

E. L. Mascall and the Anglican Opposition to the Ordination of Women as Priests, 1954–78

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This article examines the grounds on which the Anglican philosopher and theologian Eric Mascall opposed the ordination of women, in a series of influential publications from the 1950s to the 1970s. It explores their basis in Mascall's understanding of the Church, the Incarnation and the ontological status of the sexes. It also considers the particular atmosphere of the Anglo-Catholicism of the period, convulsed by ecumenical advance at the Second Vatican Council and (as Anglo-Catholics understood it) the danger of moves towards the Protestant denominations in England. Whilst Mascall allowed that women priests might one day be embraced by the worldwide church, acting together, the peculiar atmosphere of the period seemed to make it the least auspicious time to make what would be a unilateral and far-reaching decision. The article also situates Mascall's interventions in the context of a wider realignment of conservatives, both evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, within the Church of England.

The period from the late 1960s until the early 1980s was a time in which several strands of conservative Christian opinion turned decisively against the trends of the previous few years, both in England and elsewhere. Hugh McLeod characterized the decade to 1975 as one of acute crisis for Christian churches in many countries, while at the same time conservative churches were relatively buoyant.¹ In part this was a retreat to older certainties in a time of disruption. Such a retreat might have entailed a re-establishment of older party divisions within churches. However, the pattern in the Church of England was different, and significant in the longer term, as conservative Anglo-Catholics and conservative evangelicals, previously divided over matters of doctrine and ritual, began to find common

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¹ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007), 188–212.

cause against developments within the Church of England that both groups opposed.² A straw in the wind was the collaboration in the late 1960s and early 1970s between conservatives on both sides in opposition to the scheme to reunite the Church of England and the Methodist Church.³ There was also shared concern over the liberal direction in which academic theology seemed to be heading, in publications such as *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), edited by John Hick and *Christian Believing*, the 1976 report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England.⁴

Born in 1905, Eric Mascall established his reputation as a theologian and philosopher in the catholic and Thomist tradition with a series of substantial works in the 1940s and 1950s. Although ordained as a priest, he worked out his vocation primarily in institutions of teaching and research: Lincoln Theological College (as subwarden); Christ Church, Oxford, from 1945; and King's College London, where he was professor of historical theology from 1962 until 1973.⁵ Although his reputation rests principally on his substantive books, he was also a tireless reviewer and critic of the work of others, a theological popularizer, and a trenchant polemicist on a range of issues. As such, he came to be an unofficial theologian-in-chief to conservative catholics in the Church of England, and increasingly overseas. As a result, Mascall was drawn into several of the disputes of the period on the conservative side. He was one of the authors – with the catholic Graham Leonard and the evangelicals Colin Buchanan and J. I. Packer – of the dissenting report on Anglican-Methodist reunion, *Growing into Union* (1970).⁶ He was also a prominent critic of trends in liberal theology for over two

² On this development, see John Maiden, 'Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic Relations, 1928–1983', in Andrew Atherstone and John Maiden, eds, *Evangelicalism and the Church of England in the Twentieth Century: Reform, Resistance and Renewal* (Woodbridge, 2014), 136–61, at 148–57.

³ Andrew Atherstone, 'A Mad Hatter's Tea Party in the Old Mitre Tavern? Ecumenical Reactions to *Growing into Union*', *Ecclesiology* 6 (2010), 39–67. This is to be read along with Atherstone's article, 'Evangelical Dissenters and the Defeat of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme', in Jane Platt and Martin Wellings, eds, *Anglican-Methodist Ecumenism: The Search for Church Unity, 1920–2020* (Abingdon, 2022), 118–34.

⁴ Peter Webster, 'Eric Mascall and the Responsibility of the Theologian in England, 1962–77', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21 (2021), 250–65.

⁵ On Mascall's understanding of his vocation as scholar and priest, see *ibid.* 252.

⁶ Colin Buchanan et al., *Growing into Union: Proposals for forming a United Church in England* (London, 1970).

decades. By the late 1970s, Mascall was convinced that the theology then being produced in England was misdirected in terms of its subject matter, inattentive to the tradition on which it should have been based and irresponsible in its expression. His critique found many echoes in evangelical concerns of the same period.⁷ Writing his memoir in the early 1990s, Mascall noted the growing alignment of evangelical and catholic voices, of which he had been part, on the side of revelation and the supernatural over against the kind of liberalism that had, he thought, come to dominate both church and academy.⁸

Conservative evangelicals and traditionalist Anglo-Catholics also found themselves in unfamiliar and unstable coalitions with others who owned neither label. Opposition hardened during the 1970s to liturgical reform and the supposed ‘abandonment’ of the Book of Common Prayer, and the adoption of the Alternative Service Book in 1980.⁹ There was increasing disquiet over the reforms of the law that had weakened the influence of parliament in the running of the Church of England, in favour of the General Synod.¹⁰ In the early 1970s there were signs of increasing conservative opposition to the permissive legislation of the 1960s: a sense that even qualified church support for those reforms had had ill effects, both foreseen and not, notably in the case of abortion.¹¹ Other critics charged the established church with having been captured by a kind of left-wing politics, and of concentrating on the kingdom on earth to the exclusion of the main issue, entry into the kingdom in

⁷ Webster, ‘Eric Mascall and the Responsibility of the Theologian’, 261.

⁸ E. L. Mascall, *Saraband: The Memoirs of E. L. Mascall* (Leominster, 1992), 380–1.

⁹ See, for instance, the essay by the conservative evangelical Roger Beckwith, ‘Doctrine and Devotion in the Book of Common Prayer’, in David Martin and Peter Mullen, eds, *No Alternative: The Prayer Book Controversy* (Oxford, 1981), 73–9. On the critique of the direction of travel within the church from a non-aligned perspective, see Peter Webster, ‘“Poet of church and state”: C. H. Sisson and the Church of England’, in Victoria Moul and John Talbot, eds, *C. H. Sisson Reconsidered* (Basingstoke, 2022), 159–82.

