Feminising Faith: A Reflection on Personal and Academic Journeys

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Abstract

Written in response to the conference organisers' explicit invitation, this paper combines personalised reflection on a scholarly journey with a broader historiographical overview. The 1970s seemed unpropitious times for researching women of faith in South Africa. Neo-Marxist concerns with rural political economy and urban workers' struggles with capital gave little space or validity to female spirituality in the mission encounter. What wider perspectives, changing trends and scholarly networks over the ensuing decades have sustained my own research and that of others in related fields? First, anthropology threw light on African religious and social developments, while historians like Richard Gray focused on African Christian agency. By the 1980s, feminist analyses and a new social history were enriching South African scholarship. In the 1990s, the Comaroffs gave mission history fresh cachet, while others – often at odds with them – developed new academic collaborations on Christianity. Meanwhile, gender research and advocacy acquired a higher profile in South Africa's nascent democracy. Further advances after 2000 suggest that both mission history and female religiosity – certainly from a UK perspective – now have a much stronger standing in the academy.

Introduction

In early 2010, attendees at one of the many seminars hosted by London University's Institute of Historical Research could hear academic papers by a

Swiss historian on missionary maps in Cameroon and a German on a premier girls' mission school in Sierra Leone. An American specialist on India reflected on his recent pioneering overview of the British missionary venture, as a prelude to a panel discussion drawing in British academics. The final presentation of the term came from a PhD student working on the missionary family in South Africa and the South Seas, and concerned possible inappropriate behaviour by the clergyman running a school for missionary children. This was fairly typical of the geographical and thematic range of the new seminar on Christian Missions in Global History which the author of this article helps to convene. At that point, it had been going barely a year, its healthy attendances confounding the skeptics who had warned that the market was already too crowded. As Figure 1 shows, visual images, spatiality, women's history, gendered education, childhood and sexuality were all there, as well as a summary master narrative – a powerful sign of the changing times historiographically in the past four decades. Certainly, in my experience, no such topics featured as standard content for history courses at Cape Town University in the late 1960s, while I would have given a great deal to go to such a seminar when starting doctoral research at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University, nearly 35 years ago!

Other presentations at the Christian Missions in Global History seminar have explored nineteenth-century indigenous Christian leaders in Western Canada as compared with the Eastern Cape; mission medicine, whether in World War II China or among path-breaking Catholic nuns; the missionary indebtedness of South Africa's first black president of the Methodist Conference; how Christian missions may have stimulated a Buddhist revival in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka; the educative and propagandistic role of missionary lantern slides; the Dissenting Academy education of a pioneer missionary to China; and the place of overseas missions in the literary culture of Nonconformist women in the early nineteenth century (CMGH).

Institute of Historical Research, London
Christian Missions in Global History
Spring Programme, 2010

19th January, Silke Strickrodt, German Historical Institute, London
Christian Missions and Female Education in West Africa: The Church Missionary Society's Female Institution in Freetown, Sierra Leone 1840s-1880s

16th February, Guy Thomas, Mission 21, University of Basel
From Missionary Sketch Maps to Persuasive Map-Images: Religious and Spatial Transformation in Colonial Cameroon

2nd March, Jeff Cox, University of Iowa
What I learnt about Missions from Writing *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700*

16th March, Emily Manktelow, King's College, London
Rev. Simpson's "Improper Liberties": Moral Scrutiny and Missionary Children in the South Seas Mission of the LMS
Source: CMGH Programme circulated electronically Spring 2010

Figure 1: Example of a Current Term Programme of the Christian Missions in Global History Seminar Series

This modest development needs pointing out as something new, to prompt some thinking about why it is now viable, and to underline that its origins lie in the opening up of the comparative history of missions across the world; it came about independently of any involvement of mine in *South African history* circles. This is an observation which will recur frequently in this paper, though I have certainly appreciated recent links with South African researchers on missions too (even beyond my UJ conference invitation) – such as being part of the group which Alan Kirkaldy and Caroline Jeannerat gathered to explore missions at Rhodes University in mid-2007, which resulted in a special issue of the *South African Historical Journal* (Jeannerat, Kirkaldy and Ross 2009). Among those at Rhodes was Lizé Kriel from Pretoria, whom I first met at a workshop in Leipzig organized by Adam Jones, on Religious Space and the Shaping of Gender Encounters in African Christianity, which again led to a journal publication (Jones 2007). These particular local scholars are making a vital contribution in their thoughtful explorations of German female mission input (Kriel 2007) and the faith of African Lutheran women – including a weighty challenge to glib assumptions about female religiosity and greater readiness to convert (Kriel and Kirkaldy 2009; Jeannerat 2009).

To set alongside this unexpected prominence for missions in London in 2010, the "faith" part of the article's title phrase, this introduction next draws attention to equally notable changes in the trajectory of the "feminising" of faith, with a second example from the United Kingdom, from the Women's History Network (WHN), which holds a large annual conference. At Oxford in September 2009, WHN grouped a hundred papers into six simultaneous strands on aspects of the theme, "Women, Gender and Political Spaces." One of these strands was on religion, to the gratification of the strand organiser, Sue Morgan from Chichester. At that point, she was preparing a new collection of essays with Jacqui de Vries, focusing on ten significant areas of British cultural activity which both shaped and were shaped by women's religious beliefs and practices,

from the time of the evangelical revival to the Second World War (Morgan and De Vries 2010). Her earlier work included a pioneering study of Victorian sexual purity campaigner, Ellice Hopkins (Morgan 1999), and an important anthology on faith and feminism with a strong section on women missionaries (Morgan 2002: chs. 10-12).

