

Living in Two Worlds: Spirituality and the Changing Role of the South African Indian Woman in the Full Gospel Church¹

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Ara-panahy! "According to the spirit!"² This term encompasses everything from worship and praise, evangelisation, speaking in tongues, to the laying of hands and the exorcising of demons. Any problem can be solved "*ara-panahy*". According to this mindset, the church should deal only with matters 'spiritual'. Having spent my formative years in the Full Gospel church (a sector of the Pentecostal movement), it struck me that these terms aptly capture the essence of Full Gospel spirituality.

The roles that South African Indian women have played, and continue to play within the church, are intricately connected to this understanding of spirituality. In other words, it is the separation of the physical world from the spiritual that has contributed to the discrimination against women within the church. However, this notion of spirituality is not the only factor that impacts on the way in which women act out their roles within this church. Culture is an undeniably strong influence in most Indian lives. Hence one cannot speak about spirituality without engaging with some discourse concerning culture. The fact is that South African Indian women have certainly become more liberated than their Indian counterparts in India. Nothing proved this to me more than my recent two-month stay in India. That women in South Africa might be somewhat more liberated than their Indian counterparts does not mean, however, that their collective psyches have been completely emancipated from an inferiority complex or the need to be subordinate to men. It is my contention that many of the practices that Indian women have adopted in South Africa, both within the church and in secular life, are largely due to the unconscious appropriation of various discriminatory cultural ideas that prevail in India even today.

Such cultural ideas find roots in ancient Hindu Scriptures, and also in folklore and mythology. Even as I say this I hear the alarm bells sounding from

Christian Indian women in South Africa, who will caution me that once they accept Christianity they abandon any trace of Hinduism in their lives. This might be true at a conscious level, but the fact is that at an unconscious level the cultural ideas found in Hinduism actually do impact on the way in which women conduct themselves. However the issue is not as simple as an uncritical appropriation of Hindu cultural practices. The fact that Christian Scriptures (especially the Jewish law codes and Paul's writings) find continuity with the Indian culture, is also a significant contributing factor.

In order to examine the roles that South African Indian women play within the church, therefore, cognisance has to be taken of the various levels with which we are dealing. At least three levels are operative. The first is that of the all-American Pentecostalism (including its theological foundations) that is diligently followed and imitated. The second level is the level of the culture of Hinduism from which most Indian Pentecostals have emerged. And finally there are the Christian Scriptures whose comments regarding women connect well with the way in which Indian women are seen in their own culture.

The two worlds that I refer to in the title are the spiritual and the physical or material. My central contentions in this chapter are therefore the following: Firstly, it is the limited understanding of the notion of spirituality that has confined and continues, in some respects, to confine the leadership potential of women within this church. Secondly, this limited notion of spirituality is grounded in an understanding of the Bible as the indisputable, infallible Word of God. The subsequent uncritical, non-contextual interpretation of the Bible as normative and authoritative contributes to the discrimination against women with regard to issues of ordination, divorce, dress code – and, as I was told recently by an ordained minister, even to issues of salary. And finally, these notions of spirituality, coupled with the discriminatory attitudes toward women inherent in Indian culture, act as a powerful weapon in controlling the roles that women play within the church.

In order to provide the background for exploring how the roles of women have changed in recent years, for examining the progress that women have made, and considering what has helped or hindered this progress, I will start with a brief history of Bethesdaland, the previously all-Indian Full Gospel Church (FGC).

A brief history of Bethesdaland

Indians first came to South Africa in 1860, as indentured labourers, and the vast majority of them were Hindus from the lower castes of Indian society. Only 5% were Christians. The Pentecostal movement took root mainly among the poor, the ex-indentured Indians (Pillay 1994: 6). Subsequently, however, a considerably large number of members have become fairly affluent, especially in

the last ten years or so.