¹⁰ Peter Webster, ‘Parliament and the Law of the Church of England, 1945–74’, in Tom Rodger, Philip Williamson and Matthew Grimley, eds, *The Church of England and British Politics since 1900* (Woodbridge, 2020), 181–98, at 198.

¹¹ On a shift in evangelical engagement with ‘permissiveness’, see Matthew Grimley, ‘Anglican Evangelicals and Anti-Permissiveness: The Nationwide Festival of Light, 1971–1983’, in Atherstone and Maiden, eds, *Evangelicalism and the Church of England*, 183–205. More generally, see also Andrew Atherstone, ‘The Keele Congress of 1967: A Paradigm Shift in Anglican Evangelical Attitudes’, *Journal of Anglican Studies* 9 (2011), 175–97, at 185–6.

heaven.¹² A prolific essayist, Mascall was a frequent contributor to collections drawn together by others which addressed these themes.¹³ Mascall's contribution to one 1983 volume was typical. His essay was a reprise of his familiar critique of liberal theology, but the volume also contained essays on the various supposed ills of the established church, including the ordination of women.¹⁴

The philosophical theologian Brian Hebblethwaite in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* described Mascall's apologetic works of the 1960s as 'polemical conservatism at its best'; 'less appealing', however, 'were his extraordinary arguments against the ordination of women'. A similar note, of faint incomprehension attended by the whiff of moral failure, has tended to be struck in the wider literature on the position of women within the Anglican churches. For Wendy Fletcher-Marsh, such 'bizarre' and illogical arguments were those of the Gramscian traditional intellectual, 'who resists change in a self-protective desire to preserve the privilege of his or her own position in the old order society'.¹⁵ The accusation was made at the time, and has been echoed in the literature since, that opposition to the ordination of women was grounded in complex and deep-seated feelings of sexual inadequacy, and a fear of female sexuality, in the same male clergy.¹⁶ Both of these may well have influenced at least some of the opponents, although the degree of such influence is hard to determine. In general, however, the opponents of the ordination of women have rarely been treated in their own terms, and placed in their fullest historical context.

¹² See, for instance, Edward Norman's Reith Lectures for 1978, published as *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford, 1979).

¹³ See, for instance, Mascall's preface to a collection of essays on abortion, from the evangelical Paternoster Press: J. H. Channer, ed., *Abortion and the Sanctity of Life* (Exeter, 1985), 7–12.

¹⁴ Anthony Kilmister, ed., *When will ye be wise? The State of the Church of England* (London, 1983).

¹⁵ Wendy Fletcher Marsh, *Beyond the Walled Garden* (Dundas, ON, 2005), 209–15, quotation at 209. Similar, though more measured, is the account in Sean Gill, *Women and the Church of England from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1994), 232–67; on an earlier period, see Timothy Jones, "Unduly conscious of her sex": Priesthood, Female Bodies, and Sacred Space in the Church of England', *Women's History Review* 21 (2012), 639–55, particularly 640; idem, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England, 1857–1957* (Oxford, 2013), 93–130.

¹⁶ Fletcher Marsh, *Beyond the Walled Garden*, 212–13; Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 259–60; Rupert E. Davies, *The Church of England Observed* (London, 1984), 50.

Leaving aside their intrinsic appeal, or lack of it (in Hebblethwaite's terms), this article examines the grounds on which Mascall opposed the ordination of women, expressed in a series of influential publications from the late 1950s to the 1970s. It explores their basis in Mascall's understanding of the Church, the Incarnation and the ontological status of the sexes. It considers the particular atmosphere of the Anglo-Catholicism of the period, convulsed both by ecumenical advance at the Second Vatican Council and (as Anglo-Catholics understood it) the danger of moves towards the Protestant denominations in England. It also situates the opposition to the ordination of women in the context of shifting patterns of cooperation between Anglican evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. Mascall was far from alone among Anglican Catholics of the period in expressing such opposition.¹⁷ However, his interventions form a useful case study. They were among the most extensive and the most noticed writings on the subject, expressing the substantial parts of the Anglo-Catholic objection at their strongest, while largely eschewing the more flimsy objections which were also heard.¹⁸

The movement towards women's ordination was an international one, with different parts of the Anglican Communion making decisions at their own speed. Mascall kept a keen eye on developments, as he did with most international trends, both ecumenical and theological. The 1968 Lambeth Conference was unable to reach a conclusive view on the question, and asked the various provinces of the Communion to consider the issue.¹⁹ The meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1971 decided (by 24 votes to 22) that if

¹⁷ Other notable statements included the contribution of V. S. Demant, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford, to the report *Women and Holy Orders* (London, 1966), entitled 'Why the Christian Priesthood is Male': *ibid.* 96–114. Often cited was an essay by C. S. Lewis, 'Priestesses in the Church?', first published in 1948, and included in Lesley Walmsley, ed., *Essay Collection and other Short Pieces* (London, 2000), 398–402. In the 1970s, the Church Literature Association published a series of pamphlets, including reprints of Demant's essay, and another by Mascall himself.

¹⁸ Examples of Mascall's arguments being cited in later discussion include Susan Dowell and Jane Williams, *Bread, Wine and Women: The Ordination Debate in the Church of England* (London, 1994), 23; from a Methodist point of view, Davies, *Church of England Observed*, 41–2.