Sue Morgan commented after the 2009 conference that it had been "heart-warming to chair an entire strand" of fourteen papers dedicated to "religion, belief and selfhood." In a lively discussion on the WHN mailbase she went on to reflect: "20 years ago this would just not have been the case in feminist or cultural history, so what has prompted this 'religious turn' and what will its legacy for women's history be?!" Alison Twells affirmed that the religion strand had been "fabulous; I can't remember when I last stuck with one strand throughout a conference!" Others chipped in to list vital scholarship which had taken historical analysis of women and religion forward. A Canadian student pointed to the sophisticated historiographical discussion by Joy Dixon in *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001), suggesting that "an artificial divide has been sustained between religious and feminist historiographies – the religious beliefs of feminists have often been relegated to religious history and their activism to feminist history – and the investigation of intersections between the two precluded." A number of correspondents were enthusiastic about a possible conference explicitly on feminism and religion, which, again, seems a fairly unprecedented development among this bunch of UK women historians (WHN Discussion List December 2009).

These two vignettes set the scene in the present from my personal point of view as located in the UK. Attendance at the UJ conference offered a chance to gauge quite where things are in such scholarly endeavours in South Africa at this time. But I was also asked to be somewhat autobiographical, in the sense of thinking through what it was like embarking on research about women of faith in the 1970s, at the height of the neo-Marxist surge and in the heart of one of its strongholds, those studying with, or in the orbit of the influential fortnightly Institute of Commonwealth Studies seminars of, Shula Marks at SOAS. I have not managed to be as concise as Sue Krige, who also drew on her own experiences for a punchy and engaging reflection on "the ways in which spirituality, religion and belief have or have not been integrated into South African historical research over the last 20 years" (Krige 2009: 1). I offer a glimpse of the kinds of networks and research that helped me stay with and follow through on what I thought was important in exploring Anglican, Methodist and American Board women missionaries and the African women they worked among in the early twentieth century round Johannesburg, or, as I entitled the thesis, "Female Mission Initiatives: Black and White Women in Three Witwatersrand Churches, 1903-1939" (Gaitskell 1981). I take four broad schematic sweeps, decade by decade

(see Figure 2), because there are interesting changes and important organisations and ventures linked with each, which I hope will move beyond the personal and merely descriptive to both inform, and spark further ideas and questions among, colleagues and younger scholars.

The 1970s
- African agency
- Resistance
- Political Economy
- Some missions, but independency more glamorous
- Little on gender or women's history

The 1980s
- More women's history
- Adult education
- WISH
- *Journal of Southern African Studies*
- "Women in Africa"
- HSG / SGCH

The 1990s
- Missions in vogue again
- Gender to fore in SA transition
- Some watershed gender collections
- ICS "Gender in Empire and Commonwealth"
- NAMP (North Atlantic Missiology Project)

After 2000
- Gender and mission / faith more mainstream in both UK & SA
- (CWC) Currents in World Christianity
- BIAMS and IBMR
- Christianity and History Forum
- WHN (Women's History Network)
- Scandinavian networks
- LFM / SSM
- CMGH

Figure 2: Feminising Faith: Context and Some Influences by Decade

The 1970s: Political Economy, African Agency and Minimal Attention to Women

The 1970s were not a time of much gender awareness or of particular sympathy with the spiritual in South African history-writing, as is well known. As Dana Robert has recently observed of the era more broadly, "the subject of Christian mission – if noticed at all – was treated as a form of western hegemonic discourse wedded to economic and cultural imperialism, or European colonialism," while "[s]tudies by non-western historians often focused on the limitations and advantages of mission in relation to nation-building or the creation of communal identities." By the late twentieth century, by contrast, as we will see, "mission historians emphasized the complexity of intercultural and interreligious encounters, including the need to put indigenous leaders at the center of the picture" (Robert 2009: x).

I was a doctoral post-graduate in the late 1970s as William Beinart and Peter Delius were finishing SOAS PhDs, with Philip Bonner and Jeff Guy having preceded them, hence substantial studies of the Pondo, the Pedi, the Swazi and the Zulu were emerging. But there was also huge interest in the history of the mining industry and black workers – Robert Turrell on Kimberley, Peter Richardson on Chinese labour, Timothy Keegan on rural sharecroppers. This research was showcased in two landmark volumes (Marks and Atmore 1980, Marks and Rathbone 1982). It largely bore out the later comment that "the new South African historiography, while not totally ignoring experience, consciousness and religion, has been preoccupied with colonial conquest, state formation, expropriation, capital accumulation and proletarianization" (Du Bruyn and Southey 1995: 29). The first article I published picked up on the neo-Marxist interest in mine labour control by foregrounding the handy, vivid phrase a white church leader used to describe the hostels which several denominations set up to shelter young black women coming to work in Johannesburg: "Christian compounds for girls" (Gaitskell 1979). Although I was also very interested in how these ventures formed part of evangelistic and church-building endeavours, for the purposes of a paper initially presented at the first History Workshop in Johannesburg, I emphasised mission training and control of female domestic labour in town.

A detailed exploration of interactions (or their lack) between Marxism, faith and gender in the 1970s and 80s would require a whole new paper. Nevertheless, Elaine Unterhalter was most unusual in seeking to bring a materialist analysis of labour migrant flows to bear on late nineteenth-century patterns of conversion in Zululand (Unterhalter 1981). A substantial stock-taking of the "emergence of historical materialism" (Bozzoli and Delius 1990: 19) in South African history-writing, produced halfway through the period I am appraising, gives faith no importance or space at all, apart from a glancing reference to W. M. Macmillan and C. W. de Kiewiet's debunking of "the story of the triumph of white settlers

over barbarous blacks and meddlesome missionaries" (Bozzoli and Delius 1990: 15) and to researchers' growing realization that religion was one of many factors producing divisions which helped explain "the production of class". By contrast, the apparent weakness of studies of women and gender merited nearly a page (Bozzoli and Delius 1990: 31, 33-4). My impressionistic recollection from my post-graduate years in London (against a general background within South African scholarly circles there of relative indifference, scepticism or hostility towards missionaries and the internal dynamics of black Christianity) is of the analytical prestige of radical authors like E. P. Thompson and Eugene Genovese, who were seen to throw light on the ambiguous role of religion ("opium of the people," after all) in other fraught settings: Methodism curbed workers' struggles while providing some consolation for the horrors of English industrialisation; Christian faith might help slaves in the American South make a supportive world of their own, or even enable resistance. What mattered, from a Marxist viewpoint, was the impact of religion on wider social, political and economic struggles, not the way in which individual or communal religious beliefs and experience as such were changing, or what their meaning or spiritual (or cultural or gender) ramifications might be. My particular focus on the latter need not – and does not – preclude concern for the former.