Bethesda was founded on 11 October 1931 by Pastor J.F. Rowlands. Although he was an Englishman, he stressed cultural continuity with the Indian tradition and often "emptied" Hindu concepts and practices of their religious content and "baptised" them with Christian meaning (Chetty 1995:152). In recent years, much of this cultural continuity has been broken and the emphasis is on an iconoclastic, non-ritualistic form of worship. In fact anything that is foreign to an American western form of Pentecostalism is deemed "demonic" or "evil." Many other aspects of the kind of Pentecostalism that Rowlands advocated have changed drastically since his death. Chetty notes that

the death of Rowlands provided the space for 'typical' Pentecostal and also unique practices to emerge in the life of Bethesda under the 'freedom' of the Pentecostal umbrella of the FGC. The 'brakes' that Rowlands put on emotionalism was now disengaged. His 'middle path' between the formalism of the established churches and the fanaticism of Pentecostals was jettisoned for 'classical' Pentecostal beliefs (1995: 158).

Emotionalism (loud wailing, "laughing in the spirit," etc.) has become, in recent years, a hallmark of Indian Pentecostalism. What is interesting to note is that even though most FGC's stress a discontinuity with Hinduism, there are some forms of Hindu rituals that strongly resonate within these churches. For example, when people are "filled with the Holy Spirit" they go into a trance-like state not very different from a Hindu trance. The 'trance' is characterised by periodic deep intakes of breath, accompanied by loud shrieking voices, and a vigorous jumping up and down or spinning around in total euphoria, oblivious to those around. I have personally witnessed this occurrence both in my formative years and recently. In my experience, most times it was characteristic of women's worship, but recently, men have also adopted this kind of emotionalism. It is thus clear that the FGC places much significance on emotional forms of spirituality – as one woman said to me, "if you cannot speak in tongues then you have not reached spiritual maturity."

As I have said, most FGC's today reject any form of Hindu symbolism within the church. There are numerous examples of how this is done but I will cite just one. The *thali* – a yellow piece of string decorated with valuable gold jewellery that is given to a woman by her husband on the day they get married – is one such symbol rejected by the church. Instead, the western symbolism of marriage, namely the ring, has been adopted. The cultural ambiguities and implications of these symbols are thought-provoking. The *thali*, although valued as an Indian cultural symbol, can also be oppressive, in that once the *thali*

is put round the woman's neck, it signifies that she now belongs, not only to her husband, but to her husband's family as well. The idea that women can be possessed is in itself an oppressive idea. Manu (a post-Vedic religious writer famous for the Manu codes) declares: "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons ..." (*The Laws of Manu*, 5: 195-99; cited in Young 1993: 277-78). Although it is clear that the *thali* might be considered oppressive, given its connotations of belonging, the trading in of the oppressive Indian cultural practice for that of the oppressive Christian one is questionable. For example, in some Christian wedding ceremonies, the vows that a woman recites still contain the phrase "I promise to obey you", and the white dress and the veil are supposed to symbolise virginity, an ever-prized virtue for a woman but one that is apparently not as important for a man.

We can sum up the characteristics of the Indian FGC's as follows: They started off with an emphasis on cultural continuity but as the years progressed that emphasis was lost. The emphasis, at present, is very much on emotionalism, and the more emotional you are, the more spiritual you are considered to be: speaking in tongues and ecstatic outbursts are regarded as signs of a higher spiritual level. Within this emotionalism many facets of Hindu ritual worship unconsciously surface.

Caution: loaded perspectives!

In exploring my topic, my primary method of investigation was personal unstructured interviews: with women in leadership roles in the church, and also with some men in key leadership roles in the denomination as a whole. As well as the interviews, I also took as my starting point my own experience as a member of the Full Gospel Church. I therefore reject the notion of "disinterested objective researcher," in favour of a more postmodernist subjective approach, contending that neither the process of writing, nor interpretation, is neutral. Rather, they are motivated by the writer's or reader's own ideological location: "[T]he observer is not objective but 'paradigmatic'. All searchers and researchers work with points of view and vested interests which influence what they see and affect what they discover. The best image for gaining knowledge is not 'dredging up facts by the bucketful' " (Thomas Kuhn; cited in Walker 1993: 147). Walker goes on to use West's idea of the searchlight. The searchlight, West says, is "inevitably directed from a point of view and ... what it illuminates is determined as much by this as by what is there for it to shine upon" (West 1991: 11-12).