¹⁹ Resolutions 34 and 35, in *The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Reports* (London, 1968), 39.

the diocese of Hong Kong (where the deaconess Florence Li Tim Oi had been ordained priest in 1944, but later surrendered her licence, although not her orders), and any others that might follow suit, should decide to ordain women, the decision would be ‘acceptable to this Council’, which would ‘use its good offices to encourage all provinces of the Anglican Communion to continue in communion with these dioceses’.²⁰ Thus each province could follow its own path, and the central organs of the Communion would try to manage whatever tensions that might cause, both within the Communion and in its global relations with other churches. By 1978 women had been ordained to the priesthood in Hong Kong, Canada, New Zealand and the USA.²¹

The story in England ended much later, but had begun earlier, not least due to campaigners such as Maude Royden between the world wars.²² The debate began to intensify in the 1950s, and a series of reports were issued, most notably that on *Women and Holy Orders* (1966). Unable to resolve anything in the Church Assembly in 1967, the Church of England continued to deliberate. In response to the request from the Anglican Consultative Council, there was a period of consultation between 1973 and 1975; in July 1975 a majority in the General Synod agreed that there were no barriers in principle to the ordination of women, but did not act to remove the barriers that existed in fact. In 1978 the matter came once again to the synod, which debated a motion to remove those barriers. Carried by the laity and the bishops, it was heavily defeated in the House of Clergy.²³ The movement in favour of women’s ordination continued to gather momentum, however, and in 1984 the synod returned to the question, agreeing this time to bring forward legislation to ordain women to the diaconate. Finally, in 1992 the vote on the ordination of women to the

²⁰ Resolution 28, in *The Time is Now: Anglican Consultative Council, First Meeting, Limuru, Kenya* (London, 1971), 34–5, 38–9.

²¹ For an overview, see Cordelia Moyse, ‘Gender Perspectives: Women and Anglicanism’, in Jeremy Morris, ed., *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, 4: Global Western Anglicanism, c.1910–Present* (Oxford, 2017), 68–92.

²² See Gill, *Women and the Church*, 234–42; Brian Heeneey, *The Women’s Movement in the Church of England, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1988), 116–38.

²³ The motion was defeated in the House of Clergy by 149 votes to 94. The bishops accepted it by 32 votes to 17, and the laity by 120 votes to 106. See Paul A. Welsby, *A History of the Church of England, 1945–1980* (Oxford, 1984), 258.

priesthood was won, and the first women were ordained as priests in 1994.²⁴

It is not quite clear when Mascall first began to take note of the issue, although the range of his reading on most other subjects suggests that it might well have been between the wars. He certainly knew the book by Charles Raven, *Women and Holy Orders: A Plea to the Church of England*, first published in 1928 when Mascall was a highly engaged young Anglican Catholic and reading voraciously.²⁵ He also read a reprinted essay by the former MP and Anglican laywoman Edith Picton-Turbervill, which appeared in 1953 under the auspices of the Society for the Equal Ministry of Men and Women in the Church; other books that came to his notice included a 1949 study by the evangelical R. W. Howard.²⁶ His first intervention was in the journal *Theology* in 1954 in response to the New Testament scholar Margaret Thrall, later one of the first women ordained in the Church in Wales.²⁷ Thrall subsequently expanded her case into a short book, which appeared in 1958.²⁸ Mascall was for a time a member of the theological committee of the Church Union, the conservative catholic society, and produced private reports on various issues. His report on the ordination of women was written in 1959, presumably as a response to the renewed discussion, and published shortly after; it dealt with Thrall's case at some length.²⁹

²⁴ For a summary account of the process to 1980, see *ibid.* 255–8; Ivan Clutterbuck, secretary of the Church Union between 1966 and 1974, covers it at length, if more partially, in his *Marginal Catholics: Anglo-Catholicism, a further Chapter of Modern Church History* (Leominster, 1993), 240–55.

²⁵ Although Mascall cites a later edition, it seems likely that he would have been aware of the book, or at least the debate, at the time of its first publication.

²⁶ Edith Picton-Turbervill, *Should Women be Priests and Ministers?* (London, 1953); this consisted of two chapters first published in B. H. Streeter and Edith Picton-Turbervill, *Woman and the Church* (London, 1917). See also R. W. Howard, *Should Women be Priests?* (Oxford, 1949).

²⁷ Eric Mascall, 'The Ministry of Women' [letter to the editor], *Theology* 57 (1954), 428–9; Jenny Watts, 'Margaret Thrall: Obituary', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2010, online at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/dec/21/the-rev-margaret-thrall-obituary>>, accessed 12 December 2021.

²⁸ M. E. Thrall, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Study of the Biblical Evidence* (London, 1958).

²⁹ A typescript dated September 1959 is at London, LPL, CU 104/2/2. It was published as Eric Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood of the Church* (London, 1959); citations are of the published edition.

It became widely cited as a summary of the catholic dissenting position.³⁰

Mascall laid out his case again in three publications in the 1970s. Two of them appeared in 1972. One was a pamphlet published by the Church Literature Association, the publishing arm of the Church Union.³¹ The second, a reprinting of his 1959 report, appeared in a volume of essays that emerged from circles overlapping with those that had opposed Anglican-Methodist reunion. It had originated as a project involving catholics alone, but became a collaboration with evangelicals, led by Michael Bruce, vicar of St Mark's, North Audley Street, in central London, and his evangelical counterpart in the Church Assembly, Gervase Duffield. The book contained an essay by J. I. (James) Packer, a co-author with Mascall of *Growing into Union*, who occupied a position among conservative evangelicals analogous of that of Mascall among Anglo-Catholics. Much of the editorial work was done by Roger Beckwith, librarian of Latimer House in Oxford, of which Packer had been warden. The publisher was Duffield's own Marcham Manor Press.³² Mascall returned to the fray in 1978 in another collection of essays, this time with contributions from Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Jewish authors, as well as from Roger Beckwith (again); it also included vivid reports of divisions caused by recent decisions to ordain women in both the Church of Sweden, and (within the Anglican Communion) the Episcopal Church in the USA.³³

As a young man, Mascall had not imagined himself heading towards ordination. He read not theology but mathematics in the mid-1920s and then spent some years as a schoolmaster, before entering Ely Theological College. It was also a surprise to find himself, as one without any formal theological training, responsible for teaching ordinands the subject from 1937, as sub-warden of Lincoln Theological College. Despite the professional status that he achieved

³⁰ Demant, 'Why the Christian Priesthood is Male', 112; see also the repeated citations in the 1972 report by the Advisory Council on the Church's Ministry, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* (London, 1972), 39–44.