Indeed, my interest in religion went back to the early 1970s. Coming to England as a young MA student in 1972, I was delighted to discover, having been active in church youth work and the Students' Christian Association at UCT, that people actually researched the church in Africa as a legitimate historical topic. I was blithely unaware of the existence of a whole field in religious studies debating whether it was better to be an outsider than an insider in order to study religious phenomena (McCutcheon 1999). I can see now how pivotal it was that I followed an interdisciplinary path on an African Studies course. In addition to a major with Shula Marks on South African history, one of my two minor courses was on religion – "Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion in Tropical Africa". Richard Gray, whose research and initiative from the 1970s were increasingly directed towards the study of Christianity in Africa (Roberts 2005: 167), taught the course alongside John Peel and Humphrey Fisher. Working on the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) archives in London provided a good way to bring history and religion together for the short MA dissertation (Bates 1973). I looked at both men and women on the Rand, but felt particularly interested in the women, so was happy to focus on them when the way opened up to return three years later (after teaching in Zimbabwe and South Africa) to start a PhD. Contact with retired women missionaries increased my incentive: they were keen for their story to be told and had gathered documentary material from the past.

But it was in London in 1972-3 that I first read *Bantu Prophets in South*

Africa (Sundkler 1961) and tackled the first volume of a massive work on Shona independent churches (Daneel 1971). It was exciting to see what Africans, ostensibly left to themselves, made of Christianity, especially teachings on the Holy Spirit and healing. Sources on missions in South Africa were mostly rather old and narrowly institutional in focus in those years – while scholars like J. F. Ade Ajayi and John McCracken were writing about Christianity and mission education making new elites in West Africa or Nyasaland, and seeing missions in a broader social and nationalist setting. Gray's PhD students gave us an idea of the potential within research on African Christianity, especially the gifted Ian Linden, then exploring religion in Rwanda (having already published on Malawi and later to write on the church in Zimbabwe), and, most unusually, an invaluable (male) researcher on the Mothers' Union in Malawi (Stuart 1974).

Once embarked on the doctorate, feminist African history from the USA was just beginning to help – the first of a stream of influential anthologies on women carried a study of women's religious associations in Sierra Leone (Steady 1976). A rare example of historical mission analysis with a radical "political economy" tinge, exploring African Christian communities in Natal and Zululand (Etherington 1978), I first consulted, in thesis form. But, to make sense of what I was finding in the archives, it is clear (looking back now) that what I really turned to was anthropology rather than much in the way of South African religious studies scholarship as such. Enlightening sources included the pioneering *Black Woman in Search of God*, obviously (Brandel-Syrier 1962); the rich doctoral research of Jean Comaroff, which had helpful observations on Mafeking Methodists (Comaroff 1974); studies of Tswana and Xhosa Christians (Pauw 1960, 1975); but also other anthropologists writing on African "traditional" society more generally. I used such work to help explain black female religious solidarity, women's response to revivalism, the power of extempore prayer, the lure of eloquent preaching, the complexities of attitudes to premarital pregnancy. My discussions of such religious and social phenomena tried to marry mission archive findings with insights from anthropology (Gaitskell 1982, 1995).

It was only much later, in the 1990s or after 2000, that I encountered or corresponded with younger scholars drawn to exploring female church groups (see further below). Nevertheless, back in the late 1970s, it was important getting to know personally other fellow students also researching African women in twentieth-century South Africa, like Cherryl Walker and Julie Wells, busy producing important studies of the female anti-pass campaigns (Walker 1982; Wells 1993). When researching at Wits in 1977-8, I met promising young women students taught by Peter Kallaway – Sue Krige, Cynthia Kros – and became aware of the feminist research of Joanne Yawitch. Perhaps if I had stayed on at UCT through the 1970s, these contacts would have had an impact anyhow, for Cherryl initially worked on women's suffrage, for an astonishingly substantial 1974 UCT

Honours essay (Walker 1979, 1990). Nevertheless, three years earlier I had allowed myself, without much inherent affinity with the subject, to be shepherded into studying a male politician of the 1930s (Sir Patrick Duncan) for my own (1971) Honours essay, largely on the basis that UCT library held his papers. There was little of faith or gender in the outcome! Especially, I did not make enough of Duncan's potentially extremely interesting lengthy correspondence, kept up since the days succeeding Milner's Kindergarten, with Lady Maud Selborne, a fascinating and pivotal figure in British female imperial history (see Bush 2000), of whom I knew far too little at that stage. The idea was for me to continue working on Duncan for a PhD if studying in the UK did not eventuate. That might have been a miserable fate.

In terms of British research to provide context once I began the wider doctoral project on women in three missions, that was also very patchy at that point, with a couple of useful theses evaluating missionary candidates (Williams 1977, 1993), some research on Victorian Christianity which enabled one to glimpse the women, and a scattering of biographies of notable missionary wives in South Africa, with the letters of Mrs Colenso and Bessie Price particularly rich (Rees 1958; Long 1956). Feminist theologians, especially in the US, were beginning to write overviews of women in Christian history, but only one scholar had attempted to survey the female mission field (Beaver 1968). Much of the work we rely on today for our grasp of women and missions only appeared after my thesis was completed in 1981.