It is therefore significant that I state at the outset that I read and write as an Indian womanist,⁴ having grown up in a lower socio-economic township, and having attended the local Full Gospel Church. The 'triple oppression' of

race, class and gender have impacted on me in profound ways and therefore exposing these kinds of oppression, especially within the church, is a pivotal concern of mine. But my position is ambivalent since I also write as a student of a fairly westernised academy, now belonging to a middle-class society. I struggle with this ambivalence. Yet it is precisely the ambivalence that motivates me to write pieces like this in an attempt to bridge the gap between the academic and the ordinary faith communities.

Spiritual and material: two worlds

I would suggest, from my recent conversations with several Indian women, many of whom are in leadership positions within the church, that their spiritualities correspond directly with the meaning attached to the term *arapanahy*. I was prompted to entitle this chapter "living in two worlds" because I discovered, both from my own experience in the church and my conversations with the women, that the women within this church do live in two worlds: the spiritual and the material. Paget-Wilkes also notes this dualism when he argues that:

the church has accepted the concept of dualism – that life is divided into body and soul; matter and spirit and that these two aspects can be kept separate. But such a division leads to inadequate interpretations of the Gospel. For as long as faith can be divorced from reality the demand for the church to face the facts of human existence, is unheard (1981: 44–45; cited in Walker 1993: 185).

The dualistic understanding of body and soul, matter and spirit, is more complicated for Indian women in that within both these worlds there exist two further dimensions: emancipation and oppression. In the world of work, most Indian women of the younger generation are emancipated – they have careers and are therefore economically independent. However, when they come home, most women are still bound by domestic duties that include taking care of the children and doing household chores. Very few have broken out of this mould of domestic servant because of the cultural assumptions that have been passed down to them by their parents, especially their mothers. My own upbringing serves as a case in point, for even now my mother feels distinctly uncomfortable if my husband does the dishes since this is considered "women's work". Being exposed to feminist and other liberation discourses has helped me to break out of this mould, but most women – including my sisters – have internalised their oppressions and continue to perpetuate such a mould for other women as well. There is little doubt that these ideas are cultural. A recent study on working

women, done in India, shows exactly the same dilemma. Along with the new-found freedom that a 'liberated' woman enjoys in terms of having a career, "she is expected to give greater care and attention to the children and their studies, to keep the home in a better and more attractive manner, provide more varied meals, and play hostess to guests and friends of the family more frequently than her counterparts in rural areas" (Mittal 1995:31-32). In other words, the new "liberated" women are expected to take on many new roles *in addition to* the traditional ones. This reflects the situation of most working South African Indian women as well.

In the spiritual world, both the emancipatory and the oppressive experience also exist side by side. The roles that South African Indian women have played in their churches have changed significantly over the years. From occupying submissive and silent positions within the church, they now occupy ordained ministerial positions. However, women in the ministry are few and far between, and the issues run far deeper than merely the change in the constitution of the church to allow for ordination of women. The way in which women view themselves, and the way in which men view women – both in the home and the church – dictate the extent and levels to which women are willing (or allowed) to advance in the church. Although women's domestic roles are transposed into the church, their emancipated ones are not. There is an essential discrepancy between legality and reality. Legally (i.e. according to the Full Gospel constitution), women are now allowed to participate fully in the church, even to be ordained. Actually, according to the information I got from the leaders of the denomination, the constitution never "disallowed" women from being ordained. It was just silent on the issue. However, the fact that right until the 1980's women were allowed to train for up to two years only, while men were allowed to train for the full duration required for ordination, certainly suggests that there was implicit discrimination against women. The fact that they could not complete their full tenure at the college obviously meant that they could not be ordained. I was told, however, that women can now participate fully in the church – and can proceed right to the level of ordination if they so desire. However, the reality is that they do not. They are still relegated to what have been considered traditional tasks for women (e.g. making the tea, being in charge of the Sunday School, helping with the "sisters' " meetings, etc.), and they very rarely take up leadership positions.

