesus'. Can Jesus be androgynous? He certainly appears so in much iconography. As part of my search, I went to Vilnius to see the image of Jesus with an emerging rainbow given to Sister Faustina in 1931: "I offer people a vessel with which they are to keep coming for graces to the fountain of mercy."<sup>10</sup> I resolved some of this with a chant, which I finished in this simple church:

### **Sweet mother Jesus**

CHORUS: Sweet Mother Jesus, mercify me,  
Sweet Mother Jesus, Christic rose,  
Sweet Mother Jesus, mercify me,

<sup>9</sup> June Boyce-Tillman 1990, to the Tune Cross of Jesus Copyright Stainer and Bell.

<sup>10</sup> 14 <<http://faustina-message.com/image-merciful-jesus.htm>>, contacted 3 March 2018.

Sweet Mother Jesus, My repose.

1. Circle me gently with your loving,  
Holding me gently in your arms.  
Circle me gently with your loving,  
Keeping me softly from all harm.

CHORUS

2. Circle me gently with your loving;  
Gather me in and comfort me;  
Circle me gently with your loving;  
Nurture my creativity.

CHORUS

3. Circle me gently with your loving;  
Give me your hope and silent care;  
Circle me gently with your loving;  
Fold me within your silent care.

CHORUS

4. Circle me gently with your loving;  
Form me into an eagle priest;  
Circle me gently with your loving;  
Gather us in the mystic feast.

CHORUS

(June Boyce-Tillman 2018: 103 )

The invention of the word ‘mercify’ enabled my escape from the mountains of guilt loaded on me by Cranmer’s prayer book and abuse. I no longer was a miserable sinner asking God for forgiveness, which made the Divine seem more and more distant and more and more good, while I became more and more evil; I needed mercy to grow within me – for others, for the natural world and (perhaps most of all) for myself.

Holy Rood House<sup>11</sup> Centre for Health and Pastoral care in Thirsk in Yorkshire has played an important part in this development. A residential and day-visit therapeutic centre, it works within a holistic framework. Hospitality is offered inclusively. Mutuality and friendship abound, as a safe space is created for many guests from many places, at times of crisis, trauma and vulnerability. The community builds on the continuity of the churches’ healing ministry and recognises the interconnectedness of all things, helping the community to learn what it means to be wounded healers. There I found Jesus/Sophia the Wisdom of God, present at the crossroads of our lives (Proverbs 8 vv 1–2) (Heyward 1989: 33). My initial ideas on music and health were tested here; I had the chance to blend more orthodox ideas with those I had encountered in my excursion into the shamanistic practices of the New Age. Many of my one-woman performances, hymns and songs have been trialled here. I have led two memorable Easters. It gave me a firm base to do syntheses of traditions that other parts of the church might find unacceptable. Free of and challenging all the hierarchies, my dear friends, Elizabeth and Stanley Baxter gave me a safe space to explore and many times of rest and acceptance

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.holyroodhouse.org.uk>

The discovery of the Wisdom traditions within the Abrahamic faiths found expression in practical strategies for inclusion. I find myself wincing now at the repeated use of Father God for prayers; always at funerals I commit the deceased into the hands of Mother/Father God. My blessing now is:

The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit.

It is difficult now, as a priest in mainstream churches, to sing hymns whose language and theology I no longer subscribe to, after all the years worshipping in groups where these would have been totally unacceptable. There is a sadness that despite all our work the Church appears to have been left unchanged and, indeed, to be returning to less inclusive language. It has already caused many people to leave; as the culture of gender, sex and sexuality in the wider culture (Hendricks & Boyce-Tillman 2018) becomes more varied and accepting, the Church will appear as less reflecting of the all-accepting love of the Divine than the wider society. It will need Peter Ward's (2002) concept of 'liquid church.' This he sees as replacing 'solid church' with its fixed location as a nostalgic heritage. 'Liquid church' is concerned with providing a range of experiences linked with people's desire for the divine with "a high level of authenticity in its spirituality, and integrity in its allegiance to Christ" (Ward 2002: 77). Authentic interiority rather than imposed dogma will demand a more fluid, all-embracing view of Church. This would defy hierarchies of dominance.