³¹ Eric Mascall, *Women Priests?* (London, 1972).

³² Eric Mascall, 'Women and the Priesthood of the Church', in Michael Bruce and Gervase Duffield, eds, *Why not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women* (Appleford, 1972), 95–120. The work went into a second edition, significantly expanded, in 1976.

³³ Eric Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', in Peter Moore, ed., *Man, Woman and Priesthood* (London, 1978), 9–26.

within the discipline, throughout his career he retained a sense of distance from it; a feeling that his approach – logical, philosophical, rigorous – was not shared by many others.³⁴ As I show elsewhere, his entire project of synthesis and exposition was founded on a sense that, in principle at least, reason would confirm revelation; indeed, it could do no other without contradicting the nature of God himself.³⁵ An almost aesthetic sense of the beauty and orderliness of doctrine was accompanied in Mascall by an impatience with those who seemed to see things less clearly, and a kind of righteous anger at those who seemed consciously to sidestep inconvenient questions. The scheme for Anglican-Methodist reunion had been based, for Mascall, on an unacceptable ducking of the crucial issue; a rather disreputable dodge to avoid the inconvenience of derailing a process that was already in motion.³⁶ So, too, did some advocates of women priests seem to capitulate to a kind of institutional pragmatism that ignored the questions it could not answer. It was not enough to act, he thought, and hope that a theological rationale might follow. Leslie Houlden, principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon, argued that, as the ecclesiastical past was no longer normative for the present, then it was a matter to be settled by ‘common sense’: ‘if social institutions point that way, if there is need, if there is desire, let not “theology” be falsely involved ... It is a matter of expediency for the Church, no more, no less’.³⁷ This kind of argument Mascall could not accept. Soon after the Movement for the Ordination of Women was formed in 1979, its leaders were challenged (by a supporter) to put aside arguments based on emotion, and to apply themselves to the theology of the matter.³⁸ This Mascall would surely have welcomed.

Although he paid close attention to the proceedings of both, Mascall seems never to have considered standing for election to the Church Assembly or its successor, the General Synod. Why this

³⁴ Mascall, *Saraband*, 378–9.

³⁵ Peter Webster, ‘Eric Mascall and the Making of an Anglican Thomist, 1937–46’, *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* (forthcoming).

³⁶ Peter Webster, ‘Theology, Providence and Anglican-Methodist Reunion: The Case of Michael Ramsey and E. L. Mascall’, in Platt and Wellings, eds, *Anglican-Methodist Ecumenism*, 101–17, at 110–11.

³⁷ As quoted by Eric Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London, 1977), 37.

³⁸ The recollection of Judith Maltby from 1980 or 1981, as recorded in eadem, ‘One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, but Two Integrities?’, in Monica Furlong, ed., *Act of Synod – Act of Folly?* (London, 1998), 42–58, at 42.

was unclear, but the issue of women priests showed, in Mascall's view, that such quasi-democratic bodies were unsuited to dealing with certain kinds of questions. 'There will always', he argued, 'be possible courses of action that are constitutionally and canonically legal but are either morally or theologically wrong, abhorrent as the fact is to the administrative mind.'³⁹ Despite assertions to the contrary, the 1975 Synod vote had not settled the theological justification for the ordination of women, but had merely shown that a majority of delegates thought there was one to be found. How, he asked, could such a body be competent to decide when its members needed only to be resident in a parish, and named on its electoral roll?⁴⁰ Mascall also doubted both the competence of the Anglican Consultative Council to rule as it had done in 1971, and the status of its ruling. He was similarly critical of the grounds on which the Lambeth Conference of 1968 had reasoned.⁴¹ But Mascall's understanding of the Church placed the greatest importance on the worldwide and historic body of bishops as makers of such decisions, even if some of them seemed content to delegate the task to their local synodical assemblies.⁴² The precipitous action of the American and Canadian churches in ordaining women (he later reflected) might have been avoided had there been a greater consciousness among the American and Canadian bishops of their membership in a worldwide episcopate of all the bishops of historic catholic Christendom: Roman, Orthodox and Old Catholic, as well as Anglican.⁴³

There were, however, more substantial disagreements in play. As in relation to Anglican-Methodist unity, Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical opposition to the ordination of women was on related but not identical grounds. Evangelical opposition tended to start and end with a reading of Scripture, and the Pauline epistles in particular. The issue was not so much about the sacraments as it was about authority in the congregation. As such, some evangelicals, such as James Packer, were content (though unenthusiastic) to see

³⁹ Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 17–18.

⁴¹ Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 6–9, 13–14

⁴² See, for instance, Eric Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity: A Theological Approach* (London, 1958), 170–93.

⁴³ In an unpublished manuscript, dating from late 1984: Oxford, Pusey House Library, Mascall Papers, Box 4B, 'The Overarching Question: Divine Revelation or Human Invention?', fol. 101.

women at the altar and in the pulpit so long as they were not exercising headship over the whole congregation.⁴⁴ Mascall did make some use of the analogy of the headship of God the Father over the Son, Christ as the head of the Church, and the Genesis account of man as head of woman.⁴⁵ However, his use of it was not central to his argument; the specifically historical and biblical arguments that Mascall deployed, along with other Anglo-Catholic critics, were related but distinct.