The 1980s: Feminist Stirrings and More Social History

By the next decade, though, feminism was making much more of an impact. In January 1980, not long before the pioneering appearance of *Maids and Madams* (Cock 1980), a little bunch of female postgraduate students, including Judy Kimble, Elaine Unterhalter, Moira Maconachie and myself, wanting both to challenge the marginalisation or invisibility of women in South African history and to learn from left-wing feminist scholarship in the UK, banded together in London to read Engels on the family; liberal and structuralist anthropology; and Marxist-feminist analyses of the domestic labour debate, the sexual division of labour, and patriarchy. Some of my UK feminist reading at this time (Oakley 1976; Barrett 1980) is reflected in the *Journal of African History* article on the contradictions of domesticity (Gaitskell 1983a). Elaine and Judy were also active in the London anti-apartheid scene, stirring us to think about women's emancipation and national liberation (Kimble and Unterhalter 1982). Our small group (Women in South African History, or WISH for short), which included others like Liz Gunner briefly, did some joint conference presentations and published a few academic papers together, on the historiography of the

1970s (Gaitskell, Kimble and Unterhalter 1983), domestic workers in South Africa (Gaitskell, Kimble, Maconachie and Unterhalter 1984), and women and nationalism (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989).

We also produced a couple of issues of an informally-circulated cyclostyled booklet, called *Women in South African History*, first evaluating our reading and compiling an annotated bibliography (WISH 1981); then publishing an interview with Hilda Bernstein as well as thoughts on female proletarianisation and papers by African scholars from Botswana and Swaziland. These last came from a seminar series, "Women in Africa," which we started at SOAS in the autumn of 1982 with the help of Susan Martin, a group member on the staff, and also set out in the booklet (WISH 1983). Later in the decade, when Shula Marks became director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, where her own famous Southern African seminar was based, she suggested our shoe-string seminar operation move to the ICS, where with her encouragement it broadened its scope beyond Africa to look at Gender, Colonialism and Commonwealth.

Shula herself was exploring female inter-relations in a new way, in a trio drawn together personally round social and educational aspirations (Marks 1987); and then via women in the nursing profession (Marks 1994). It was Shula who chaired a round table discussion at Northwestern University, Chicago, in 1988, on "South Africa: New Directions in Women's History," organised by Karen Hansen. There, I was delighted to meet female historians of Africa of the calibre of Margaret Strobel and Susan Geiger. The changing concerns of African history more broadly (and its increasing proliferation of women scholars) are part of the backdrop of this paper, kept track of in part via intermittent attendance at both the US and UK African Studies Associations over three decades – useful, for example, for spotting likely contributors to the second *Journal of Southern African Studies* special issue on women (Walsh, Scully and Gaitskell 2006).

But other contacts also sustained my interest in women's history on the one hand and Christian history on the other (still rarely connected within the discipline) – especially hearing, at an adult education day school geared at women, Catherine Hall on the changing sexual division of labour in the Cadbury family of Birmingham and Anna Davin's research on the poor children of London. Both were inspirational, with this work available in book form in due course, or developed further to show the centrality of religion to middle-class domestic life (Hall 1992; Davidoff and Hall 1987; Davin 1996). These were only the first of many superb British women historians whose writings I acquired eagerly and used in adult education teaching jobs in that decade, and later in research on girls' schooling. As well as classes in South African and African – and even Middle Eastern – history, I ran Workers' Educational Association or London University Extra-Mural courses on British social history with a feminist slant – The Family Past and Present; Women's History through Biography. Besides wanting to understand

my own past as a Western woman, I was very aware, as a feminist historian, that the British and American women missionaries I researched came from changing societies which I needed to grasp better – and such women tried to implement in Africa assumptions and approaches about Christian womanhood in which their home setting had deeply steeped them. Mid-decade, pioneering explorations of female faith in Britain finally surfaced: on women preachers (Valenze 1985); sisterhoods and settlements (Vicinus 1985: chs. 2, 6); and Anglican deaconesses and church councils (Malmgreen 1986: chs. 7, 11). A monograph on Anglican sisterhoods emerged a decade later (Mumm 1999).

For Christian history, when reading archived files from Johannesburg in the old Methodist Missionary Society building in Marylebone Road, I encountered Brian Stanley, doing a Cambridge thesis on home support for missions. We met again in the graduates' Christian organisation for historians, the Historians' Study Group (HSG), later Study Group on Christianity and History (SGCH). An even more male organisation then than it is now, this modest group seeking to build solidarity among church-going academic historians and teachers has actually seen some of its leading members achieve influential positions in British scholarship. Brian, an early HSG leader, is now professor of World Christianity at Edinburgh and, fittingly, has recently published the definitive study of the 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference (Stanley 2009), while David Bebbington, John Coffey and John Wolffe are history professors at, respectively, the universities of Stirling, Leicester and the Open University; David Killingray, another group stalwart, retired a while back from Goldsmiths'. The 1980s saw milestone work on a substantial overview of British Evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989) and a nuanced exploration of missions and imperialism (Stanley 1990).

But in the 1980s, I myself was not actually publishing the more detailed, explicitly spiritual research from my thesis, about African women's praying and preaching. I was dipping into various aspects of girls' education, whether in the Christian youth movement of Wayfarers or how empire impinged on mission schools (Gaitskell 1984, 1988). Some of this research – on education for domesticity; mission sources on female schooling; sewing versus agriculture; and African women teachers – only reached full fruition later (Gaitskell 1994, 1996, 2002a, 2004c). I also coordinated the first special issue on women for the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Gaitskell 1983b) – commenting on its very rural focus (apart from the article by Wells on passes) and making a self-interested plea for more attention to female Christianity and to urbanisation. Both these areas received welcome coverage in Belinda Bozzoli's subsequent rich study of the women of Phokeng (Bozzoli 1991).