### **Interfaith**

I have also had much support from the interfaith brothers and sisters. As part of a neighbourhood festival initiated by my church a celebration of diversity in our local area in South London. The dancers were lined up to tap their way over the boards laid on the outdoor tennis court; the roads would be shut and Ruposhi Bangla, the local Indian jeweller, would set up their stalls of Indian bangles. The Scouts were all set to prepare the hotdogs; costumes were coming from the Commonwealth institute and local people were carefully prepared to wear the elaborate head dresses and gauze wings familiar from the Notting Hill carnival. The marching band was rehearsing their counter marches and the harpsichordist had arranged to transport his instrument to the church for his Baroque recital. The scones for the cream teas were ready for baking and the neighbourhood multicultural festival was well underway; but what could be done on the Sunday to celebrate the spiritual dimension of the area? The multi-branded Christians were being brought together; embryonic mosques were developing in some houses; Julia Neuberger was the rabbi at the local synagogue. The Sikhs had not yet bought the local slipper baths and still went to the gurdwara at Wimbledon and there were Hindu temples from various traditions all around the area. And so the interfaith vision was born. For many Christians, the essentially Hindu practice of Transcendental meditation had initiated my encounter with one Eastern tradition. Yoga was another possibility. Interfaith dialogue was largely hearing what different traditions had to say about death, suffering or partnerships. The notion that a group might celebrate together – in both their similarities and their differences – had seldom been considered. But that was what was now being planned slowly and carefully, treading uneasily on an unknown landscape. We were aware of sensitivities, and memories of imperial armies with crosses on the breast plates, and Jew-hunts around Easter in Christian Europe, as well as the deep divisions that occur within so many faiths. Some religious institutions chose not to join. One Christian minister called me: "At best, sub-

Christian and, at worst, pagan.” The Orthodox rabbi wished the planned celebration well but could not conscientiously be involved. I tried to be all things to all people, wary of my own Christian heritage – even, maybe, ashamed. At that time, England was just becoming aware that the red patches of the map that we had been taught to be proud of, might not be worthy of such high esteem. Many tropes played out in my thinking, but it was the beginning of a long journey towards giving <sup>12</sup>dignity to difference (Sacks 2002) .

Dialogue at that time was not between ordinary people of faith, but just between leaders, such as the Dalai Lama meeting the Archbishop of Canterbury in the highly formal ceremonial environment of Westminster Abbey; but this event was to be different – featuring people of different traditions living near one another who chose to offer a spiritual dimension to a neighbourhood festival. I had started my own journey into interfaith dialogue with the mothers whom I met each day at the gate of the school. There were Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians of various denominations. Brian Pearce from the Interfaith Network helped me find contacts within the faiths that were not present in the school that my children went to. For instance, there was not a strong presence of the Jains in that area of South London. The main link with Islam was the mother of one of the children in the class that I taught. This started well, but problems within the Muslim marriage meant that eventually this member of the group had to move over and over again to escape. The woman who ran the children’s classes at the local mosque took on the role and managed to provide a choir of girls and a group of young men, who were learning the call to prayer and could explain all the movements involved in prayer in Islam. This same person continued in this role for over twenty years. I visited local mosques, wrapping round my head any scarf I could find.

Over the years, the interfaith group (Boyce-Tillman 2018: 114) has worked towards a greater integration within the act of sharing. While we started with separate contributions from each faith, the group gradually worked out prayers and rituals that could be more fully shared across faiths. Each of these took several meetings to develop and complete together with a great deal of discussion and debate; we gained a great deal of understanding of other people’s beliefs and sensitivities in this process. The questions raised by these efforts were many. Where did the Buddhists stand on the use of a name for God? Could the group use the word Allah for God? This is associated with Islam, but it is simply the Arab word for God and used in Christian churches where Arabic is the main language. “Surely we all share the notion that we are the children of a Father God?” said one pastor. “No we don’t,” said the pagan, who had a much more polytheistic view of the world, while the feminists objected to a male descriptor of God. To accommodate the belief systems of a variety of faith traditions and the sensitivities within these two issues such as inclusive language and the creation of rituals and prayers in which all can share, was complex and required imagination. However, it led to the latest rituals – a greeting for those who want to communicate across the different faiths that at once declared our origin while at the same time honouring and acknowledging the faith of the other:

I am a human being with hope and desire for happiness and for me being a  
(Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh ...) helps.

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<sup>12</sup> Sacks

The group was better at creating more material expressions of our shared values. This was largely due to the skills of Les, the Buddhist. It started with a sharing on the theme of ecology. Here a great net was set up slung between two church pillars; during the sharing children made pictures of wind, rain, pollution and trees, which were pinned onto to the net at the end of the sharing. At the same point, bundles of ribbons were attached and each person present was given one to hold, to show that all the cosmos is in connected through the environment. When the ribbons were stretched out over the heads of the assembled company, it looked incredible – like a giant maypole; as the closing *Shalom* was sung, tears poured down people’s faces at the sheer beauty of the symbolism. That same sharing saw the construction of a see-saw with ecological themes in the attempt to get the world into some sort of balance. For one sharing, there was a polystyrene bridge of peace that people walked over to meet members of other faiths.

These schemes and plans often involved a great deal of laughter and fun. For the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, the group used the image of the diamond. This time, Les had the idea of building a large diamond with Perspex panels that could be put in by each faith and then lit from the centre. Everyone laughed as his wife’s face fell; she described how their garden had been invaded by the polystyrene bridge and the see-saw and asked exactly what size the diamond frame might be. Everyone laughed again, at the notion that it could be lit by disco lights from within. I had just come back from a pilgrimage to Lourdes and remarked that I could have brought back many Virgin Mary statues with assorted fairy lights and indeed could at present offer a coloured waterfall with a statue of Bernadette. It is these periods of laughter, that bring the group together so powerfully and gives the meeting its welcoming atmosphere.

