Perspectives on
Women’s Everyday Religion

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Women’s Everyday Religion

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Introduction

Marja-Liisa Keinänen

During the past decades, the academic study of religion has been increasingly criticised for its one-sided focus on formal religious institutions and their textual and doctrinal traditions. According to critics, this narrow demarcation of the subject matter of Religious Studies has led to a neglect of the study of both indigenous religions (Olupona 2004:xiv; Harvey 2000:6; Cox 2007:1), and the lived religion of ordinary people (Orsi 2002: xvi; King 2002:69–70). The recently published, Europäische Religionsgeschichte. Ein mehrfacher Pluralismus (2009) can be regarded as further evidence of the persistence of this research trend. As Ingvild Gilhus has pointed out, this important, pioneering work has failed to find space in all of its 854 pages for indigenous and popular religions in the European history of religious pluralism (2010:109). Similar scholarly bias can be found in other disciplines concerned with the study of religion. Peter Berger draws attention to the fact that the Sociology of Religion has also had a certain predilection for the study of formal religious institutions, and, when investigating people’s religiosity, has used quantitative methods which disregard religion as it is lived in the everyday lives of ordinary people (2007:v).

We may find the reason for this scholarly preference in the “world religions” paradigm and its theoretical underpinnings which have hitherto delineate the scope and limits of the academic study of religion. As critics of this paradigm have argued, it proceeds from an abstract, ahistorical and universalising notion of religion (Schopen 1991; King 2002:69; Masuzawa 2005), defining the actual beliefs and practices of the “folk” in such a way that they fall outside of its subject matter. Mircea Eliade’s treatment of “the customs and beliefs of European peasants” is a case in point. He writes:

It is true that most of these rural European populations have been Christianized for over a thousand years. But they succeeded in incorporating into their Christianity a considerable part of their pre-Christian religious heritage, which was of immemorial antiquity. It would be wrong to suppose that for this reason European peasants are not Christians. But we must recognize that their religion is not confined to the historical forms of Christianity. /.../ We may speak of a primordial, ahistorical Christianity; becoming Christians, the European cultivators incorporated into their new faith the cosmic religion that they had preserved from prehistoric times. (Eliade 1959:164.)
Gregory Schopen, who is critical of this kind of essentialising approach, criticises Eliade:

Eliade separates what Christians actually did or do, their “customs and beliefs,” from “historical forms of Christianity.” What European Christian peasants do or believe is excluded from the history of their own religion and is assigned to something called “ahistorical Christianity.” Once again the implications are clear: “the historical forms of Christianity” – whatever they are, and that is assumed to be self-evident – have little to do with actual Christians. (Schopen 1991:18.)

According to Schopen, approaches of this kind proceed from texts which are assumed to be binding and which therefore should reflect the actual behaviour of the adherents of the religion under study (1991:19). The texts and the behaviour which was thought to accord with these texts were regarded as religion proper, while religious behaviour deviating from these expectations fell outside the category ‘religion’.

The consequence of the “world religion” approach has been that popular practices, depending on the research context, have been relegated to a residual category “popular religion”, “folk religion” or “folk belief”. These classifications in turn have had concrete consequences for the study of religion since they have led to the fragmentation of the scholarly field, serving as they have done as a basis for the division of academic labour. One result of this division has been that the study of Christianity has become the exclusive domain of Christian theologians, while historians of religion have primarily focussed on the remaining “world religions”. Indigenous religions, “popular” or “folk” religions, which are often closely interwoven with local traditions, have by and large become the province of social or cultural anthropologists.1 In Lutheran North of Europe, church historians and, to certain extent, ethnologists and folklorists, have devoted themselves to the study of vernacular Christianity, called “folk piety”, whereas “folk belief” – the pre-Christian beliefs and practices which now more or less belong to history – were allotted to ethnologists and/or folklorists (Keinänen 2003:47).

As this disciplinary division of labour between the Christian West and “the rest” implies, the “world religion” paradigm with its classifications proceeds from the hegemonic Christian perspective and has furthered the othering of non-Christian “world religions” on the one hand, and the “primitive” religions of “the savages” or the religion of the peasantry and uneducated masses, on the other (Orsi 2002:xvi; Masuzawa 2005:18; Cox 2007:45). Because women tend to be the other of the others, these ethnocentric and, as we shall see, androcentric scholarly paradigms have had particular repercussions on the study of the religious lives of women. Since women have more

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1 The dividing line is not sharp, because there are anthropologically trained historians of religion who have studied indigenous religions.
often been involved in practices which were outside the formal religious institutions or – seen from the perspective of these institutions – at their margins, their activity has fallen outside the scope of religious studies.

The purpose of this book is to shed light on women’s everyday religion which, in spite of the progress made during the past decades, is still a neglected area in the academic study of religion. In like manner to the sociologist of religion Nancy T. Ammerman, I have chosen to use the term ‘everyday religion’ in order to privilege the everyday practices of the non-professionals (2007:5), contrary to the aforementioned trend which has privileged the texts, doctrines and ceremonies of the professionals in formal, official institutions. But unlike Ammerman, I do not limit the scope of the notion ‘everyday religion’ to the unofficial sphere, since many of the women described in this book are/were involved in the daily activities of the formal institutions. This means that everyday religion takes place both in the private and in the public sphere. Moreover, following Ammerman, I do not limit everyday to mundane, quotidian routines, but include also “the crises and special events that punctuate those routines” (Ammerman 2007:5).

Because of the aforementioned fragmentary nature of the scholarly field, this book approaches the issue from a multidisciplinary perspective in order to give as multifaceted a picture of the field as possible. The authors represent history of religions, social/cultural anthropology, ethnology, theology and intellectual history. Although the articles are centred on women and their religious ideas and practices, primarily in various Christian contexts but also in some Muslim settings, most of the authors place women within a wider framework of gender relations. Besides gender, the papers also acknowledge the significance of other variables, such as class, marital status, setting (urban/rural) for women’s negotiations on gender, religion and space.

The invisibility of women in the study of religion – an outdated issue?

Given the fact that the number of books on women and their religious practices has increased dramatically during the past few decades, my claim that women’s everyday religion has been neglected in the academic study of religion may seem to be no longer valid. However, though women may indeed have become empirically more visible, as many students of gender and religion posit, they have still remained analytically invisible. I would maintain that the reason for this is the gender-blindness which has characterised the academic study of religion. Gender studies in the history of religions scholarship has lagged behind other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (King 2005:3297). However, gender-blindness also seems to have characterised certain, central sectors of the anthropological and sociological study of religion in spite of the fact that gender studies have long
been an established field within these disciplines (Gross 2002:42; Woodhead 2001:72). Both Randi R. Warne and Linda Woodhead have drawn attention to the fact that in spite of the increasing feminisation of religion and new spiritualities in the West, dominant theoretical frameworks, such as secularisation theories, have remained surprisingly gender blind (Woodhead 2001:74–75; Warne 2000:151–152).

Warne finds the reason for this persistent gender-blindness in the very logic of Religionswissenschaft itself. From the very outset this incipient science was embedded in an androcentric gender ideology which implied that the man was seen as the norm for humankind whereas the woman was a deviation from this norm (Warne 2001:146, 148). Warne’s analysis indicates that these androcentric underpinnings have provided a scientific justification for male-centred studies within the scientific study of religion:

The asymmetry of androcentrism assumes that what men do is of preeminent human importance. The “self-evidence” of that importance is then naturalized and its gender-embeddedness obscured. When men then do what now is considered “objectively” important (often because it is “public”, itself a contrast and consequence of a particular gender ideology), men and their actions become not only a “serious” subject for intellectual investigation and analysis, but also representative of humanity overall. In similar circular fashion, what women do is less important by definition, because women do it; alternately, what women do is important only in the terms set down for them within the androcentric frame. (Warne 2000:150–151; references omitted.)

The kernel subject for intellectual investigation within the phenomenology of religion has been the so called homo religious, who has been perceived as a representative of all humankind. Feminist scholarship has naturally been critical of the androcentric bias in this scholarly construct arguing that the homo religiosus does not represent “the religious (hu)man”, as has been alleged, but the vir religiosus, “a religious male” (e.g. Shaw 1995:67–68; Gross 1996:18–19; Gross 2002:46). Idinopulos’s summary of the life span of the homo religious as it is evinced in the work of Mircea Eliade epitomises this critique:

[T]he religious man will take a wife, build a house, make love, raise children, eat, sleep, go to war, make peace, and prepare for death out of that felt relationship to the gods, and what he believes they expect of him (Idinopulos 1994:72).

This summary serves as a perfect example of the male-centred approach which does not depict women as agents in their own right but as objects for men’s actions. Gross criticises earlier studies within the anthropology of religion for not giving “a coherent, connected account of women’s religious lives and activities, but only glimpses, as they entered or left the stage of men’s lives” (Gross 2002:45). It thus became a major challenge for feminist
scholarship to deconstruct this androcentrism and complement the prevailing one-sex model of humankind by focusing on women and their religious experiences.

However, the historian of religion Katherine K. Young has accused feminist scholars – especially Gross – of having turned the tables by replacing androcentrism with gynocentrism, i.e. turning the homo religiosus into a \textit{femina religiosa}, which in Young’s eyes is as biased an enterprise as the prior androcentrism (1999:172; 2002:34). Young does readily admit that the generic male underpinned earlier phenomenological studies of religion and she recognises the earlier need to fill in the lacunae of the earlier studies (Young 1999:173, 175; 2002:17, 31), but blinded by her aversion to feminist studies and her determination to vindicate the rights of men, who, in her view, have been flagrantly violated by feminists,\footnote{Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young have co-authored the following books: \textit{Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture} (2002) and \textit{Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systematic Discrimination Against Men} (2006).} Young fails to see the continued women-centredness as warranted. Her criticism of feminist scholarship for regarding androcentrism as a bias, but gynocentrism as an expression of inclusivity and greater objectivity (Young 1999:173, 175; 2002:33–34), indicates that for her the androcentric phase in the academic study of religion is a thing of the past.

Awareness of the androcentric bias is undeniably much greater in current religio-historical scholarship than it was, but believing that it no longer exists is simply wishful thinking.

Rita M. Gross whose \textit{Feminism and Religion} (1996) was one of the major targets of Young’s attack, demonstrates that androcentrism was very much alive in the scholarship of the history of religions in Chicago in the 1970s (1994:328). Diane Bell’s early steps in the academy during the late 1970s bear witness to similar trend (2002:279). In her epilogue from 1994, Gross still identifies androcentrism as a major problem in the field of religious studies and, as far as I can see, it continues to be a central problem which justifies the continued focussing on women in feminist scholarship.

As Warne’s analysis of androcentric thinking shows, androcentrism and gynocentrism are not symmetrical notions and it is therefore specious to juxtapose women-centredness with androcentrism in the way Young does. As several feminist scholars have bitterly learned it has been fully possible to generalise from men to humankind whereas women can only represent women. The reception given to Diane Bell’s doctoral thesis \textit{Daughters of the Dreaming} from 1983 provides us with a good example of this asymmetry. Her approach to the Australian aboriginal religion from the perspective of a group of aboriginal women was fiercely criticised for partiality (Bell 2002:280–281). Warne has pointedly analysed the logic that underlies this kind of criticism:
First, insofar as the male is taken as the human norm and ideal, studying females makes no sense, for this will only yield deficient, less significant, and potentially distorted results. To learn about the general case, one rightly studies “normal” subjects, not anomalies. Second, insofar as men and women are different, and the nature of the difference is understood in term of a complementarity of public/private, reason/emotion, science/religion, and so on, insights and arguments from a woman-centered perspective will be scientifically dismissible as personal, emotional, and unreliable. Thus, there is a scientific reason not to study women (deficient results) and a reason to consider the non-androcentric study of women to be unscientific. (Warne 2001:148.)

Warne has also pointed out that androcentrism, together with the nineteenth century gender ideology which endorsed gender complementarity and the closely related doctrine of “separate spheres”, permeated the fundamental assumptions of key theorists of religion such as Durkheim, Weber, Malinowski and Freud (Warne 2001:147). And, as several students of gender and religion have adroitly argued, the legacy of the thinking of these founding fathers still informs the study of religion, since this gender ideology is built into the intellectual foundation of those disciplines which are engaged with the study of religion. The consequence of this legacy is that it is the prestigious public sphere, in which men are recognised as the principle actors in activities which are defined as religious and which in turn are purported to uphold the moral order of society, which comes to represent society as a whole and is the focal point of scholarly studies. The domestic sphere, where this ideology places women, stands for the particular and personal and tends, therefore, to be located outside society and hence outside scholarly studies of society. Women’s supposedly profane practices in the private sphere have often been labelled as magic or superstition – a further reason for leaving them out of the scholarly study of religion (Bell 2002:236; Dubisch 1983:185; Kendall 1987:24–25; Dubisch 1991:35). Since this public–private dichotomy is embedded in the intellectual foundation of the disciplines that study religion, it continues to bolster the empirical and analytical invisibility of women in religious studies.

However, Katherine K. Young argues that the scholarly focus on religious institutions has even rendered the religion of ordinary men invisible. The universalistic construct _homo religiosus_ has in her mind largely been based on the experience of the male religious elite and does not therefore cover the religious experience of ordinary men (Young 1999:176 and 2002:17). Because of this oversight, there is, in her opinion, an urgent need for men’s studies:

/…/ just as we once [emphasis mine] needed a “correction” to understand the distinctive experiences of women, we now need one to understand the distinctive experiences of men. In other words, we need to eliminate the distortion of assuming that everything presented as universal by earlier phenomenologists applied to all or even most men. We need accurate and “thick” de-
scriptions of men and their experiences, ones that are developed with empathy and *epoché* (to the point of bracketing out feminist critiques) and attention to their specific needs and vulnerabilities. If that sounds like heresy from the perspective of feminist orthodoxy, so be it. (Young 2002:35.)

Although I would agree that there is an urgent need for men’s studies – though qualified with the word “critical” – I think it should be patently clear by this point that the corrective task of women’s studies is far from complete despite what the passage above might wish to make us believe. In her criticism of the women-centredness of feminist studies, Young has overlooked the empirical fact that men’s religiosity is more visible than that of women because of androcentrism and the scholarly tendency to focus on the narrowly defined public sphere. It is true that ordinary men may indeed be excluded from formal public roles as religious professionals due to their social background (for example class, caste or estate), but, nonetheless, they have been and still are public beings who are expected to participate in the worship of the formal institutions and are therefore more liable to be included in scholarly descriptions. Women, on the other hand, have often been barred from formal positions *qua* women, i.e. because of their purported nature, sexuality and bodily functions, notably menstruation and childbirth. Moreover, the restrictions pertaining to women’s bodily states have limited their participation in official ceremonies in numbers of ways. Since the scholarly focus has tended to be on prescriptive traditions, we have frequently learned more about the restrictions and taboos concerning women – what women are not allowed to do – than what, in spite of the restrictions, they actually have done or do (Keinänen 1999; 2000). This scholarly bias also implies that women have been treated as an exception, a special case whose presence has to be explained. A further consequence of such a prescriptive approach is that it makes the relationship between women and religion appear antithetical.

The scholarly focus on the male-dominated public sphere and the fact that this sphere has been defined as religion proper has obscured women’s religious practices, particularly in societies where religious life has been *ideally* organised into two separate, gendered spheres: the public and the private. Social anthropologist I.M. Lewis treatment of Somali women’s religiosity is a perfect example of the approach which makes women’s religious lives invisible since it prioritises official, male forms of religion and gives them universal validity. It can also serve Young as one of many proofs of the viability of the androcentric thinking in the study of religion. A historian of religion, Rannveig Haga, has drawn attention to the way in which Lewis in his book *Saint and Somalis* (1998), places Somali women’s religious practices outside Islam (2009:43–44, n. 44). Lewis describes women’s relationship to Islam as follows:
[Women] are almost totally excluded from full participation in the public Muslim cult. They are not admitted to the mosques where men regularly pray; they do not participate effectively in the highly developed activities and regular ceremonies of the mystical religious orders or ‘brotherhoods’ which play such a vital part in men’s religious life; and at large-scale public Muslim feasts and festivals they gather only on the periphery of the all-male crowd, trilling at appropriate points in the rites. While a considerable number of men succeed in going on pilgrimage to Mecca, few women accomplish this highly prestige-giving act of devotion. Thus, in religious life also, women play an essentially passive role. They are not expected to be ostensibly devout, as men are, and the fact that they rarely observe the obligatory daily prayers excites little adverse comment. In sum, it is not going too far, I think, to suggest that men consider that their own active public devotion is sufficient to excuse the relatively passive religiosity of their womenfolk. (Lewis 1998:116.)

In this single passage Lewis regurgitates a number of classical androcentric fallacies. Firstly, he proceeds from the classical view that public equals male and defines women’s collective activities as private (cf. Dubisch 1991:45). Secondly, this view does not question whether it is valid to regard rituals and ceremonies as public, when half of the population is barred from attendance and we by ‘public’ understand “accessible to or shared by all members of the community” (MWOD 2010). Thirdly, it is important to note that “what may appear as a male exclusion of women from a certain aspect of the religion may actually have a parallel in female exclusion of men from certain religious activities” (Young 1987:4). Lewis thereby fails to see that the ritual exclusion is mutual: women are excluded from men’s cults and brotherhoods while men in turn are excluded from women’s rituals and, among nomads, even from the women’s part of the tent. Fourthly, as Haga asserts, it is symptomatic that Lewis, writing a book whose topic is “popular” Islam, specifically the cult of saints, only mentions women’s worship of saints in passing. The result of all this is that women’s cults, inclusive saar, are not seen as a self-evident part of vernacular Islam in Somalia (Haga 2009: 43–44, n. 44).

When deeming women’s religiosity to be passive, Lewis has had the male religious sphere as his point of departure and has once again relegated women’s practices to the category of peripheral activity. As the critics of his earlier studies of women’s possession cults have pointed out, women’s cults are, in fact, only marginal when viewed from the perspective of the official, normative sphere (Kendall 1987:24–25; Boddy 1989:6). Formal Islamic leadership may have labelled these cults as non-Islamic, “superstition” etc., but Sudanese and Somali women, who consider themselves to be Muslims, see their rituals as an integral part of Islam (Boddy 1989:278–279; see Haga 2009:43–44). In the final analysis, this scholarly approach raises the earlier mentioned issue of the true locus of religion. Are we as scholars to proceed from the abstract academic constructs of ‘religion’ or from the male-centred self-definitions of religious institutions when studying ‘the religion’ of a particular group – as often is the case – or is ‘religiosity’ to be found, quot-
ing Richard King, “in the beliefs and practices of actual adherents of the religion under consideration?” (King 2002:68).

Viewed from the perspective of the formal religious institutions, women’s practices indeed seem to be peripheral, but viewed in the context of the everyday lives of the people, the opposite might be true. Women’s practices may appear to be quite central in the home-centred approach, whereas the official rituals may appear quite peripheral (Keinänen 1998:142 and 2000:128). Women’s rituals in the domestic sphere may be central to the religion in many ways even when their importance might not be culturally recognised. As we shall see in Keinänen’s article in this volume, domestic observances may be foundational for the household members’ ritual purity which is a precondition of their proper religious performance – be it domestic or non-domestic – and these observances are also strongly coupled to the religious identity and even to the status of the family.

In the following, I will largely proceed from the articles in this volume in order to discuss in greater detail the implications that the ideas of gender complementarity and the closely related doctrine of separate spheres have had both for women’s religious practice in different religious traditions and for the study of women’s religiosity.