I want to argue that the reason for this discrepancy lies in the Full Gospel interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God and therefore as authoritative and normative for daily living; and the refusal on the part of the people, especially the leaders, to look at the Bible critically. Everything is done *ara-panahy* which means that the emphasis is on the laying on of hands, ecstatic outbursts, speaking in tongues, being slain in the spirit, etc. That is the realm of spirituality. Anything out of that realm is *tay ara-panah* – not spiritual – and therefore

of secondary importance to the church. It is therefore not surprising that women's emancipation is not a major concern. The emphasis is on the spiritual. In the spiritual realm (i.e. the world of speaking in tongues, ecstatic outbursts, saving souls through evangelisation, and so on) everybody is equal in the sight of God. Sugden (1988: 352) describes this dualistic understanding in terms of inner and outer realms. He says that the "inner realm is the locus of the vertical relationship with God ... a realm of unchanging spiritual realities", and "the outer realm is the locus of horizontal relationships ... of physical and material existence." Walker (1993: 185) argues that "the effect of this form of thought is to move material, social, and political aspects of life out of the orbit of God's influence". Therefore, even though gross inequalities might exist in the material and physical world, it is of little consequence, as long as the vertical relationship between God and oneself is "correct". I want to argue that it is this predominant focus on the vertical and personal relationship with God that has caused a lack of social engagement on the part of the FGC, especially with regard to gender concerns. "As long as concerns for the healing of society can be kept separate from a primary mission of soul saving it is possible to relegate these interests to the sidelines" (ibid: 184). From my experience within the FGC and my conversations with several women, this is exactly where women's concerns are relegated to – the sidelines. Even those women who are ordained as ministers find it difficult to bring issues of gender equality into their sermons since they will thereby be deviating from the 'spiritual'.

The separation of the spiritual from the material is evident in issues such as divorce, dress code, participation in sacramental duties and sermons, submission to male authority; and even in issues of salary. At this point, I would like to discuss some of the interviewees' responses regarding these issues.

I asked several of them how they deal with cases where the wife is being abused, especially physically, since this is quite a common occurrence within the community.³ Almost all the women, except one, said that they would first find the reason for the beating, since in most cases "when a man hits his wife it is because of something that she has done". A senior male lecturer at the Bethesda Bible College, where almost all of the FGC's pastors are trained, pointed out that men are also abused. He went on to assert that in most cases where a man has beaten his wife, it is because she has "irritated" him. What they (the senior ministers) do in those cases, is to bring in the woman and counsel her from "the Word of God" and then send her back to her home. In other words, in every case of wife-beating there is always a reason behind it, and most times it is the woman's fault. Further, the woman and the man (if he is a Christian) are counselled and prayed with, and the woman is sent back to her husband. All the women, except two ordained ministers, said that they would never encourage a woman to leave – because, firstly, divorce is wrong according to the Bible; and secondly, the church's constitution does not permit

divorce, except in cases of marital infidelity, and even in those cases every effort must be made to reconcile the couple.

The idea of laying blame at the door of women is not a new one, as I discovered in the course of my inquiry as to why, previously, women's meetings used to focus on proper grooming for women and how to be a good wife by cooking and cleaning. The answers I got were that at the time there was a high rate of marital infidelity on the part of the men – and the women leaders concluded that if a man was being unfaithful to his wife it had to be her fault. In other words it was probably because she was not taking adequate care of herself, through grooming; or because she was not taking adequate care of her husband by keeping a clean house, cooking, and doing household chores. This idea that that a woman should please her husband in every respect finds echoes again in the Indian culture. "*Karvane Kann Kannada Theivam* (The husband is [the wife's] god in sight)". Thus, as Robinson points out "the Hindu wife is made to believe that by worshipping her husband, she actually worships God" (1999: 116). "*Kallanalum Kanavan Pullanalum Purushan* (A husband, even if he proves himself worthless as a stone or grass, still has to be honoured and worshipped as husband)." "*Thannaku Thazhnthathu Tharum* (A bride in all respects should be inferior to her husband)."

Interpretations of scripture

The way in which the Bible is interpreted concerning certain matters of dress code is also interesting. In the past, as was advocated by Pastor Rowlands and others, a woman had to have her head covered with a piece of material (a scarf). Almost every woman within the church followed this practice until very recently (the last ten years). Now, there are an infinitely small number of women who still follow this practice. As almost all the women I spoke to take, as the starting point to their faith, the authority and infallibility of the Bible, it was interesting to hear their 'new' interpretations of Paul's injunction for women to have their heads covered. The most interesting idea was that this passage was misunderstood because it was taken too literally. The passage, one woman said, was supposed to have, not a literal meaning but a figurative one – therefore Paul means that a woman's covering is her husband. Although the women found no problem in reinterpreting the Scripture, their interpretations still leaned toward patriarchal bias. Almost all the women I spoke to believed in the submission of a woman to a man. The way that was explained was that a woman was supposed, lovingly and willingly, to submit to a man's will and do what made him happy. However, there was no room for the man to submit to the woman.

