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# *Bearers of an Idle Tale : Women as Evangelists in the Christian Tradition*

ALISON WHITE

## ABSTRACT

Women as evangelists are an almost unexplored area of the considerable writing that the Decade of Evangelism has provoked. Yet women were the earliest announcers of the Lord's resurrection, and their contribution, Alison White's title reminds us, has been consistently undervalued from that day to this. She identifies the particular features that go with a female evangelism; narrative form, relationality, domestic or small scale settings and an eschewing of power motifs in proclamation. All of which have things to teach us, men and women alike.

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**T**HE questions which I am addressing in this article arise from the last eighteen years working in Anglican and ecumenical settings as a lay woman and now ordained. I have had extensive involvement in what might broadly be called evangelism and this has taken me into some interesting situations where I have encountered women with a wealth of experience of telling the 'idle tale'. It is this kind of experience which has provoked the questions and the desire to see them more widely considered.

According to words used at baptism women are co-inheritors of the Kingdom of God. As such, whatever their tradition, they share the reception of the Christian gospel and the consequent responsibility for its proclamation. The bearing of the good news of God's revelation of himself in Christ has often stretched the ingenuity and determination of the women so entrusted. The credibility of the messenger has been intimately linked with that of the message from the outset. The women of Luke's account, coming from the first encounter with the risen Jesus, are met with outright disbelief on the part of their male fellow disciples: 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11). This disbelief has extended beyond this early record and seems to have relegated women and their practice of evangelism to the fringes of ecclesial notice or theological investigation. There is a notable lack of writing on the subject. The texts used to support this present exploration are drawn from associated areas, mostly concerning issues of language, metaphor and women's spirituality. This silence needs to be set alongside an increasing volume of writing on the subject of evangelism. This is particularly interesting in a decade which is designated both for evangelism and for churches in solidarity with women.

Experience suggests that the manner and contexts in which women communicate their faith offer insights into the content and practice of evangelism. They may be of significance in broadening the Church's understanding of evangelism and in establishing the proper recognition of this responsibility being that of the whole people of God.

The debate over what is meant by 'evangelism' seems to be perennial. For the purposes of this discussion the term is used to mean a verbal communication of Christian faith. This does not deny the integral importance of actions and presence but helps to focus on the dimension of evangelism in which women's contribution has been most suspect.

There has recently been a determined if not widespread re-evaluation of the presence and activity of women described in the New Testament documents.<sup>1</sup> Some of the figures remain shadowy and their roles are brought to contemporary attention through inference based on the limited information available (For example Prisca in Acts 18:2; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; or Phoebe in Rom. 16:1.) The account of the meeting of an unnamed Samaritan woman with Jesus is frequently cited as an example of good evangelistic practice, with Jesus being the exemplar.<sup>2</sup> The woman herself becomes an evangelist however, drawing her neighbours to faith through the vividness of her experience (John 4:29-30,39). There is an ambiguity in the closure of this pericope when John quotes the words of the villagers, 'It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42). The focus is on the proper acknowledgement of belief in the individuals concerned, but the woman may now safely be forgotten. Rebecca Chopp offers a positive approach based on that of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's notion that 'Scripture should be treated as a structuring prototype and not an eternal archetype; as a model of how Christians have, rhetorically and aesthetically, proclaimed the Word in the world'.<sup>3</sup> This would allow a useful uncovering of the hidden possibilities of the role of women as evangelists without prescribing the extent of that role from the very limited historical evidence. In turn this allows for a theological exploration of women as evangelists which is not based solely on the limited number of biblical examples.

Historical records do yield instances of women evangelists and indeed martyrs through the centuries. It is a reasonable supposition that those women whose stories have been written down are only representative of myriad others whose witness has been lost to the contemporary Church, partly through its own doing. The early history of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary is an instance of institutional anxiety over and antipathy to women who engage in evangelism and in so doing break the codes of convention. The Papal Bull of 1631 which suppressed the work of the Institute charges the members that they,

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1 e.g., Fiorenza E. Schüssler, *In Memory of Her*, SCM, London 1983; E. Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, SCM, London 1982.

2 e.g., W. G. Morrice, *The New Beginning*, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1981.