It was not enough (Mascall thought) to read the record of the early church as merely determined by the cultural context of the first century; to argue, in effect, that Christ could just as easily have been incarnated as woman, and appointed female apostles, but was not and did not in order that the reception of the gospel be made easier. Jesus, after all, had hardly shied away from controversy, and the opening of the sacraments to male and female alike was in itself a radically equalizing act. In view of the counter-cultural emphasis that Christ had put on the equality of men and women otherwise, Mascall argued, it was not accidental that Christ was incarnated male, and that all the apostles were men: ‘is it not natural to assume that there must be some very deep and significant reason in the nature of things for this restriction?’⁴⁶

That deep and significant reason, for Mascall, lay in the given nature of the Church. Mascall observed that the ministry of women posed different issues to catholic churches than to Protestant ones. Protestant churches, as Mascall understood them, tended to view their ministers primarily as laypeople with a particular training, authorized in various ways to perform certain functions. Apart from that authorization, there was no essential difference in character between clergy and laity; nothing in a person’s nature changed at ordination.⁴⁷ In books such as *Christ, the Christian and the Church* (1946) and *Corpus Christi* (1953, 2nd edn 1965), Mascall had worked out a doctrine of the Church, the body of Christ, the eucharist and the priesthood which was perhaps as elaborate and rarefied as an Anglican could produce. The common

⁴⁴ See, for instance, James Packer, ‘Thoughts on the Role and Function of Women in the Church’, in Colin Craston, ed., *Evangelicals and the Ordination of Women* (Nottingham, 1973), 22–26.

⁴⁵ Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood*, 17, 33–4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 15–16.

Protestant focus on the priesthood of all believers – male and female, but individuals – was, in his view, correct but slightly out of focus. This priesthood was only secondarily individual in nature; the ‘priesthood of the Body’ (as he preferred to call it) was corporate, and ‘is seen in its fullest exercise when the Church is assembled together, with all its members playing their several and interrelated parts in one organic and coherent activity of praise and offering, for the celebration of the Eucharist, the rite which day by day recreates the Church and gives it its life’.⁴⁸ However, there was a ministerial priesthood, quite distinct from the corporate priesthood exercised by all Christians together, that was in the hands of the priest himself: ‘in his sacerdotal acts Christ’s priesthood is, as it were, channelled or focused to a point and made operative by the words and gestures of one particular man’.⁴⁹ Within the body, the very manifestation of Christ on earth, the clergy did not act merely as representatives, or even as agents, but as ‘the very organs through whom [Christ] himself acts’; there was an ‘essential identity’ between Christ’s personal ministry on earth and that which he now exercised in the Church. As such, it was ‘highly congruous that the manhood through which he acts is male as he is male’.⁵⁰

For some catholic Anglicans, then, an exclusively male priesthood contained an important symbolic fact, and there was a loss entailed by its discontinuation. At stake was what two later commentators (and supporters of the ordination of women) described as a ‘particularly dense and satisfying sacramental framework’.⁵¹ But even if the ordination of women was undesirable, was it feasible nonetheless? The bishop of Ripon, John Moorman, a vigorous opponent of the Anglican-Methodist reunion scheme, while thinking the ordination of women inexpedient, held that there were no fundamental objections: a position not unlike that of Michael Ramsey, archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 until 1974.⁵² For Mascall the issue was not that women were in some way temperamentally unsuited to the

⁴⁸ Ibid. 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 22.

⁵⁰ Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 16.

⁵¹ Dowell and Williams, *Bread, Wine and Women*, 23.

⁵² Michael Manktelow, *John Moorman: Anglican, Franciscan, Independent* (Norwich, 1999), 77–8. On Ramsey, see Owen Chadwick, *Michael Ramsey: A Life* (Oxford, 1990), 278–84.

work of a priest, although some campaigners did take this line. Neither was the issue that the presence of female bodies in such a visible position would pose too great a distraction from their prayers to heterosexual male worshippers, although such an argument had also been made, and by eminent men.⁵³ From Mascall's understanding of the metaphysics of the human person flowed certain unavoidable, and drastic, conclusions about women priests, that went beyond considerations of symbolic richness and congruity. It was at this point that his thought was most distinctive, and most speculative.

In the heat of the debate in England, it was suggested that it was no more possible to ordain a woman as a priest than one could a dog, a monkey or a pork pie.⁵⁴ All the evidence of Mascall's character suggests that he could not possibly have used such an expression, in print or in person. Nonetheless, it starkly expressed the heart of the catholic objection at its very strongest, a position that Mascall held right from the start of his public involvement in the issue and which he continued to elaborate throughout. The very nature of a woman made it not undesirable that she be a priest, but *impossible*. Mascall held a high view of fundamental human rights; there was a specificity to human nature, that distinguished the human from the other animals, derived from the Incarnation.⁵⁵ However, Mascall could not regard the exclusion of women from the priesthood as a form of discrimination analogous to racism, as some critics did. For Mascall the very nature of the human person was fundamentally binary, organized around a division into male and female. Beneath all the racial, temperamental and cultural differentiations of human beings, there was not, for Mascall, a single human nature, common to male and female but sexless in nature. At the most fundamental ontological level, there was no essential human being, only men and women. 'Humanity is, so to speak, essentially binary; it exists only in the two modes of masculinity and femininity'. It did not exist partly in one and partly in the

⁵³ Such a view had been expressed in 1938 by N. P. Williams, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford. Mascall concluded that it would bear little weight: Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood*, 6–11.

⁵⁴ The recollection of Judith Maltby, prominent in the Movement for the Ordination of Women, as given in eadem, 'One Lord', 42.

