Prologue

A time of transition, with all the upheaval that it brings, is a time of transformation. When the status quo is questioned and shaken, practices that have been carried out as habits are halted, and, before they are reinstated, some of them are discarded. Currents of criticism and introspection, once they get under way, tend to generate a momentum of their own which carries them beyond their initial object.[1] Consequently, many momentous events which may bring ruin with them (like wars, for example), may also allow for change in the order of hierarchies – to the benefit of the less privileged and the social underdogs. Not only does the order of things tumble at these times, but there are also changes in perceptions of what is, and what is not, acceptable.

Furthermore, survival in times of upheaval provides an opportunity for groups, previously considered marginal or incapable, to come to the fore, carry out tasks successfully, and take on roles which under normal circumstances had never been offered to them. The problem is that while the changes are possible and obvious at a time of crisis, often when the dust has settled, things revert to the old ways, and only some of these changes endure.

One social group which has been marginal since the beginning of recorded history, is women. At times of economic instability, women are able to fill positions that were not available to them before (Hackett 1968). During political instability, when a powerful majority is toppled, a vacuum is created that often gives women the chance to be included in the new political order, and thus to change the face of their reality. The same applies during social crises (one sees it clearly in times of war) or social revolutions. However, during the ensuing peace times, those opportunities have often been closed to them – by men, in their endeavour to revert to the customs of 'old times'.

The idea that transition can bring about transformation also applies in the religious and spiritual sphere. When there is no challenge to a religious authority, the hierarchy is crystallised and any attempt at change evokes insecurity and a fear of losing power in that authority. It is interesting to note that often social, economic, political and spiritual themes are closely interwoven; and when questions arise, are aired, and instigate debate, the door is opened for challenging the stable – if not stagnant – traditions of previous eras.

While we are very well aware that human rights infringements need to be laid at the door of a society as a whole rather than a particular group, and that

injustices to women cannot be treated superficially as if men are the only ones to blame, we do still live at a time when women's anger and hurt need to be aired. This is partly the function of this volume. The book deals with various aspects of women's search for status, position or recognition in the realm of spirituality. However, before considering these, I want to provide some important illustrative background. Owing to the special circumstances of recent historical events in South Africa, there are experiences of political transition and transformation which are unique to a large number of South African women, and some of these are outlined below.

Political and social position of women in South Africa in recent history [2]

Two of the groups of women falling victim to the violence of war during the 20th century in South Africa were Afrikaners and Africans. The Afrikaners fought imperialism and the Africans fought Apartheid. But the dominant worldview after these conflicts could not have been more different. Afrikaners reconstructed themselves in a way that led to the formulation of one of the most vicious racist systems since Nazi Germany. The African National Congress has taken a different route – that of the Truth Commission and endeavours toward reconciliation.

Although Afrikanerdom is known for its conservative patriarchal culture, there have always been strong vocal women present among Afrikaners. As far back as August 1843, one of the pioneer Voortrekker women, Susanna Smit, from the deepest outback, demanded women's franchise from a visiting Commissioner of the conquering British. He laughed, describing her as a disgrace to her husband, because nowhere else in the world did women want to vote. After this insult, she uttered her famous words: "I will rather walk barefoot across the Drakensberge [a formidable mountain range] ere I live under British rule."

At the end of the 19th century the two tiny Afrikaner republics fought a three-year war against England. It was a very costly war for both sides. During that war 27,000 Afrikaner women and children died in British concentration camps. Others took the place of their men on the farms or hid in the mountains and bushes. Their bravery, resourcefulness, and their ability to fend for themselves, is well known. Emily Hobhouse, the British woman who took the plight of Afrikaner women to heart, said, "They [the women] have shown the world that never again can it be said that woman deserves no rights as citizen because she takes no part in war ... Women in equal numbers to men earned the right" (cited in Krog 2001: 1).