3 R. S. Chopp, *The Power To Speak*, Crossroad, New York 1991, p 42.

Under the guise of promoting the salvation of souls, have been accustomed to attempt and to employ themselves at many other works which are most unsuited to their weak sex and character, to female modesty and particularly to maidenly reserve.<sup>4</sup>

Despite deliberate and accidental loss of the accounts of women evangelists, there are attempts to recover their history.<sup>5</sup> This may be evidence of a desire to make this aspect of women's ministry more visible, to place it in the public arena so that it can help to shape the way evangelism is engaged in and also authenticate and support women as they evangelise. This dual function is important in that it acknowledges the existence of a public and private face of the Church and might make the experience of women part of the way in which these are held together.

The public, more readily accessible practice of evangelism has been undertaken by men. In 1993 for instance the membership of the Fellowship of Parish Evangelists stood at 218, of which 204 were men. It is difficult to find in the popular consciousness named women whose main work is as an evangelist. This is consonant with the whole of public ministry in the Church which is principally a male domain both numerically and in terms of status.

### Teaching with authority

The public authorisation to speak lends weight to the voice of the speaker. Pulpit and platform, the stages of public evangelism, have been jealously guarded and fenced with academic qualification, training and licences. Anyone, male or female, who wishes to exercise a public ministry in a denomination such as Anglicanism must satisfy diocesan authority that the prospective preacher has suitable, approved academic capabilities. There will then follow a frequently lengthy training process, with assessment or examination. When these requirements have been adequately fulfilled, a renewable licence to preach will be conferred for those in Reader ministry, or ordination will admit the candidate to an authorised ministry. Women, of course, meet these requirements and gain access to accreditation for public ministry, but the description of the 'fences' around pulpit and platform indicates obvious areas in which they may find themselves at a disadvantage. For instance, some women find that the experience of marriage and childrearing results in the temporary or long-term relinquishing of the pursuit of academic goals and may also make a lengthy training process, as it is presently conceived, impracticable or unduly arduous.

The assumption that preaching will be the principle method of evangelising carries with it interesting questions about power which will be addressed later. 'Authority in preaching has traditionally been defined as that quality of proclamation that pertains to special rights, power, knowledge, and capacity to influence or transform'.<sup>6</sup> Certainly the power position usually

4 A. Loades, *Searching For Lost Coins*, SPCK, London 1987, p 68.

5 A recent example is L. Byrne, *The Hidden Journey*, SPCK, London 1993, ch. 3.

6 D. M. Noren, *The Woman in the Pulpit*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1991, p 48, quoting Christine Smith.

associated with the pulpit/platform is often only reluctantly shared with women. The pulpit brings with it the implied approval of the institution which permits its use. Even when a woman is given this kind of authorisation, it is often not unequivocal. One woman working as an evangelist expressed her weariness at having to prove herself on every occasion that she spoke, not to those who were seeking faith but to the Christians: 'I feel I have to fight for every inch of ground I'm allowed'.

Maude Royden, writing in the early part of this century observes,

'More recently, women have been invited to preach to Church Congress meetings, to National Mission meetings, at Conferences and in retreats. Great care was taken however, to insure that such 'preaching' was always called 'speaking', such sermons to be described as 'addresses', and such meetings never to be held in consecrated buildings'.<sup>7</sup>

Women, then, have been denied access not only to the same platforms and opportunities as men but to the recognition of their capacity to evangelise. It may be that these are not the best arenas for the kind of communication in which women want to engage, but they need to decide that on the basis of their evaluation of appropriateness rather than because they are deemed not to be fit or qualified to use pulpit or platform.

### **Apologetic forms**

It may be that some of the forms that have become associated with evangelism are themselves more immediately understood as traditionally male ways of communicating faith. This might be seen for example in the way that the explanation of core values and doctrines of Christian faith is undertaken. The business of apologetics has relied heavily on the skills of rational, linear argument which has been understood as a primarily male form of discourse. Women are entirely capable of using this style and form of communication, but may want the freedom to choose other forms without relinquishing the possibility of publicly naming them as evangelism. There is an important discussion to be had over the expectation that a woman will develop an 'androgynous style'. One of the several difficulties with this is the question as to whether 'androgynous' is actually a more subtle way of expecting women to speak like men. Where this is the case the Church's evangelism is inevitably narrower and misses the contribution of women's style and interpretation. Helene Cixous writes

'Whenever an ordering intervenes, a law organises the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. All the couples of oppositions are couples. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought — all of the concepts, the codes, the values — to a two term system, related to "the" couple man/woman?'<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a normative couple needs to be treated with a measure of suspicion. It not only marginalises other couplings but may itself be disad-