⁵⁵ Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', 21; on Mascall's understanding of human rights, see Peter Webster, 'Eric Mascall and the Rise, Fall and Rise of "Christian Sociology", c.1935–1985', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 23 (2023).

other: ‘under a difference in mode it is fully in each’.⁵⁶ Since the priest was the ‘agent and instrument through which [Christ] is exercising *his* priesthood, he too must be male ... Christ exercises his priesthood in the Church through human beings who possess human nature in the same sexual mode in which he possesses it.’⁵⁷ Mascall admitted that this could not easily be fitted within the Aristotelian logic on which his work usually rested, but it pertained both to the redemptive order and to nature. Sex differentiation was not merely read off from the existence of the human body: in the words of C. S. Lewis, in an essay often quoted (including by Mascall), ‘we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as the live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge’.⁵⁸

It was not coincidental that the Christian churches that had retained an exclusively male priesthood – the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox – were also those with the highest view of the person of Mary. Writing in 1959, Mascall thought that the demand that the roles of men and women in the church be identical stemmed from an almost complete neglect of Mariology in the Church of England.⁵⁹ Mascall, along with other opponents, sought to separate out the priesthood from the other professions to which women sought access (rightly, in his view), since to treat them in the same way was to make a category error. The particular cultural pressures of the time made it difficult for any argument based on the obedient Mother of God to be heard. However, Mascall wanted always to speak not in terms of the sexes being inferior or superior to each other, but different. Although men and women had been made equally members of the body of Christ, it had been to a woman that the highest possible honour had been given: to give birth to the incarnate Christ. For Mascall, there was a tight theological intertwining of Mary as *theotokos*, the permanent incarnation of Christ, and the existence of the Church as his body, into which all were incorporated.⁶⁰ As he told a 1949 symposium of Anglicans and Orthodox, ‘Mary is

⁵⁶ Mascall, ‘Some Basic Considerations’, 20–1. Mascall was to elaborate his thinking on the absolute binary division of sex, based on a reading of contemporary genetics, in *Whatever happened to the Human Mind?* (London, 1980), 131–8.

⁵⁷ Mascall, ‘Some Basic Considerations’, 22–3.

⁵⁸ Lewis, ‘Priestesses in the Church?’, as quoted by Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 17.

⁵⁹ Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood*, 26.

⁶⁰ Mascall, ‘Some Basic Considerations’, 23–4.

our mother and we are her children, by adoption into her Son. This is not an exuberance of devotion, but a fact of theology; it can be denied only by denying the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation.’⁶¹ Mascall’s sense of the dogma concerned was largely unchanged by the time he expounded it again in 1968, to a meeting of the newly formed Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but he had been encouraged in particular by the treatment of Mary in relation to the church in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, which seemed to chime with his own.⁶² Here was part of the ecumenical balance that was threatened by the ordination of women, to which I shall return shortly.

There were other arguments, based on grounds not of principle but of the position of the Church of England: just one part, if an important one, of a communion which even as a whole represented perhaps only one in twenty of the world’s Christians, by Mascall’s reckoning.⁶³ As the ‘canon’ of Vincent of Lerins – the widely-used threefold test of catholicity – had it, it was for the catholic church to hold to those things ‘which hath been believed everywhere, always and by all men’; it was a matter of ‘universality, antiquity and consent’.⁶⁴ The catholicity of the Church of England was central to Mascall’s concerns throughout his career, and from it flowed his opposition to successive ecumenical schemes, from the Church of South India in the 1940s and 1950s to Anglican-Methodist reunion in the 1960s.⁶⁵ The whole body of the church, in all its separated parts, had for nineteen centuries maintained the apostolic practice of an exclusively male priesthood. Should it not be a matter of great seriousness, then, to alter it? A sense of history alone ought to impart a certain circumspection. It was possible, he conceded, that the worldwide church might, after the requisite reflection, agree

⁶¹ Eric Mascall, ‘The Dogmatic Theology of the Mother of God’, in idem, ed., *The Mother of God: A Symposium* (London, 1949), 37–50, at 43–4.

⁶² Later published as ‘The Mother of God’, in Alberic Stacpoole, ed., *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue* (Slough, 1982), 91–7. Mascall was referring to the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, properly titled the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. See also his ‘Theotokos: The Place of Mary in the Work of Salvation’, in H. S. Box and E. L. Mascall, eds, *The Blessed Virgin Mary: Essays by Anglican Writers* (London, 1963), 12–26.

⁶³ Mascall, ‘Some Basic Considerations’, 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 11; on the issue at large, see Andrew Chandler, ‘Catholicity: Anglicanism, History and the Universal Church in 1947’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18 (2018), 236–51.

⁶⁵ Webster, ‘Theology, Providence and Anglican-Methodist Reunion’, 104–10.

that a fuller understanding of ecclesiology and Christology demanded a priesthood of men and women. Particularly in times of such theological turbulence, however, the most searching examination of the issues was required, lest the church commit itself to an ‘irreversible course of action that future generations will condemn as reflecting the ephemeral and unsubstantial prejudices of the latter part of the twentieth century’.⁶⁶

Mascall had often intervened in the movements towards unity between Anglican and Protestant churches. Such interventions indicated not opposition to ecumenism as such, but where his priorities lay: with the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox East. Mascall had been involved in the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius from the late 1920s onwards, editing its journal and symposia, and thus helping to bring together Anglican and Orthodox.⁶⁷ Ecumenical progress with the Orthodox had been slow; rather more had been achieved with the Old Catholic churches, with the entry into full communion in 1931. The change in theological atmosphere after the Second Vatican Council came as an astonishment to Anglican Catholics of Mascall’s generation, and there seemed to be a prospect of real advance.⁶⁸ The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) began work in 1970, as did an equivalent enterprise between Anglican and Orthodox in 1973.⁶⁹ Just as prospects for real progress among the catholic churches seemed to be brighter than ever before, the ordination of women threatened to destroy them.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, after a second rebuff from the Church of England in 1972, the Methodist Church in England had decided in 1974 to go ahead with the ordination of women.⁷¹ Writing in 1972, Mascall thought it unwise to take the apparently lively discussions within the Roman church as an indication of imminent change in

⁶⁶ Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 25.