Gendered religious spheres and conflicting vocations

It seems that Young has overlooked the significance of the fact that the conditions for women’s participation in the official religious sphere has differed and differ from those of ordinary men. Many of the major religious traditions not only subscribe to the idea of gender complementarity and separate spheres, but in many cases have also contributed to the naturalisation of this ideology. These traditions advocate or have advocated a God-given, complementary gender order which assigned men to the public sphere and women to the domestic. Ideally, a man has been recognised as the breadwinner and head of the family while a woman’s ideal duty has been that of a wife and mother, subordinate to her husband.

The complementary gender order and the doctrine of separate spheres have in many ways limited women’s choice of religious career and their practice of religion. Firstly, women have frequently been denied positions as religious leaders in formal public institutions. Secondly, although the major traditions have regarded marriage and parenthood as essential for both men and women, men’s choice of a religious career has not been hindered by family obligations to the same extent as that of women. A woman’s choice of a religious path – especially when it has entailed strict otherworldly orientation or celibacy – has been found particularly challenging, because it has conflicted with her primary duties as a wife and mother. Studies of holy women in Medieval Europe show that a women’s choice of a religious path,
for instance as an ascetic or a nun, was either dependent on her parents’ or husband’s good will or was possible only after his death (Bynum 1992:40–43).

Even in other religious traditions a woman’s choice of religious career tends to be overridden by her primary, this-worldly calling as mother and wife. Riffat Hassan writes of the gender-specific expectations which, in certain Muslim contexts, have guided the practice of religious asceticism:

In the view of the fact that Muslims generally consider marriage to be “half of one’s faith”, an unmarried man or woman is rather an oddity in Muslim society /---/ Due largely to the influence of mysticism, the celibacy of men who dedicate their whole lives to God is accepted in many Muslim societies, yet these societies are not as accepting of “holy” women who turn their backs on the institution of marriage to lead celibate, God-centred lives. (Hassan 2006:246.)

Even in Hindu cultures both men and women are expected to marry, but even though there are female ritual experts, gurus and occasionally yoginis, woman’s primary role is still that of housewife and mother (Wadley 1977:121–123; Peach 2002:20–21). In Theravada Buddhistic Thailand, a girl becomes a woman through marriage and childbirth whereas a boy comes of age by renouncing the world and residing in a monastery as a novice monk for a period of time. A woman who insists on renouncing the world is met with great ambivalence, since her vocation as a nun conflicts with her role as a wife and mother (Lindberg Falk 2000:38, 42). Mahayana Buddhistic societies do not either encourage women’s religious careers. Quite the contrary, a woman is expected to fulfil her religious duties within the household as a mother and wife. The monastic path is not such a self-evident choice for a woman as it may be for a man (Peach 2002:66).

In spite of this widespread tendency to define women primarily as mothers and wives and to deny them the roles of ascetics and religious specialists within the formal/official institutions, women have exercised considerable religious leadership outside these institutions and have often been able to circumvent the male monopoly of religious leadership by establishing a direct communication with superhuman powers (Wessinger 1993:2). Women have been particularly active as mediums, shamans, prophetesses, mystics and ecstatic preachers, to mention some typical female modes of communication with these powers. Taking up these roles has often involved a personal calling by a god, a saint or an honoured ancestral spirit who provides a woman with the ultimate source of legitimacy and enables her to challenge conventional gender roles and to embark on a religious career outside the home (see e.g. Bynum 1992:40–43; Harvey 1989:43; Paul 1975:451–452).

It is therefore important to note that even though the gendered public–private dichotomy has served as an ideal organisational principle in many societies, this division is not an adequate scholarly instrument for analysing
women’s and women’s *actual* religious activities. This distinction, which is
based on a narrow understanding of the public, creates the false impression
that only men act in the valued public sphere whereas women are confined to
the devalued private sphere. We will see below that women may have been
excluded from the key offices of official institutions but that they have none-
thless been active as lay-functionaries and/or have practiced religion in an
unofficial or informal religious sphere which is not synonymous with the
private domain.

**Women’s calling in nineteenth and twentieth century Sweden**

According to Inger Hammar, the gender order in nineteenth century Sweden
was largely defined by the Lutheran doctrine of calling. Parenthood was a
call for both women and men, but women were to exercise their calling
largely within the household as mothers and wives and housewives, whereas
men were also active as public persons. Even though men and women were
regarded as equals spiritually and in the eyes of God, at the worldly level
women were subordinate to men. In the domestic estate, the wife was to be
subservient to her husband. Women’s subordinate role was justified by the
reference to the biblical accounts of the Creation and Fall. At the Creation
women were designed to be men’s handmeets and the Fall was the result of
Eve’s feeble mental faculties shared by all womankind – a fact that subse-
quently was used to disqualify women from ruling positions in society

The nineteenth century complementary gender order implied that women
were denied the role of *persona publica*. The historian of ideas Ulla Manns
writes in this volume:

> Women were not supposed to take part in public matters (that is societal mat-
ters), be seen in the public space on their own (that is as individuals) or to
speak in public (that is addressing an audience). In short, women were not
supposed to appear as speaking subjects in public, nor were they supposed to
perform a preaching activity. (p. 43).

Women’s crossing the boundary into the public even made them morally
suspect, as the term “public woman” implies. Hammar postulates that there
were only two ways by which a woman could exert influence in the public
sphere. As a mother and wife she could influence society indirectly through
her husband and sons or she could act as a mouthpiece for a higher cause.
The proviso for her acting as such a mouthpiece was that she was not self-
assertive and did not seek personal aggrandisement (Hammar 1999:24, 40;

The women emancipationists of nineteenth century Sweden did not ques-
tion these complementary gender roles or the alleged gender differences
which underpinned the division of these roles. Neither did they question the idea of women’s domesticity, even though they wished to widen the sphere of activity for unmarried women, many of whom were without financial support due to the demographic imbalance in nineteenth century Sweden. What the emancipationists did strongly question was women’s subordinate position, which was deeply rooted in the Lutheran societal order. Inger Hammar writes:

The pioneer emancipationists’ line was firmly anchored in a Lutheran tradition that asserted that, at the Creation, God destined the sexes to complement one another. This, however, was not synonymous with accepting the subordination of women. A mortal woman was as much the image of God as a mortal man was, and the emancipationists were unreserved in their acceptance of the idea that woman’s God-given, sex-specific role was to be a spouse and mother. (Hammar 1999:250.)

Thus, it is important to emphasize that although religion provided the ideology for women’s subjugation, women activists did not turn their backs on religion but, on the contrary, saw Christianity as the guarantor of women’s liberation. In their interpretation of the Christian tenets, Christianity stood for gender equality and they were strongly opposed to the literal, patriarchal interpretations of the Bible which were commonly used to legitimize the prevailing gender order within the church and in society at large (Hammar 2000:39).

Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865), the focus of the historian of ideas Ulla Manns’s paper in this volume, was an internationally renowned author, according to Hammar “the first woman in Sweden to challenge the religious framework that since the Reformation had determined the extent of women’s calling” (2000:27). Bremer, who was critical of the limitations of women’s calling to those of wifely and maternal roles, saw her vocation to be that of an author and “freethinker”, and spoke strongly for the extension of women’s sphere of activity outside their homes. A woman should also be allowed to live “as a human being, as a citizen of God’s kingdom, and as citizen of an earthly society” (Hammar 2000:36–39). At the outset, Bremer recommended unmarried women in society the role of philanthropist (Hammar 2000:39), which, of course, could be seen as an extension of women’s maternal and caring roles. By the mid-nineteenth century, when she was at the peak of her career as an author, she arrived at a more radical form of emancipation and pleaded for women’s emergence as social beings (Hammar 2000:40).

Bremer saw herself as a spokeswoman for feminism and saw this role as being vested upon her by God (Hammar 2000:40; Manns this volume p. 47). She saw herself as God’s servant and her authorship as a way of serving the Lord. She stressed that women’s duty was not to serve their men but to serve the Lord and through him the whole of society (Burman 2001:219).
The idea of being God’s mouthpiece probably supplied Bremer with the strength and the justification that was necessary to transgress the gendered boundary as a public speaker and as, what I would call, a lay-theologian. Her book *Morgon-väckter* (1842), where she pondered theological issues, provoked harsh criticism from reviewers and readers (Burman 2001:215). This outrage against the gender order – a woman taking part in the public debate – was particularly exacerbated by the fact that she had the audacity to debate religious matters, at a time when theology was strictly a male domain (Hammar 2001:157).

The historian of religion Hanna Nyberg’s paper on Fredrika Ehrenborg (1794–1873), a forgotten woman in nineteenth century Swedish historiography, provides us with our second example of the women intellectuals who, contrary to the prevailing norms, acted in the public as an author and advocate of Swedenborgian teachings. She did not question the prevailing gender roles but saw childbirth and childcare as women’s divine tasks. She did not dedicate herself to the Swedenborgian movement until she was released from her wifely and maternal duties, i.e. after she was widowed and her children were grown up. She did not struggle for women’s emancipation, since, in her Swedenborgian interpretation, Christianity vouched for equality and would emancipate both women and men (Nyberg this volume, p. 62, 69–70).

Even Ehrenborg saw herself as an instrument of God. God provided her with the genius her mission needed – the genius that the prevailing view of gender did not acknowledge in women. Acting as God’s mouthpiece gave her the moral strength to transgress the boundary into the public sphere and become involved with religious issues which were generally considered to be a male monopoly. She did, however, gradually channel her activities into areas that were held to be proper for women, such as teaching and writing spiritual, pedagogical texts for children. Her charitable works – in the public sphere – were also a further extension of women’s domestic role (Nyberg this volume, p. 65–68).

**Women evangelists and preachers**

Besides the intellectual middle class women who fought for gender equality and women’s right to speak in public, there were a number of women – many of them from the lower classes – who more directly challenged the silence which according to traditional interpretations of Paul was required of women in the church and, by extension, in society at large. During the second half of the nineteenth century Sweden saw an upsurge of religious revival movements many of which had a great following among women. As many as two thirds of all Swedish Free Church members of this period were
women and in some regions their numbers were even higher (Lundkvist 1977:92, 158).

Women preachers were to be found even in the early years of the nineteenth century – and even before it – but it was particularly during the 1880s that their numbers started to grow and their activity became more organised. The impact of the Salvation Army, which was introduced into Sweden in 1882, was crucial to the establishment of women preachers since this movement not only systematically combated restrictions on women’s religious leadership but actively encouraged women to take up these roles (Gunner 2008:142). Some other revivalist groups such as the Örebro Missionsförening (Örebro Mission Society) and Helgelseförbundet (Holiness Alliance), also favoured women as evangelists and preachers, although on occasion this did cause friction within these movements with some fractions subsequently denying women the role of preacher (Oskarsson Nyberg 2007:268–269).

Nelly Hall (1848–1916) who was a teacher by profession but who resigned her post in 1882 in order to devote herself to preaching, launched a heated debate in Sweden during the 1880s and 1890s on women’s right to speak in public. Inspired by the Methodist movement and its offshoots, among them the Salvation Army and the Helgelseförbundet, she not only claimed that women had the right to preach, but saw it as their obligation to do so if they were “filled with God’s Spirit”, i.e. were called by God for this very duty. As the church historian, Gunilla Gunner, points out Hall’s faith functioned for her as an emancipatory strategy (Gunner 2003:14, 83, 221 and this volume p. 74).

All of the aforementioned women were exceptional in that their actions were in many respects incompatible with those conventionally held to be appropriate for women. Whether they intended to or not, they acted in the public space as authors or preachers or both. Fredrika Bremer and Nelly Hall contravened the gender ideal by not marrying and bearing children. Had they married, they would have been obliged to abstain from their public activities. Fredrika Ehrenborg, who had been married with children, embarked on her religious career after her husband’s death and her children had grown-up.

Many of these nineteenth, and even twentieth century women evangelists and preachers were to share the same fate as those women in world history, who, having played an important role in the initial phase of religious movements found themselves redundant once these movements had become institutionalised. Once the Free Church movement in Sweden was established, women were pushed aside. They did not preach to the same extent as before and were not given positions as congregational leaders (Gunner 2008:144; Oskarsson Nyberg 2007, passim). Ehrenborg and her female collaborators in the Swedenborgian New Church shared the same fate (Nyberg this volume p. 68–69).
Although earlier scholarship has denied the theological value of, for instance, Bremer’s religious contemplations, she and her fellow critics’ interpretations of the Bible could be said to have anticipated feminist theology. These women became involved in theological discussions before women were admitted to the departments of theology, which, along with the Law Schools, were the last bastions of male exclusiveness at Swedish universities. It was not until 1909 that a woman took a degree in Theology in Sweden (Hammar 2005:370).

Motherhood – a contested calling in twentieth century Sweden

Even though the participants of the women’s churchly conference in 1920 – a year before women went to the polls for the first time in Sweden – did not question the ideal of women’s domesticity (Södling 1997), there was a radical turnabout later on, the working mother replacing the housewife as the norm. Given this development, the idea of contested vocations acquires quite a different meaning within those conservative religious circles of twentieth century Sweden which still treasure the cult of motherhood. The Schartauan women in the coastal area of South-Western Sweden, who are discussed in the ethnologist Katarina Lewis’ article, subscribe to a view of femininity and gender roles that in many senses clashes with the dominant view of the twentieth century.

The originator of this revival movement was Dean Henric Schartau whose message from the very outset proved to be particularly appealing to women from the lower classes, many of them servants. During the first decades of the nineteenth century the movement spread from the Lund area to the west coast of Sweden where it thrived in small fishing and agricultural communities. According to Katarina Lewis’s study, which covers three generations of Schartauan women born between 1895 and 1968, motherhood constituted the essence of womanhood. The ideal was “a birth-giving, nurturing homemaker, who set an example for her children through her way of being” (Lewis 1997:146). However, in spite of the aforementioned ideal, the Schartauan women’s vocation as a mother was not limited to their own children and many of Lewis’s interviewees practised their calling as societal mothers (“Samhällsmoder”) – a term Lewis has borrowed from Ellen Key. Women’s roles outside their homes, for instance as teachers, nurses and servants, can hence be seen as an extension of their maternal and household duties.

Thus, even though the home was indeed the platform for these women, the middle class concept of a housewife confined to the home was not applicable in a Schartauan context (Lewis this volume p. 81–82). Moreover, the ideal of being a good wife seemed to have been secondary to the ideal of Christian motherhood (Lewis 1997:146).
Even the younger generations of Schartauan women see motherhood as their principal duty and stay at home when their children are small, which is somewhat incongruous in present-day Sweden, where the majority of mothers work and their children are looked after by day-care institutions. Younger Schartauan women feel that they are subjected to structural pressure by society since their ideals are hard to maintain in the prevailing ideological, economic and social conditions. A family can hardly support itself on one wage and many of the women who, by Swedish standards, have an unusually large number of children, feel themselves socially ostracised (this volume p. 91).

All the women whom Lewis interviewed subscribed to Paul’s alleged exhortation about women’s silence in church and were critical of women’s ministry. Lewis stresses that this does not mean that they left the interpretation of religious teachings entirely to the male priests, but diligently studied the Scripture and the sermons themselves. Instead of pleading for women’s ministry, Schartauan women believed that work in general and their own example of piety was their silent way of spreading the Gospel and serving God (Lewis 1997:54–58).

In spite of their idealised view of motherhood and their ability to identify themselves with the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, Schartauan women have been decidedly unenthusiastic about the gradual return of Mary to the Church of Sweden. Even though Mary is for them exemplary in fidelity, piety and modesty, they are nonetheless opposed to her worship, arguing, that since Mary was a mere mortal like anyone else, she herself was in need of the Saviour (Lewis 1997:106–108).

Many Christian feminists have also distanced themselves from Mary since, to them, she represents patriarchally defined motherhood. As a submissive virgin mother, Mary is an onerous, unattainable ideal for ordinary woman. The theologian Cristina Grenholm, whose paper closes the first part of this volume, has mixed feelings on the return of Mary into the Church of Sweden. She also sees Mary as representing oppressive motherhood, but, since it is not possible to ignore her – even in contemporary Sweden she is a presupposed icon of motherhood – Grenholm is looking for some way to liberate Mary from the patriarchal ballast she has carried over the centuries. Grenholm presents an interpretative model which facilitates a critical, feminist construction of Mother Mary which entails challenging both the predominant gender stereotype of motherhood and the Marian dogma.

**Gendered religious spaces in vernacular Catholicisms**

Many of the papers in this volume deal with issues which are central in the book *Women, Religion, and Space* (2007), namely how “women created and supervised female-managed spaces or how they negotiated and contested
male-controlled religious spaces in order to pursue their own personal goals” 
(Morin & Guelke 2007:xxi). The notion of space is foundational for the 
study of religion, since all religious practice is spatialised and religious 
spaces are gendered and valued in various ways. Religious spaces are also 
connected to power or powerlessness and, as we saw above, and shall see in 
the following section, power is exerted for instance by spatial mechanisms of 
exclusion and inclusion. The papers of this volume also show that spatialisa-
tion, gendering and the power associated with these gendered spaces is not 
static but under constant negotiation.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which provides the context for Keinä-
nen’s and Ruotsala’s articles, has been an exclusively male-dominated insti-
tution which has denied and still denies women clerical office. In pre-Soviet 
Karelia although churches and village prayer houses were supervised by 
male clergy, male church wardens and male-dominated parish councils, they 
could still be seen as space common to both men and women. The division 
of parish duties between lay-functionaries largely followed the gender-based 
division of labour and the allocation of authority in the community. In the 
case of women, these duties were often an extension of their domestic 
chores. Women were in charge of family rituals and the cleaning and decora-
tion of the church or prayer house. Since women were in charge of memorial 
rituals, which required frequent visits to the graves, the cemetery was coded 
as female ritual space.

Churches and prayer houses were important religious spaces for rural Ka-
relians but, since the vernacular religious practice was largely home-centred, 
these spaces can be seen as peripheral to the home in the context of the eve-
ryday life of the peasantry. The historian of religion Marja-Liisa Keinänen 
focuses in her paper on the home as a ritual arena and on women’s domestic 
chores and the religious and social significance of these chores. Besides be-
ing the stage for the practice of everyday religion, the home was the prin-
ciple arena for the performance of indigenous rites of passage, of which 
women were the principle ritual leaders. These rituals, among other social 
events, turned the home periodically into a public space.

After the Soviet takeover, priests were banished and the churches were 
closed, which led to the paralysation of the Russian Orthodox Church. In this 
situation Karelian women’s ritual expertise became indispensible, facilitat-
ing the expansion of their activities even into the sphere which earlier had 
been the monopoly of the clergy (Keinänen 2002:102–103). Women were 
also particularly active during the re-emergence of religion in post-Soviet 
Russia, but with the “normalisation” of the situation, the church and other 
male-dominated religious organisations have gradually re-established their 

The religion of the Mari – a Finno-Ugrian speaking group in Central Rus-
sia among whom ethnologist Helena Ruotsala has conducted fieldwork – is 
also a mixture of Russian Orthodoxy and their ethnic religion. However, the
ethnic religion of the Mari, particularly in Eastern areas, has survived to a much greater extent than that of Karelia and in some areas the influence of Russian Orthodoxy has been quite superficial. In Karelia the indigenous traditions provided women with various roles as ritual leaders, whereas among the Mari they seem to have been limited to the role of the traditional midwife (Toidybekova 1997).