Food and cooking have always been an important part of the group’s sharing both at the end of the final event and also for the planning meetings. The food needs always to be vegetarian and alcohol-free, in order to be acceptable to all the traditions. The group often contains a number of women who regularly bring food to share to the meetings. The discussion often starts with how to make chapattis, birthday cake or samosas and so on. It is an excellent common starting point for discussion and characterises groups containing women. The group’s discussions have been interesting, for what has become clear is that the boundaries between faiths for more ‘ordinary’ people are less clear-cut. People were synthesising traditions, despite claiming to be part of one of them. In the group, the meaning of the term ‘spiritual but not religious’ was beginning to become apparent. It was the Sikh who taught the group about how colonialism caused him to develop a multiple religious self:

Well, as a child in India, by day I was a Roman Catholic learning to read by copying out the Bible; by night at home I was a Sikh singing the songs of the Guru Granth Sahib.

My own intentions broadened over the twenty-six years. I had been keen to explore what the great faiths shared and to establish interfaith dialogue between ordinary people in neighbourhood – not just at national and international level. “What could they share and what could they not?” had been my basic question. I look back with joy at our friendships some of which have lasted: In all these friendships I conceived the idea of creating a more life sustaining world through gathering people from different faiths work towards peace by

musicking. It became associated, particularly after 9/11, with notions of peace, justice, respect and honouring.

### **Between**

Between the God and the Goddess  
 And the mosque and the synagogue  
 The bullet holes in the tumbled statues  
 And the grass blades on the landfill,  
 The shaman and the cleric  
 The hysteric and choleric  
 The slaying and the praying  
 And the coping and the hoping  
 In the fractured rapture  
 In the hole in the soul  
 At the crack  
 The lack  
 Might  
 Bite  
 The Contradiction of 'or'  
 Meets  
 The Paradox of 'and'  
 Rebirth.

(June Boyce-Tillman, November 2004 in Boyce-Tillman 2018:105)

This was initiated in an interregnum at the church but later incumbents embraced it and questioned it. In the end it was evicted from the Church.

The broadening of the vision that started in the neighbourhood festival met with my thinking about widening the groups of people included in musical events to produce a radically innovative event in Winchester Cathedral, a musical vigil entitled *Space for Peace*. (Boyce-Tillman 2018: 118) . This used the cathedral as a resonant meditative space, able to contain and merge diversity, accepting it without obliterating it. Local choral groups from a variety of sources – community choirs, school choirs, the university, the cathedral choristers and quiristers (from Winchester College) – were assembled. Rabbi Mark Solomon and Cantor Jacky Chernett chanted the Hebrew Scriptures; the local imam uttered the Muslim call to prayer. Solo singers and Andrew Blake, a brilliant improvising saxophonist, wandered around freely improvising on Hildegard chants. Some were skilled musicians, while others were part of the community choir movement singing by ear. Some were Jews, some Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, some secularists, some school children from church and secular schools. The age range was seven to eighty-five. Each group had chosen in advance what they would sing: motets, hymns, worship songs, and chants; all concerned with peace. I had become fascinated by a musical form called a Quodlibet. In this, each part of the choir has its own separate tune and yet these all fit together in a miraculous way. This resembles society, where diverse groups have different tunes but potentially all fit together. The loss of these varieties of musical textures in contemporary society could mean that the society is moving towards uniformity. At the beginning of the event, I taught the congregation some of the nine shared peace chants that made up the opening quodlibet, which were sung by all the choirs together in the nave:

- “Sing of a place, a flowering field, where divisions end, I’ll meet you there.”
- “Where there is love and joy and peace, where there is love, forgiveness grows.”
  - “Shalom my friends, shalom my friends, Shalom, salaam. May peace my friends be with you today, Shalom, salaam.”
    - “Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth. Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace. Let peace fill our hearts, fill our world, fill our universe. Peace, peace, peace. Peace, peace, peace.”
- “Come, flowing air, serving every part of earth, Bind us together in a unity.”
  - “Walk gently, stand tall, for sacred is the earth.”
- “As the water with the rock and the air with the sun, may we be drawing nearer with love and respect.”