⁶⁷ Aidan Nichols, *Alban and Sergius: The Story of a Journal* (Leominster, 2018), 21–3; Mascall, *Saraband*, 80–4.

⁶⁸ For more on this context, see Webster, ‘Theology, Providence and Anglican-Methodist Reunion’, 104–6.

⁶⁹ ARCIC built on the work of a preparatory commission set up in response to a joint declaration by Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI in 1966: ARCIC, *The Final Report* (London 1982), 1–4; Welsby, *Church of England*, 272.

⁷⁰ This was the feeling of Peter Moore, editor of one of the collections in which Mascall’s work appeared: ‘Introduction’, in Moore, ed., *Man, Woman and Priesthood*, 1–8, at 1.

⁷¹ Jane Platt and Martin Wellings, ‘Introduction’, in eadem, eds, *Anglican-Methodist Ecumenism*, 1–10, at 7.

relation to women priests, and certainly not as an invitation to other churches to change their practice.⁷² By 1978, it had become clear to him how damaging such a move might be. After its vote in 1975, the General Synod had asked Donald Coggan, archbishop of Canterbury from 1974 to 1980, to consult with other worldwide churches in order to gauge their likely reactions. The responses came in different ways but all were resoundingly negative, from the Orthodox churches, the Vatican and the Old Catholic bishops; for a time the idea seemed even to jeopardize the ongoing ecumenical exchanges with the Orthodox churches.⁷³ The reaction was expressed not only in private; *Inter insigniores*, the declaration issued by the Vatican in October 1976, was clearly negative, in terms congruent with Mascall's.⁷⁴ The recent experience of the Episcopal Church in the USA had been both disorderly and divisive.⁷⁵ In the light of all these reactions, Mascall wondered why the matter seemed to be of 'such immediate and compulsive urgency' to its proponents 'that literally nothing ... can be allowed to stand in its way'.⁷⁶

As noted already, Mascall was prepared to accept that it was at least conceivable that, together, the whole worldwide church might one day embrace women priests. The shape of his whole theological output suggests that he should have accepted the fact; his view of the authority of Christ in his church would most likely have outweighed his scruples.⁷⁷ However, Mascall thought the social and cultural ferment of the period to be another reason for caution. Mascall was far from alone in detecting in English society a much more fundamental questioning of traditional Christian understandings of sex, gender, marriage and the family that brought together conservatives of all

⁷² Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 4–5. Mascall noted the lack of precedent in Roman Catholic history in a review of Haye van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?*, *Religious Studies* 12 (1976), 394–5.

⁷³ Welsby, *Church of England*, 257–8; Margaret Pawley, *Donald Coggan* (London, 1989), 234–5.

⁷⁴ 'Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood', 1976, online at: <https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html>, accessed 11 January 2022.

⁷⁵ Mascall was in the United States for several weeks early in 1977, months after the General Convention of the Episcopal Church had authorized the ordination of women as priests, and it is highly likely that the subject was discussed: see Mascall, *Saraband*, 337–43.

⁷⁶ Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', 13–14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 25–6.

kinds.⁷⁸ No sound understanding of the sexes and their relation could, he thought, be discerned when sex itself was trivialized and commercialized, and detached from its place in the order of creation.⁷⁹ The long history of women's suffrage, and the changing patterns of employment catalyzed by the two world wars, made it perhaps inevitable that equality of access to the profession of priest should be caught up in the same questioning. 'It is unfortunately true', Mascall wrote some years later, 'that we live in a society whose public structure was mainly devised by men for men'. However, the efforts of secular feminism, as he saw it, were misdirected: 'a really healthy society will not be one which offers women increased facilities for imitating men, but one which makes it easier and more natural for them to be themselves'.⁸⁰

The question of social status was made sharper in the Church of England which, when compared to the Free Churches, was relatively clerical in its unspoken assumptions. The priesthood was bound up with questions of status and power, made sharper again by the particular social standing that establishment conferred. James Packer, though he could imagine women ministering in a team of clergy under male headship, thought that it would be an unkindness to those women to ordain them while withholding what many reflexively felt to be the 'minimum sign of clerical adequacy', that is, to be 'a sole incumbent [holding] a parish freehold with the degree of independence of the bishop that this gives'.⁸¹ The real underlying issue was, for Packer, the kind of clericalism that caused people to focus on the stipendiary clergy in isolation, rather than the many ministries of clergy and laity, exercised together. Until the Church of England had a clearer theology of ministry, the time was not right to think about women's ordination. Mascall had himself never been a parish incumbent but only a curate, in the early 1930s. But it was, he thought, possible to separate the issues of authority and sacramental competence: he could imagine a situation, theologically coherent if perhaps somewhat inconvenient, in which the government of the church was in lay hands but the

⁷⁸ On the issues at large, see Nigel Yates, *Love now, pay later? Sex and Religion in the Fifties and Sixties* (London, 2010), 22–37; Peter Webster, *Archbishop Ramsey: The Shape of the Church* (Farnham, 2015), 65–90.

⁷⁹ Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', 20.

⁸⁰ Mascall, in the preface to Channer, ed., *Abortion*, 11–12.

⁸¹ Packer, 'Thoughts on the Role and Function of Women', 26.

sacramental function remained in the hands of the male priesthood he desired.⁸²

CONCLUSION

Read superficially, and without the context of his metaphysics and understanding of the person, Mascall's view perhaps seemed indistinguishable from the patriarchal discrimination that campaigners were trying to dismantle; indeed, he himself was conscious that it might be so read.⁸³ One can only speculate how Mascall's attempt to rescue the word 'subordinate' from negative connotation would have been received, or his suggestion that the unique privilege granted to Mary as mother placed women *above* men both in nature and in the scheme of redemption;⁸⁴ as Sean Gill has noted, the sheer force of changing language and culture made such resistance quaintly Canute-like in its futility.⁸⁵ A reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* was blunt: 'whatever Professor Mascall says, androcentrism of the kind he expresses is now no more morally tolerable than racial discrimination or slavery'.⁸⁶ That many of those arguing against women's ordination were, like Mascall, ordained men – and, again like Mascall, unmarried too – made it harder for their case to be heard. But the kinds of argument that Mascall made, 'important worries ... about the theological significance of the particular, the concrete historicity of God's speech with us in Jesus', were enough to keep a theologian of the subtlety and openness of Rowan Williams from supporting the cause for several years, although by the early 1980s his mind had changed.⁸⁷ If this article has placed the early opponents of the ordination of women in a more secure historical context, and shown the internal logic (if not necessarily the persuasiveness) of the catholic objections, it will have achieved its aim.