Finally, leaving female spirituality aside, radical theologians caught up in the cauldron of 1980s South Africa (Cochrane 1987; Villa-Vicencio 1988) offered a more sustained analytical engagement than had the revisionist historians of the

previous decade. "Protracted political struggles, combined with Marxist categories of analysis, provided the lenses for interpreting mission Christianity primarily as a source of ideological and political oppression" (Robert 2003: 5). The daily meaning and practices of black Christianity were still a neglected historical focus.

The 1990s: Missions and Gender both More to the Fore

It was only as Cherryl Walker shepherded a group of researchers together to publish our work in a pioneering collection on gender all of twenty years ago that the *manyanos* or prayer unions got more sustained attention (Gaitskell 1990). Interestingly, colleagues in South Africa noted this rather delayed shift on my part "from class to gender and from consciousness to spirituality" (Cuthbertson and Kretschmar 1996: 283). I would argue, rather, that the actual thematic structure of conferences and the terms on which participation in publication are offered can be decisive in whether particular emphases in academic work find an outlet. Fortunately, the decade of South Africa's painful but dramatic transition helped facilitate various landmark gatherings and scholarly ventures locally, where space was found in a new way for both women and the spiritual. The academic context thus changed markedly in the 1990s.

Regarding women, three key gatherings I found invaluable were the milestone gender conference in Durban in 1991, the workshop on promoting women's history at Rhodes mid-1995, and the conference on gender and colonialism at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1997 (Woodward, Hayes and Minkley 2002). For religion, new vistas were opened up by collections on women in the church in South Africa – strong on current spiritual struggles and theological, rather than historical, perspectives (Ackerman, Draper and Mashinini 1991); on missions, especially in the Western Cape, which provided half the case-studies (Bredekamp and Ross 1995a); and on the history of Christianity more broadly across the whole country (Elphick and Davenport 1997), this last a coherent, substantial attempt do justice to its pervasive influence and amplify standard historical macro-narratives by Christianity's insertion (a goal still awaiting real fulfilment). Helpful appraisals appeared of the changing historiography of women, gender and Christianity (Landman 1996; Cuthbertson and Kretschmar 1996) and relevant resources on Southern African women in theology and religion (Brand 1996). This was also the time when, asserts Elphick, rich and provocative work on Christianity and the Tswana (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997) was aided by "the postmodernist moment" which "enable[d] religious history to escape the ghetto" (Elphick 1995: 21). Twenty years after their first volume appeared, the Comaroffs' detailed portrayal of the "long conversation" of the mission encounter is still much studied and their claim of mission "colonisation of consciousness" hotly debated.

In terms of gender research beyond South Africa as well as within it, the fortnightly seminar I ran at the ICS was, by the 1990s, entitled Gender in Empire and Commonwealth. Though modest in size, its duration from 1985-2001 was a real enrichment of the scholarly circle for a number of us, making links between Africanists (and Indianists) and (now eminent) British feminist historians working on empire, and exposing us to research often subsequently published in book form. That was where I first heard about women's anti-slavery campaigns (Midgley 1992), Hannah Kilham's mission to Sierra Leone (Twells 2009: ch. 4), the female anti-imperialists of the 1930s (Bush 1998, 1999), and the imperially-minded women of the Victoria League and the female emigration societies (Bush 2000), all topics with reverberations for my own concerns. Several South African researchers (Sheila Meintjes, Helen Bradford, Anne Mager, Sue Krige) contributed key papers at various points. The seminar was not purely historical, so literature, politics, anthropology and religion (not always Christianity) featured within the fairly interdisciplinary mix too; copies of many of the GEC papers are still available for library reference in the holdings of the ICS.

Internationally, feminist (including Africanist) historians in the USA were increasingly producing monographs and editing collections. Studies of mission domesticity and education in Africa were of particular interest to me in the batch gathered by Karen Hansen, whose careful introduction still bears re-reading (Hansen 1992). In a consideration of Western women and imperialism, Indian comparisons sparked fresh ideas: Did the three-way analysis of five British women activists (Ramusack 1992) offer an illuminating approach to women missionaries in South Africa? In their promotion of education and voluntary organisations, were the latter agents for change like their counterparts in North India, despite much reinforcement of female domestic identity (Flemming 1992)? Then Dana Robert produced what is still lacking for UK women – a sympathetic, theologically informed, historically well-grounded, yet immensely readable analysis of American women (both Protestant and Catholic) in world mission (Robert 1996).

From Britain, in the long-running series from the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women at the University of Oxford, a landmark anthology on women and missions (Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener 1993) had as many as six pieces looking at Christianity from the African women's point of view (out of 13 articles, which included one on women missionaries in South Africa). Rosemary Seton at SOAS was improving organisation and publicity for mission archival collections, but also analysing London Missionary Society female candidates (Seton 1996), while the high profile (and numbers) of medical women in India emerged alongside in that group venture (Fitzgerald 1996). John Wolffe edited a set of essays with an appraisal of women in evangelism and ministry in the nineteenth century (Murray 1995) and an overview of Evangelicals and overseas

concerns (Stanley 1995). A study of the female contribution to UK Anglicanism over 200 years, especially in the fields of spirituality, philanthropy and overseas missions, broke new ground (Gill 1994).

Four continental church histories of Africa were also published between 1994 and 2000. Sadly, there is no space to appraise them properly here, but a superb recent reflection by one of their co-authors suggests how the field has changed since then (Steed 2009). The period in which all were conceived – the late 1970s and early 1980s – very much overlaps with my own doctoral "formation", hence my easy identification with their "main aspiration", which was "to show a demonstrably worthwhile and lively Christian past achieved through local agency," by placing church history "within indigenous structures" and stressing "African initiatives and enterprises, thus downplaying outside missionary control and paternal direction" (Steed 2009: 492). This echoes Richard Gray's emphases in the 1970s, despite the Comaroffs' warning that "[t]o collapse this mutually determining, non-linear process [of the mission encounter] to the terms of a linear equation, under the political chic-speak of appropriation and agency, belies and belittles its sheer complexity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 49).