7 L. Byrne, *op. cit.*, p 60.

8 Quoted in R. S. Chopp, *op. cit.*, p 2.

vantageous to women. Chopp's analysis is that the kind of opposition Cixous describes will be detrimental for women who will experience oppression when they are held in a couple which is constructed from opposition. She pleads for the making of connections rather than the increasing of oppositions between the two 'terms'. Presumably the connection would then allow for the sharing of power rather than the defence of it in order to preserve identity. She quotes Carolyn Heilbrun, 'Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter'.<sup>9</sup> This does not imply that the 'discourse essential to action' remains unchanged. The public proclamation of the Christian gospel cannot be understood as the preserve of men alone, because the gospel itself offers the opportunity of new ways of relating and understanding to both men and women without gender preference.

### Women's work

Another way of managing the 'two term system' is to limit the spheres in which women are sanctioned to work. These have traditionally been framed with regard to evangelism as being in the Sunday School, on the 'mission field', or in the home. Women in Britain have been seen as appropriately evangelising and teaching children or other women. This kind of restriction, particularly that which creates women's groups, may actually prove to be a form of liberation for many women. It is interesting to compare this often more accidental grouping with the more self-conscious forming of Women-Church. Women may experience a greater degree of freedom, for example in articulating their hopes, doubts and values where there are no men present. The experience of a woman running a group for women interested in Christianity mirrors this; 'It is easier just to talk as ourselves about what we really think and to ask any questions we like. You can have a really good discussion where any of the women can join in'. A same-sex group seems to experience less inhibition and anxiety and a greater level of participation on the part of its members.

There is often a greater sense of security for women with other women. An account was published in 1912 of the work of a Miss Croll in India;

'She went among the women as a sister and a friend and soon succeeded in winning the hearts of a few. The poor women welcomed her mingled strength and gentleness, and soon grew to regard her as a principal adviser and guide.'<sup>10</sup>

The colonial overtones do not obliterate the significant description of Miss Croll as 'sister and friend' neither of which have hierarchical implications. This allows for the significance of person and personality in evangelism where we become living icons of faith. Carol Noren takes this discussion further by analysing the role women have for other women as 'icon',

9 R. S. Chopp, *ibid.*, p 2.

10 L. Byrne, *op. cit.*, p 66.

'precedent', and 'mentor'.<sup>11</sup> Her argument is with regard to discovering these roles for women preachers. Women evangelists may offer these models to those who will not only hear but see the Christian faith in their encounter with these women. It is important for women to have images of Christian life in women's terms so that they can more readily imagine themselves participating in the community of faith as women. A young woman who had recently made a public profession of faith at confirmation said of an older woman who had helped in the preparation classes, 'It really helped me to have heard a woman talk about God. She was really confident in what she said and she really knows what is in the Bible. It made me feel like I could be like her a bit'.

This also gives the opportunity for what Ruether calls 'mutual empowerment'. 'Ministry means exercising power in a new way, as a means of liberation of one another.'<sup>12</sup> This is significant in an evangelistic context where too often the relationship has been cast as the possessor of the gospel giving it to the enquirer. This new interpretation allows for the freedom of God who is the giver, and the mutual status of all as receivers of the gospel. This might open the possibility of a corporate exploration of the human condition, of God and of the insights which Christian faith offers.

### **Kerygmatic testimony**

The apostolic accusation that the women coming from Jesus' tomb were bearers of an 'idle tale' highlights the vulnerability of speaking from experience. There is, however, often a more experiential approach in women's evangelism than is customary in much of the Christian tradition's discourse. Where great store is set on objectivity, the voice of experience will be easily dismissed as subjective and without transferable value. Lavinia Byrne writes of the importance of everyday experience as the place of encountering the divine rather than relegating God to the periphery by using language that is divorced from experience.<sup>13</sup> This is a significant emphasis especially where evangelism is understood in terms of faith development because it suggests the importance of engagement with faith at a different level from that of a formalised and coded set of religious activities. The two may not be mutually exclusive but the valuing of daily experience clearly extends the range of religious sensibility.

Where women have effectively been excluded from access to education, publication and forms of public discourse, it is not surprising that it is the articulation of faith in the light of experience that will be the substance of women's contribution. Where historically and culturally these restrictions have become less powerful, it still seems to be that women want to speak out of their experience. This might be understood as the offering of a different kind of telling of the gospel. It is a telling which has an authority of its own

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11 D. M. Noren, *op. cit.*, ch. 3, pp 31-45.