Early twentieth century sources on Mari indigenous religion show that even this religion was male-dominated as far the incumbents of formal offices and the officiants of the community rituals were concerned. The sacrificial priests (kart), their assistants and the guardians of the sanctuaries were all men. Only male adults were allowed to enter the holy of holies in the home sanctuary (kudo) and women and visitors were not allowed to approach the shelf with cult objects (Holmberg 1926:44–45). Although everybody was free to attend the grove or field sanctuary for the celebration of agrarian feasts, the sacred groves were largely a male domain. In earlier times women were forbidden from entering certain groves, the so-called keremet. In Eastern areas, women seldom took part in the field ceremonies, whereas among the western Mari, women participated in these ceremonies kneeling behind the men (Holmberg 1926: 103, 155, 159–160, 178).1

During the late 1930s, the karts came to share the same fate as the Orthodox priests and Siberian shamans and were either deported or executed. This deportation of the religious leaders led to the decline of indigenous religious traditions, even though many ceremonies were performed clandestinely throughout the whole Soviet period. In Mari villages where there were no sacrificial priests left, women, who were more religiously orientated than men, took over the performance of ceremonies since they remembered the traditions, rituals and prayers. These traditions have been revived in the post-Soviet period, old women playing an important part in this process, but here again, normalisation has meant that men have regained their position as religious leaders. Although men still possess the role as karts, a duty that is handed down from man to man, the majority of the participants at the ceremonies and rituals are in fact women (Ruotsala this volume p. 169).

Ruotsala’s study shows that the feminisation of Mari indigenous religion during the Soviet period also led to a re-gendering of the religious spaces. “The boundaries of the gendered spaces that have earlier been strict and difficult to surmount have, in the last few decades, become reduced and began to fade, but still exist” (p. 170).

Although women’s participation in certain ceremonies used to be restricted, the home was and still is as important ritual scene among the Mari as it was in Karelia. In both cases women were responsible for the cleanli-

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1 This brief overview serves as a good example of the older scholarly literature which informs us about women’s religious activities through negation, i.e. we know more about the restrictions and prohibitions concerning women than about women’s actual activities.
ness of the house and were in charge of the home observances and cooking. At the large sacrificial feasts among the Mari men cook the main offerings, whereas women prepare the rest of the foodstuffs, clean the place of worship and the clothes to be worn (Ruotsala this volume p. 167).

Moving from Orthodox Eastern Europe to the Catholic South, we find certain similarities regarding the gender-based allocation of religious roles and the gendered division of space. The formal structures of the Roman Catholic Church are the exclusive domain of men and clerical offices are reserved to men. In spite of this, vernacular religion in Southern Europe is strongly feminised. As a result of the reforms of Vatican II, the role of lay-people in the celebration of the mass and in church life in general was strengthened and expanded. Women have been gradually allowed to carry out all lay functions in the church (Gemzöe 2000:225). The social anthropologist Lena Gemzöe’s study of women’s religious life in a north Portuguese town shows that both men and women acted as readers, singers, ministers of communion and as catechists who taught catechism to the children and prepared them for their First Communion. The majority of the catechists and zeladoras, who are the subject of Gemzöe’s present paper, were women (Gemzöe 2000:225).

Gemzöe’s earlier studies show that women dominated other religious activities as well. They played an important role in the cult of the saints — especially in that of the Virgin Mary — which among other things involved pilgrimages to the holy shrines (2000:167). We saw that in the Orthodox areas of Eastern Europe cemeteries were female spaces, this is also the case in Catholic Southern Europe, where women are in charge of commemorative rituals (Gemzöe 2000:139–140). The home was an important locus for women’s activities even among Gemzöe’s informants. In her paper Gemzöe studies the material aspects of home-making and women’s extension of these activities to the public sphere, the churches, graveyards and religious festivals.

Thus, even though women in both the Orthodox and Catholic contexts have been and still are excluded from the key roles in religious institutions, they have gradually acquired other roles within these institutions and have dominated the popular religious scene either as ritual leaders or as religious practitioners.

Gendered religious spaces in vernacular Islams

The spatial public–private distinction has also served as the starting point for the study of religion in Muslim contexts. It is important to note however that even in this case the distinction is not absolute but flexible and fluid (Salamandra 2007:531–532). Several scholars have pointed out that the gendered use of space in Muslim cultures varies depending on the time of day, on the
socio-economical status of the family and between urban and rural settings (EWIC 2007:536, 538–540).

The complementary gender order, which is also the ideal in Muslim countries, places men in the public sphere and assigns them the roles of breadwinner and protector of women. A woman’s principle role is that of wife and mother and the locus of her activities is, ideally, the home (Haddad 1998 passim; Roald 2001:145, 179–180). Since women in underprivileged classes and in agrarian communities are required to contribute to the family economy they cannot fully comply with the seclusion norms. The seclusion of women has thus become an indicator of the family’s socio-economic status (Haddad 1998:10; Salamandra 2007:531). Even though many women do in fact work outside the home, conservative and Islamist movements whose vision of an Islamic society necessitates women’s domesticity are on the ascendency (Haddad 1998:5–10).

The cultural anthropologist Katherine Platt’s article on gendering of space in the Kerkennah Islands off Tunisia’s eastern coast shows that, unlike the common stereotypic notion of Muslim women, women’s sphere of activity in these islands was not only limited to their homes and devalued domestic labour. Since women were also responsible for agricultural work, their sphere of activity extended from the courtyards in the village to the fields and palm groves, which were primarily conceived as female spaces. Consequently, female agriculturalists in the Kerkennah Islands were much more mobile than women on the mainland or women who lived in villas without courtyards. Women’s upward social mobility is thus offset by a more limited geographical mobility. Moreover, Platt makes the important observation that the gendering of space is not fixed but flexible. In the Kerkennah Islands space is gendered differently at different points of time and ungendered space can become gendered (Platt this volume p. 192–193).

In Somalia, the main geographical context for Rannveig Haga’s and Marja Tiilikainen’s papers, gender roles and the segregation of genders deviate from the Islamic ideal in several respects. During the pre-colonial period, the nomadic lifestyle did not allow for strict gender segregation or a strict public-domestic dichotomy (Haga 2009:35). Some scholars have argued that it was colonial rule that ushered in changes in the local gender order by reinforcing men’s control over women and, after World War II, by encouraging the urban middle class ideal of women’s domesticity. In spite of the reforms introduced after independence, for which women also had fought, women’s position changed very little in rural areas (Haga 2009:45, 53). After 1988, when people fled the urban areas and many men were either unemployed or in the war, Somali women increasingly took over the male role of breadwinner and head of the family. In spite of this increase in their responsibilities, women did not gain positions of leadership outside the family, that is, in the public sphere. It seems that men efficiently blocked women from this male
domain and used Islam as a weapon to maintain the male hegemony (Haga 2009:54–55).

The Somali women traders whom the historian of religion Rannveig Haga has studied are caught up in a web of conflicting vocations. In practice they have abandoned the ideal of women’s domesticity, which they appear to cherish, but attribute this to the exceptional circumstances – the war. As traders they contravene the prevailing gender norms in several respects: they are their families’ breadwinners and move in the public sphere; some of them even travelling without a mehram, male companion. They justify this breach of the norms by the referring to the importance of their duty as providers for their families. They consider their new role to be merely a temporary response to exceptional circumstances, although if given the chance they seem to be happy to continue with these activities even when not compelled to. By demonstrating their piety, woman traders seek to prove that “it was possible both to be a pious, decent woman and, at the same time, active trader and economical provider” (Haga this volume p. 231).

The segregation of genders, which largely regulates social and religious life in Muslim countries, has given rise to parallel gendered spheres, which, given the scholarly tendency to focus on the religion of formal official institutions, has created some problems for the study of women’s religiosity. Traditional scholarly descriptions such as those we find in The Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices (2006) present the mosque as the most central place of worship in Muslim countries, which, given the fact that most Muslim women do not attend the mosque on a regular basis, if at all, is somewhat less than adequate. We might therefore agree with Diane D’Souza that the claim that the mosque is central to Muslim religious life as highly androcentric (in Huq 2007:554). If we view the religious landscape from women’s perspective, the mosque, though the source of the local religious authority that regulates women’s lives, is nevertheless a peripheral locality.

Katherine Platt’s article widens our view of gendered religious spaces in a Muslim context. Since mosques were coded as male domains, Kerkenni women did not visit them even though they were not formally forbidden from doing so. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, the local shrines of Muslim saints, which women regularly visited for a number of purposes, functioned as religious spaces for women. These shrines, the graves of saints, are believed to be imbued with spiritual powers (baraka) (Flueckiger 2004:724). Platt emphasises that these multifunctional shrines were not marginal to the mosque but were centres of women’s practices. According to her, these female spaces are not “public in the sense that women are out interacting with anonymous institutions and populations, but public in the sense that these are economic/ social/ spiritual forums where women take decisive productive action on their own behalves and can demonstrate the results to the community of their peers”. Platt stresses that the shrines also serve as places where
the gender order is temporarily suspended – even subverted – and can be seen as a platform for levelling the unequal distribution of power between men and women (this volume p. 198).

As we saw earlier, in Somalia the mosque has also been coded as a male space which, in some areas, women were barred from entering. Haga’s informants, however, did frequently pray at mosques in Hargeysa (Haga 2009:52–53). In similar fashion to the Christian and Muslim women we have met above, women in Somalia have also carved out religious spaces of their own. They have been involved in the *saar* cult, which has been led by women and whose members have been predominately women (Lewis 1998:122). Sufi orders have also facilitated the creation of specific religious spaces for women both in Somalia and elsewhere in the Muslim world. According to the historian of religion Marja Tiilikainen, any place where women perform their *sitaat* (*dikri*) ceremonies, praising God, the Prophet Muhammad, various Sufi saints and the women of early Islam, becomes a religious space. One of her Somali informants, who is a *Sheekhad*, ritual leader, actually describes the *xadra*, the place for Sufi meeting, as “a women’s mosque”. A *xadra* is a female space in the sense that this space and the rituals performed there are accommodated to women’s everyday needs and bodily conditions. According to the *Sheekhad*, the mosque is off-limits to women during the menses and the menses also limit women’s religious observances, but this restriction does not apply to the *sitaat* ceremonies (Tiilikainen this volume p. 213).

Only time will tell how these female spaces will fare in Somalia. The growing Islamic revival movements are strongly opposed to Sufi orders and *saar* cult (Haga 2009:52; Tiilikainen this volume p. 216). However, Saba Mahmood’s study of women’s Mosque movement in Egypt shows that women actively participate in the revival movement and have created female spaces within the confines of the mosques (2005), and a similar process seems to be taking place among the women in Somalia (Haga 2009:52–53).

In sum, all these articles clearly show that the gendering of religious space is constantly under negotiation. Moreover, it is important to note that gendered religious spheres are not to be perceived as being mutually exclusive but rather as complementary, overlapping and interacting.

**Women’s everyday religion – a brief overview**

It was stated at the beginning of this introduction that historians of religion have paid little attention to everyday religion in general and to domestic religion in particular. Although the goal of women’s studies/feminist studies has been to make women’s religious practices visible it seems that relatively little has been accomplished within the study of domestic religion. In fact, it seems that the study of household practices has suffered a double oversight,
since even feminist scholarship has largely ignored the subject. It is symptomatic of this that Ursula King in her critical review of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), in which she complains of women’s invisibility as specialists and ordinary practitioners of religion (1995:237), fails to look for women in the six entries on domestic observances. This is remarkable since the editor even mentions in the brief introduction that “these articles give particular attention to women’s religious responsibilities, which often govern religious life in the home in ways not common in other dimensions of religious life” (*ER* 1987:400).

It may be the case that this lack of interest in, if not downright aversion, to the study of women’s domestic practices can be explained by the emancipatory agenda of western feminist scholarship. Given what we have seen in the previous sections, it is not surprising that feminist scholarship has regarded the household as the locus of women’s oppression and has consequently seen the release of women from the imprisonment of the household as a prerequisite for women’s emancipation. As Saba Mahmood has argued, due to its emancipatory goals, feminist scholarship in the West has prioritised types of subjectivity and agency which have been conceptualised onto a binary model of subordination and subversion (Mahmood 2005:14). Feminist studies of religion have had a strong tendency to view religion either in terms of oppression or have searched for activities which could be interpreted as subversive (see Keinänen 2000). As a consequence of this polarisation, those scholars who have studied women’s domestic practices beyond the subordination–subversion poles, have been criticised for reinforcing the traditional, unequal gender order instead of challenging it (e.g. Joy 1993:23, 28).

Despite this general lack of interest some scholars have provided us with glimpses into women’s everyday practices in the domestic sphere. The pioneering work within the field was *Unspoken worlds. Women’s Religious Lives* edited by Nancy Falk and Rita Gross (1989). Since *Unspoken worlds*, a number of studies have been published on women’s domestic religion – many of them by social anthropologists – but we still lack synthesising studies in the field. The neglect of comparative studies by feminist historians of religion can be coupled to the general trend in postmodern research which has favoured particularistic studies at the expense of comparative approaches. The social anthropologist Susan Starr Sered’s cross-cultural study *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (1994) can be seen as the first ground-breaking attempt at such a synthesis.

Sered seeks to identify features which are common to women’s religious orientations, ideas and practices in what she labels “religions dominated by
women”.¹ The term refers to religious configurations where the leaders and the majority of the members are women, and which, as a consequence, address women’s particular concerns and interests (1996:3). Sered further posits that many of the themes that are typical of female-dominated religions can also be found in women’s religious activities within male-dominated religions. The difference being that these themes are easier to identify in “women’s religions” since these practices are embedded in matrifocal, matrilineal or matrilocal contexts and have therefore become institutionalised and esteemed (Sered 1996:46–48, 60, 286). But as we have seen, we find in many male-dominated societies parallel gendered spheres whose existence has been conducive to women’s cultivation of women-centred religious ideas and practices. Since many of the ritual complexes, which Sered classes as ‘religions dominated by women’ are, like the saar mentioned earlier, embedded in male-dominated religious traditions, I am not completely comfortable with the term “religion dominated by women”. In spite of the terminological (and certain methodological) shortcomings, her survey makes an important starting point for the comparative study of women’s religious ideas and practices.

One of the features that Sered has found to be typical of religions dominated by women is the strong emphasis on motherhood. “Through ritual and theology, female-dominated religions enhance, dramatize, and strengthen women’s identities as mothers” (Sered 1996:73). However, as we have seen above, motherhood has been defined as central to women’s identity even in male-dominated religions. The difference, according to Sered, is that whereas male-dominated religions honour women as birth-givers and wives and seek to control their sexuality and reproductive functions, religions dominated by women emphasize the social aspects of motherhood, i.e. value women as nurturers (Sered 1996:81, 286; see for example Wadley 1977:119). Sered argues further that maternal interests also inform women’s outlook on life, their religious ideas and practices and that women’s rituals are tightly interwoven with their social roles as nurturers and caregivers (1996:81–85). However this is not unique to women’s religions, but is also pivotal in women’s practices in male-dominated religions as demonstrated in her own outstanding study of Jewish women in Jerusalem (1992). The social anthropologist Jill Dubisch concludes from her studies in rural Greece, another area of male-dominated religion, that women’s religious activities “reflect, or are aspects of” women’s “social roles as nurturers, caretakers and guardians of the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of the house and its

¹ The concept ‘religion’ is itself somewhat problematic, since the groups Sered has studied are usually labelled as sects, cults, or religious movements. A more adequate term would be “ritual complexes”. Only one of the twelve “religions” studied by Sered forms an independent religion which is also the dominating one in the society.
occupants” (Dubisch 1983:190). Because religious ideas and practices generally tend to be intertwined with social roles, it is self-evident that motherhood shapes women’s religious outlook and ideas and defines the focus of their religious practices irrespective of whether the religion is dominated by men or women.

Sered further suggests that motherhood and the physical and social vulnerability it may involve in the form of miscarriage, infertility, pregnancy, birth-giving, infant mortality, or poor health, predisposes women to deal with existential issues and human suffering. In contrast to male-dominated religions, women’s religions deal with these issues in concrete, this-worldly contexts (Sered 1996:104, 285). In fact, scholars who have studied vernacular Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe have coined the term “female suffering” or women’s “culture of suffering” to depict the cultural competence women have acquired for dealing with pain and suffering (Caraveli-Chaves 1980:146; Nenola-Kallio 1982:97–99). The folklorist Aili Nenola has pointed out in her study of Ingrian laments that because women constantly deal with the fundamental issues of human life, they have developed a culture which provides meaningful answers to existential issues (Nenola-Kallio 1982:98).

Although male clergy preside over the official rites of passage in Christian contexts, studies from different parts of the Russian and Greek Orthodox areas as well as of Roman Catholic Europe show that women direct the vernacular rituals around dying, death, and mourning. These rituals can be seen as an extension of women’s domestic roles of care for their family members. Women take care of the dying and often take charge of the washing and dressing of the corpse. They are the principle organizers of wakes, prayers for the soul of the deceased and thereby extend their care-giving into the hereafter. Women also organize memorial feasts for a particular deceased and calendric memorial feasts for the dead of the family. In the Orthodox areas of Eastern Europe, lamenters had a major role in mourning and remembrance ceremonies long into the twentieth century.

Moreover, as childbearers, mothers and caregivers women must also deal with suffering caused by illnesses (Sered 1996:103). Healing is therefore a central theme in women’s religious practice and has been seen as an integral part of their domestic duties in both male and female dominated religions (McClain 1989:7). Healing and well-being are also central in the female dominated holistic spiritualities in the West (Sointu & Woodhead 2008:259).

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1 This, of course, actualises the issue how we define a “religion dominated by women”. Given the fact that, in many patriarchal societies, there are two parallel religious spheres, women’s religious activities within these spheres might qualify as what Sered calls “religions dominated by women”. Caraveli-Chaves, for instance, argues that women’s sphere was rather autonomous in rural Greece (1980:143) and according to Nenola-Kallio this was the case also in Ingria (1982:97–99) and according to Keinänen in Karelia (this volume p. 122).
Sered presents the zaar/saar cult in North Africa and in the Middle East as a perfect example of women’s cults which centre around healing and alleviating suffering (1996:36, 106–107). Visits to the shrine of a holy man or a saint can be seen as functional alternatives to healing cults. A healing ceremony – arranged at a holy shrine or at home – is often preceded by a vow. Anne H. Betteridge, who has studied women’s vow-making in urban Iran, contends that vows were central to the religious practice of Iranian women in spite of the fact that vows and the ceremonies connected with them were considered controversial both by male religious leaders and educated women because of their putative non-religious nature and because of the participants’ alleged disrespectful bargaining with God. Women’s vows dealt with a variety of issues among the important ones barrenness and children’s sickness (Betteridge 1989:104, 110). Platt’s study also shows that the main reason for women’s visits to the Maraboutic shrines in the Kerkennah islands is healing as well as infertility. These shrines also function as a kind of spa, i.e. a centre for health maintenance (this volume p. 197).

On the northern coast of the Mediterranean, women’s vows and pilgrimages are also closely related to health issues. Because of this close connection between vows and health, Gemzöe views vow-making itself as a healing ritual (Gemzöe 2000:92, 80–82). Health has also been central to women’s vow-making and pilgrimages in Greece (Dubisch 1995:94).

Sered has identified a further feature characteristic of religions dominated by women, namely their interpersonal orientation, which again is coupled to the socialisation of women into mothering and care-giving. Women’s rituals demonstrate dependency and interconnectedness and are designed to cure and strengthen relationships (Sered 1996:121–122). A closer analysis of the aforementioned vows and pilgrimages makes the interpersonal nature of women’s rituals explicit. Flueckiger has found that women’s and men’s visits to holy shrines in Muslim cultures are motivated by their gender-specific interests. She writes: “Women may visit the grave to ask for fertility, for the health of a child, or resolution of a marriage negotiation; men may ask for business success or success in an exam” (2004:724). Platt’s study shows that women visit the Maraboutic shrines both on their own account and on for the sake of their family members, pleading to the saint if, for example, their husband has been unfaithful or if their son needs help to pass an exam (this volume p. 198). When imploring the saints to put an end to a husband’s infidelity or when seeking to influence marriage negotiations, women ritually manage relationships.