The late 1990s was also when the North Atlantic Missiology Project (NAMP) got going, under the leadership of Brian Stanley of Cambridge University, organising conferences and publishing monographs and collections which took seriously and tried to elucidate the theology and practice of Protestant missions from the North Atlantic world between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. A few historians of southern Africa benefited from, and contributed to, the deeper scholarly reflection and wider context for thinking about mission which the Project made possible (Natasha Erlank and Rick Elphick, for example, have chapters in collected volumes). NAMP's origins lay partly in changing US research priorities with the big funder responsible, The Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia. But Dana Robert, a moving spirit in the project, sketches how pivotal it was that world Christianity itself was changing:

> In the 1990s, however, the icy grip of the "colonialism paradigm" over mission history began to thaw, warmed by an awakening realisation that Christianity had become a primarily non-western religion. In one of the greatest demographic shifts in the two-thousand-year history of Christianity, by the year 2000 over two-thirds of the world's Christians lived in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, while the European percentage had shrunk to less than one-third. Flaws emerged in a scholarly paradigm that saw the primary significance of the Western missionary movement to be the monolithic imposition of European domination. After

> all, only an excruciating paternalism would attribute "false consciousness" to the majority of Christians in the twenty-first century. (Robert 2008: 2)

This transformation enabled those of us involved to develop a new comparative frame of global mission and the world church.

2000 Onwards: Mission History and Women's Religious Trajectory More Firmly Rooted

The impact of NAMP worked itself out in print in the new millennium, when the venture projected itself anew as "Currents in World Christianity" (CWC). I presented a couple of conference papers on women missionaries in South Africa, assessing their changing work experience as a group (Gaitskell 2003a), and then focusing on one particular individual, detained in the 1960 state of emergency (Gaitskell 2003b). I am also pursuing a longer-term project for CWC, first aired at the UWC conference in 1997, on five Anglican women missionaries active between 1907 and 1960 in the southern Transvaal: Deaconess Julia Gilpin, Dora Earthy, Frances Chilton, Dorothy Maud and Hannah Stanton. My initial overview of their half-century of female mission encounter with African women and children argued, against the tenor of the special issue editorial published alongside, that Christianity had been an arena in which women had actually been able to find meeting points and interaction. "Far from race and religion being a 'fatal combination', religion was one of the few forces that brought at least some women together across a growing racial divide" (Gaitskell 2000a: 88). Later in the decade, I looked at the same mission quintet through the lens of space and place (Gaitskell 2007), and evaluated the rise, flourishing and decline of the Society of Women Missionaries to which all but one of them belonged (Gaitskell 2009a).

At the same time, building on my earlier work on the *manyanos* (Gaitskell 1997), I tried to take the comparative story of South Africa's female church groups more broadly conceived (among both black and white) further into the later twentieth century (Gaitskell 2002a). Then, after attending a significant multiracial conference of the Anglican Women's Fellowship, I reflected in print on striking new developments at that time, particularly the pivotal leadership role of Coloured women (Gaitskell 2004a, b). For more contemporary insights, it helped enormously that South African women theologians and church activists had also been researching female faith, whether in the African Mothers' Union (Nye 1987; Haddad 2002, 2004) or the white Methodist Women's Auxiliary (Attwell 1997), while a notable female historian of Anglicanism gave women a preliminary exploration (Goedhals 1998). By this time, I was aware of or in touch with younger scholars working on Catholic and Methodist churchwomen

in Zimbabwe (Hinfelaar 2001), Lesotho's pious female associations (Epprecht 1993, 2000: ch. 8), women Methodists of all races in Cape Town (Theilen 2005), or Mozambican Anglican churchwomen (Van Koevering 2005). I have also benefited from the insights of Kathrin Roller, who is currently researching African Lutheran women in South Africa. Wider perspectives have recently been offered by the historian and archivist of the British Mothers' Union, exploring the movement internationally (Moyse 2009), and through superb studies of African Catholic sisterhoods and laywomen in central Africa (Burke 2001; Martin 2009).

Other rich comparative research has provided continued inspiration in this past decade. Biographical studies of female Canadians in twentieth-century Asia and Africa showcased an unforeseen mission interaction with indigenous men (Brouwer 2002), by contrast with the classic "women's work for women" of Victorian times (Brouwer 1990). The varying responses to Christianity of a trio of prominent Tswana women could be reconstructed and evaluated in the light of their relatively intimate dealings with missionary Bessie Price (Urban-Mead 2002). Female mission interaction in India, with all its contradictions and inconsistencies, evoked sustained debate (Semple 2003; Singh 2000). Wide-ranging, resourceful, often stimulating anthologies regrettably short-changed Africa, considering its growing significance in world Christianity (Huber and Lutkehaus 1999; Robert 2002). The editors of the Oxford History of the British Empire acknowledged that both gender and missionaries needed more attention (Levine 2004; Etherington 2005), although, disappointingly, Andrew Porter decided "not to discuss at any length ... the issue of gender" in his own substantial questioning of whether religion challenged empire, arguing of missionary women that "their presence and its importance may be taken as understood" (Porter 2004: 8-9).