12 R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, SCM, London 1983, pp 206f.

13 L. Byrne, *Women Before God*, SPCK, London 1988, p 30.

but one which is still deemed to be subordinate. It does not deny the importance of a doctrinal framework but asserts the engagement of the whole human person, individually and collectively, with God.

This may constitute perspectives which open new understandings of the *kerygma*. There is a well-established custom of using the telling of a personal story of faith in public evangelism, the testimony. It is often placed prior to the sermon, as a supplementary to it, which then goes on to expand and explain Christian faith in more general, often more abstract terms. Chopp however, asserts the importance of testimony in keeping open the established order, the doctrine. In discussing Luke 4 she writes,

'Jesus allows us to consider proclamation as a testimony to and of God.... Thus proclamation involves our lives and our words as a testimony to what we have seen or heard, or, in the present tense, what we see and hear in relation to ultimate reality.'<sup>14</sup>

The personal engagement is not an end in itself and is not expecting to be reproduced in its particularity in others. Neither is it equating finite experience with infinite 'ultimate reality'. It does take seriously the significance of immanence in the world. 'Where we are certain both of our identity and of our experience at a place where God is already at work and where God's call can already be heard, then can the reign of God begin.'<sup>15</sup> There is a weaving together of the human and divine in a more explicit way than is sometimes acknowledged in more abstract or conceptual ways of expressing Christian faith. There is also the implication that the *kerygma* is not closed in that it is constantly and contextually experienced and interpreted. Women may and do contribute fully to this *kerygmatic* adventure.

If testimony is used as the principal mode of evangelism, the significance of the narrative form is raised. Story and anecdote become the vehicles of communication. This is not to suggest the exclusion of analysis which may be couched in the form of interpretation of events, the exposure of meaning and the relating of the contemporary experience to the formative narratives of the gospels. It is an example of what Walter Hollenweger calls 'oral theology'. He suggests that the gospels belong to an oral genre whereas the epistles are of a literary genre.

'The Gospel of Mark is an example of oral theology. Oral theology operates through the medium of the story, not the statement. It does not use definitions, but descriptions. It operates with songs not with systematic statements.'<sup>16</sup>

This is important where evangelism is within an oral culture. Many groups of women have arrived at using a more narrative style through attending to the response of those who are invited to listen to an evangelistic speaker. An invitation to a speaker recently issued by a local branch of

14 R. S. Chopp, op. cit. pp 60f.

15 L. Byrne, *Women Before God*, p 30.

16 W. J. Hollenweger, 'The Discipline of Thought and Action in Mission' from *International Review of Mission Vol. LXXX 317*, WCC, Geneva, 1991, p 100.



Christian Viewpoint read, 'Please come and tell us your story. We find this is what gets through to the women who come to our meetings'.

The use of narrative may also have implications for the kind of vocabulary which the evangelist is likely to use. The most frequently heard form of public Christian communication is the sermon, given in the context of a faith community with certain shared presuppositions and a background of biblical and liturgical material. The language of the pulpit is often encoded because the assumption is made that the congregation will understand the shorthand. This language is too easily assimilated by the hearers as the only way in which God is spoken of. This religious language is then transferred to other contexts and jargon then becomes exclusive and alienating. This is particularly true in evangelism where by definition the hearer does not share the religious code. The challenge is to discover and use an expanded vocabulary which would include the development of new models and metaphors. Sallie McFague for example addresses this need in *Models of God*. Her concern is with the direction of theology rather than specifically with evangelism. It is interesting to note however that the dynamic of her argument springs from 'the relationship of God and the world in an ecological, nuclear age'.<sup>17</sup> She expresses the need for models which will more fully, if provisionally, offer ways for people to perceive and collaborate with the Divine in salvific enterprises.

Language understood in this way might become more of a bridge between communities of faith rather than a picket fence. Lavinia Byrne speaks from within the Church:

'As a believer I need to be able to name myself as someone who is looking for God both within the community of believers on a Sunday and within my everyday situation and everyday contacts, because I am the same person'.<sup>18</sup>

Thus in an evangelistic context, inclusive language takes on a new meaning. The woman in an 'everyday situation' need not feel she must in some sense learn a new language in order to find out about God or indeed to speak to God. She needs to be able to recognise herself when she hears the Christian community speaking.