We find a similar gender-specific pattern in the South of Europe. Jill Dubisch’s observation that women are the majority among the pilgrims to the island of Tinos in Greece, because they are responsible for the family’s

1 However, it is important to note that healing cults, which are prevalent all over the African continent, are not exclusively a female phenomenon – men have their own cults.
physical and spiritual well-being (Dubisch 1995:94), is echoed in other cultures where women are the care-givers. Gemzöe has discerned a gender-specific pattern in vow-making among the Portuguese women she has studied. Also here women tend to make vows and pilgrimages on their own behalves or on behalf of their family members, whereas men made promises on their own behalves, for instance when in danger at sea (Gemzöe 2000:92, 80–82).

Love rituals, which are often women’s speciality and which has been seen by traditional scholarship as a merely personal, sometimes even anti-social activity, is another example of women’s ritual management and control of social relationships. These rituals serve similar socially approved social ends as the aforementioned supplications to the saints. Love rituals bind pairs together or break undesirable bonds and soothe marital relationships (Bell 2002:178–179; Stark-Arola 1998:134, 154).

Basing on Sered’s comparative study on religions dominated by women, I have sought to show that we can find similar themes in women’s religious practices in the male-dominated religions which are in the focus in this anthology. The explanation for this is simple because in both types of societies women have been socialised into motherhood which in various ways shapes their outlook on life and their everyday practices. Given the fact that there has been a scholarly tendency to view women’s practices in the domestic sphere as private and personal, not constitutive of cultural patterns, there is an urgent need for comparative studies that would more methodically identify such patterns and display their overall significance in the society.

References


PART I

Contested Vocations and Gendered Boundaries
**Fredrika Bremer: A Preacher on the Borders of Religion**

Ulla Manns

**Introduction**

“Damn, you preach too much Fredrika!” This irritated outburst was directed at Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865), one of the leading Swedish women intellectuals of her time. Fredrika Bremer was a world known novelist, famous for her work in social reform and her participation in public debate. The person loosing his temper because Bremer was arguing in what he perceived to be a preaching style was the Swedish leading intellectual *per se*, Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847). Besides being a friend of Bremer he was a prominent philosopher and historian famous for his political volte-face in becoming an out-spoken liberal in the 1830s. Bremer and Geijer became dear friends and besides meeting and discussing, they carried on an extensive correspondence. Bremer regarded Geijer as one of her main intellectual inspirations and often sought his opinion on theological and philosophical matters. Even though she was intellectually devoted to him, she had a great need of independence. This was sometimes interpreted as stubbornness. She never ceased asking questions, especially of Geijer and Per Johan Böklin, her mentor and lifelong friend. She did not stop at complex issues concerning good and evil in life, the wonders of the Bible and ways of reforming society. Even though both Bremer and Geijer were liberals, they occasionally disagreed, particularly on matters of theology. According to Bremer, Geijer was somewhat vague and irrational on theological matters whereas she always sought morally sustainable answers that could be fitted into her rational way of thinking.

Geijer’s outburst points to something still not thoroughly taken into consideration in analyses of intellectual nineteenth century women. Many studies overlook the role religion played for intellectual women, both as a gendered discourse to act within and for the importance religion had for how one should think of societal matters at large. The role religion had, as a gendered discourse and an ethical framework must be taken into consideration if

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1 This is shown in many scholarly works about Bremer. See here Färnström (1964) and Burman (2001).
we are to understand at a deeper level how women intellectuals could act, how they in fact did act and how they were perceived and reacted to.¹

When Geijer complains about the preaching style of Bremer, he shows that he finds something in her way of performing the role of the intellectual woman as disturbing. Something was wrong and it was very much along gender lines that it was considered to be wrong. Preaching was not an expected way of performing intellectuality for a woman. Fredrika Bremer was known to be timid, well behaved and very womanly, in an expected gendered way. But, as mentioned above, she was stubborn when it came to reasoning. She wanted to know, wanted to seek answers. For Bremer, discussing with wise partners was important. Dialogue with intellectual friends was one way she often chose as a means of probing deeper into complicated questions. She seems to have regarded her male intellectual colleagues as equals and at the same time deliberately put herself in a subordinated position to them. This seems to have suited Geijer. He often addressed Bremer in a warm and loving tone, without irritation. In letters she was usually his “dear sweet Fredrika”, and Bremer referred to herself as “his little friend” when they were discussing important social matters (Färnström 1964:81, 96). In one letter, Geijer underlined their intellectual affinity. Because of their mutual understanding and friendship, no real words were considered necessary for communication. They understood each other just because of their close friendship and likeness in opinions. Geijer’s statement was, in fact, only half true. Bremer did oppose parts of his way of reasoning. She could not accept some of his theological explications. His interpretations about the biblical wonders, the revelation and his ideas about Satan were not similar to Bremer’s. But, typical of her way of acting, she did not immediately stand up against Geijer. In fact, she did not become explicit and daring in her writings until later in life.²

This article argues for the use of preaching as an analytical tool to analyze the construction of intellectual women in the nineteenth century. By focusing on preaching as a way of performing intellectuality, women’s way of acting as well as the reactions to them, can be further scrutinized. Existing gendered norms as well as challenges to them can be further analyzed if studies of the intellectual woman takes into consideration the role played by religion.

¹ Many scholars have pointed this out, Hammar (1999) in particular. Even so, we still need studies devoted to these issues.
² She did not argue with Tegnér either, the other intellectual giant of the time in Sweden. See Färnström (1964:98). This evading yet stubborn way of acting is interesting to look closer into. Cf. Toril Moi’s interpretation of how and why Simone de Beauvoir chose and was quite content with the position as second to Jean Paul Sartre (Moi 1996).
Preaching

Preaching is usually described in ways that underline its vague and plastic character. In a broad way, preaching is presented as the presentation of a religious discourse (a sermon) to an audience, by a preacher. In a more narrow way, preaching is said to be a sermon delivered by an authorized cleric “within the context of a worship service or liturgy”. It is therefore, as Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker underline, a fluid and flexible phenomenon. Preaching is, regardless of definition, centered on authority, logos and public appearance (Kienzle & Walker (1998), quote, xiv. See also Long 1993). Who is legitimized as a preacher, what is a sermon, what is an audience, and not least when it comes to women as preachers, where is the activity (the preaching) taking place? These questions are crucial for the activity to be classified as preaching. Legitimacy, addressing an audience and public space are central when it comes to writing about and debating politics and becoming involved in public matters. As can be seen, all three key words related to preaching (authority, logos and the public) are notions historically intertwined with the idea of masculinity. Very briefly, authority is about legitimacy, agency and autonomy. Logos refers to word, speech, thought, reason and law, and is as such a diffuse word. In its nineteenth century context, the public was a highly gendered space. Women were not supposed to take part in public matters (that is societal matters), be seen in the public space on their own (that is as individuals) or to speak in public (that is addressing an audience). In short, women were not supposed to appear as speaking subjects in public, nor were they supposed to perform a preaching activity.1

Preaching as performance

Preaching is here considered as a way of performing gender, as doing gender in action, in everyday life as well as at certain occasions. Preaching can be used as a heuristic tool to study aspects of women and intellectuality in the nineteenth century.2 Using preaching, in itself very male gendered, as an analytical tool can enable us to study conditions for intellectual women dur-
ing the nineteenth century from a perspective that includes the prominent place religion still held in most of the Western world. The construction of the intellectual woman is thereby historicized, taking into consideration the religious gendered context in analyzing ways of acting, reacting and negotiating in public space.

Many features of a preacher and an intellectual are historically similar. The space for action is the same. Both intellectuals and preachers during the nineteenth century were acting in society, that is, the arena for action was outside the home. Both groups were addressing an audience. Furthermore they used the word; they spoke and wrote in and for the public. Their intellectual and/or theological activity was based on authority, an authority skilled or wise enough to address others about rights and wrongs in life. This required some kind of legitimacy: theological, educational or other kinds of legitimacy. Yet another similarity is that both groups are usually described as speaking and acting out of necessity: the necessity to spread the word of God, to tell the truth, to act against injustices et cetera.1

Fredrika Bremer was but one of the women intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Other well-known contemporary women intellectuals were Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), George Eliot (1819–1880) and Flora Tristan (1803–1844). Studies show that they were often met by suspicion, since they were crossing several gender lines by participating in the public debate. This seems to have been the case irrespective of religiosity (David 1987; Bloch-Dano 2001). Women were by and large not supposed to act either within the realms of theology, or as intellectuals.

Preaching is here understood as an act, something one does in a certain context. If applied on historical source material such as Fredrika Bremer’s writings, a study like this can provide us with analytical tools to look closer upon several questions concerning the construction of the intellectual and women in public space. What an intellectual does when acting in public, under what conditions the intellectual works and acts, and how this was reacted to when performed by women are questions that will provide us with insights into the constructed nature of the intellectual. This is done from a theoretical perspective with a basis in the thinking of gender as a process, an ongoing identity process within a setting where frames for action is both present and negotiated.2

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1 Preachers have of course occasionally used their positions to act politically, acting within the clerical room as well. See recent studies on Sweden in early-modern times, Ericsson (ed. 2007).

2 Especially Judith Butler and post-colonial thinkers stress the importance of viewing identity as a constant process. See Butler (2004) and Loomba (1998) on identity as a process in post-colonial thinking.
The intellectual

The intellectual is here defined as someone taking part in public debates discussing societal matters, a person using her wits and intellectual capacities for the good of society. Ethics are usually considered to be the basic ground for the intellectual to act: a wish, a vocation or an urge to make the world a better place (David 1987:2–6). As intellectuals, women were considered just as odd as women preachers. When women took on the role of the intellectual in the nineteenth century they did provoke. By her very appearance, the woman intellectual stressed the gendered features of the intellectual. Women intellectuals also made visible the gendered space they acted within. By participating in public debate, intellectual women interfered with the notion of the intellectual as a free-floating spirit, disconnected from body, matter and place. This kind of public participation was new, since the only public women hitherto had been those historically “allowed” in public space, namely the prostitutes. Reactions to women as intellectuals were similar, regardless of whether, as Fredrika Bremer, they claimed that they acted out of a divine reason or whether they argued from a more secular stance, as George Eliot or Flora Tristan.

The intellectual in a more modern sense, the educated and secular person, is a figure who remains unusual until the end of the nineteenth century. The shift is often illustrated by the Dreyfus-affair in France and Émile Zola’s strong exclamation J’accuse! This accusation, to expose society and formal law as unfair and unjust, modeled a type of intellectual who was standing free from authority, relying on his own wits and moral convictions. Zola accused other intellectuals of not daring to take a stance on a political matter in France, a matter of a serious anti-Semitic sort. Zola underlined the moral responsibility intellectuals had in society that, regardless of personal inconvenience and societal convention, the intellectual had an obligation to defend truth and justice. Many descriptions and attempts to define an intellectual are based on this secular way of comprehending. The search for truth is, for example, the secular truth and the modern intellectual is first and foremost constructed on the basis of formal education and cultural capital based on

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1 The modern intellectual took shape during the nineteenth century, as someone separated from convention, with no political or religious bond to the ruling class. Compare the older notion “man of letters” and Gramsci’s distinction organic and traditional intellectual. (David 1987).

2 A historical example of how public women in regard to intellectual women were portrayed is shown in Gripenberg (1893) when the many learned women during the Antiquity are presented. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) has a similar presentation of the public woman in history.

positions within the field of higher education. Furthermore, the space is the sort of media we are used to today. In the nineteenth century media and the public arena as we know it was not yet fully developed (Ericsson, ed. 2007). Newspapers with daily reports about political matters did exist in Sweden, as Aftonbladet (1830–), but such publications were few. Other arenas for public discussions in writing about politics and society were still rare around the middle of the century: literary saloons, pamphlets, travel journals, letters and novels were all used by women intellectuals.

Why preaching

Hitherto much research on women in nineteenth century has discussed the use of a distinction between a public and a private sphere. Studies about the gendered public sphere most often starts off from the theories of Jürgen Habermas. They usually end up with a similar conclusion: the distinction public/private doesn’t work properly, it is too vague, imprecise, it doesn’t capture what women actually did, could do or were hindered from doing and so forth. More subtle distinctions within this theoretical frame are needed, as other approaches to capture how the gendered society has changed. Focusing on women as intellectuals using preaching as an analytical tool, is worth trying in order to shed new light upon conditions, strategies used and identity processes among this particular group of women. Apart from studying on what they did themselves, gendered political structures in the nineteenth century can be analyzed as well. Religious faith was important for many politically activists in the nineteenth century, not the least for liberal women and men. What is recognized but still not theorized enough, is the fact that for societies in large parts of the Western world religion was still a main societal discourse (no matter Protestant or Catholic). It set the moral grounds for society at large, religion had a crucial impact on educational systems in most countries and it constituted the factual frame for agency as well as for identity processes.

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1 The literature about the role of the intellectual and definitions of the intellectual is extensive. Yet many studies do not dedicate itself to present a specific definition of an intellectual. Both Bourdieu (1992) and Moi (1996), two very influential studies about the construction of the intellectual, almost take for granted that an intellectual is someone with a thorough formal education, which is not necessary in anyway, particularly not from a historical point of view.

2 The literature is vast. See for example works by Nancy Fraser, and studies done on Swedish source material as Holmquist (2000), Nordenstan (2001), Österberg & Carlsson Wetterberg (eds.) (2002) and Florin & Kvarnström (eds.) (2001).

3 Secular views existed of course as well, but in Sweden the vast majority of women and men active in the woman question were religious and used Christian Protestant ideals as arguments for change. See Manns (1997), (2005) and fc. (2010), Hammar (1999).
An application to come

Fredrika Bremer is interesting to choose for a study about intellectual women in this perspective. She was an intellectual throughout her public life: she wrote extensively about societal matters and was active in social reform work. Because of her position in cultural life she received much attention. Her guidance in life was God, her own conscience and her rational thinking; all combined into what she herself called reason.¹ She did provoke, not only Geijer but also other male intellectuals of her time. There is an abundance of source material such as her writings and reactions to them and private material such as letters to and from her vast network of friends and intellectual comrades. Two of her writings provoked the greatest reaction: the theological comment on David Friedrich Strauss’s book *Das Leben Jesu*, published in 1842, and her most explicit novel about the need for women’s emancipation, *Hertha* published in 1856. In both cases her theological discussions and religious argumentations, in *Hertha* intertwined with her claims for social and feminist change, caused most reactions. Who was she to become involved in debates of this kind? How could she claim to know God’s plan of better than others? Who was she to interpret the Bible, the creation narrative, the Gospel and so on? Reactions were of different kinds, everything from ridicule to accusations of being too conventional, and at the same time unwomanly because of her theological interfering.²

Just as her contemporary Harriet Martineau, Bremer had a “need of utterance”.³ Bremer gave the following description about that need when she explained to her friend and mentor Per Johan Böklin why she had to follow her own intellectual path in every question: “I must obey, otherwise I become a cowardly betrayer to my Genius.”⁴ And her genius was God, the higher power and will, which gave her guidance and enlightened her. This need of utterance led to numerous novels, two large travel journals (one from her journey in the USA 1849–1851, one from a journey to the Middle East in the late 1850s), articles about the social conditions among Great Britain’s working class, writings about peace, and as mentioned earlier, the theological piece about the theological authority of the Bible. In her numerous letters, many to prominent women and men throughout the Western world, discussions about political, philosophical and theological matters were held.

¹ Burman (2001) and Adlersparre & Leijonhufvud (1896) 2 vol., are the most important biographies, showing her particular mind and philosophizing.
² Reactions towards her writings are not yet thoroughly analyzed. For overviews, see Qvist (1969), Burman (2001).
³ Here quoted from David (1987:27). The quote is taken from the obituary Martineau wrote about herself, very decisive to construct her own history.
Bremer was in short a true intellectual, using her social and intellectual skill in order to change the world into a better place, no matter what the consequences might be.

Usually Bremer avoided public debates and quarrels. She did not respond when she was criticized for her theological pamphlet in the 1840s, she did not comment on the famous novelist Carl Jonas Love Almqvist’s critiques of her writings, and she did not comment upon the huge critique following *Hertha* in 1856. She did not want to; she found it both embarrassing and unsuitable for a woman. In later years, Bremer became more daring, less afraid of confrontation and simply did not care if reactions in public debate were to be expected (Burman 2001:338, 340). But she did avoid going into polemical writing of any sort. This might seem a bit paradoxical, to become involved in the public debate discussing theological and social core questions and at the same time almost refusing to participate when the going got tough. She herself felt that she did provoke (which she did!), and she did not want to. But, in her own view she was correct in debating societal matters. She participated as an intellectual, first and foremost led by her reason, her conscience and her own relation to God.¹ This meant only one thing for Bremer: she had to act. She had to tell the truth – in public. By doing so, she crossed well-drawn gender lines. She was not expected to be acting within public debate as a reason, as guided by a divine enlightenment. Nevertheless, she took place in public space, but she was not given authority.

A last comment about preaching: Fredrika Bremer did actually preach occasionally. Some of her texts are indeed preaching in both style and message, not least the novel *Hertha*, which argues for the rights of women. Bremer clearly shows that she knows God, his inner thoughts and plans. The protagonist *Hertha* gathers her disciples just before she dies and explains their mission to come: to free women and make the world a better place. According to prevailing norms of gender Bremer did wrong – but felt deeply in her heart that it was right. Therefore she could not keep herself out of the public debate. To end suffering in society was her overall goal and she kept on searching for the solution in all of her writing and debating life.²

Negotiating Gender

One way of describing Fredrika Bremer is that she did act on the borders of religion, in the outskirts of religion. Another way to put it is that she claimed the right to act within the religious realm as a preacher. She thereby negoti-

¹ David stresses how the oscillation between being an intellectual and a woman according to conventional gender lines is striking when studying women intellectuals during the 19th century.

² The novel quickly goes into a preaching style. Bremer also uses biblical citations throughout her argumentation in the novel. See also Burman (2001) and Manns (2005).
ated the construction of being a preacher and an intellectual in a time when both concepts underwent large changes. Bremer went right into the realms of both reason and religion. She knew it was difficult and in some persons eyes wrong – but she could not do otherwise.

References


Fredrika Ehrenborg and her Swedenborgian 
Thoughts on Inner Spirituality, Transformation 
and the Marriage between Love and Wisdom, 
Will and Intellect

Hanna Nyberg

In the mid eighteenth century Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), one of Sweden’s great scientists experienced an awakened interest in religion. Like Carl von Linné he was a member of the Swedish Academy of Sciences and was internationally renowned. They both investigated general patterns in created Nature, but Swedenborg searched for universal laws that could embrace the spiritual or inner realms too. Influenced by Stoicism, revivalist movements, physico-theology and Deism, Swedenborg’s research changed into an enquiry into the human soul. It was his intention to prove its immortality by means of his inner senses, ipsis sensibus. During his research the scientist experienced a vocation and became a reformer and founder of a theological system that mixed faith and knowledge. Combining Christian belief, ancient philosophy and modern science, Swedenborg worked out a system that promoted change for both the individual, the Church and society. Swedenborg used his knowledge and visions to interpret and unseal the inner meaning in the Bible. According to him, the knowledge about the inner sense in the Word was the Lord’s second arrival. The relation between divine archetype, spiritual likeness and earthly image was important when Swedenborg tried to explain how the human soul, the inner sense of the Bible and even marriage and its union between man and woman were dependent on God’s nature. In Swedenborg’s theological system, Love, Wisdom and Use are more than concepts and virtues, together the three words denote the Lord, his omnipotence and his providence. According to Swedenborg, Divine Love and Divine Wisdom emanate from God and influence (influxus) the human soul if she is open to receive and use her faculties of life (facultates vitae), her free will and her intellect. The aim for the human being is to be regenerated and transformed through inner spirituality and good deeds. Regeneration, from the Latin word regeneratio means in this context to be born again, a spiritual awakening in this life, or, in the afterlife. Swedenborg wrote that this spiritual change could stop the degeneration of mankind, so often preached in sermons during the seventeenth century, and instead turn
man into homo nova, a transformed and better human being. Through divine providence, free will and intellect the human soul had the possibility to develop and strive to become an image of God. In accordance with his theological system, Swedenborg’s followers in the nineteenth century were often readers, had much self-knowledge and manifested their faith in actions and good deeds.