⁸² Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood*, 17.

⁸³ Mascall, 'Some Basic Considerations', 23.

⁸⁴ Mascall, *Women and the Priesthood*, 17, 33–4; idem, 'Some Basic Considerations', 22–4.

⁸⁵ Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 262.

⁸⁶ 'Reverend Madam', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 November 1972, 1399.

⁸⁷ Rowan Williams, 'Women and the Ministry: A Case for Theological Seriousness', in Monica Furlong, ed., *Feminine in the Church* (London, 1984), 11–27, at 19, referring to Mascall specifically.

This article covers the period until 1978, although the story of the Anglican ordination of women was far from over. But the defeat in the Church of England's General Synod at the hands of the clergy in that year was a marker of a kind, of the point by which all the negative arguments that were to be heard had been thoroughly aired, and the two sides firmly entrenched. Mascall was never to be reconciled to the idea of women priests; the evangelical George Carey, who as archbishop of Canterbury presided over the final vote in 1992, came to regret the pain the matter had caused Mascall in his old age.⁸⁸ Mascall continued to correspond with opponents, including his long-time friend the bishop of London, Graham Leonard, and Margaret Hood, one of the leaders of Women Against the Ordination of Women; he also wrote letters to both the national and the church press.⁸⁹ 1978, however, marks the end of the sequence of his writings on the issue directly; he was in his seventy-third year, and although he continued to write, the rate of production was already slowing significantly.

Yet the objections persisted, until (and after) the ordination of the first women to the priesthood in the Church of England in 1994 and beyond, forming a persistent dividing line within both catholic and evangelical constituencies, and a bond between conservatives on both sides, both in England and around the Anglican Communion. Many on the evangelical side, from the 1960s onwards growing in numbers in the Church of England where Anglo-Catholics were not, were able from that position of strength to come to a more accommodating position.⁹⁰ But evangelical opposition continued, not least from the campaign group Reform, founded in 1993.⁹¹ On the Anglo-Catholic side, the resistance remained stronger, although far from universal; Forward in Faith stood against the ordination of women from its formation in 1992. Continued co-operation between evangelical and Anglo-Catholic was evident in the Association for

⁸⁸ George Carey, *Know the Truth: A Memoir* (London, 2004), 61–2. Carey was archbishop of Canterbury from 1991 until 2002.

⁸⁹ The correspondence with Hood is at Pusey House Library, Mascall Papers, Box 13. See also *ibid.*, Box 2, File 3, fol. 188, Graham Leonard to Mascall, 8 May 1984. Mascall's letters to the editor of *The Times* were published on 12 February 1982 (p. 11) and 12 June 1986 (p. 15); draft letters to the *Church Times* and *The Tablet* from February 1986 are in Mascall Papers, Box 2, File 3, fols 4–5.

⁹⁰ For example, by 1986 Colin Craston had become fully and vocally supportive: *Biblical Headship and the Ordination of Women* (Nottingham, 1986).

⁹¹ See, from within the orbit of Reform, Douglas Spanner, 'Men, Women and God', in Melvin Tinker, ed., *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis* (Fearn, 1995), 72–93.

the Apostolic Ministry, formed in 1985, which numbered among its early members James Packer, by that time resident in Canada, and Roger Beckwith.⁹²

The issue was fundamentally one of the relationship between the Bible and Catholic tradition on the one hand, and the ongoing work of the Spirit in the churches, and the salience of culture, on the other. Conservative evangelicals and conservative Anglican Catholics could agree that the balance was threatened, even if they disagreed on the precise relationship of Scripture and tradition. The point at issue was succinctly expressed in 1972 by Benedict Green, vice-principal of the Anglo-Catholic theological college at Mirfield, while reviewing both *Why not?* and *Women Priests?* Despite all the arguments, he suggested, there had to be more that catholic Anglicans could say to those women who felt a call to ordained ministry than *non possumus*. 'At some point,' he continued, referring to the joint evangelical-catholic symposium, 'collaboration becomes collusion; the fundamental question that both sides dodge is (as put to evangelicals) "has the Lord yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word?", or (as put to catholics) "is the Holy Spirit still leading the Church into all truth or has it already got there?"'⁹³ Mascall, in contrast, used a formulation of the same problem to which he was to return several times in his later years. The most salient division among Christians was fast becoming that between 'those who believe in the fundamentally revealed and given character of the Christian religion and those who find their norms in the outlooks and assumptions of contemporary secularised culture and are concerned to assimilate the beliefs and institutions of Christianity to it'.⁹⁴ Mascall's readers may have thought this a false dichotomy, but it was along these lines that other conflicts in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion have often been configured since.

⁹² Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 254. In 1986 Beckwith was listed as one of the two joint secretaries of the Association: Mascall Papers, Box 2 File 3, fol. 202, Arthur Leggatt to Mascall, 10 February 1986.

⁹³ Benedict Green, review of *Why Not?* and *Women Priests?*, *C.R.* [the journal of the Community of the Resurrection] 279 (1972), 46–7.

⁹⁴ Mascall, *Women Priests?*, 24; on the same lines, see idem, 'Some Basic Considerations', 26; (much later) idem, *Saraband*, 380.