Where the content of evangelism is drawn more from experience and couched in more oral than literary forms, it is not surprising to find a greater concentration on persons and less on propositions. The structure and content of the four Gospels are complex but through them all the integrating focus is the person of Jesus, his actions and words. Little of women's evangelism is published or recorded but it seems from experience that most women will retell stories, either from the Gospels or the Christian tradition, as ways of conveying what Christianity is about. 'Sin' or 'salvation' are not so much dissected as enfolded. Personal experience over the last eighteen years indicates that this appears to be the case across a variety of denominations

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17 S. McFague, *Models of God*, SCM, London 1987, p 181.

18 L. Byrne, *Women Before God*, p 10.

and church traditions. In these examples there have often been instances of not only speaking of persons as individuals but as related to one another socially and globally. Mutual concerns about the development of the world have sometimes figured, upon which a Christian perspective has been offered. More frequently concerns are expressed about perhaps more closely felt situations of family life. In all these matters it has usually been on persons that attention has centred. A possible weakness in this approach is that it makes room for reducing faith to personal predilection rather than relating it to truth. It may also offer not so much a Christocentric picture but one that unduly stresses the male figure of Jesus. Women may have a variety of responses to a solely male representation of that to which they are asked to give their allegiance; for some it is an easily understood attraction, for others a source of diminishment.

### Domestic settings

It is not only the content of evangelism offered by women which is of interest, there are also questions about the contexts in which women evangelise. Much evangelism is neither formal nor public. It is carried on through conversation with friends and family in the ordinary places of life. This contributes to the hiddenness of most women evangelists. The domestic setting of the home is cherished in contemporary Western society for its privacy. Chopp suggests,

'Women's religious practices, so rarely talked about in great religious and theological literature, are lived out in the realm of the private, composed of duty, preparing, waiting, taking care — the religiosity of the domestic.'

She goes on to assert the significance of this for the development of religion:

'And, as religion has joined women in the margins of modernity, in the realm of the private, in the so-called non-essential realm, women's religiosity to look more and more intuitive of religion itself.'<sup>19</sup>

Ruether takes up the same linking of religion and the private which 'shift the cultivation of piety to the home'. She points to the liberation and restriction of this which,

'... suggests to many women that they are uniquely capable of evangelising others. Conservative churchmen seek to control this by segregating women's evangelical role strictly within the home... and within the private women's prayer group.'<sup>20</sup>

God in the home is an important means of affirming the significance not the subordination of the home and thus, beginning where many women find themselves, offers an authority to women's experience which is not dependent on male sanction. Byrne cites the biblical example of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet to illustrate this:

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19 R. S. Chopp, *op. cit.*, p 118.

20 R. R. Ruether, *op. cit.*, p 198.

'She has seen that she can use the rabbinic way of learning within the context of her own home. She vindicates both the idea that women may know and learn God — the prerogative apparently of priests — and the idea that they may do so at home.'<sup>21</sup>

The image of God is also widened by this kind of context; he is not confined to the church building but becomes himself a 'homemaker' and one who lives with and among people. While valuing the domestic, there needs to be a note of realism which will not perpetuate stereotyped idealisation. The wealth, variety and even the ambiguity of women's experience and insight need to find a voice beyond the constraints of what is considered to be typical or suitable material for evangelism.

Ruether sees in the home and private context the potential for much fuller development for women:

'Once empowered, women's evangelising activities constantly break out of these domestic limits. The prayer group turns into a revival meeting with women as organizers and then as preachers. Benevolent societies turn into women's home and foreign mission societies with their own budgets, their own leadership in women's hands.'<sup>22</sup>

Although Ruether takes her argument towards the demand for women's ordination, this need not be the only conclusion to be drawn. The contexts of women's evangelising need not necessarily lead them to reproduce the same structures or platforms as the mainstream, male-organised forms of evangelism. This can be illustrated by the way in which women's groups will often meet in the face to face context of a home or, when in more public venues, seating is frequently arranged around small tables thus enabling closer interpersonal contact. The context of evangelism is important. It is not about creating a good impression or a conducive atmosphere. The context in which the gospel is spoken forms part of that gospel. It offers insights into the person or community who are speaking, it can change the way the content is understood, and maybe the image of God which is made visible.

### The 'R' factor

There is then a convergence of content and context. This seems to focus on the importance of relationship for evangelism. In a recent project to discover how people find faith today, five hundred and eleven people were interviewed who had made a public profession of faith in the previous twelve months. In summarising the main factors in these journeys of faith, John Finney writes,

'As in the findings about their definitions of a Christian it was clear that once again the personal is much more significant than those factors which did not involve direct contact with people. For example friends and family are more widely influential than the media.'<sup>24</sup>

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21 L. Byrne, *Women Before God*, pp 49f.