In Sweden, it was the Placard of Conventicles (konventikelplakatet) from 1726 which prohibited Swedenborgians and other revivalist movements from gathering in convents until 1858. The religious persecutions made the Swedenborgians cautious about what they said. Sweden had no religious freedom and radical religious thinkers could be reprimanded by the priests, fined, imprisoned or banished, not least, they could be ostracised from society. The absence of periodicals in the spirit of Swedenborg was for a long time another obstacle for Swedenborgians to interact and keep in touch. A woman who, despite these obstacles, raised her voice in public was the Swedish authoress and anti-militarist Fredrika Ehrenborg (1794–1873). Fredrika Ehrenborg had become well acquainted with Swedenborg’s religious system and her writings are an important source for the study of the development of the Swedish Swedenborgian movement during the nineteenth century. Ehrenborg travelled in Europe, translated articles, collected life stories from Swedenborgians abroad and wrote both novels, prayers, reflections, children’s books, travel books and polemical pamphlets. Her activity was concentrated to the period between 1840s and 1870s and her Swedenborgian thoughts on inner spirituality and individual transformation have by and large been neglected by the historians.

In her memoirs, Fredrika Ehrenborg wrote that all her written works were imbued with Swedenborg’s ideas and were part of her mission to spread his doctrine and promote the New Church (Ehrenborg 1873:45). Ehrenborg published her work anonymously, but in Sweden and within her circle of friends and acquaintances her name and her mission were well-known. The awakened Ehrenborg spread her own work in the literary saloons in Uppsala and her actions made people smile: “Poor thing, poor thing – it can’t turn out well! She writes so many small yellow prayers” (Hamilton-Geete 1910:127). The note is important because it shows a change in the distribution of Swedenborgian thoughts at the time. No longer had only the scholar or academic access to his theology written in Latin.

Print was another way to spread the gospel and studies in the field of popular culture point out that religious tracts were of great importance during the nineteenth century. The tracts were present in the mission field, sometimes they were even more effective than human speakers and challenged the oral tradition of the Church (Morgan 2007:29). Fredrika Ehrenborg was one of those pioneers who used the freedom of the press to spread her message about inner spirituality and good deeds. The interaction between religion and popular culture is obvious at any level in Ehrenborg’s works.
and – thanks to her publications – Swedenborg’s thoughts met a new audience outside the scholarly circles.

Fredrika Ehrenborg and her way to regeneration

Like other awakened Swedenborgians, Ehrenborg had experienced enlightenment and regeneration and because of this focused on the inner individual and personal growth in her scriptures. Ehrenborg herself thought that the need for spiritual knowledge came more from misfortune than from happiness and, she says, her own power and involvement came from her “history of suffering” (Ehrenborg 1873:23). Where did she come from, this elderly woman with her resolute opinions, her strong will, her curiosity and self-education?

Anna Fredrika was born in 1794 in the small town Karlstad in the South West of Sweden. Her father Nils Carlqvist was a tradesman. When he died she was raised in a wealthier home and only met her mother, Anna Christina Reimer, on holidays. According to her autobiography, her education was neglected in her foster home and she tells us that her childhood was spiritually and intellectually poor. Through her foster parents she met Casper Isaac Michael Ehrenborg (1788–1823), the man who in 1811 became her husband. Since Casper and Fredrika were both fatherless, they were free to decide whom to choose and they married from love. Seventeen years old and married above her station Fredrika felt inadequate. She writes that her husband allowed her to use his library to study and described him as a “saving angel” (Ehrenborg 1873:31).

Fredrika Ehrenborg gave birth to eight children of whom four died of child diseases. Not long after his appointment to the post of Parliamentary Ombudsman Casper Ehrenborg became ill and died of tuberculosis in 1823. Fredrika was left alone to bring up the children and manage two large properties, Kråk and Råbäck in Västergötland. In her grief she looked for the book written by Emanuel Swedenborg her husband had studied and started to read Swedenborg’s works on her own. Ehrenborg’s description of her husband in her memoirs seems idealized and coloured by her knowledge of Swedenborg’s doctrine of Conjugal Love and correspondences between spiritual development and intimate love. Nonetheless their innermost relationship can explain her deep faith in Swedenborg’s description of the spiritual world and marriages in heaven. If an earthly marriage between two persons was a spiritual union the couple would meet again in the spiritual world or even in heaven (Swedenborg 1895: §47).
Loss and enlightenment

The loss of her husband and her children drew Ehrenborg to Swedenborg’s works. She was urged to find out what happened in the afterlife and Swedenborg’s descriptions of the spiritual world gave her a sense of certainty about the state of her husband and her children. Swedenborg’s thoughts about knowledge and change and his view on spiritual transformation also cured her of her feelings of inferiority. The belief that one could enter into a state of eternal bliss and even reunite with an eagerly longed for husband or wife gave comfort to those like Ehrenborg who were in bereavement of dead family members. Swedenborg’s interpretation of the spiritual world was controversial and conflicted with the orthodox view on death and resurrection, but, with a new faith in the doctrine of eternal conjugal love, Ehrenborg accepted other parts of Swedenborg’s religious system. According to her, Swedenborg’s interpretation of the Bible made the vision of the Lord simple and easy to understand.

Ehrenborg fell ill and had a fever during her reading and her regeneration is described as an enlightenment. Ehrenborg writes that she suddenly felt a ray of sunlight breaking through the pall of her sorrows and stood up awakened and rejuvenated:

The Holy Spirit had swept over the darkness of my soul, the Lord had said his: let it be light – and there was light. And the light was to be divided from the darkness through grades of development and growth.1

Ehrenborg’s description of her regeneration and revival showed that she was familiar with Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia* from 1749 in which he interpreted Genesis and presented it as a history of the soul in general and as the development and history of the Church in particular. According to Swedenborg the word church signifies a spiritual state of mind and he divided the different churches in different ages according to their spiritual condition. His vision of a New Church was a vision of a new age and his interpretation and exegesis had a great influence on Ehrenborg’s thoughts. Although the synthesis of the magical and the rational in Swedenborg’s religious system so attracted the practically oriented Ehrenborg that she made contact with other Swedenborgians, she nevertheless did not dissociate herself from the official service and attended church as before. In her home noble families such as the Gyllenhaals, Schönherrs and Hamiltons were treated as family members as were the priests from the Odhner and Knös families. Ehrenborg was at the centre of a coterie that her daughter described as “a charming world of mesmerism and hopes for the future that I cannot share” (Rodhe 1949:244).

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It was quite common that the youth broke with the older generation’s Swedenborgian beliefs (Norberg 1939:143). Their relationship to the older generation was not without conflicts and in Ehrenborg’s family, there was a young philosopher called Ernst Kjellander (1812–1835) who got Fredrika’s children to denounce their mother’s mesmerism influenced Swedenborgianism (Horn 1921:64–67). Kjellander, a pupil of the poet P. D. A. Atterbom (1790–1855) was predicted a splendid academic career and like Ehrenborg attended the literary saloons of both Atterbom and the authoress Malla Silfverstolpe (1782–1861) in Uppsala. As a young student, Kjellander and a circle of friends belonged to “Andarnas brödraskap” (“The brotherhood of spirits”). They were connected by emotionally tinged piety and philosophical-theological interests and were in contact with family members of both Knös and Ehrenborg at Kråk in Västergötland (Nordin 1987:190).

In consideration of her children and their spouses Ehrenborg was more cautious about what to say and what to do in her native country. Her son Richard was a member of a nationalistic religious association called Evangeliska fosterlandsstiftelsen (“The Evangelical Patriotic Foundation”) and she wanted to spare her children and also her son-in-law the bishop E. G. Bring (1814–1884) from official shame. Humorously Ehrenborg called herself “the heresiarch”. Ehrenborg died in 1873, she was 79 years old by which time, according to her daughter Betty, she had taken exception to the movement of Spiritism, but retained her Swedenborgian faith.

Acquaintances and friends in this world

Ehrenborg, who felt the need to share her thoughts and experiences with a wider audience, did not immediately find her literary form. In Sweden there was no forum for her opinions. Her varied work includes recipes for health and economy as well as a roman-à-clef from her inner circles in Sweden and literature for children. The mildly reprimanding tone in all her texts caused the authoress Sophie von Knorring (1797–1848) to advise her to publish children’s books, a task which in her later life Ehrenborg set for her daughter Betty Posse (1818–1880).

Lacking Betty’s light-heartedness, Ehrenborg never felt comfortable in the drawing rooms of the historian E.G. Geijer (1783–1847), Atterbom or Malla Silfverstolpe and never joined in their playful games or worlds of poetry. More interested in improving her mind, Ehrenborg attended Atterbom’s and Geijer’s lectures in Uppsala with her daughter Betty. The fact that Ehrenborg wanted education and visited the university was a minor scandal at that time (Rodhe 1949; Bexell 1995). Ehrenborg never mentioned the names of those in her social circle in her writing but tells us that two renowned persons recognized and accepted Swedenborg as a great man, as a philosopher and as a scientist, but not as a “Servant of the Lord” (Ehrenborg
Both Atterbom and Geijer did mention Swedenborg and his religious thoughts in their work, they compared his ideas to their own but did not acknowledge any form of influence from Swedenborgianism in their own philosophy (Bergquist 1996:176).

According to Ehrenborg, the practical Christianity in the spirit of Swedenborg was largely “misinterpreted and misunderstood, feared and persecuted, unfamiliar for the mob or distorted” (Ehrenborg 1854:66). Still, in a letter to a “Precious, unforgetable and eternal lady friend”, most likely Fredrika Ehrenborg herself, Atterbom confessed his feelings for the Swedenborgian movement. After describing his busy academic life, Atterbom, a member of the Swedish Academy constantly suffering from disease, started to explain his spiritual and political standpoint. He was devoted to Swedenborg’s doctrines, he writes, to the spread of his teachings, but felt unfamiliar with the Swedenborgian movement. Atterbom himself was a monarchist and it is obvious that his lady friend had a different view in political matters. Atterbom thought that all Swedenborgians were republicans although Swedenborg was described as monarchist. Referring to page 204–205 in his own work on Swedenborg, *Svenska siare och skalder* (“Swedish Seers and Poets”), Atterbom pointed out that Swedenborg had described the monarchy as heaven and the republic as hell. At the same time he was able to support his lady friend’s opinion that, throughout the ages, kings and monarchs were infamous for their faults or bad behaviour. Supposing that the lady friend was Fredrika Ehrenborg who wanted Atterbom to correct himself and make a statement gives perspectives to a complex Swedish network of brothers and sisters engaged in the interpretation of Swedenborg’s works. That the woman really is Ehrenborg is revealed by the fact that the two friends discussed Elihu Rich (1819–1875) and a translation of his biography on Swedenborg, a translation made by Ehrenborg herself which was published in Sweden five years later (Ehrenborg/Rich 1855, *Kristendomens filosof: Nya kyrkans första apostel*).

Fredrika Ehrenborg wrote anonymously but as a widow, with grown-up children, she was free to travel and free to speak her mind. In 1852 and 1853 her daughter Betty was a pupil at the British and Foreign School in London during which time Fredrika visited the New Church’s temples. In England Swedenborg’s followers were called New Salemites after New Jerusalem, the new teaching in the spirit of Swedenborg. The New Church started to establish their organisation both in the capital and elsewhere in Britain, soon after Swedenborg’s death. In Britain as opposed to Sweden, Swedenborg was remembered as a religious leader, not as a mad scientist. His portrait was common in book shops which sold new translations of both his scien-

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tific and his religious works. Swedenborg’s works circulated among the New Salemites, the most popular being *Divine Providence* (1764), *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–56) and parts of *The Four Doctrines* (1763).

In her travel books and in her letters Ehrenborg documented life stories of the Swedenborgians and the different ways they had come into contact with the works of Swedenborg. Like her, a lot of people found their Swedenborgian faith while in mourning, while others experienced rebirth or regeneration only after a long period of study and soul-searching. John Garth Wilkinson (1812–1899), a Swedenborgian homeopath and doctor, described that his inner nature and his heart were warmed and opened to the influence of Swedenborg’s ideas when he fell in love (Ehrenborg 1854:12). To improve her knowledge of the New Church Ehrenborg contacted Wilkinson both by letter and in person when she arrived in London in 1852 (Ehrenborg 1854:4). As a translator of Swedenborg’s works and the writer of one of the early biographies Wilkinson was one of the key figures in the history of the New Church in Britain. Wilkinson described the new movement of Swedenborgianism as the most silent of revolutions (Ehrenborg 1854:52). When Ehrenborg tried to explain the same phenomenon she said that a new era is always characterized by a state of fermentation, this was manifested in the individual as a change towards purity and transformation, on the societal level this could be manifested in revolutions (Ehrenborg 1852:47).

Despite the international fame of the opera singer Jenny Lind (1820–1887) and the authoress Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865), Sweden as such was little known abroad. It was Fredrika Bremer who submitted Ehrenborg’s first manuscript *Skildringar ur det husliga lifvet* (“Accounts of the Domestic Life”) to a publisher in 1845 (Ehrenborg 1873:38). Ehrenborg had a lot in common with the younger authoress Bremer (see Manns in this volume), they both used a personal kind of journalism and spoke and wrote about subjects women did not usually speak about. They also shared religious interests and Ehrenborg often got questions about Bremer’s confession from Swedenborg’s followers in England. The Swedenborgians found Swedenborg’s principles in Bremer’s writings and because Bremer was met by acclaim from her readers her work was useful to the Swedenborgian cause. Bremer’s work showed general Christian faith and according to Ehrenborg her work might have been less useful if overtly confessional (Ehrenborg 1854:65). Confessional or not, the religious influences from Swedenborg and his doctrines can be seen in Bremer’s novel *Hertha* with the subtitle *En själs historia. Teckning ur det verkliga livet* (“Hertha, or, The Story of a Soul”) from 1856. Even if the influence is not explicit in the novel, the description of man and woman as one soul, the spiritual discussions between Hertha and her soul mate and the accounts of a practical Christianity manifested in an association working for good deeds were typical Swedenborgian themes at the time (Bremer 1986:146–156). Deeper religious studies, inner spirituality and good deeds were not always easy to combine with an active life. In a
letter to J.G. Wilkinson in 1853 Fredrika Bremer apologized and complained that her commitments prevented her from intensifying her studies in the works of Swedenborg (Sahlin 1998:26).

In England, religious freedom made man’s faith a matter of individual decision, yet the relationship between the new religious movements and the Church was not without conflict. Swedenborgian preachers were often charismatic and their preaching threatened the orthodox clergy. People who were against any religious reformation were upset to the extent that they demonstrated their opposition with placards around the streets of London and even warned against certain preachers (Ehrenborg 1854:16, 23, 263). The phenomenon of Swedenborgianism, Swedenborgians and their capability of preaching were explained with their deep knowledge in the doctrine of correspondences:

The rich doctrine, that appears in the whole visible Creation as a clear book of words and pictures, will make preaching so easy, like reading is easy then You have once learned letters and spelling – or like travelling is easy on railways instead of sandy and stony ground.¹

Instead of listening to the warnings against the New Church and their preachers Ehrenborg recommended people to think and try and make up their own minds. Ehrenborg noticed that the preachers in London spoke without big gestures, that they were relaxed and sat in comfortable armchairs; one reading the Scripture and another explaining it to the audience. As twins, the officiating clergymen corresponded to the Bible, one symbolized the literal or external Word and the other the Word’s inner sense. Ehrenborg’s report of the New Church is a moving document of the early attempts to practice the words of Emanuel Swedenborg in the sermon. The handbooks diverged in their rituals, but a frequent theme in their preaching was the rebirth, or regeneration, according to the Scripture and the gospel of St. John (John 3: 3).

According to Ehrenborg, the New Church temples in London were harmonious and light. The temple near Argyle Square was built in the Gothic style and had a small library near the gate. The works of Swedenborg were also reflected in the church interior. From a coloured rose window with the inscription “GOD IS ONE” the light fell on the Ten Commandments. The altar was clad in red velvet and embroidered with the Greek letters alpha and omega with their implicit direction to the Revelation of St. John the Divine and the words of the Lord: “I am A and O”, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1: 8, 21: 6, 22: 13). The temples were also made comfortable for the congre-

Ehrenborg attended services in different temples around London and found to her surprise that men and women came and sat together in the church room (Ehrenborg 1854: 26). Also, it was new to her that no official announcements disturbed the sermon. Although the absence of official announcements allowed one to concentrate on the Words of God, instead of the world of war and debates outside Ehrenborg was critical of the long readings from the Bible. Ehrenborg was of the opinion that the devout should not only fulfil their duties by attending the service but also perform their devotions at home. According to both Swedenborg and Ehrenborg one should practice what one preaches and therefore faith and action were intimately connected.

As a guest from Swedenborg’s native land, Ehrenborg was invited to reading-circles. One read *Divine Love* another *True Christian Religion* a third studied *Apocalypse Explained* and a fourth read *Heaven and Hell*. In these closed meetings the readers discussed the works of Swedenborg in a way that Ehrenborg found boring. She said that women usually sense the truth in a different way from men, that they sense God with their feelings and compared to men, who rely on their intellect, do so much more quickly (1854:73). Ehrenborg felt need for a different kind of meeting; gatherings where the young and old could communicate their thoughts and experiences without the ceremony of the church service. Ehrenborg described a new kind of meeting similar to that of the first Christian disciples and the Lord’s Supper of love.

Acquaintances and relationships in the spiritual world

Ehrenborg made a lot of new acquaintances in London. She met some Swedenborgians involved in mesmerism and studied their practices with psychics. Ehrenborg documented the meetings and also described her own experience of healing. In their circles it was common to ask for dead family members and their state in the afterlife but even the spirit of the living could be seen in the spiritual world. When Ehrenborg described the phenomenon of somnambulism and clairvoyance she cited the Bible (Luke 17: 21) and explained that God’s kingdom is an inner realm. In one session a medium claimed to be able to see Ehrenborg’s inner spirit and portrayed her as a young girl with white shiny clothes and a lot of jewellery, all in accordance to Swedenborg’s descriptions of spirits in the spiritual world. Yet, Ehrenborg made clear that neither the spiritual clothes nor the outer features were a creation of our own. Only through divine love and rebirth could the human heart bloom, as a seed grows through light and warmth. In Swedenborg’s accounts from the spiritual world heaven is a state of mind. Through retelling the medium’s experiences in the spiritual world Ehrenborg wanted to
show how the inner spiritual man could change, regenerate, blossom and bear fruit thanks to the truths in the Scripture (Ehrenborg 1854:130, 156).

In *Heaven and Hell* (1758), the book about the spiritual world that gave Ehrenborg such comfort, Swedenborg set down many of his ideas about marriage and the relationship between man and wife. The union between man and woman was a common theme in Swedenborg’s system and in Ehrenborg’s works this union was highlighted through her deep longing for her husband. Familiar with Swedenborg’s *Conjugial Love* from 1768 she was able to see the inner meaning of the marriages in the spiritual world and heaven, the union between Love and Wisdom and between the human will and the intellect. Ehrenborg’s works are imbued with the most important concepts of Emanuel Swedenborg’s religious system: Love, Wisdom and Use (Utility), but Emanuel Swedenborg’s comprehensive works had only begun to be translated and Ehrenborg complained about misinterpretations. A new Swedish translation of her favourite *Delitiae sapientiae de amore conjugiali* (Conjugial Love) had so many printers’ errors that it led to misunderstandings. According to Ehrenborg only a very attentive reader with extensive knowledge of Swedenborg’s doctrines could get the message clearly, and, if the principles of Swedenborg’s system were misinterpreted the whole doctrine was distorted.