After this, the choirs, still singing, processed gradually to the various cathedral chapels and transepts. Instead of a programme, the congregation had a map showing where all the musicians were placed. In the middle section, each choir sang one of its chosen pieces when they felt it was right. There were some common chants threaded through the complex texture, binding its diversity together. The groups could also be invited by the congregation to sing. The congregation and the performers moved around the building, lighting candles, praying, being quiet, as they chose, but also participating in creating the musical sound. People became very sensitive to their surroundings and to one another. Some of the soundscapes were very complex as a number of pieces were performed simultaneously and some were quite simple as various groups moved away to pray or explore what other groups were doing. Children sat in traditional prayer positions and lit candles, as well as learning new material. Then, each group was gradually given a note by the saxophonist, on which they sang shalom or an alternative word for peace, while processing with lighted candles back to the nave, where the opening chants were sung again. The effect was beyond my imaginings. Children singing *I think to myself what a wonderful world* merged with plainchant, Jewish cantillation, Taizé chants and motets in a way that saw diversity held in a unity that was not a uniformity. The comments following it included many references to the inclusion of diversity. The critic from the *Church Times* wrote:

It was an incredibly brave and innovative venture which worked brilliantly. The acoustics in the Cathedral are not generous to choirs (I’ve performed in a choir there myself) but your inspired idea of removing the pews and placing individual choirs in different areas and having them sing spontaneously meant every nook, cranny and nave was filled with the most incredible music. I loved the fact that you could walk around, sampling different styles and interpretations and, along the way, enjoy the surprise of a lone voice suddenly appearing from a balcony or behind a pillar. (Williams 2009)

Remarkable things happened in the middle section, when the choirs dispersed. A Jew in the congregation asked the rabbi to sing Kaddish for a friend who had died. The rabbi crossed to the imam and they sang a verse from the Koran together and an image of this moment shot across the internet. All of this was able to happen because the event was a process rather than a product, as many concerts, religious rituals and liturgies have become; it was an entrance into the complexity of diverse belief systems through the medium of music as a potential space for new and deepening relationships. But again the Dean James Atwell who thought that a diocesan cathedral should be open to everyone was replaced by a successor who was suspicious of the event and evicted it.

I was heartened in my position by my friendship with Sir John Tavener (Boyce-Tillman & Forbes 2020) in a position that he called universalist. He was very clear that his own spirituality was rooted in Orthodox Christianity but that this does not deny the validity of other faith traditions. Like me, he had collected instruments, prayers, ideas from a variety of sources. His standing in the field enabled and empowered him to transcend the hierarchies that I encountered although the media frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted his position spiritually.

I feel now that our task in the interfaith dialogue is into the development of what was once called the New Age which is synthesising a multitude of traditions in a growing forest with some larger and smaller glades. The goddess (McColman 2001) is found repeatedly in these in various forms from various traditions. It is important that the Christian story is part of these debates, even though many in the Anglican church would despise them.

In this area we see how the hierarchies operate at a local level, depending on the individual views of the people who happen to control a church space at any given time. The event was never called worship – always a celebration of faiths. It was easier to do this in the noughties than it is now and I and many others have lamented the loss of the vision of the truly inclusive Christ.

### **The Movement for the Ordination of women**

I ended up challenging all three hierarchies within the Movement for the Ordination of Women. During most of my adult life, there have been debates about women's authority within Christianity and the nature of the priesthood:

All official, priestly systems, whether political or religious, operate in the same way ... so sacred books are discovered and imposed with great solemnity upon these people. The evils that have befallen the nation or sacred community, it is claimed, were the result of estrangement from the sacred text ... Priesthoods, sacred or secular, all operate through concept of sin or fault. Priests create a place of power for themselves by getting into position between nature and God, or humanity and political ideology. They become mediators of value and truth, and disobedience of their law acquires the name 'sin'. Conveniently, the means of becoming reconciled, whether with God or the Party, operates in a mediating role, the role of fixer or broker: the priest alone redeems. This was one of the assumptions that Jesus speaking from the prophetic tradition, challenges by his claim that the kingdom of God ... was 'brokerless'; it required no mediator ... Jesus said he had come to remit sin, and his most radical parables are all about a Divine forgiveness that precedes human repentance. (Holloway 1999: 76)

My own vocation had now become relatively well hidden under a failing marriage and two growing children. I was also involved in Women in Theology which was beginning to publish liturgical material by women, including, in co-operation with Stainer and Bell, *Reflecting Praise* (Boyce-Tillman & Wootton 1993), concentrating on women's contribution to hymnody. This encouraged new writers like my friend, Ruth Thomas, as well as making my hymns better known. It was in a service organised for the Southwark ordination course by Nicola Slee, in Southwark Cathedral, that I wrote the hymn that has become closely associated with women's ordination. It has been used for a wide variety of situations including weddings and funerals and a service for World Aids Day in Westminster Abbey. It is set to the traditional Irish tune often called *Danny Boy* or *the Londonderry Air*:

1. We shall go out with hope of resurrection.  
 We shall go out, from strength to strength go on.  
 We shall go out and tell our stories boldly,  
 Tales of a love that will not let us go.  
 We'll sing our songs of wrongs that can be righted.  
 We'll dream our dreams of hurts that can be healed.  
 We'll weave a cloth of all the world united  
 Within the vision of a Christ who sets us free.

