

Introduction

Adam Jones

Whilst religion has in recent times once again assumed a key position in the discussion of transcultural encounters, relatively little attention has been paid to how an additional factor – gender – may affect the form taken by religious interaction. Particularly within Christianity and Islam, but also for example in Hinduism and Afro-American religions, gender can be of crucial importance in understanding how people shape for themselves a religious space, how boundaries are (re)constructed and how the religious spaces may shift or overlap. As Deborah Gaitskell points out in this volume, considerable attention has been paid in recent years on the one hand to the relationship between “space and religion” (notably with regard to “sacred places”) and on the other to that between „space and gender“ (mostly meaning „social maps“); but seldom have the three factors – space, religion and gender – been considered together.

The papers in this volume were presented at a workshop held at the University of Leipzig in January 2007 under the auspices of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft’s graduate college “Fractured Zones of Globalisation” (*Bruchzonen der Globalisierung*). Although originally intended to discuss a variety of different religions in worldwide comparative perspective, in the end most of the papers presented dealt with Christianity and with Africa. This limitation of the breadth of coverage had a positive side, however, since the cases studies present a number of striking similarities and differences.

Three of the papers explore the still under-researched topic of European women missionaries sent to Africa.¹ *Silke Strickrodt’s* article is devoted to West Africa between the

1 The pioneering study (not limited to Africa) is: F. Bowie/D. Kirkwood/S. Ardener (eds.), *Women and Missions. Past and Present. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Oxford 1993.

1840s to the 1870s, when the Church Missionary Society began to provide secondary education for a limited number of West African girls in Freetown. Differences of opinion within this Anglican mission concerning such education focused partly upon geographical space: whether the school should be located in or outside the city, for example, or whether African girls of higher social status („parlour boarders“) should eat separately from other pupils. Other issues involved the kind of person the Female Institution was seeking to engineer: a good Christian, a lady, a potential partner for a Christian husband, a mother capable of instructing her own children, a docile daughter, or someone skilled in needlework. Strickrodt offers us an interesting account of the “complete moral transformation” that was striven after and of how this vision related to the expectations of the girls’ parents. Above all, her article indicates the new social space which a growing awareness of women’s importance for the success of the missionary enterprise created for women – not just for African schoolgirls, but also for the British female teachers sent to Sierra Leone, most of them unmarried.

As *Deborah Gaitskell* argues, women missionaries by their very nature embody the relationship between religion, gender and space, since they leave the familiar space of “home” and move to a distant space, where they “carve out” new religious and cultural female spaces, seeking to spread their faith in a gender-specific manner. Drawing upon her own published work, she examines from this perspective the careers of five Anglican women from Britain who served in southern Africa (mainly in the southern Transvaal, but in one case also in Mozambique) between 1907 and 1960. During the early part of this period, she shows, sacred spaces were “opening up” for such missionaries, for example in establishing a defined female role in the adornment of “bare and masculine” newly built churches or in the organisation of buildings where women’s needs were of paramount importance. From the 1940s onwards, on the other hand, with the coming of apartheid and ultimately of resistance to it, some of these newly gained spaces were again shut down, either by the Nationalist government or by African women emancipating themselves from missionary tutelage. Gaitskell reminds us of one of the central dilemmas of feminism: “Are single-sex spaces empowering, or do they trap women in a ghetto of special needs?” The net result of the interaction between women missionaries and African Christian women has been a remarkable degree of „corporate female spirituality“ within church life, and this separateness has been, as Gaitskell demonstrates, both a strength and a weakness. Her article provides a salutary antidote to the still widespread assumption that for Christian missionary societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women’s place was exclusively in the home: rather, she demonstrates a spatial tension between the high value attached to the piety and domestic skills of “home” on the one hand and the constant movement – not only of women missionaries, but also of the female congregations with which they interacted – “away” from home.

Lize Kriel, who likewise focuses upon the Transvaal, looks at the “working space” accessible to an unmarried woman missionary in a highly patriarchal and authoritarian situation, but at the same time she examines a different kind of space: the “vast and silent” space that increasingly separated the Berlin Mission from its African adherents in South

Africa during the early apartheid era. The older generation of missionaries, who in 1949 explicitly refused to condemn the apartheid policies of the new Nationalist government, shaped the “hegemonic order” within which missionaries had to work. Kriel draws attention to the distinction between male missionaries and their wives on the one hand and single women missionaries on the other, who in the eyes of most of the former constituted a problem – the “sister question”. Drawing upon the fragmentary source material concerning one particular woman missionary who came from what had recently become East Germany, Kriel raises interesting questions concerning what such sources actually tell us. Given that in some circumstances women can act less obtrusively than men and that a „dissident“ woman would be unlikely to report on her dissidence to her superiors in the mission hierarchy, it is necessary to read between the lines in her other writings. To some extent, we are shown, the woman concerned was able after 1956 to secure a space in which she could do meaningful work among African women, albeit work that might be considered a maternalistic form of “women’s work for women”; yet ironically this space – involving a more direct involvement in the lives of African Christians – was largely the result of a growing recognition that it was time for the Berlin Mission to “withdraw gracefully” and hand over much of its work to the newly independent Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Dealing with South Africa in a slightly more recent period than Gaitskell and Kriel, *Andreas Heuser* shifts our attention from mission churches to the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), one of the most famous of the innumerable African Independent Churches which emerged in the early twentieth century and continue to play a significant role in religious life today. As he says, these churches are almost always perceived as being male-dominated, even if the experience of spirit possession tends to be predominantly a women’s affair and in some cases female leadership may play a role in the sphere of ritual. Yet despite the absence of any reference to the visionary power of women in the collective memory of churches such as the NBC, it is clear that under certain circumstances individual women have indeed played a significant role as prophetesses and “angels”, claiming to have received visions (as well as hitherto unknown hymns) from the church’s deceased founder. These women not only took sides in the political struggles within the church’s male hierarchy but also promoted particular ideas – in particular the need for ritual purity, but also the vision of a future “Zulu nation restored under the NBC’s religious and moral codes”. Here too space is of importance: the Church’s central space, Ekuphakameni, was in the late 1970s „infiltrated“ by a prophetess coming from the periphery, while another prophetess argued that the central space had become ritually impure and that it was hence necessary to found a new church nearby. But social space too is involved: what Heuser describes is the transgression of the boundaries between male and female during the period when Apartheid was becoming fully consolidated.