In 1768 Emanuel Swedenborg was to present *Delitiae sapientiae de amore conjugiali* to the Swedish Parliament but the book was banned. Unlike his previous works, Swedenborg wanted to present the manuscript as a work of ethics, rather than a work of theology and was therefore less cautious about its content. Even in the shape of a moral philosophy the book upset and threatened the clergy. Critical voices only saw the descriptions of sexuality and not their inner meaning to lead and guide lost sheep to a deeper love.

In the works of Swedenborg the delightful vision of the heavenly marriages between a man and woman is an image of God. According to Swedenborg the marriage between man and woman corresponded to Divine Wisdom and Divine Love and had a spiritual likeness to the union between will and intellect. In Ehrenborg’s time Swedenborg’s descriptions of love between human will and human intellect caused some problems too. According to her, only the pure of heart and those without prejudice were able to see the paradisiacal and heavenly innocence in *Conjugial Love* (Ehrenborg 1854:91). Swedenborg’s speech about concubines and the possibility of putting an end to the cold union between man and woman was also controversial. In 1853, the same year Ehrenborg spent her time in London, the different or misleading interpretations caused the Swedenborgian movement to investigate the question about marriage in a publication, *Swedenborg on Marriage and its Violations, being an Exposition of the VIIth Commandment of the Decalogue*, but competent lectures and scriptures from within the movement could not stop the rumours or simplified interpretations of Swe-
denborg’s doctrine of conjugal love and marriage that already circulated in journals and pamphlets (Woodman 1865, Appelgren 1999).

Ehrenborg showed her ethical values when Swedenborg’s dream diary was discovered in 1858.¹ The dream diary created a stir when ninety-nine copies of the manuscript were published and circulated among the curious and was officially debated in the newspapers. Unlike his theological and Latin writings Swedenborg wrote the diary in Swedish, for his own personal recordings, describing both his personal loss of lust for power and the loss of sexual needs. Swedenborg’s reputation as an erotic nymphomaniac was again actualized in everyone’s mind. Ehrenborg had the opinion that it was unethical to print the manuscript, but when they had been she wanted to guide the readers. She wrote an apologetic text and published it together with friends and their articles (Ehrenborg, Kahl & Sevén 1860).

When the critics focused on Swedenborg as a person, making recapitulations of his former lust for women, Swedenborgians like Ehrenborg tried to explain the dream diary as a lost trace to his spiritual development, the transformation from a natural philosopher to the founder of a new religious system. She and her friends proposed that the dream diary was a sketchpad for Swedenborg’s future visions. Ehrenborg declared that Swedenborg in Conjugial Love, further developed the problems only mentioned in the dream diary. Her faith and obedience to the doctrine of Swedenborg and, also her sensibility to moral law and ethics became apparent when she wrote her reflections on the official debate and its hypocrisy. Ehrenborg pointed out that “the naked truth” in the diary not only showed the human being and its sexuality, it showed a human clothed in a nightshirt and a human condition often thought about, but a condition one never spoke about. The critics accused the author of the same thing that he wanted to warn them about in his work on marriage and the relation between the sexes. Swedenborg warned against everything which he thought damaged the harmonious and conjugal love between man and woman. He warned about prostitution, adultery in general, and also condemned sex with innocent young girls, sexual violence and rape (Swedenborg 1895: §444, §501, §506, §511, §513).

The descriptions of sexuality in his works did not threaten Swedenborg’s position as a religious leader. Like other Swedenborgians Ehrenborg saw temptation as a state in the process of fermentation in the purifying path to regeneration. To the innocent everything was pure, in accordance with the Bible and the epistles of the apostle Paul. According to Swedenborg and his doctrine of conjugal love sexuality was of minor purpose outside marriage. The object of marriage on earth was reproduction, but a spiritual union and

¹ The National Library of Sweden bought the manuscript and G. E. Klemming (1823–1893) interpreted its content. Together with Norstedt’s Publishing Company the dream diary was printed in ninety-nine copies, all in accordance with the law and the freedom of the press. Ehrenborg’s article was published together with the second edition of the dream diary as an introduction to its content.
true conjugal love between man and woman could at the same time teach the terrestrial man the secrets of heaven. Marriage and its pleasures were thus a means of catching a glimpse of the heavenly and paradisiacal. According to the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, mortal man can only receive spiritual things through his body.1 Marriage and its union between man and woman was a path to an understanding of the union between the will and the intellect and corresponded to the divine union between love and wisdom. If understood properly, sexuality had a higher purpose and its pleasures could shimmer with eternity. Man and woman were created as two beings, but together they formed one flesh and the more they were united, the more their feelings were heightened.

Ehrenborg who was married for love to a warm, but intellectual husband saw their relationship as complementary before their separation. The domestic sphere with childbirth and childcare was a divine task for a woman. Her housekeeping and his official duties separated them and he never shared his thoughts about Swedenborg with her. As a widow, as an intellectual and free woman, Ehrenborg did not only inherit her husband’s library, she spoke her mind and educated herself, wrote reflections, tracts and polemic pamphlets about subjects women usually did not speak about. Her behavior was sometimes contrary to women’s role in her society, but she was not emancipated in the ordinary meaning. According to Ehrenborg, Christianity gave women the right to educate and transform themselves and they therefore needed no other emancipation (Ehrenborg 1849: 46). The focus on the transformation of the inner person through the union between love and wisdom and between human will and intellect was of more importance than conforming to the ordinary role of women at that time.

In her later life, as an editor of the periodical *Ett Kristligt Sändebud* (“A Christian Messenger”), Ehrenborg translated William H. Holcombe (1825–1893) and his scripture on *The Sexes, Here and Hereafter* (“Könen, Här och Härefter”) dedicated to his mother and his wife. From her friends in America she received the famous book and published the most interesting material in her periodical (Ehrenborg 1870, 1871). Holcombe described the relation between the sexes, their attraction and magnetism, affection and marriage, both in nature and culture, in ancient and present time, in an attempt to explain Swedenborg’s doctrine of conjugal love. With all due respect to the principles and image of God formed in Swedenborg’s works Holcombe described the human soul as “bi-sexual” (Ehrenborg/Holcombe 1871:66). Every thinking human being has a soul, the two faculties will and intellect, used and brought into harmony through the regeneration and a reasonable use of the elements of Good and Truth. The regenerated soul is a miniature of true conjugal love and therefore an image of God. Holcombe supposed

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1 Swedenborg, 1984:44. Swedenborg gave a direction to the episode with St. Thomas (Joh 20: 24–29).
that if every adult man and woman were united in a true marriage, heaven and divine order would descend to earth and supersede war and a lot of diseases (Ehrenborg/Holcombe 1871:42, 47).

Ehrenborg about the use of technology in a world of peace

Ehrenborg not only showed interest in Swedenborg’s ideas, she described Mesmerism, Unitarism and Spiritism with curiosity and collected information about other movements as well. Her letters and travel books contain accounts of such technical innovations as the telegraph, the railway and descriptions of the Crystal Palace. Ehrenborg contrasted the advanced state of development in England with conditions in the Sweden of 1853 which lacked both railway, telegraph, post- and police department and most importantly, her country of birth had no freedom of worship. The more liberal press laws of 1810 did to some extent make the situation more tolerable for those seeking religious freedom, although Ehrenborg was quick to point out the paradox that one was allowed write and read what one was forbidden to speak or listen to. After 1848 Ehrenborg published her texts on her own, she was free to print her message and had the financial means to do so.

Unlike other devout people, Ehrenborg was not opposed to the industrial revolution and like Fredrika Bremer hoped that the technical developments would help and alleviate the situation for all classes. Ehrenborg believed that if society were built on a fundament of charity and piety the one class would not oppress the other. With factories and machines physical labour could be as healthy and spiritually uplifting as the blessed work of the intellect (Ehrenborg 1854:267). Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences even affected Ehrenborg’s view of the telegraph. Ehrenborg translated a letter addressed to Wilkinson from W.F. Channing, the inventor and relative of the unitarist W.E. Channing (1780–1842). W.E. Channing is described as the apostle of Christian socialism in America (Ehrenborg 1854:19). In an analogy to the human body W.F. Channing described his new telegraph as an electroneurological organisation. He compared the telegraph and its central station to the brain, its electric wires to the nerves and the operator to the ruling and intellectual will.

In her travel books Ehrenborg reported on the British preparations for war against France. Ehrenborg became acquainted with the peace activist Elihu Burritt (1810–1879) and could therefore publish what huge sums of money England invested in the army, the navy and the artillery (Ehrenborg 1854:214). These investments where compared with the public expenses and costs for courts, education and museums. As a pacifistic counter fire Ehrenborg proposed that the red jackets and the white trousers from the military should be altered into holiday clothes for children. The children should be sent out in the fields for singing, praying, useful play and studies of the
wonders of Nature. Elihu Burritt who was called the learned blacksmith, 
started women circles and a universal brotherhood, made annual peace con-
vents and fought against slavery. He is described as a Quaker and reminded 
Ehrenborg about Swedenborg and his ideas. In accordance with Elihu Burritt 
and his beliefs Ehrenborg was of the opinion that Britain’s real enemy was 
not the French Napoleon, but “Ignorance, Immoderation and Crime” (Ehren-
borg 1854:214). Ehrenborg’s descriptions, prejudices and valuating compari-
son are not only curious facts but also a close portrait of a woman who did 
not hide her opinion and her letters are therefore an important document of 
her time.

Teaching natural science and the doctrine of correspondence in 
everyday life

To visualize his doctrine and to animate his inner world and inner state of 
mind Swedenborg used a symbolic language that Ehrenborg learned by 
heart. In his visions Swedenborg developed and systematized metaphors 
from the Bible and through the doctrine of correspondences wanted to teach 
others how to live a spiritual life. Ehrenborg explained her view of the sys-
tem of correspondences:

A lot of images in his visions are extremely successful; like striking hiero-
glyphs, they paraphrase with expressive forms, the ideas he had in charge to 
make clear, and these surprise us with their plastic pregnancy and solid char-
acter that often in our dreams make us wonder.1

Ehrenborg saw the rich poetry in the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, but 
also had her own experience and opinions about the interpretation of the 
Scripture and the wonders of Nature.

To read the Scripture and interpret its inner meaning was, according to 
Ehrenborg, the same translating the mystery of life. Her own life changed 
through her knowledge of Swedenborg’s system and her own exegesis col-
oured her days with correspondences and deeper meaning.

Not everyone had the same need or sensitivity to understand the eternal 
puzzle of life. According to Ehrenborg, the scientist knew a lot about the 
matter, its parts and its order, but was not able to understand the underlying 
will, he studied effect, but was not able to see its cause and life itself. The 
scientist could count every star in the sky, study every part of the body, but 
could not see the thought or will that moved the Creation (Ehrenborg 1851:

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1 Ehrenborg (1852:7). “Många bilder uti hans syner äro utomordentligt lyckade; som träffande 
hieroglyfr, omskrifva de med talande, uttryckssfulla former, de idéer hwilka han föresatt sig 
att deruti göra äskådliga, och dessa öfwerraska oss med denna plastiska fullhet och gedigenhet 
hwarigenom våra egna drömbilder ofta sätta oss i förundran.”
6). Ehrenborg declared that the divine influence on the spirit is dependant on the individual and his or her state or grade on the way to regeneration. She explained the differences in abilities by differences in people’s will or inner nature, but also with the human spirit and its evolution in general. In England Ehrenborg met soul mates with the same view on religion and teaching and, in Manchester, she saw the practical use of Swedenborg’s doctrines. During her travels in 1852–53 Ehrenborg paid visits to schools in the spirit of Swedenborg. The New Jerusalem School in Manchester promoted free and thinking individuals and the impressions encouraged Ehrenborg. She tells us that the children looked healthy and wise and did their work without rote learning. The schools in Manchester were still influenced by John Clowes (1743–1831) and his “warm theology from the heart” (Ehrenborg 1854:230–244). John Clowes was a clergyman in the Church of England and many of his works were translated into Swedish during the early nineteenth century. He had a deep knowledge of the works of Swedenborg and Ehrenborg translated his polemic text An affectionate address to the clergy of the united kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, on the theological writings of the hon. Emanuel Swedenborg from 1802 (Ehrenborg/Clowes 1858).

Familiar with Swedenborg’s works and ideas, Ehrenborg wanted to educate children in the same way and started to write “true stories”, dialogues with children where she gently led them through complicated religious and ethical questions. Ehrenborg had the wrong sex to be a preacher, but no one could stop her from speaking to the children. Instead of preaching, a woman could teach and Ehrenborg also spread her message through her writing. When she wrote her reflections for children she wrote without any model, but told her readers that her texts could be used as a “postilla”, a book for meditation at home that followed the year and the holidays of the church. She explained that she received the gift of thinking from above, she wrote while praying and with the Bible next to her (Ehrenborg 1848:6). Ehrenborg saw herself as an instrument of God, but it was not common for a woman to talk about the holy of holies, to make comments about the Scriptures and to interpret the Bible on her own.

In her periodical publication Läsning för barn (“Readings for children” 1846–49) she started by focusing on small children and their interest in nature. The spiritual was mixed with the natural sciences when she recommended the children to visit The Academy of Sciences and its large museum in Stockholm (Ehrenborg 1846:21). Ehrenborg taught the children to see God’s Creation in the garden of Nature through visualization and through using their senses. She described shells as jewels in a jeweller’s shop, humming birds, butterflies and dangerous spiders with a lethal poison. She described plants like bananas, grapes, melons and pineapples and their special way of growing to show the variety in the Nature. She visualized different birds with feathers sparkling as the rainbow and described order, health, beauty and wholeness as a gift of God. Ehrenborg described the days in
Eden, but she did not mention the names of Adam and Eve and therefore gave the story a feeling of universal application. The man found his woman and his complement and the woman found her man and her complement, but they lived in richness and without sorrows and therefore forgot to preserve the garden from traitors. Even in Ehrenborg’s version of Genesis the trial was necessary to reach perfection and according to her own life story suffering had a positive effect on spiritual growth.

In another “true story” Ehrenborg retold the story of spiritual transformation in the shape of the Flood (Ehrenborg 1847). The kingdom of God had to be founded inside the person and the evil enemies had to be forced from the chest of man if the spiritual evolution could begin. The words “transformation” (förvandling), “to unite” (förenas) and “union” (förening) were recurrently mentioned in Ehrenborg’s text and she also chose to print them in italics to give them weight. The disruption and division of the Christian Church is pointed out as a weakening factor, but Ehrenborg was also controversial when she expressed her opinion about the Jews. In her gentle and mild lectures, in a time of Jewish emancipation and old Christian prejudices, she exhorted the children to pity the Jewish people who had no land of their own and no Messias. Ehrenborg saw the Jews and the Christians as twins and made clear that all human beings, Christians, Jews, Muslims and heathens ought to change through spiritual growth and transformation. They all had to receive love, faith and bliss – to regenerate – if they wanted to gain supreme felicity (Ehrenborg 1849: 19).

It was Ehrenborg’s wont to strive to bring parts together, she wanted to unite the upper and working classes just as Swedenborg wanted a union between the body and the soul, between man and woman, between the human soul and God. Swedenborg and Ehrenborg wanted to unite Lutherans, Protestants, Puritans, Huguenots and Catholics. All should be united by a new name and all had to be regenerated. To unite Christians and their religious faith Ehrenborg held that no church should be named after humans such as Luther, Calvin, Wesley, not even after Swedenborg, but only after the Lord (Ehrenborg 1854: 78).

The women’s association in Uppsala

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marriage and family life were religious institutions and important building blocks in Christian society – a society many felt threatened by secular thoughts and atheism. At the universities, theologians tried to solve the religious crisis through philosophy and Ehrenborg’s friend, the academic A. J. Kahl (1794–1888) from Lund held that Swedenborg and his doctrine were the foremost defence against naturalism and materialism. That Kahl was an eager Swedenborgian was obvious and made clear in his work Den Nya kyrkan och dess inflytande på theolo-
giens studium i Swerige (Kahl 1847–1864, “The New Church, and its Influence, on the Study of Theology in Sweden”).

Unlike prayer the interpretation of the Bible was a part of official church life and the sermon. Lacking permission to join the academic discussions about Swedenborg and with the wrong sex for preaching, Ehrenborg instead wrote tracts about how the individual should act in her private life and how he or she might relate to the different elements in the New Church and practical Christian life. Ehrenborg gave no instructions or details about the reformation of the Swedish church life, but she tells us a change was going on. According to Ehrenborg a more practical Christianity was preached in Sweden from the 1840s and despite an earlier decline Ehrenborg noticed that the Swedenborgian faith grew in that decade (Ehrenborg 1854:3). A faith that combined inner spirituality with actions or good deeds.

Swedenborg was of the opinion that, in his time, the church preached sola fide, faith alone. According to him people had lost their knowledge of the union between will and intellect, between love and wisdom and its manifestation in actions – actions not only in words but good deeds. Enlightenment required education, the individual had to use her intellect and be conscious of her own failings, but also had the freedom to choose and act. Only if her will were elevated and her intellect enlightened would she be able to be a spiritual and regenerated being. The transformation was, according to Swedenborg and Ehrenborg, a spiritual and moral change inside the individual, but in their worldview the microcosm influenced the macrocosm and could therefore transform the world.

Through useful actions and the union between love and wisdom the earth could be a better place. This was a task for women in their homes where mothers raised their children to feel charity and piety. Practical Christianity also gave women a new opportunity to act outside the domestic sphere where they acted against pauperism with good deeds. Ehrenborg and her “small yellow prayers” can be seen in a wider context. The profits from Bön på julafon (“Prayer on Christmas Eve”) from 1842 and also her tract Betraktelse på Julafon (“Reflection on Christmas Eve”) from 1851 went to a women’s association in Lund.

In 1844 the poor relief in Uppsala was in a critical state and Ehrenborg showed her practical Christianity in a new association of women. In accordance with A. J. Kahl’s investigating text Räddningshus, betraktade i förhållande till fängelser och fattiginrättningar (“Rescue houses, examined and compared to Prisons and Poor relief”) from 1843 and encouraged by an appealing announcement from Fredrika Bremer in the Swedish journal Aftonbladet in the same year women started to act (Furuland 1987:113). The relief of the poor, the local school and its education board developed a close cooperation through the pressure from the association.

Ehrenborg was a key person in the evolution of the association in Uppsala, but working together for a better world was not free of conflict. Some
women felt insufficient outside their household spheres. AnnaLisa Geijer (1790–1861) and Malla Silfverstolpe even believed that there was something revolutionary and unfeminine in official charity (Hamilton-Geete 1910:125). They joined the association, but wondered if the only real task for a woman was not the task that God sent her: Childbearing, childbirth, childcare and raising children. Ehrenborg was persistent and propagated for a “rescue house” in the spirit of Kahl. To support the work she donated the profits from her first novel *Skildringar ur det husliga lifvet* (“Accounts of the Domestic Life”) to the association.

Ehrenborg dedicated the novel to “Eva and her daughters”. According to Swedenborg there is no original sin and one is only doomed for his or her deeds or state of mind. In this context, and contrary to orthodox Christianity, “Eva” was not a negative name for the female sex. In accordance to Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia* and *Conjugial Love* the story of Adam and Eve became the history of spiritual evolution and was a representation of the union between will and intellect. As an image of God, the human being could transform her soul and stop the degeneration through a unity between love and wisdom and a rejection of self-love. Swedenborg’s description of the spiritual development and the importance of use and good deeds in his system influenced different interpretations of women’s role in society. In Ehrenborg’s Swedenborgian accounts from the domestic sphere “Eva and her daughters” got new and important duties: The wife of a clergyman opened her home to teach the local girls. The chapter about the girl’s school was based on a true story and was used as a model when other women started to associate and teach (Ehrenborg 1873:38).