2. We'll give a voice to those who have not spoken.  
 We'll find the words for those whose lips are sealed.  
 We'll make the tunes for those who sing no longer,  
 Vibrating love alive in every heart.  
 We'll share our joy with those who are still weeping.  
 Chant hymns of strength for hearts that break in grief.  
 We'll leap and dance the resurrection story  
 Including all within the circles of our love.  
 (Boyce-Tillman 2006: 80–1)<sup>13</sup>

It was written at a time when women were not allowed to be ordained as Anglican priests and many groups were meeting privately and sometimes secretly – some women only – praying and discussing and longing. Many women (including me) had felt their vocation for a very long time but the patriarchy of the Church chose for a long time to ignore it or not exclude men who did not agree or were just slow and cautious in their thinking. It caused many young people to be puzzled as their schools were teaching equal opportunities but the Church was in their eyes plainly sexist (and still is in many ways). Many never joined. So the opening line in 1990 was only a hope and a longing. We went on strength by strength with our placards, our demonstrations our praying and our lobbying of those in power and in our writing and hymn writing. These new hymns used inclusive language (Boyce-Tillman & Wootton 1993, Boyce-Tillman 2006), as this one does, so balancing the maleness of the old hard backed hymnals. Most people never noticed that hymns like this were inclusive.

There were attempts to silence us, as there have been by many silenced groups over history, but the hymn says that we will tell our stories boldly; and we have although within

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<sup>13</sup> Copyright Stainer and Bell.

the Anglican church there is more celebration of the women who have been ordained than the struggles and strategies of those who worked for this for so long. Women's struggles did not quench their faith in an all-embracing God, just questioning of the church's policies in this area. "God is an equal opportunities employer – pity about the church" ran one slogan. Deep in Christianity is the notion of healing and reconciliation and the end of the first verse reflects this; but the wrongs, when I wrote it, were not righted, and indeed, even now, for many women and others in subjugated groups the hurts are not healed. The image of God the weaver is a very popular one seen in the last lines of verse one. In general, we were women who had the advantages of education in these groups and verse two reflects at the opening our desire to enable others to find their power. As a musician, I know that many have been demusicalised by the structures of the church and its hierarchal views of beauty associated with the perfection – supposedly – asked for by God. "Kings College Cambridge has done for Church music what Barbie has done for women" said an Anglican monk (Boyce-Tillman 2014). Music is the reflection of the vibrations of love in our hearts. Many women were broken by the denial of their vocations and still are, so we wish to be alongside the broken-hearted and lamenting.

In the same service I found Hildegard of Bingen whose hymn I had to sing. Hildegard was the first major notated composer in Europe with seventy-seven songs and a morality play with music – a large body of work; yet I did not hear of her until 1990, when I was asked to sing a hymn of hers, *O viridissima virga*. Well before this I had already noticed their absence from the constructed world of music-making that I had learned since I was seven, from the busts of male composers on my piano teacher's piano and finally from the curriculum at Oxford University. No women taught me at university and no women appeared in the syllabus. I was somewhat grudgingly employed to sing soprano in the choir of a men's college, because they could no longer afford boys. The men that sat alongside me in the Holywell Music Room were being groomed to become the professors, composers and conductors of their generation. Some of the lecturers would not teach women. The three women were being prepared to become teachers: heads of music in grammar schools and public schools, and two of them became just that (Boyce-Tillman 2018: 88,97). The discovery of the story of Hildegard (1098–1179) and other women composers (Reardon 2002) became an inspiration to me. In the end, I told her story, talked about her, sang her and meditated on her. And I did this so successfully that in the end, in my sixties I achieved my own potential as a composer and conductor, conducting in the great cathedrals and abbeys of the land, just as Hildegard had preached. My desire for inclusion has led me into great sadness about the exclusion from the Communion of members of other faiths. I experience a similar sadness when I am excluded from receiving Communion in Roman Catholic and Orthodox contexts. I cannot imagine Jesus excluding anyone. I was the local deanery synod representative (Boyce-Tillman 2018; 143) when the votes were taken in all the Anglican churches about women's ordination. I reported that our local church was three quarters in favour. At that meeting, a rather pompous local cleric said over and over again: "You must understand that it is not for myself that I shall vote against, but for our relationship with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters." On and on he went. I thought that the gentleman did protest too much. Incensed by his pomposity, I stood up and said: "And, Father, the Roman Catholic women will not thank you one little bit." Indeed, the Roman Catholic women, I am sure, helped the final vote. My dear friend, Ianthe Pratt, went up to Church House on the vote day at 7 a.m., with a banner that said: "Roman Catholic Women support the ordination of Anglican women." I am sure that many of the voters, who

were being swayed by the arguments being put forward by the local cleric, were converted to the women's cause by this placard. The vote was close; outside Church House, we did not know without calculators whether we had won in the house of laity. A huge shout went up. I remember Monica Furlong (1965), in a wheel chair, and the jubilation. We sang *Jubilare Deo* over and over again. A lone man wandered around in a daze saying that it was what everyone feared, apparently unaware that he was in the middle of a group pro women's ordination. I was with my Roman Catholic friends, with whom I had been processing around Westminster Cathedral piazza, in mourning for women's lost gifts. They had a huge placard that they thrust in front of the TV cameras saying: "Well done, Anglican women! Roman Catholic Women next!" "What shall we do with this?" we asked after the jubilation ended. I suggested that we pinned it to the front of Westminster Cathedral, for which there were good precedents. We were passing Cardinal Hume's house; we posted it through his letter box!