South Africa was now producing a flood of material on women and gender, particularly on female political participation, with an invaluable historical reach back into the 1980s and the liberation movement in exile (Hassim 2006), or appraising fraught current attempts at female organising (Britton, Fish and Meintjes 2009). Four authors in the latter volume overlapped as earlier contributors to a *JSAS* special issue (Walsh, Scully and Gaitskell 2006) which was (not surprisingly), in its far more explicit focus on politics and sexuality, very different in scope and tone from its predecessor in the 1980s (Gaitskell 1983b). An important and wide-ranging historical collection mustered a much more representative authorship than previously achieved (Gasa 2007). The significant research on masculinity in South Africa, much of it galvanised initially by Robert Morrell, also began to have an impact – and certainly needs to be incorporated more consciously into gendered appraisals of faith history, though a start has been made (Cleall 2009).

Regarding mission history, former stalwart analysts of rural political economy or mine migrants in South Africa instead probed the political and scholarly labours of missionaries in meticulous detail (Guy 2001, 2003; Harries 2007) – but as a logical outcome of their prior work on the Zulu or on Junod of the Swiss Mission, respectively. Indigenous female faith has not been neglected in the past decade. From a journal whose scope illustrated the new salience of gender post-1994, a special issue on religion and spirituality (*Agenda* 2004) drew on theologians in KwaZulu-Natal who were thinking through doctrine and practice using women's writings from Africa (Rakoczy 2004) or coordinating accounts by and of female leaders and women of faith across the continent (Phiri, Govinden and Nadar 2002). Female theological innovation in the African continent as a whole also needs acknowledging (Pemberton 2003), and the production of gendered analyses "from the inside", whether of Presbyterians in Malawi (Phiri 1997) or Vapostori in Zimbabwe (Mukonyora 2007). Reflecting on all this new local and regional scholarship needs more time, but its appearance is warmly welcomed, as are the two documentary volumes issuing from the Social History Project of the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa at the University of Cape Town (Villa-Vicencio and Grassow 2009; De Gruchy 2009). Clearly, too, as warmly recommended by Dana Robert (in another useful historiography survey piece), more of the "seminal" church history insights of (the late) Ogbu Kalu need exploration (Robert 2003: 7).

In addition to backing the CWC, Pew also funded a separate venture on African initiatives in religion, based at Unisa, where it was helpful for me to be able to build on and further develop unpublished material gathered earlier on Methodist Biblewomen (Gaitskell 2000b). These were semi-autonomous, financially supported indigenous female preachers and Bible teachers active in the community. They were *not* clergy wives, who invariably led *manyanos*. Nor did they have the public profile and power to alarm of the ex-Methodist prophetess also active in the 1920s, in the Eastern Cape (Edgar and Sapire 2000). I then organised a small conference on transnational Biblewomen with a colleague who taught British women's history, as we were keen to highlight global networking connections and mutual influence with the Biblewomen of mid-Victorian London. This led eventually to a special *Women's History Review* (*WHR*) issue highlighting examples of early indigenous female evangelistic and teaching endeavours in China, Burma, Korea, India, Kenya and Zimbabwe (Gaitskell and Urban-Mead 2008). Some of the "contradictions of domesticity" for Indian Biblewomen, and the ironies round white women's "mission of sisterhood", had already been explored by Jane Haggis with provocative subtlety (Haggis 1998a, 1998b, 2000).

WHR also published special issues arising from the annual conferences of the Women's History Network (WHN); I have appeared in two (Gaitskell

2002b, 2004c). Active in WHN in the past, Linda Wilson has proved a very welcome female colleague in the Christianity and History Forum (CHF), which grew out of the Study Group on Christianity and History. Her PhD became a fascinating book on the spirituality of Nonconformist Victorian women (Wilson 2000), since when she has published a biographical study of a prolific female religious journalist and writer of that era, Marianne Farningham (Wilson 2007). Another WHN activist has now (as part of the religious "turn" with which this paper began) looked more closely at the early female mission movement within feminist engagement with empire (Midgley 2007).

While strengthening such feminist history links in the new millennium, I also found (to reiterate this article's dual interest in both "feminising" and "faith") new sources of scholarly insight on the broader mission context beyond South Africa via the discussion and book reviews in newsletters of the British and Irish Association of Mission Studies (BIAMS) and the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (*IBMR*). I attended a couple of the Yale-Edinburgh conferences on international missions and met researchers old and new. Of more lasting impact has been my involvement in the Methodist Missionary Society History Project (MMS), where themed annual conferences have stimulated me into investigating the under-appreciated role of Rev. E. W. Grant in the ecumenical movement in the 1940s (Gaitskell 2008), and exploring the career of Rev. Seth Mokitimi, South Africa's first black President of the Methodist Conference (Gaitskell 2009b). These concerns are something of a diversion from the "feminising faith" theme, and are more in dialogue (or contention) with, respectively, recent explorations of black Christians' dealings with the International Missionary Council (Erlank 2009) and white Rand Anglican projects for transformation (Skinner 2005), on the one hand, or biographical appraisals of Christian leaders like D. D. T. Jabavu (Higgs 1997) and James Calata (Goedhals 2003), on the other.

The Methodist Missionary Society History Project was responding to a situation where bicentenaries (or even a tercentenary) for other mission societies had resulted in the production of invaluable commemorative histories. For the Baptists, women's role had to be gleaned from the index (Stanley 1992). The Evangelical Anglican story (Ward and Stanley 2000) offered specific reflections on Church Missionary Society wives and spinsters, plus a two-tier female approach to Islam (Murray 2000; Francis-Dehqani 2000). For the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, disappointingly, the focus was only (somewhat unsystematically) on the married, despite unmarried women being employed in such significant numbers in High Church settings (like South Africa) which honoured male celibacy (hence, had fewer missionary wives to draw on); a medical vignette, however, highlighted spinsters' work (O'Connor *et al* 2000: chs.7, 9).

