Of God, Dolly and Gloria Steinem â?¦ and the women who keep the faith

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The sun was shining in a clear blue sky last weekend in Adelaide when about 100 Anglican women gathered at St Peterâ??s Cathedral for a clergy conference. There was no fanfare, no media coverage, no razzle or dazzle, no inï¬?uencer poses, just comfortable shoes and a series of workshops and talks. When I walked into one of the sessions on Saturday, I was struck by the cheer.

Dolly Parton had died that week, and the women had toasted her at dinner the night before. Parton, as was pointed out in t hese pages, told Andy Warhol (whom she described as the only person sheâ??d ever met who was weirder than her) that she saw herself as a preacher. Who might not have been allowed at a Southern Baptist pulpit, but who created her own platform, and united vast swathes of America â?? the world, really â?? as few others could.

While Dolly Parton regarded herself as a preacher, feminists such as Gloria Steinmen worried that religion is used to oppress women.

Interviewed last year, Dolly said: â??I like trying to make people happy and lift people up and glorifying God. Thatâ??s my mission in life, so I just hope to get to do more of that.â?• Her faith was rooted in love, tolerance and inclusion, though myriad news reports skipped over it entirely.

Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden and Dolly Parton unveil* Coat of Many Colors*, the one hundred millionth book donated by Partonâ??s nonprofit Imagination Library, during a ceremony in the Great Hall, February 27, 2018. Photo by Shawn Miller.

Can you imagine the many thousands of conservative evangelical men who bop to her songs, who believe women should submit to men and shouldnâ??t vote, and who were at times so distracted by her glamour that they didnâ??t clock â?? or want to clock â?? that she was one of the most inï¬?uential faith leaders in their country?

As Billy Bragg said last week, â??at a time when followers of Jesus Christ are talking about â??the sin of empathyâ?? and claiming that loving thy neighbour as thyself will lead to the end of Western civilisation, Dollyâ??s faith led her to embrace everyoneâ?•.

Thinking of Parton reminds me of the bald truth that women have long had authority from God, if not permission from the church. And of the fact that the enduring struggles inside the church are rarely aired. Some progress has been made, but

many places still donâ??t ordain women as priests (most notably Sydney), and in some dioceses they struggle to maintain a foothold, as a recent report into Canberra-Goulburn revealed.

Women clergy are often ignored by mainstream feminists, whether from a belief that the church is intractable, concern about religion being used to oppress women (Gloria Steinem, who died this week, called it â??politics in the skyâ?•), or an impatience with faith. But as I looked around the room at these decent, caring women, who still face enormous opposition, who are not fully recognised in places like Sydney, whose authority and ministry is constantly questioned, whose work is often considered secondary, who report rising numbers of blokes whoâ??d like them to submit to men, who have to grit their teeth during debates about the basic worth of women, I realised that this ï¬•ght that they are still, quietly, engaged in is arguably the longest ï¬•ght for emancipation and basic equality in Western feminism.

Hear me out here. I know in many ways, on many fronts, as Steinem said, we have just started. But, happily, most obvious, basic barriers to equal participation were removed decades ago â?? even though backsliding is evident in many places. Think of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, the ï¬•rst national American womenâ??s rights conference which produced the Declaration of Sentiments, listing 12 resolutions demanding equal social, civil and religious rights for women.

Their core demands were: the right to vote. Tick. Legal equality, especially for married women who wished to own property, manage their own wages and have independent legal standing. Tick. Family and divorce rights, especially over child custody. Tick. Equal access to higher education, universities, professional trades. Tick. And ï¬•nally, religion â?? an equal voice and participation in religious institutions and the abandoning of the idea of a â??separate sphereâ?• for women. Womp-womp.

In the 1890s, after she was elected president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Elizabeth Cady Stanton pulled together a group of women to edit and publish The Womanâ??s Bible, which caused a scandal â?? including among other suffragists who thought it was a distraction. This bestselling tome laid out an argument against the subservience of women to men that the church claimed to be an immutable truth, an argument that still needs to be heard today.

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Bishop Sophie Relf-Christopher

Itâ??s signiï¬•cant that women were campaigning for the right to vote and the right to be equal in the church at the same time â?? and that now it is fundamentalist evangelical pastors in the US who are saying women should not vote. Back then, Stanton wrote to her critics: â??The only difference between us is, we say that these degrading ideas of woman emanated from the brain of man, while the church says that they came from God.â?• Quite.
Our parliaments are heavily populated with people of faith, many of whom have not ever been exposed to women in positions of authority in their upbringings, schools or congregations. We routinely forget or underestimate this, yet it is my belief that the reason the pushback from religious men has been so sustained and ferocious is because this is about the bedrock belief that women do not possess authority in the same way men do.

And this leaks into more cultural pockets than we recognise.

It also means Christianity is more likely to be associated with a strongly male, American nationalism in the public imagination than a quiet, forceful compassion.

So, when we talk about the manosphere, instead of blaming a â??feminised curriculumâ?• for the toxic sludge online, as Nationals leader Matt Canavan did this week, we need to stop and look in other directions. Where are women equal, upheld and respected? Where are women speaking? Where are they prevented from speaking? Why does this matter?

The organiser of the Adelaide conference, the whip-smart Bishop Sophie Relf-Christopher, told me the mood of the conference â?? where the governor of South Australia, Frances Adamson spoke along with the Archbishop of Perth, Kay Goldsworthy, was â??jubilantâ?•.

â??We persevere,â?• she said, â??because we are unwilling to cede the Holy Church of God to people who do not support the full and equal worth of women when Jesus did. We are unwilling to leave the church a place that girls and women are coerced and controlled.â?•

Relf-Christopher wants women who have left the church to return â??to work with us in a new reformationâ?•. She said: â??If what you believe about God requires women to remain permanently grateful, un-ordained, quiet, or endlessly available, it is not a theology that is compatible with the message of Jesus Christ. Patriarchy is not synonymous with Jesusâ?? ideas, but more the Roman Empire that wanted to suppress them.â?•

Julia Baird is a journalist, author and regular columnist. Her latest book is* Bright Shining: how grace changes everything*. This article first appeared in the* Sydney Morning Herald *on 5 September 2026 and is reproduced here under licence.

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