Yet, as Afrikaner nationalism took root, the role that woman had taken during the war was diminished to that of martyr. She was not allowed a man's job – the men claimed that she had suffered too much, was too noble to be

burdened by politics. She was given a new task: to raise the nation, to be the Mother of the Afrikaner Nation (*Volksmoeder*). Women's voices slowly died out from Afrikaner public discourse. The second generation of Afrikaner men coming out of that war did everything to get exclusive hold of power. Their sons, the third generation, under the guise of preserving home and hearth, turned the power against fellow citizens and instituted Apartheid. In neither the second nor the third generation were Afrikaner women given any political or economic power. What channels did the fiery genes of the Afrikaner foremothers choose? It was soon obvious. With the limitless freedom of time granted by cheap intelligent black domestic help, they poured their privileged energy into entertaining, designing clothes, gardening, Bible study, reader groups, becoming connoisseurs in silver, and making their own pots. Their ambition drove their children at school, in sport, in studying. The Afrikaner men had their way. The more idle their wives, the more successful they obviously had to be. Most of the men kept on living the way their ancestors had – complaining about the government, hunting up north and telling racist jokes in clouds of barbecue smoke.

As a liberation movement, the ANC took a different route. Black women fought Apartheid during the 20th century against the backdrop of three hundred years of colonialism. One of the famous moments of women's uprising was in March 1913, when hundreds of women marched to Bloemfontein, in protest against pass laws and inhumane treatment by the police (Wells 1991). The process of industrialisation affected African men and women in very specific ways: the migration of males from the rural areas into wage labour left women solely responsible for the maintenance of the household and of subsistence cultivation in the rural areas.

Black women fought relentlessly against migrant labour and the pass laws. The introduction of pass books for women in 1952 turned out to be a disaster, because women went to jail in such large numbers that the authorities were forced to discontinue arrest owing to overflowing prisons, and subsequently the offending clauses in the Act were dropped. During the liberation struggle and with the formation of the armed wing of the ANC, women became combatants, were commanders, and served in top structures, where women's rights were generally acknowledged.

When the ANC came to power in 1994, it stood by its principles on equal treatment of women. The new government introduced a quota system for women into all its structures as one of its principles. The new South African parliament has one of the highest numbers of female members and cabinet ministers in the world. The quota system for women is particularly successful. The government has also passed legislation whereby companies and businesses are compelled to employ a specific number of women as well as black people and those who are disabled. Suddenly women have become a real option. Boards and panels and groups find it embarrassing to be exclusively white or exclusively

male. So whether or not a woman is appointed just to change the gender composition, women now form at least a presence in most decision-making positions. However, no sooner were women appointed, than these women became a butt for cartoonists and the media – pointing up corruption and incompetence. It did not matter that many of their male colleagues were far less competent, nothing was worse than a woman at fault.

It was striking how the first female South African cabinet ministers made it their main task to better the lives of women on the ground: the Minister of Health, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, introduced free medical care for pregnant women and children under five; she made it possible for people to put their parents into their medical aid schemes. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi introduced grants for single mothers and increased the pension payouts for black women, who usually look after children. The Minister of Housing, Sankie Mthembi-Mahanyele, found ways of giving women access to bonds to build their own houses.

Nowadays, as normalisation settles in, women in power fulfil the mandate bestowed upon them by their political affiliation, often forgetting the hope attached to them by women at grassroot level for promoting their interests. Now they do not necessarily look after women's special issues as was the case some years ago (Reisenberger 2001). This may be a cause for disappointment, yet it may also be a sign of normalisation in the political arena.

As indicated above, however, it is clear from global movements that, once self-criticism and introspection get under way in a certain field, the momentum carries them beyond their initial object. This we see clearly in all aspects of women's lives. The changes in South Africa, as well as global changes, have brought about transformation in women's lives.

About this book ...

This book traces some of these changes – as well as aspirations for change – in a particular field: women's search for the beyond, the transcendent. The papers range from personal experience to academic proposals for change. They represent a spectrum of different religious traditions and spiritual expressions. I am not suggesting that they cover all areas in this complex terrain, but I do believe that they present an important section of the South African mosaic. Since I understand the term *spirituality* in a wider sense than do institutional religions, a chapter on women's poetry has been included.

The book comprises eight papers, each of which deals with a separate topic, some of which interlock or discuss similar issues from different traditions or different points of view.

One particular theme is recurrent: the power of words. Speech is a particular ability reserved for the human species. It shapes the cultural environment

which we occupy. Its power lies in the fact that we perceive our life experience and give meaning to it through words. The complex interactions between individuals, human nature and the conditions of living in a human body on this planet are perceived and conveyed by language (Pinker 1994: 415). Language is recognised by many scholars as the most accessible part of the mind. Therefore understanding language gives us an insight into human nature (ibid: 404).