During the nineteenth century priests started to preach about good deeds and practical Christianity. At the same time philanthropy gave women a reason to associate outside their domestic sphere, but when doing so, women took part in the official and political life. In the mid nineteenth century, pioneers like Ehrenborg did not mind about these questions, because teaching, writing and doing good was urgent and more important. Swedenborgians and their opinions, both men and women, were divided on the question of how to interpret the sexes, their complementary roles and their development. In a short article from 1872 the answer was made clear by the American professor Rudolph Leonard Tafel (1831–1893), once and for all: The sexes should support each other, but not change their roles (Ehrenborg 1872: 81). In accordance with Swedenborg’s own work, *Conjugial Love* (Swedenborg 1895: §174, §175), man and woman had different characters and duties on earth. But according to Holcombe’s and Ehrenborg’s interpretation, a reasonable and regenerated human being was an image of God and had both sides, both divine love and divine wisdom was reflected in his or her soul. This interpretation gave women a new strength and power to act and manifest their faith in good deeds, sometimes outside their domestic sphere. Later, when the New Church in England, America and elsewhere was better organized with
priests and temples, Ehrenborg and other women in the movement had to step back, the domestic and the official duties were separated once again.

Summary

As a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg Fredrika Ehrenborg made an effort to spread Swedenborg’s ideas about change and spiritual transformation from a practical Christian view. Her work was concentrated to the period between the 1840s and 1870s and her anonymous writing from the first century of Swedenborgianism give us an insight into her personal view of the evolution of the New Church in England. Ehrenborg’s reports, translations and collection of material abroad are important documents of her time. As a female guest in foreign countries and with an outsider’s view on new religious movements her writings documents reception, influence and spread of Mesmerism, Unitarism and Spiritism as well.

Much of her work propagated for anti-militarism and she became acquainted with the pacifistic movement in England. In her children’s books Ehrenborg pointed out the similarity between people and tried to teach spiritual growth with gentle and mild preaching and dialogue. In her lectures she encouraged the children to think for themselves and she mixed spiritual with earthly matters, natural science and ethics. Through using the children’s senses she visualized the inner meaning in the Bible: To receive Divine Love and Wisdom and – to regenerate – to be transformed and make useful deeds. Her own way to regeneration went through suffering and enlightenment and important texts in her production show her reflection of Swedenborg’s speech about the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. In spite of prejudices, due to the Jewish emancipation and through her deep knowledge in Swedenborg’s thoughts she was able to see the Jews and the Christians as twins.

Fredrika Ehrenborg, her life story and her texts can remind us about the most important principals in the worldview of Emanuel Swedenborg. Ehrenborg showed her practical Christianity in action and worked for children and poor, even outside the domestic sphere, in a time when the task for a woman was childbearing and childcare and a lot of women were afraid to change their role. Her participation in women’s associations changed the view of women’s work in the official charity. According to Ehrenborg and her Swedenborgian worldview the microcosm could change the macrocosm and a women’s association could change the world and the future. In associations for philanthropy, poor relief and childcare women like Ehrenborg had important roles, they spoke and acted for a good sake. Ehrenborg interpreted the Christian faith as an emancipation for all people, if man or woman understood the message in the Bible he or she was free. Her emancipation stood
above the one of the sexes and her freedom was a freedom for thoughts and actions in the name of the Lord.

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Literature


Women in Public: Preaching in Late Nineteenth Century Sweden

Gunilla Gunner

This paper focuses on some examples of the discussion around women’s preaching ministry in late nineteenth century Sweden. I shall examine the arguments themselves and the extent to which both men and women were involved in the issue of women’s appearance in the public space. The focal question is in what way this can be understood as an act of trespassing, or crossing borders.

Apart from what was female in her voice and clothing she performed with all the qualities of the perfect preacher. She led the meeting with a calm assuredness and did not allow herself to be interrupted for a single moment, not even when a woman in the crowd fainted because of the heat and people started to shout for water. Even though she spoke without any written notes, her lecture flowed with an ease and coherence, which would have given credit to any male speaker. What was most unusual was that she was apparently led more by calm rationality than by imagination and turbulent emotion.1

This portrayal of a woman preacher was published in the Swedish paper Göteborgs Weckoblad, in 1883. The preacher was depicted as being equal to any ideal male preacher and the reporter expressed his surprise that a woman could appear in public without emotional outbursts. Apparently she did not act in a way corresponding to the common perception of woman’s innate nature. The woman who so convincingly could have given credit to any male preacher was Nelly Hall (1848–1916), one of the most well known and listened to women preachers in late nineteenth Century Sweden. She started her career as a preacher in 1882 after having worked for ten years as a teacher in Gothenburg. She had graduated from the prestigious Royal School for Women’s Higher Teacher Education in Stockholm. One of the founders of this school was the well-known writer Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865). Celebrities such as Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940), writer and Nobel Literature Prize laureate, studied at the school in the 1880s. Fredrika Bremer was still around when Nelly Hall started her studies in 1865. Perhaps they met in one

1 Göteborgs Weckoblad February 1, 1883 (Translation from Swedish).
of the school’s social gatherings. At least there are reasons to believe that Nelly Hall must have noticed the famous advocate for women’s rights.

Nelly Hall may have been one of the most well-known women preachers of her time but she was by no means the only one. Women preachers were to be found throughout the popular revivalist movements in late nineteenth century Sweden. Many of them dedicated their time to travelling around spreading the Christian message. They evangelized as it was often called. Their preaching ministry is one example of how women throughout the twenty centuries of the Christian era have found ways and strategies to overcome the various constraints put on them in order to silence them.

In the case of Nelly Hall one can say that she changed pulpits, from the school dais to the preaching pulpit. Other women preachers started their ministry after a career as a singer or actress. Others were farming daughters who responded to a calling they could not resist. The first leader of the Salvation Army in Sweden, Hanna Ouchterlony (1838–1924), ran a bookstore in Värnamo before she was assigned to introduce the British movement to Sweden in 1882. The Salvation Army developed into an important movement, especially for women and women preachers. The founder, Catherine Booth (1829–1890), became a significant role model for the women of her time. Her pamphlet on women’s right to preach was published as early as 1859. The pamphlet was later revised and published in several editions. In 1884 a translation was made into Swedish and Catherine Booth’s ideas were spread among the revivalist groups. Ten years later the Swedish Baptist preacher John Ongman used the main parts of Catherine Booth’s booklet in order to defend the fact that he chose women to work as evangelists and preachers in his campaigns.

What then were the main contents in Catherine Booth’s approach and way of reasoning? How did she view the relationship between women and men? For her, the two sexes were different and it was this difference, which qualified women for the task of preaching. Women were still subordinate to men but they had the right to preach, and women’s specific qualities made them invaluable to the preaching mission. The only possible hindrance would be that their husbands forbade them. But, as Catherine Booth put it, what husband would step in between his wife and a Divine vocation? (Walker 1998:292ff.) The struggle to advocate and support women in leading positions became a life-long assignment for Catherine Booth. Later in life she saw clear advantages in the military system that the Salvation Army had built up. Within its hierarchy a woman captain could be the leader of hundreds of men and in that way change the gendered boundaries. Catherine Booth became a clear role model for women’s leadership and appearance in

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1 Fredrikke Nielsen, Ida Nihlén (Gunner 2003).
2 First published in Swedish in Stridsropet (War Cry) in July 1884.
public spaces and her ideas and practice inspired both Swedish women and men.

Discussions in Sweden

The appearance of women preachers in the public space became a frequent topic of discussion in the 1880s and 90s, particularly in Christian magazines and newspapers. Quite a few of these discussions in the press, at least initially, can be directly referred to Nelly Hall and her ministry, even if there were many more itinerant women preachers, most of whose names and background are still unknown.

What were the main arguments for and against women’s preaching in these public disputes? One of the most influential voices in the revivalist groups and the most powerful opponent to the whole idea was the former Lutheran minister and ideological father of the Mission Covenant Church, Paul Peter Waldenström. He became involved in a debate in 1883 with an adversary who used the pseudonym Theofilus. (No one really knows the true identity of the person behind this pseudonym). The two combatants crossed swords for some months in the Christian magazine *Hemlandsvänner* and Theofilus made it clear that the cause of the debate was the public appearance of Nelly Hall. In the debate, the two combatants focused on where the border between public and private could be drawn. According to Waldenström, women should be allowed to lecture and give religious messages within the family, which was to be understood as a private arena, but not in public. He drew a clear line between the family (household) and the public spheres. Theofilus proposed that where this line should be drawn was a matter for negotiating. He argued that if God gives a woman the power and courage to preach publicly about Christ, and if her preaching turns out to be successful, who then should deny her the right to preach? For him it was necessary, and even desirable, to trespass borders between the private and the public by referring to Divine authority. According to Theofilus the (Holy) Spirit wanted to act in full freedom, regardless of individuals, time or space. This way of giving reference to the Spirit, as a mean of exercising power and authority, is something we recognize in many marginalized religious groups through history.

Waldenström disagreed with the argument that women’s ministry in itself might prove to be worthwhile. He started with the words of Paul in the New Testament saying that women should be silent in the congregation (1 Corinthians 14: 33–34). These words had to be understood as a direct command from Paul on the issue of women preaching. And this, according to Waldenström, was no mistake on the part of the apostle. He would never have made such an error as to deny women the right to speak. Paul was only following the rule by God, which had existed since Creation. If the apostle Paul was
proven wrong on this point he might even be proven wrong on other matters and where would that end? The fundament of biblical truth, as Waldenström saw it, could then be jeopardised. Women should not be allowed to trespass the border between the public and the private because this would lead to a collapse of the gendered order, which was established from the beginning of time and told in the Bible. Women should stay in the subordinate position to which they were supposed to adhere. A woman who thought that she had a greater mission than merely submitting to the God given order of subordination was, according to Waldenström, if not born at the wrong time at least somewhat premature. Perhaps Waldenström understood in some way that a new era was fast approaching even though he did not approve of it.

Fredrik Franson

If Waldenström can be viewed as a clear representative of the voices against women’s appearance in public there were others who wrote of the cause much more favourably. One of these was Fredrik Franson (1852–1908), a Swedish–American itinerant preacher and missionary. He ran numerous revival campaigns in the Nordic countries before extending the area for his mission work and travelled around the world opening up new mission fields on every continent. He very often cooperated with women in his campaigns and saw them as necessary tools in the mission work, both in Sweden and in other parts of the world. He also felt an urge to defend his custom of working with women by writing about it. Thanks to his book *Prophecying daughters* he has become renowned in the historiography as an important advocate of women’s right to preach in public.

The itinerant Franson had another approach in his way of arguing than Waldenström. Basically it had to do with his theological view and his burning call for mission work. He was inspired by, and a promoter of, an apocalyptic message according to which mankind lived at the end of time (millenialism). One consequence of this idea was that time was short. There was not much time left before Jesus would come back to judge the world and establish his Kingdom on earth, his reign of thousand years. This time frame made it very urgent to do everything to save as many souls as possible. It called for a universal revival and in this mission women had an important role to play.

Another of Franson’s ideas was that men had not fulfilled their obligation to spread the Christian Gospel to the whole world. As a matter of fact they had failed, even though they had been given enough time (1900 years) to carry out their task. But the failure of men cleared the way for women. Now it was time to call for them. Their preaching could be very helpful in the enormous task of carrying out the plan to save as many as possible of the lost souls of mankind before the return of Christ. In fact, Franson saw women as
some kind of reserve army, ready to be called upon when needed. It was still predominantly a male project but women were crucial as helpers and assistants. Once again ideas of complementarity guided a man to advocate for women’s voices in public.

It is clear that Franson was eager to promote women’s position in preaching, and he referred in his writing to the discussions on female preachers. In order to clarify his standpoint he used an image of people drowning. In order to help the poor people who were about to sink to the bottom of the sea some men set out in a boat. Some women saw what was happening and started out on the same mission to rescue the drowning people. But a group of men stayed on the shore and shouted that women should not join in this mission because they were not equipped for this kind of work. The result of such reasoning would be that people would drown. In Fransson’s view, this put the discussion on women preachers in a nutshell. People would drown in the sea of sin and unbelief because women would not be allowed to set out and rescue them. It would as a matter of fact be an insanity to deny them this right.

In the debate on women preachers reference was often made to passages in the Bible. To Fransson, as to many of those in favour of women preaching, the words of the prophet Joel in the Old Testament were essential. “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2: 28, King James’ version). These words were interpreted as foretelling what would take place at the end of time and together with the apocalyptic overtones nurtured the arguments in favour of trespassing borders. It gave inspiration and the strength to act against oppressive ideas, obliterating whatever hindrance there was.

Franson had his famous pamphlet first published in Germany in 1890. At this time he ran a campaign in the Alsace area and Nelly Hall was taking part in this crusade as one of his co-workers. The book was translated into Norwegian five years later and into Swedish only the following year. The reason for his hesitancy to publish it in Sweden was that he did not want to give more fuel to what he saw as an over-heated debate. In the preface to the Swedish version he even warned women not to defend women’s preaching in public. Women should not let themselves to become involved in a public dispute on the subject. On one hand he argued that women could deliver a religious message in public, but on the other hand he did not want them to discuss or defend the vocation in itself. Franson’s rationale was that by discussing it in public women would act as teachers in a controversial issue. This was not only outside their area of competence; it was also transgressing a border. By doing so, women would acquire a position above men, acquire authority over men, and whatever happened they should never be allowed to exercise power over men. In this case Franson argued along the line that the gendered order of subordination had to be kept intact. As a consequence of
his way of thinking it becomes clear that it was only for practical reasons that he argued in favour of women’s preaching in public. He saw women as useful tools in the fulfilment of the apocalyptic vision for the world.

These are some examples of the arguments pro and against women preaching in the late nineteenth Century Sweden. The arguments were multifaceted. In some respects they pointed in the direction of transgressing gendered boundaries, in others they were combined with a clear desire to preserve the idea that women should remain in their subordinate positions.

The debate was clearly connected to the practice of women who took upon themselves the task of delivering religious messages in mission houses, in open spaces, meadows, outside city borders, on emigrant ships, in shelter homes as well as in their private homes. Whatever women did they did not confine their talking about God to the limited spheres of their families. Their inspiration came from various sources. Apart from the religious motivation it is very obvious that the growing movement for women’s rights in society as a whole played an important role. Women did not keep silent on political matters and parallels can be drawn between the preaching of women in the revival groups and the growing demands for women’s political rights. These connections have to be studied more in depth, which will lead to a clearer understanding of both the struggle and the complexity of the arguments for women’s rights to their own voice. It will also give a broader and deeper knowledge of women’s own contributions to the public debate in nineteenth Century Sweden.

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“Let her own Works Praise her” (Proverbs 31:31): Christian Vocation Expressed in Everyday Toil among Schartauan Women

Katarina Lewis

For some years I have studied how religious beliefs are expressed in the everyday life of women. The women I study have been brought up within a revivalist movement in the Church of Sweden – Schartauanism. Geographically my study is limited to the county of Bohuslän on the west coast of Sweden. It involves women of the same social class, but from varying environments: a district of small farming, some fishing villages and a small town. The time span is approximately one hundred years, from the turn of the 1800s to the 1900s (Lewis 1997:58, 125).

Here I will show how their Christian faith is incorporated into the very core of their being and expressed in the toil of everyday life. The Schartauans consider work not as a means to gain earthly goods and advantages, but as a goal in itself, a daily service to God and their way to glorify creation. Since in accordance with their faith, women are not supposed to preach (1 Cor. 14:34–38), it is, too, their way of silently spreading the Gospel. The Evangelical-Lutheran idea of vocation further developed in this special form of Christian belief seems to encompass every fraction of the lives of these women from an escatological perspective (Key 1903, Ambjörnsson 1974).

This faith makes for a very special way of life which contains a great deal of independence and self-reliance. Moderation and responsibility when it comes to the “gifts of God” and to what they consider as stewardship are others characteristics.\(^1\)

Having been born in Bohuslän and brought up as a Schartauan, I work with a view from the inside. Being an insider is essential since I am trusted by this reticent group which is very shy when it comes to speaking about their spiritual experiences. I “know the language” and I am familiar with their code of behaviour.

To obtain the information I need, I have formed my own network of people connected with the Schartauan belief. I have studied an extensive litera-

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\(^1\) Especially moderation when it comes to the use of wine and other alcoholic drinks is a thoroughly reflected view on life in this group. They consider organized tetotalism as a way to develop self-righteousness (Lewis 1996a).
ture from this field of intrachurch revival\(^1\) and biographical material, such as letters and diaries,\(^2\) but my main method for gathering source-material has been in depth-interviews. I have conducted interviews with altogether forty-six women from different age-groups; the oldest one having been born in 1899 and the youngest in 1968. In this paper I will focus on three of the oldest women born between 1904 and 1913, coming from different straits of life and representing three of the main models for women’s life, used in my study. I will compare certain aspects of their life stories and what will be discussed is their respective concept of vocation and of work.\(^3\) Let us first look at the three models these three women represent:

1. **The Social Mother** represented by Miriam, a school teacher, born in 1904, married to a businessman. Miriam is a typical representative of the Social Mother, a concept coined by Ellen Key (1849–1926), the great Swedish ideologist working for women’s and children’s rights (Key 1886, 1900).

   According to Key the Social Mother (Samhällsmodern) is a type of woman who exercises her female distinction by being maternal. Being maternal does not necessarily involve biological motherhood, but is an outlook on life which gives priority to loving care of others and regard for the needs of others. Although Key was an unmarried (and childless) woman herself, her first choice for a woman was to have the “vocation” of wife and mother, and secondly to be a physician to tend to bodily and mental needs of others or to be a teacher. Key claims that “maternity” can be practised in all stations of life. Included in this view of the vocation of women she demands full equality for women when it comes to education, salary and social position.

2. **The Faithful Servant** (Tjänarinnan) represented by Selma, an unmarried housemaid, born in 1910 on an isolated island in the archipelago of Bohuslän. The Servant Maid is a concept that denotes the self-understanding of the Schartauan Woman: Her ideal is to be a lifelong servant of God and her vocation in life is to be of service to others, firmly within her “vocation”.

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\(^1\) Schartauanism started in and has never deviated from the Church of Sweden.

\(^2\) The early generations of Schartauan women from the social grops of interests here have left very little written material behind and it has been hard to find, especially material older than 1900. A good source are the almanacs, kept in every household however poor, to make notes about crops, the weather, the coming and going of children, birthdays, deaths and often interfoliated with short prayers.

\(^3\) I have discussed these concepts more in general in a recent paper at a symposium of *Sverige och kristen tro* (Sweden and Christian Faith), Sigtuna, 2006. (To be published in 2008.)
The Faithful Servant in this study is a woman rooted in the Schartauan piety, who spends all of her active years working in the households of others, often in many generations of the same family. She is frequently described in memoirs in a loving, longing fashion, especially by aging men. Beside the Mother, she is one of the most important figures when it comes to upholding and generating the Schartaun way of life. Among my informants there are five “trotjänarinnor”.

3. The Mother (Mamma) represented by Rebecka (1913–1990), a farmer’s wife, mother of thirteen children. The Mother figures in all the interviews as the dominant person in the early life and in many cases as the dominant person all through the life of my informants. Most women keep Mamma in loving memory but some have childhood memories of oppression and overstrict demands, which they try to understand later in life. The daily example of Mamma in the microsphere of the home is the very condition for the continuing existence of this pious tradition and the main method by which it is carried on to further generations.

Before a closer presentation of these three women, let me first sketch their setting.