It was also interesting to see how different women approached the various Biblical texts and how clichés that are actually harmful to women are used, not just by men, but by women too. One that struck me as very interesting was the

"Jezebel spirit". I have heard both men and women use this phrase very freely and often uncontextually. I asked the women I spoke to what this phrase meant and was quite intrigued by their responses. Some said that a woman who had the "Jezebel spirit" was a jealous woman; others said that she was conniving to overthrow a man; while still others said that to have a "Jezebel spirit" was to have a "seductive spirit", and lead men astray. Interestingly, none of them saw the connection between the meanings that they attached to the term and the actual character in the Bible. In fact, very few of them actually knew and understood the story itself.

During my visit to the Bethesda Bible College, I picked up a book that was available in the church's library. It was written by a woman for Christian women in leadership roles. From a chapter dealing with the story of Esther, I picked up a very interesting phrase: the "Vashti spirit". According to the author, Ann Gimenez, "Vashti's spirit is in the world today, destroying marriages, homes and families. Everywhere women are upsetting God's order by asserting themselves over their husbands" (1986: 24). In other words it is the "Vashti spirit" that is destroying marriages and "God's plan" for the way the church and the family unit should function. A woman should never ever disobey her husband, even if he is wrong. Vashti, a character in the book of Esther, was the king's first wife who was banished because she refused to appear before her husband and display herself before his party of drunken friends as requested by him. The author firstly "spiritualises" Vashti's character by arguing that King Xerxes is a God prototype and Vashti is the prototype of the modern woman. When God calls, nobody should disobey. That is on the spiritual level. Secondly, she turns to the material world and says that Vashti disobeyed a fundamental rule of life. "When the king calls nobody should disobey least of all a woman". Such interpretations of strong women characters are not uncommon in the FGC, both from the pulpit and also in "sisters' " meetings.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the roles that South African Indian women play within the FGC have changed over the years. However, the change is slow, and it is hampered both by the cultural norms of Indian society and the uncritical appropriation of certain Biblical texts that seek to justify the subordination of women in the church and at home. My experience within the church itself has taught me that as long as the spiritual remains separate from the physical world, women can never be truly emancipated. This separation of the spiritual from the physical is a hallmark of Full Gospel spirituality, and therefore the challenge that lies ahead for Full Gospel churches, especially those that are concerned with restoring full humanity to women, is to find the balance between the two worlds.

Notes

- ¹ I explore the Full Gospel Church, not because it is the only denomination amongst the Indians, but both because it is the largest one, and because it is the church in which I grew up; hence I have first hand experience of its practices.
- ² these are Malagasy words.
- ³ Chetty also shows that "younger ministers are jettisoning earlier meaningful indigenous patterns of ministry for western ones". He goes on to suggest that "this discarding of the 'baby with the bathwater' can perhaps be halted by inculcating an appreciation for the 'rainbow' of cultures that we are blessed with. The discriminate use of the array of cultural possibilities in the expression of the Christian faith remains an exciting challenge" (1995: 158).
- ⁴ I have stated elsewhere that I am uncomfortable with the term 'feminist' because of feminism's inability, or maybe refusal, to deal with issues of race and class as equally important categories alongside gender. For us Indian women in South Africa, these categories are an integral part of our lives and form a significant part of our identities.
- ⁵ I refer again to my recent visit to India and feel compelled again to make a comparison, by recounting an experience with the women living in the hostel at which I was staying. One of the women commented that my husband seems like a very "soft" man and therefore he probably does not beat me "very often." I was quite taken aback by her comment and responded that he never beats me, to which she replied that he probably does not love me very much, then. From further encounters with other women I discovered that wife-beating is seen to be as something "natural" that occurs within marriage, even among some educated couples. I also discovered that when a beating does occur, most times both the woman and the man feel that the woman's actions justify the beating, and that her husband is proving his love for her by beating her. In Tamil there is a saying: "only the hand that beats embraces".

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