Antjie Krog's paper deals with the power of words in women's experience through the medium of story-telling. Antjie maintains that in the past, African women were subordinated in both economic and intellectual terms, and their stories were accepted as peripheral. Women story-tellers were not valued as were their male counterparts: the praise-singers and the custodians of telling in the public space. Women's stories differ from men's stories in their participatory nature, their inclusiveness, and their everyday language – but also by their subversion, which transforms and transgresses. Now urbanisation, wars, displacement, emancipation have resulted in women's dealing with both private and public themes. Antjie suggests that the time has come for women's voices to invade the "merciless male narrative of Africa".

Christina Landman also deals with the power of words, pointing out that language both reflects and constitutes a society's dominant discourses. Christina suggests that if one changes the vocabulary, one may change the perception of situations and of the self. She then proposes changing sexist and classical feminist language into "partnership language" as a first step towards changing the dominant discourses which control the relationship between men and women.

Wilma Jakobsen deals with the power of language in the religious sphere. Wilma, who was one of the first ordained Anglican female priests in South Africa, argues for, and makes practical suggestions about, transforming the historically excluding patriarchal language of the Anglican Church to an inclusive language, in order to allow women a whole embracing spiritual experience.

Judy Tobler agrees that experience is shaped by our words, notably by symbolic discourse and cultural symbols. She discusses the extent to which there is gender equity in symbolic discourse in religious traditions, most of which are embedded in patriarchy. Judy's paper explores a feminist perspective that opens up avenues for goddesses of Hindu myth to be a resource available to all women for their psychological and spiritual empowerment.

Sarojini Nadar reflects on the lack of positive symbols and discourse regarding women in the church. She reports on her research in a historically all-Indian Full Gospel church in which she perceives two worlds, the spiritual and the physical. She notes that the leadership potential of the women in the church is limited by an exclusive notion of spirituality, by uncritical, literal interpretation of the Bible, and by deep cultural assumptions.

However, these factors do not necessarily just limit the possibility of women's leadership, they can also be seen as factors contributing to the low percep-

tion of women in the community, which in turn may lead to abuse, as is seen in the paper by Isabel Phiri. Isabel, who also considers a Full Gospel church in Durban, describes in detail a study on domestic violence among members of this church. She issues a challenge to churches to find a balance between an interpretation of religion that oppresses, and one that liberates abused women.

Then there is a paper by Azila Reisenberger and Gwynne Schrire, who study the Jewish tradition. This chapter highlights the need of all people to affiliate, to be part of their community. However, owing to the fact that Jewish women are not counted for the ritual quorum in the synagogue, they do not experience affiliation to the religious community to which they belong by birth. Instead they fulfil this need through Jewish Women's Organisations, which they establish and run. In other words, they make their place within the Jewish community, not through the religious institution, but rather through communal work.

Finally, Margaret Fourie deals with the need for self-fulfilment as well. In her case, Margaret had a calling which led her, as a woman, on a long voyage to her ordination as an Anglican Priest. From her own experience, she argues for the need to understand the Christian Gospel as true liberation for clergy and lay alike, women and men – free from the need to dominate and free from the structures of domination.

he tradition-specific and overall religion/culture fields of this collection are not mutually exclusive. Consequently the book has been organised so that the chapters could lead from one to the other, linked by theme, as has been suggested above. The collection is only a sample of other work done in the field. It constitutes a second volume in the series *Religion and Society in Transition*, which emanates from the research project "Sonderforschungsbereich" at the University of Hamburg with the title "Change processes in African Societies and the ways to cope with them". I would like to thank Prof Weisse for including me in this all-encompassing project.

And last, but not least, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Janet Stonier for her guidance, support and the meticulous care which brought this book to its final form. Janet's wisdom and friendship is a guiding light in my work, but even more in my personal life – and for this, I am very grateful.

Azila Reisenberger
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Notes

1 Cf. 'Report on Economic Development and Planning', Appendix A, Annual Congress of the Trades Union Council, UK, September 1962, p. 480.

2 I am greatly indebted to Antjie Krog for her input into this section. Her knowledge and compassion concerning this subject are enlightening and contagious.

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