I have had great support from my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters on the route to ordination. It was a great delight to play for the service ordaining Catholic women priests in Canada; this ordination was to a new tradition that started with an ordination on the River Rhine. Rivers are not part of dioceses. It strengthened my own vocation, as I found my complex way through the vagaries of Anglican ordination training. Sometimes I celebrate with and for Roman Catholic friends in informal contexts. It is one of my greatest delights to work across that terrible schism in our faith. In one of these contexts, the stole is sometimes given to the celebrant by a member of the congregation saying: "We know that we are all priests here. But just for this service will you lead us?" I long for the day when I have the courage to do this with an Anglican congregation.

### **The ordination course**

Eventually I was accepted for ordination training by means of a course that was unsatisfactory in a variety of ways dictated by the hierarchy of standing because of my age. The hierarchies did not seem to have noticed that many women had had to leave a longstanding vocation on hold while the hierarchy made lengthy decisions. There was no accreditation of prior learning or prior experience (yet another example of the church out of touch with developments in the wider world); the theology was out of date and the management poor. The best parts were work placements with the local undertaker and at St James's Piccadilly and my supporting tutor David Page who became a longstanding and supportive friend. I will leave the poem to speak for itself:

### **Kicking and screaming**

O God, why did you call me to be a priest?  
 It was so long ago  
 When that seven-year-old longed for those golden robes –  
 And the gestures –  
 And the general 'holiness'.  
 It would have been OK  
 If it had been possible in my teens;  
 I was into the Bible then;

I studied it voraciously,  
 Read it regularly and avidly,  
 Strived for understanding,  
 Questioning and debating.  
 At Oxford it was *Honest to God* time.  
 I could have preached those sermons,  
 I could have been a curate at St Aldate's.  
 But in between then and now-  
 There are tarot cards  
 And Buddhism  
 And Transcendental Meditation  
 And solstices  
 And feminist liturgies  
 And synagogues and mosques  
 And liberation theology  
 And queer theologies.  
 All of these are now me,  
 Fused and synthesized  
 Into a belief system that is continually made new  
 Not by regular scriptural readings  
 But by Wisdoms of every hue of every shade:  
 "Call nothing that I have created unholy."  
 But the Church does –  
 Despite the inclusiveness of Jesus-  
 It defines its limits –  
 Who's in, who's out.  
 It's gays at present  
 Now that the women priests are in.  
 Tomorrow, it will be someone else.  
 Thirty or forty years ago  
 I could have gone through this narrow funnel of orthodoxy;  
 Now it is too narrow  
 And the bundles that I have acquired on my circuitous faith journey  
 Bang and scrape  
 Against the sides of the tunnel;  
 Sometimes the flints cut through them and seem to tear at my very heart.  
 The light at the end seems a long way away -  
 Only a sixth of the way through -  
 And I am weary, dirty and angry.  
 And yet I (and my close friends) bind up the cuts  
 And I soldier on,  
 Bruised, doubting, kicking and screaming,  
 O God, why did you call me to be a priest?  
 And why could it not be then rather than now?  
 (Boyce-Tillman 2018: 134-5)

Having reached the moment of ordination, I nearly stumbled at the final hurdle – the clothes. I am a large woman and the straight down garments – alb and cassock – were designed for bodies that had shoulders wider than hips. In order to get the garments to fit my bust and hips they hung loosely from my shoulders. The cassock and surplice were worse; for not only did the cassock fall off at the shoulders if wide enough for my hips, but the surplice, made of polyester cotton and designed for someone at least a foot taller than me and thinner, made me look like a giant balloon. When I tried a pleated cotta which looked much better, I was told by a close clerical friend that it was not correct choir dress. I very nearly despaired until I found a tailor who made a less gathered garment of an appropriate length. The clerical shirts were no better. I was determined not to wear black because of the way it drags the colour from an ageing face. Again, they were all in polyester cotton, an ungrateful material for the larger women's body. Through my interfaith group I managed to get Paramjeet to make most wonderful shirts flowing beautifully over my curvaceous hips. They are admired by many fellow clergy. I clearly remember the moment on the deaconing retreat, when we first put on our cassocks. A group of people, who had been colourful and delighting in difference, suddenly all looked the same. I thought: "That is what this institution does. It pours us all into the same mould." The best thing was that the ex-dancer in our group had forgotten to put on her black shoes and her red strappy sandals 'glowed' beneath the black cassock. This tiny vignette gave me heart that some vestiges of femininity were still visible in the grinding institutionalisation of the Church. I was reminded of my childhood, when I made little plaster of Paris models by pouring the plaster into little rubber moulds. They all came out the same, and I painted one red for Auntie and another blue for Grandma. The course had forced us all into the same moulded shape. Recently I heard a bishop preach on how his ordination course had given him a firm group of friends that had lasted a lifetime. I looked back and longed for what might have been for me, but never could be. The hierarchy of dominance which forced me in this particular course deprived me this blessing.