Two other unexpected bonuses arose out of the growing scholarly debate on

mission after 2000. Karin Sarja, whose own doctoral work was on nineteenth-century Swedish women missionaries in Zululand (Sarja 2002), knowing my research on mission mother and baby clinics in interwar Johannesburg (Gaitskell 1992), invited me to contribute a paper on women and medical missions to a conference in Uppsala in 2002 on Gender, Poverty and Church Involvement (Gaitskell 2005a). This put me in touch with a lively group of Scandinavian female researchers on gender and mission (Okkenhaug 2002; Predelli 2003) who were already collaborating on a forthcoming publication (Okkenhaug 2003); papers from four of them also appeared in the Uppsala volume (Hallencreutz 2005). Two workshops I attended subsequently in Bergen are due to feed into a publication on regional and international dimensions of the Protestant mission encounter (Okkenhaug, Nielssen and Skeie forthcoming).

These Nordic contacts in part helped facilitate a small special journal issue on women and mission (Gaitskell 2005b) for *Le Fait Missionnaire* (*LFM*), a journal then produced in Switzerland with articles in either English or French, and now published by Brill as *Social Sciences and Missions* (*SSM*). *LFM* had already caught the changing spirit of the times in an earlier special issue on "Sex and Mission", with articles on South Africa by Julia Wells and Natasha Erlank, and on colonial Zimbabwe by Wendy Urban-Mead (*LFM* 2001). Indeed, the relocation of Patrick Harries from Cape Town to Basel, and his focus on Junod as missionary (Harries 2007), strengthened the reorientation of *LFM* and facilitated a couple of worthwhile conferences in Switzerland on religion and missions.

A scholarly network formed through the range of conferences and publications generated over a decade or more by these various organisations and bodies – WHN, Currents in World Christianity, *SSM*, Yale-Edinburgh, the Methodist Missionary Society History Project – lies behind the London seminar series, Christian Missions in Global History, with which we began, and so we have come full circle.

Conclusion

I have tried to set out how the institutional and academic context for the venture of feminising faith in South Africa has changed and diversified and been enriched over four decades, frequently (at any rate, from a London-based perspective) via broader collaborations and scholarly initiatives within feminism and missiology, rather than simply advances in thinking and analysis within South Africa itself. As one of the reviewers of this paper commented, my own trajectory has been subject to "an extraordinary range of influences from different countries as well as academic and faith environments," making me possibly "in current discourse … part of very real and ongoing 'transnational' exchanges long before these were conceived as such." But my experience is not necessarily that atypical for the

North Atlantic world. South Africa-based scholars, on the other hand, may well have found global networking more problematic in these years.

The remaining challenge, though, wherever we are based geographically, is to make sure that, aided by such enhanced collegiality, we are truer to the complexity of the religious and social experiences we are trying to analyse. Some of the reflections from the milestone books of the mid- to late-1990s still have pertinence and are worth ending with. I still feel enormous sympathy with the stance of Bredekamp and Ross in their 1995 introduction, emphasising the personal, indigenous appropriation of Christianity and vehemently asserting:

> To say that the consciousness of South Africans was colonized is akin to saying that it was false. It can only be an insult, a polemical device, a demeaning of the real choice and the real dignity of those who came to accept, in part and in their own ways, the messages of the missionaries. (Bredekamp and Ross 1995b: 5)

What was being urged about African agency in the 1970s by people like Richard Gray very much connects with this concern for respecting the choices of African people of faith as they indigenised Christianity. Likewise, I am drawn to the repudiation by Bredekamp and Ross of a greater assumed "authenticity" for the independent churches as opposed to the historic churches: "These are merely alternative ways in which Christianity has been naturalized in South Africa" (Bredekamp and Ross 1995b: 5). There is still a great deal of undiscovered country in the twentieth-century history of the mission or historic churches, as I am discovering in my current research on Seth Mokitimi and ecumenist E. W. Grant.

We could also still profit from Rick Elphick's two criteria for bringing the study of religion into the mainstream of South African historiography:

> First, the thought and actions of religious people – their doctrines, rituals, spiritual experiences, individual and corporate moralities – must be studied with the utmost seriousness and interpreted with empathy. Second, these "religious" phenomena must be embedded in the many contexts – political, intellectual, social, and economic – of their time. (Elphick 1995:11)

He comments that historians of the institutional church most easily neglect contextualisation, while mainstream historians often forego empathy (Elphick 1995: 12). In calling for more attention to the private sphere, and to women and gender, however, I think what he goes on to say is no longer quite so true:

> Because historians of South Africa have been slow to abandon the notion that history is concerned with public and mostly male matters, their struggle to see society from the "bottom-up" has led them to study "subaltern" groups in the workplace and the street much more than in the family or in the church. (Elphick 1995: 16)

He suggested that the areas in which subaltern religion was most active – "moral combat, healing, preaching, sexuality, gender relations, child-rearing, corporate worship, private and family devotions" – had not yet "made their way into South African historians' definition of 'history'" (Elphick 1995: 18). A number of examples which come to mind would now contradict or modify this view – for white Christians, for instance, new vistas have opened up on Afrikaner praying mothers (Du Toit 1996, 2002) or, currently, on evangelical child-rearing and the impact of the guilt and conversion culture on someone like Andrew Murray (Duff 2008). But the challenge largely remains.

I am also still drawn by Elphick's enthusiasm for continuing to try, as he says, to "depict this messy but engrossing spectacle," which is the mission encounter in all its untidiness – "less like a battle than a civil commotion, in which innumerable skirmishes were fought by disparate contenders – African and European – over highly individual agendas" (Elphick 1995: 17). One would need another paper, perhaps, to explore why issues round religious agency and reception have been less well developed than might have been expected since Elphick's call in the mid-1990s. One (anonymous) reader suggests that the particular South African context since democracy, "at a time when pressures to view the past and the present in simplistic binaries are quite strong," may work to suppress such depiction, in its unevenness, contradictions and multivocality. Finally, I especially endorse Elphick's concern for more research on the twentieth century and its dramatic Africanisation of Christianity, which is what I am continuing to explore, particularly through the lens of the feminising of faith.

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