22 R. R. Ruether, *op. cit.*, p 198.

23 J. Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, Bible Society, Swindon 1992, p 38.

24 C. M. Noren, *op. cit.*, p 55.

Noren, in a discussion of authority suggests that, 'feminine identity is awakened, established, and nurtured in the context of relationships (as opposed to masculine identity being rooted more in achievements)'.<sup>24</sup> Despite the generalisations about gender, there is no reason to suppose that the formation of Christian identity would have a different basis. Finney's research suggests that relationship is not focused on 'one special person', rather he discovered, 'To belong to a group of friends who were Christians was important. For most people the corporate life of the church is a vital element in the process of becoming a Christian and for about a quarter it is the vital factor'.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, for the men who were questioned most cited the main factor in coming to faith as their partner/spouse; for the women it was 'Christian friends'. Women seem more drawn to group or community. The formation of community is part of the theological understanding of what it means to be Christian. This is an important insight in which women's experience has been grounded. Ruether sums it up:

'Theologically, it is essential to understand redemption as a communal, not just an individual, experience. Just as sin implies alienation and broken community, so rebirth to authentic selfhood implies a community that assembles in the collective discovery of this new humanity and that provides the matrix of regeneration.'<sup>26</sup>

If the community of faith is of crucial importance in becoming a Christian, then women may offer a rather different perspective on evangelism. A possible understanding of one of the goals of evangelism would be the invitation to belong to the community of God's people. This again suggests a relational basis to evangelism. Noren writes of preaching, 'Persuasion to a particular point of view and/or transmission of religious truths are not the goals of the preacher. Instead, preaching is a profound act of human connection and intimacy'.<sup>27</sup>

The style is then cooperative rather than coercive. Much of the language traditionally associated with evangelism in many of the Churches is that of 'crusade' or 'campaign'. This is male and military language. It has some unfortunate implications. The person being evangelised is more clearly perceived as being on the other side and a conflictual model is established. The implication then is that the evangelist must 'win' both the argument and, presumably, the soul. Where there is little or no mutuality, the hearer is put in a position of being defeated if he were to profess Christian faith. Christianity then becomes more of an ideology or a cause which seeks adherents. This takes up the question of power relationships in evangelism referred to earlier. It may rather be that the proclamation of the gospel carries with it essential implications of vulnerability. The significance of the crucifixion is often relegated to doctrinal tenets rather than related to the lived experience of Christian faith. If this is the case then the 'crusade' model is all the more inappropriate. The bearers of an 'idle tale' come to friends and suffer

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25 J. Finney, op. cit., p 43.

26 R. R. Ruether, op. cit., p 193.

27 C. M. Noren, op. cit., p 130.

rejection and possibly ridicule. Women evangelists may have lessons to teach the Church about the relinquishing of superior power as the mode of evangelism. In a period in much of the West when the Church finds itself much less secure about its identity and position, it may be more able to receive these insights.

The Church which shapes and is shaped by its evangelism does not have to be what Chopp calls,

'... a "protective" institution whose role is to serve as a space for individual expression and development while maintaining its own institutional status.... This pact of accommodation must be questioned in Christian proclamation precisely as proclamation — through emancipatory transformation — it is constitutive of Christian community'.<sup>28</sup>

It may be that women's style and experience of evangelism already embodies much of this call.

There seems to be no objective basis for differentiating between the forms and contents of evangelism available for men or for women to use. Nonetheless the evidence is that women are not operating in a similar way to the men. This may be because they are excluded from so doing in a patriarchally organised religion where 'normative' Christianity has been presented as male. It may also be because women are choosing to use other models of evangelism. The experience of women in evangelism offers the possibility of change through new insights on the *kerygma*, through the revision of power and the centrality of relationship which leads to community forming. As the hidden ministry of women becomes more visible, the private and public realms of the life of faith might find new connections through their lives and ways of working. This may have significance for the development of religion in contemporary western society and help to resist the dichotomising of private and public.

Women proclaiming the 'idle tale' may help the institutional Church to hear the tale again and to be re-formed by it. If, however, the institution persists in keeping these women on its margins then it may find the locus of Christianity will have shifted and that Christian communities will be formed where the bearers of the 'idle tale' find themselves.

**The Revd Alison White** is Director of Mission and Pastoral Studies at Cranmer Hall, Durham.

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28 R. S. Chopp, op. cit., pp 69f.