### **Permission to officiate**

And now I am an Anglican priest with a PTO and in my seventies. I have served several churches in South London and am still an honorary chaplain to Winchester cathedral. I have covered an 18month interregnum at one church; and I have now established a firmer longer-term relationship with a local parish and have been accepted on to the ministry team there. This acceptance in a particular place has been wonderful and a new experience. I have with another priest covered maternity for the vicar who has had a baby. I have planned and run a Lent course and preached and/or celebrated at least every other Sunday as well as writing and providing new hymns linked with my sermons. At Christmas many clergy received a Christmas hamper. The new diocesan directory does not list me in the ministry team of my parish. Enquiries into the reasons behind this revealed that I am now too old to be regarded as of any significance. This seemed like the abuse of hierarchies of standing. I no longer have any standing in the church; I am, I presume, worthy of pity for my age. At the two universities I serve, I am carrying on working as in my appraisals I am doing an effective job that others cannot do. I hold senior positions and carry out research of international standing. I can still (despite my age!!) carry out keynotes via ZOOM initiate music projects and supervise and examine doctoral students. In the eyes of the church I am – to use a colloquial phrase – past it. No one has asked me whether I am past or done any appraisal of my capacities. 70 is the age and I am expected to accept the

status quo of systemic restriction. It seems like the final abuse by a church that I have served in various ways since I was born. In an age when women have not been able to be ordained throughout most of their lives despite feeling a vocation anything as ageist as this is therefore sexist. Because women have had careers (indeed have needed them in an age of marriage breakdown) and have born and raised children many women even now come into self-supporting ministry later in their lives. Indeed, it was a generation of older lay women who have kept the practice aspects of the church of England in order for much of its life – cleaning brass, arranging flowers, running Mothers’ Unions, repairing church garments and washing and ironing church linen. Women are in general living longer than men and still have much to offer the churches as wise elders. Yet the hierarchies prefer to see them as of lesser capacity and standing than younger people who may be considerably less active than they are. How has this come about? It has happened by these same hierarchies who prefer systemic restriction to treating people with respect and dignity. “You would never get away with this in the wider world” I replied to one cleric exhorting me to accept the status quo. Of course, if my generation had been prepared to accept the status quo no women would have been ordained. “Well-behaved women never make history.” Obedience is a tricky virtue in the face of unjust hierarchies.

### **Hymn writing and composition**

My musical experience has helped me. For the big pieces The vision of ecclesiology was a Church that was inclusive but over its history, this vision has been lost in a normalisation based on the mistaking of uniformity for unity. I have based the Values of my musical events on a reworking of an ecclesiological frame by including everyone who wishes to take part. The four pillars of the traditional church were:

- Unity
- Holiness
- Catholicity
- Apostolicity

(Boyce-Tillman 2018: 321) Drawing on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2000) and Robert Goss (2002), Tiffany Steinwert reworked these in order to produce a truly inclusive model of church. Unity, she suggests, needs to be transformed from doctrinal uniformity (expressed traditionally in creedal statements) to solidarity, a concept central to the thinking of liberation theologians. In my musical thinking this has become the inclusion of a variety of styles (orate and literate) in the same piece to produce a unity that is not based on uniformity; this has transformed my role as the composer into a frame-builder), both rooted in the past and also alive to new possibilities, often suggested by my interaction with the participants through the process of co-creation. Pat and Kathie Debenham describe a dance project bringing deaf and hearing people together, co-creating an interdisciplinary performance entitled *Beyond Words* which:

engendered ways to build respect for difference, compassion, understanding and a sense of being connected to the greater themes of life. (Debenham & Debenham 2008: 52)

Holiness in Steinwert's model ceases to be individualised piety and becomes justice-seeking. Many of my musical events are concerned with justice, such as *The Great Turning* (2014) – with its concern for respect for the earth and ecology – and the restoring of respect for traditions and styles that have been downplayed and not honoured. Catholicity, which is traditionally worked out in a form close to Roman imperialism – both in the so-called Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant traditions, especially in their colonial enterprises – needs to be about radical inclusion and the accepting of difference. My musical policy has been one of including everyone and trying to find the place where they fit. Apostolicity has to cease to be about a male lineage, but about working out of what it means to be an apostle – in other words, committed action (Steinwert 2003). In musical terms, this is reflected in the immense stress on wellbeing and commitment through musicking which is available to everyone. The principles underpinning my work are thus a reworking of these pillars of the Church – unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity (Boyce-Tillman 2007) through the medium of musicking – a reworked ecclesiology, expressed through musicking. of one person's ideas on a group of people.