Whilst Heuser shows that South Africa’s African Independent Churches have been generally seen as male-dominated, *Marian Burchardt* demonstrates that the support groups which these and other churches have recently created to confront the HIV-AIDS pandemic are still a predominantly female affair. He examines such groups within the context

of the reconfiguration of the relationship between gender and religion to which modernization and religious revival have contributed. Drawing upon field research on responses to HIV/AIDS in Cape Town, he demonstrates the potential of religion, notably born-again Christianity, as a space in which gendered sexual dynamics can be transformed. By converting to Pentecostalist Christianity, he argues, a woman symbolically “removes her body” simultaneously from the hands of the “medical machineries” and from those of men, placing it instead in the hands of God. Thus the new Faith-Based Organisations create spaces in which moral boundaries „neutralise“ the imbalances of power between man and woman; or, as Burchardt adds, they enable women, drawing upon shared female experiences, to enter and exploit existing religious spaces. It is striking that in the workshops organised by such support groups to confront the stigmatisation associated with HIV/AIDS, like the *manyanos* (women’s prayer groups) that emerged within mission churches in the first half of the twentieth century and are still of considerable importance, ritual elements play a significant role. Finally Burchardt seeks to explain why such groups are more attractive to women than to men. Among the answers he offers, two stand out: the practice of care remains a “female sphere”, in which women are able to mobilize solidarity networks, and to admit weakness when discussing one’s personal history is still considered more legitimate for women than for men.

A similar reconfiguration is noted by *Päivi Hasu* in her article on Tanzania, although here – unlike in her book *Desire and Death*² – she does not deal with HIV/AIDS. She too demonstrates how born-again Christianity can in some cases bring more material benefits for women than for men. Just as in Cape Town the support groups associated with Pentecostalism may enable women to insist upon sexual abstinence, so in Tanzania some unmarried women are able to employ the ethos of “modesty” to pursue income-generating activities independently; and those who marry often have “re-socialised” husbands who are tied to a family-oriented way of life. On the other hand, Hasu points to the enormous gap between the male leaders who preach the Faith Gosele (*Prosperity Gospel*) in the context of a neoliberal economy and the majority of the (predominantly female) people who attend their meetings. Like Burchardt, Hasu asks why it is that more women than men are attracted to such meetings. In the view of her informants this can be explained in terms of the “greater suffering” to which women are subjected, as well as of the greater “hardness” of men, who tend to be tied to a greater extent to conventional roles. But it is also possible to study space in a predominantly literal sense when dealing with gender and religion. Unlike other contributors, *Stefan Miescher’s* article focuses upon men, as does his highly acclaimed monograph³. Here he deals with a transformation that has affected one particular form of space in the everyday lives of men in the Akan area of southwestern Ghana over the past 80 years. When Christian missionaries arrived here in the mid-nineteenth century, they found people practising separate conjugal residence: after marriage most husbands and wives continued to live mainly with their matrikin.

2 P. Hasu, *Desire and Death. History through Ritual Practice in Kilimanjaro*, Helsinki 1999.

3 S. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana*, Bloomington 2005.

This form of marriage was reflected in domestic architecture, where space was organised on gendered lines. Within the compound of any man who could afford it, one space – a platform enclosed on only three sides – served as a place for receiving visitors. Although this space might occasionally take on a religious role, the most significant sacred space within the compounds of senior persons was the stool room, a shrine for the ancestors. Miescher’s paper deals with the “new version of personhood” brought by Christianity and in particular with the desire of a new class of “scholars”, emerging in the interwar period, to imitate the architecture and furniture of missionary houses. Sharing their house with a single wife and their children, as Christianity required, these educated men nevertheless managed to include in the house they eventually built a sitting room which was off-bounds for women and children. To create a house with such a room in one’s hometown was a sign of having “arrived” in modern society. This room, located in the interior rather than in a courtyard, replaced the three-walled platform as the space for receiving visitors. At the same time it had important religious dimensions: the walls were often decorated with Christian iconography (notably calendars), and the room might serve as a place of individual Bible study or collective prayer. Even more significant is the gradual transformation that affected such sitting rooms once they had been created: the furniture acquired in different periods came in the course of time to provide mnemonic devices enabling the man concerned to recall his own career, and after his death it might even be turned by his children into a sort of museum, “in some ways a modern formulation of the ancestral stool room”. Thus Miescher argues convincingly that the transition from the three-walled reception space in a compound to a sitting room in the interior reflected the “gendered transition to a new type of men” which one particular class of Presbyterian Christians experienced.