The hymns have often been presents or commissions and *A Rainbow to heaven* (2006) relates the story of the women's secret groups into their acceptance (partially) into the church. This hymn which has been very popular for many ceremonies reflects many of the themes that have run through my life. Originally it was a wedding hymn with verses two and three looking at the two loves which need to be embraced by both partners equally – gendered. The first verse sees God in the other-than-human world. Verse 4 looks at life and faith as process. The final verse which many people have found problematic asks that the shades of our past be transfigured by the Holy Ghost – I used the archaic term to balance the shades. So often we are defeated by aspects of our past that we do not even remember. I pray that women in the church may experience the burning of their treatment by all the three hierarchies identified at the outset of this article.

1. We sing a love that sets all people free,  
That blows like wind, that burns like scorching flame,  
Enfolds like earth, springs up like water clear.  
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.

2 We sing a love that seeks another's good,  
That longs to serve and not to count the cost,  
A love that, yielding, finds itself made new.  
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

3 We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid  
To be itself, despite another's wrath,  
A love that stands alone and undismayed.  
Come, strength'ning love, live in our hearts today.

4 We sing a love that, wand'ring, will not rest  
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,  
Through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.  
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

5 We sing a burning, fiery, Holy Ghost  
That seeks out shades of ancient bitterness,  
Transfig'ring these, as Christ in ev'ry heart.

Come joyful love, live in our hearts today.  
(Boyce-Tillman 2006: 83)<sup>14</sup>

## Summary

The hierarchical organisation of the Anglican church has caused many people pain, which, when it becomes intolerable, causes them to leave. Can it ever be transformed?

Genuine reconciliation involves transition from systems of domination to relationships of mutuality. (Sutherland 2005: 23)

Is it possible to connect in new and vibrant ways or are we so obsessed with management that mutuality becomes impossible?

Connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement. Belonging is the human desire to be part of something larger than yourself. (Dowd 2019: 284)

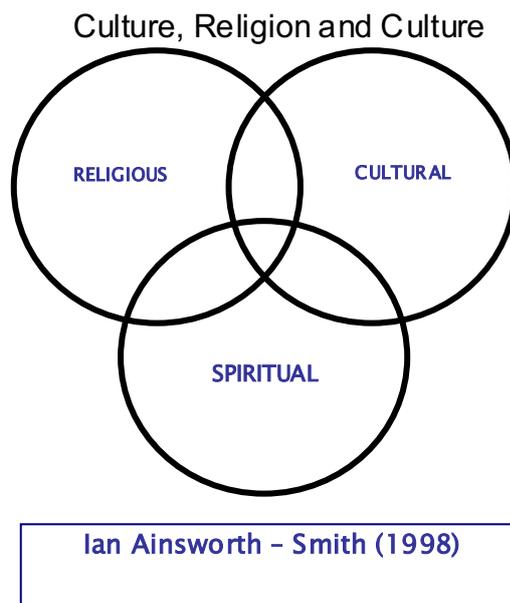
These are my dreams for a church that is so much part of cultural identity and in which I have navigated the hierarchies for over seventy years. Michel Foucault (1980) identifies two strategies for this in subjugated groups in society- strategies of survival and strategies of resistance. Music enabled me to create a new ecclesiology in musical events and the hymn writing enabled me to get my thinking heard. Apophatic ways of knowing synthesising various contemplative traditions - not even seeking answers to the questions - have served me well, as my friend the late Rev Robert Kaggwa wrote about mystery:

We have also lost the sense of mystery. This dualism of 'either/or' thinking has also given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life. It misleads and betrays us when applied to the perennial problems of being human in this world. Therefore, we need to move away from an 'either/or' attitude to a 'both/and' attitude. In certain circumstances, truth is a paradoxical joining of apparent opposites. (Kaggwa 2008)

I have left, re-joined and found new ways of being church, through other denominations, other groupings, secret liturgies. "Why do I stay?" I often ask myself. It is this strange interface of culture, spirituality and religion:

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<sup>14</sup> Copyright Stainer and bell



I am an only child with very little family and the Anglican church constitutes the last remaining cultural chain of memory with my past, which is true of many of those in its pews today. My spirituality is rooted in, but no longer depends on, the church except insofar as the sacraments mean a great deal to me – especially the Eucharist. In terms of religion, a local Anglican church brings together an extremely diverse group of people at least once a week. There is nowhere else in contemporary culture, where this happens regularly. I have tried to leave several times but I always come back. The dream of Anglicanism – a godly, righteous and sober (well balanced) life<sup>15</sup> for everyone – is a great dream. I pray that one day it may be realised.

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