Background

The originator of this revival was a dean in the cathedral of Lund, Henric Schartau (1757–1825). He was inspired by the pietist movement in Württemburg, which stressed the components of personal conversion and individual piety. His sermons spoke to the intellect and were highly pedagogical (Schartau 1885). Schartau’s teachings fostered the individual’s awareness of her spiritual shortcomings as a sinner. At the same time they were centered on Christ and his redemption. The concept of unconditional grace was of great importance.¹

Schartau’s congregation consisted mostly of women from the lower classes, many of them servants, some (male) students of theology and three professors. Most of his theological disciples came as clergymen to the diocese of Gothenburg and especially to the county of Bohuslän. Bohuslän is one of the smallest of the Swedish counties and is situated on the west coast of Sweden. Farming is hard there and the farms are small. Fishing is another way to make a living. In the cities with very few heavy industries, many people earned their livelihood by starting small enterprises.² In all of these

¹ In the Schartauan’s mental make-up there is an interesting contrast between their self-reliance and independence when it come to work and the total humility when it comes to dependence on God and his mercy.
² Such “small enterprises” can be a one-man carpenter shop, a small farm, a fishing boat, a small bakery or a small laundry where the owner works with her sister or mother.
ways of earning one’s bread, women cooperated in every possible way. The middle class conception of the housewife, confined within her home, is not applicable here.

Around the middle of the 1800s Bohuslän was a very poor part of Sweden. The great herring period had temporarily come to an end and there was in its wake crime, drinking and extreme poverty. In 1868 to 1870 there was a great famine which left people with practically nothing to eat. Many of the young and able-bodied people emigrated to North America. Farmers walked from northern Bohuslän to work in the Norwegian brickyards to supplement the meagre farming. That left the women and children to cope with the work on the homestead. With both the farming and the fishing failing the people were destitute. The small town of Uddevalla was the shopping center for the northern part of the county. So this meant hard times for the inhabitants of Uddevalla too.

I have gone into a description of the social state of this district in some detail, since the question of why a revivalist movement finds a fertile soil is of great interest both for ethnologists and church historians. My working hypothesis is that the answer to that question for Bohuslän and the Schartauan revival may well be a combination of the despair caused by the social situation, coupled with some charismatic leaders who came at a moment when people were in great need of hope. Their message was spelled out in a language that appealed to the somewhat special mentality of the people of Bohuslän. Following in the footsteps of Schartau, these young clergymen preached a sermon rather devoid of feeling. It was taciturn, clear, opening a way for the individual – not the group – to find salvation and a meaningful life in just the place and in just the circumstances where she lived. It offered redemption. To be poor, to be lowly, extremely hardworking, with no money, with not enough to eat was not degrading. On the contrary, it was just part of her vocation on her purposeful way to eternal life. In the meantime she was of immeasurable value as a subject for the salvation by Christ. She could straighten her bent back and look anybody in the eyes. She was just as good as anybody else in this world although socially she was a lowly servant, far down in the social hierarchy.

However, she was not to earn her salvation by good deeds or sanctimonious behavior. What was asked of her was to believe in the grace of God and to remain in her “Sitz im Leben”, working faithfully, praying and having a loving, caring heart for her neighbour. As a result we see individuals who have found their own inherent value. They are hard to oppress either for reasons of sex or social situation.

Here, I argue, is another reason why this revival found fertile soil in Bohuslän. As touched on above, the people of Bohuslän, “the bohusläning”, earn their living mostly in small enterprises which call for hard work, independence, responsibility and a feeling of one’s own ability. The authorities in society are there to exercise law and order and to be obeyed in as far as
they carry out a just and righteous work. But authorities exceeding their duties or being “unrighteous” should not be held in honour. Then you are to “obey God more than man”. And this Christian tradition offered them an attractive combination: independence and self-reliance in their daily toil and absolute dependence and loving trust in a God who took shape in a carpenter’s son and knew of all their hardship.

To be told by the cleryman, who was commissioned by God so to speak, that your industrious, daily work is a true service to God and that in performing it you are equal to anybody, fell in very well with the characteristics of the bohusläning: your neighbour is your equal. You must not be conceited, “högfärdig”. Giving oneself airs is still frowned upon and ridiculed. That is why the Schartauan message of equality among people was understood and welcomed.

There is, too, an emancipatory effect of this way of preaching. The value of the exact word of God, the ability to understand and remember the interpretation of this word is stressed in every sermon. This inspired these underprivileged women to learn how to memorise, structure, write down, compare with the word in the Bible, and reflect upon the sermons. Many women developed a special shorthand so as to take down as much as possible of the sermon. To learn how to read, write and reflect is a good school and a good side effect of an intensive way of listening. Reading and reflecting on the word of God became a daily practice.

The concept of vocation and work as mirrored in the lives of three women

As already mentioned the Schartauans consider work not as a means to gain earthly goods and advantages, but as a goal in itself. These women believe that God meant them to spend their lives at the place and in the work where they find themselves, be it school teacher, servant or farmer’s wife and mother of many children. They are to perform their duties to the best of their ability and to be content with that. In doing so they are equal to anyone.

Let us now view the lives of these three women: The Social Mother, the Faithful Servant and the Mother and their respective concept of vocation and thus of work:

*Miriam – the Social Mother*

Miriam comes from a craftsman’s home in a small town. Her father was a house painter and her mother took in sewing to help support the family. Both the parents belonged to the “mild” Schartauanism that emphasizes the evangelical view of Christ as the Redeemer and loving friend, whom you must not “cause sorrow” by willful sinning. Miriam’s mother was a dominant woman who brought up her three children strictly with the full but somewhat
passive support of her husband. Her two daughters did not have a lot of freedom, but had a strong devotion to their parents, especially to the mother, and their home. Their mother remained a lifelong example to them.

The children were brought up strictly within the ideals current in the social class they belonged to: you should be obedient, industrious and modest and follow the rules of your parents. There was no hint of harsh treatment, the example of the mother and the admonitions of the parents were sufficient.

Miriam decided to become a teacher very early in life, in fact one Sunday in church when she was seven years old, she says. Her immediate reason then was that a teacher sitting next to her in the bench had a lovely hat on and she thought that hats like that came with the profession. She went to the teachers’ college in her hometown living at home. She had little freedom to be with her friends. “Mother did not want me to be out in the evenings.”

She married late in life, a fellow whom she met in church. He used to give his seat to her mother when they came late to the overcrowded church. Her widowed mother, whose home she shared, and her brother and sister tried to talk her out of marrying but she followed her feelings and married her suitor. He was a “warm Christian who read the same prayer books” according to Miriam. They had a happy marriage until he died ten years later.

Miriam found her vocation to be “to bring the schoolchildren to the Gospel”. During her active years as a teacher, Sweden became increasingly secularized and the Christian religion gradually lost its function as a school subject. But Miriam kept up her Christian teaching although it rendered her quite a few reprimands from headmasters and parents. “I did what I had to do. It was my duty”, was her explanation. Since she had a tremendous presence it was probably not easy to stand up to her. During our first interviews I felt like a schoolgirl in spite of my advanced years. She had quite a following among her schoolchildren. Many have become “Christian mothers and teachers”, she says.

As a natural part of her overactive life she took good care of her aging mother and her sick sister. Mamma has been her deeply loved ideal in life. “Mamma used to do so”, she still claims about varying factors in daily life.

Miriam’s faith is the dominant feature in her life. “The Lord is my shepherd” was her guideline. It is a well integrated, reflective, personal belief, founded in Schartaun doctrine, but with her own interpretations. She avoids easy, stereotyped answers. She still finds a lot of guidance in the prayer book (published in 1882) by the Würtemberg pietist Magnus Friedrich Roos (1727–1803), which she has read all her life. “Roos is so up to date”, she claims.

As a personality she is a typical west coast woman: sinewy, with physical and mental strength, trained in hard work. She watches her tongue and is not given to outward amiability but has a quiet sense of humour that suddenly lightens up her whole being “one must not be too solemn”. A clergyman in
the congregation she belongs to says that he “feels her presence in church, her prayers for others. She is a mother in Israel”.

Miriam looked towards her approaching death with confidence: “I leave myself in the hands of God.” Her vocation as a teacher and her life were at one. She does not even deplore that she could not give birth to a child. “Everything was so wisely arranged. I had a happy marriage at last, but had my children in school.”

**Selma – the faithful servant**

Selma was one of thirteen children born on an island without public communication. The home was very poor. “What did we live on? We had nothing. We were not even allowed to grow potatoes, since the farmer wanted every strand of grass for his cows.” Her father was a sailor but when his eyesight failed he tried his hand at some fishing, not very successfully. Her mother made all their clothing by hand until she had a sewing machine in 1924. All the children had to earn their living early so Selma had a short childhood, starting at the age of nine to look after children. Then she became employed as a housemaid in a clergyman’s family when she was fourteen. She had very little formal schooling but her dream was to become a teacher. “Do not even think of it. You must work”, said her mother. So she remained a servant all her active years.

Selma never received a caress as child. “Mamma was not like that.” She never had any suitor. Once a young man showed her some interest but her older sister immediately put a stop to that since the fellow was a Baptist. To marry someone belonging to a free church was unthinkable for a true Schar-tauan. Better to marry an atheist since he could be won over to the “right” faith.

Selma’s life has meant endless hard work. She has been a servant in three families and was considered very good: absolutely honest, strong, silent and industrious. Her last family was a family with six sons. There, finally, she was treated with real respect. “When I came in the morning the father, the professor, put the newspaper aside, stood up, bowed and took my coat. They brought up their children that way too. Imagine, and they were not even Christians.” She received early retirement because of her worn-out body and had some good years living with her mother on the island: “My best years! Both Mamma and I had old age pensions and I got a motor for the boat” (and did not have to row).

Selma was the only one of all my informants who actually suffered because of her lowly place in society. She cried when she told me that her sister who served as a maid in the city was made to walk behind the children she looked after so that nobody would mistake her for a family member. It took her a long time to see what “God meant for me”. Why could she not become a teacher? Why could not she find a husband? But finally conviction came to her: She was to stay a servant to walk in the footsteps of Christ who
remained humble all his life. To be a servant in other people’s home was her “mission” as a Christian.

Selma was a lively, gifted women, physically strong but worn out. She was meditative but talkative with a lively, dry sense of humour. She became a dedicated Christian early in life with a strong, personal faith: “My Saviour supports me. He is all I have.” Her faith was formed when she was prepared for confirmation by a Schartauan clergyman. Through her social situation with extreme poverty and originally a poor language she never dared to apply to her teacher personally. By endless reading in her “good books” and listening to sermons gradually it came to her what it meant to be “serious” and she studied in private in her free time to gain spiritual knowledge. She became a knowledgeable theologian, strict and dogmatic. Her daily companion was M.F. Roos. “He is humble and easy to understand.”

Her faith was of the fighting kind though. Life had been a hard school for Selma. The circumstances of life filled her with wonder and she continuously went to the Bible to find new answers. With all her worries and questions she has developed an ability for deep reflection and she went further and further into the mysteries of Christ.

Rebecka – Mother of many
Rebecka was born in a farmer’s family. There were eight girls and one boy, the youngest. Both her parents were strict Schartauans. She described her mother as warm, loving and competent, but demanding. The father dominated in the home but he was no tyrant. Both the parents “read”, that is to say they led the family prayers. All the girls were supposed to help with all kinds of work, even work that was normally performed by men. In addition they were trained in all the duties of a country household. She even learned to play the piano and to sing.

Rebecka said that she had never “walked on other roads” but kept to her Christian belief. She went to a domestic school and then she worked in an aristocratic home where she developed her outstanding housekeeping ability. She had plans to become a domestic teacher, but when she was around twenty-six “he got his eyes on me”.

“He” was a pious farmer from one of the still remaining pockets of Schartauan practice. Even as an old woman she felt upset when she told me that he had gone straight to her parents without asking her, and demanded her hand in marriage, which he was granted and eventually even by her. According to Rebecka’s many daughters she was a beautiful, lively, gay and very competent woman. She was twenty-seven when she married and the marriage obviously turned out to be happy. She chose to obey her parents when it came to marrying although she was strongwilled. “I suppose they wanted what

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1 “Serious” is used as an expression describing a person who is a dedicated Christian.
was best for me.” Her mother was her ideal all her life and she remained close to all her sisters and her brother.

Rebecka bore thirteen children. She started out with four boys in five years, so her oldest boy claims that he has never been big brother. Then she kept having children until she was well into her forties, forty-five actually. The family took over a farm from the husband’s parents and as a housewife on a rather large farm she had a life filled of work. Beside the big household she worked with her husband in the outdoor chores until she had her fourth child.

They had a lot of company within the strict limits of their orthodox way of life. The big occasions were the birthdays of the parents, the girls’ weddings, the Christmas parties and the parish catechetical meeting in summer when the congregation gathered at one farm or another to have their Christian knowledge tried by their vicar.

The “hearing” (husförhör) was followed by a big dinner for the vicar, his wife and some other senior people. All the participants including lots of children, were offered coffee and cakes. This was a big domestic undertaking for the housewife. Rebecka’s early training came in handy when it came to this kind of festivities. She and her family were especially proud of the time (in 1951) when the new bishop of Gothenburg chose to lead the hearing in their home. “Mamma knew everything. We learned so much just by helping and watching her work. She always seemed happy and sang a lot”, her daughters say.

The home was arranged by strictly Lutheran rules. The father was the leader and the priest of the home. The wife had her fixed responsibilities. The responsibility for the children they shared, but he was the one who kept teaching the children in Christianity and he led the family prayers. “We could go to Pappa with all our questions about the faith. He had the answers. I wish I had asked more” (daughter born in 1951). Everything in the home was leavened with faith. About this the parents were in complete agreement.

Rebecka knew her vocation. All her married life she was a living example for her growing children. Varying sons and daughters claim that she had a certain skill to find out the special qualities in every child and encourage the children to find their own way “as Christians in the world”. Another outstanding quality in her was that she exceeded the limits of gender when it came to training all the children to take part in all the chores. The seven boys learnt all the household skills such as changing nappies, knitting, laundering, ironing, baking, cooking and the girls were to do everything on the farm that the strength of their bodies allowed. “All the tasks in life are of equal value.” Although I have seen tendencies of work equality in all the upbringing of my informants, nobody has been as thorough and successful as Rebecka.

All her children seem devoted to her. “To stand close to Mamma and feel her good smell and lean on her when she was reading to us, oh it was so
good” – “I cannot be enough grateful for all they gave us at home, a firm ground to stand on.”

Rebecka had a long period of what the Schartauans call “the undressing”. This extremely strong and able-bodied woman even had to go through what is called the “deprivation”. The former concept includes gradually being stripped of one’s earthly gifts: power, beauty, health, standing in life, becoming old, a widow etc. The “deprivation” can be senility and the last period of suffering, which in her case was extreme and even the temporary “silence of God”, when a great agony and fear of being lost grips the dying.

Rebecka was a widow then but her pastor visited her repeatedly and her children gathered around what was thought to be her deathbed and prayed and some of the daughters described how she was comforted “by angels” and reconciled and calm. Then she lived for two more years in comparative comfort and obviously unbroken faith.

Comparison of these three women

Miriam had her vocation spelled out for her very early. Her way was straight. She has never strayed from her given path or wondered about her vocation. She has been obedient to God and her parents, especially to her mother. She has been obedient to her superiors insofar as they did not try to keep her from “teaching the children about the Saviour (Frälsaren)” Then she showed tremendous resistance. As a special bonus in life, well into her fifties, and for the first time really disobedient to her mother, she met and married her husband and had ten happily married years. She was not obedient to her husband. “We agreed on everything, but I had my own salary.”

Miriam looked back on a life of endless work. Beside her profession conducted for many years in cold and draughty schoolhouses, she tended to her mother’s household, kept her garden, and helped her sister. During her marriage her life was easier since she did not have so many calls on her from her mother and sister. “A married woman should be with her husband.” Miriam was content with her lot and she was convinced that she was where “God intended her to be”.

Selma had a long time hesitating about the meaning of her life. She secretly wanted to become a teacher and willed her employers, a childless couple, a vicar and his wife, to “put me in school” but they did not. Then she “met her Saviour (Frälsaren)” who has remained her closest friend during a life filled with privations. She stayed a servant. She had this revelation as described earlier: she was made a lifelong servant to follow in the footsteps of her Saviour.

Selma’s way can seem straight but it was not. She was deprived of most things women long for. Late in life she had a house of her own, her childhood home. She was left to herself to fight to keep her faith and her belief that she was in her right vocation. When we had our last meeting, in her late eighties, she expressed a secret longing “to fall asleep in my chair here at the
window (in her seaside house) and wake up to meet my Saviour face to face”.

Rebecka had a different career as a domestic teacher mapped out for herself when “he got his eyes” on her. Then she gave up her independent career and probably fell in love with her suitor and entered on a career as a farmer’s wife and mother of many. “It was my lot.” During our last interviews she still expressed some wistful thoughts about her early twenties when she was on her own. She has, however, according to any standards, fulfilled her vocation and all her children keep her in high esteem and loving memory. They often smile when they talk of her. “Mamma was so playful.”

Rebecka’s way was straight. She had never been in doubt when it came to her Christian faith and her vocation as a mother. Even in her extreme physical agony during her “deprivation”, when “God was silent”, she kept her faith according to her children. Her views on work were clear in her own example and in the way she brought up her children: “All kind of work is good and should be performed well. To be able to work is a blessing.”

All three women had the same motivation for their striving: to recognize their vocation and perform their work to please God and their neighbours. Two of them never waivered, one did, but eventually found her way to be the right one.

Summary

Here I have tried to describe Schartauanism in Bohuslän from certain aspects and to do so used three models of life pertinent to women of this creed: The Social Mother, the Faithful Servant and the Mother. Their concepts of vocation and of work are the main questions examined here. I have tried to show that in spite of them being different in many ways, they are in total agreement on what they consider the most important part of life: to be the servant of God and to serve your neighbour by your silent example in your daily work: your vocation. You are to be fully present in your everyday toil and to do your utmost. At the same time you must keep in mind that every day is a station on your way to eternal life.

Women and Schartauanism

There are a number of interesting aspects of Schartauanism amongst women in Bohuslän: Why did Schartauanism find a stable footing in Bohuslän? I have discussed this in part above. In addition one answer can be that the very nature of Bohuslän offers a hard-won, scanty and rather uncertain livelihood. You had to rely on the elements being a fisherman or being a farmer. The towns had few heavy industries, but small enterprises that called for an intense effort of the individual to make both ends meet. Several of my older informants have started their lives as children in poor families and had to
earn their living very early. Selma is a good example of this. All this falls in very well with the concept of being responsible for your own life, your own daily conduct as a Christian and not look to others to take care of your material needs. The uncertainty that lies in being dependent on the weather and a scanty livelihood adds to the wish of having a loving transcendent force to turn to, who takes care of your ultimate need, secretly arranging your life to end well.

The mentality peculiar to Bohuslän has to do with being self-reliant. You want to go on as you always have, working away at your own pace, not being interfered with by “stockholmers”. You are rather conservative in a general way.

Bohuslän has a lot to offer tourists, but there is an unwillingness in local communities to work actively in tourism. It seems the money that tourism can bring is welcome but not the tourists themselves. This attitude is well in keeping with that you should remain in your station in life, not trying to better yourself, but working hard in your day-by-day tasks not interfering with other people’s. You should try to steer clear of “the world” and its temptation and not fall in with its sinful habits.

There occurred and still remains a great cleft between summer guests and local people. Part of this attitude is founded in the superciliousness shown by the first generations of summer guests in the beginning of 1900s. The local people needed the income and let the best parts of their homes to summer guests who brought a lot of unwelcome habits with them, especially when it came to the Sabbath. “They seduced our young people”, one of my informants said.

Another reason for the widespread and quick revival was the charismatic leaders, the young clergymen who arrived in Bohuslän in the middle of the 1800s. They taught a sermon that fell in very well with the taciturn, hard-working lower strata of society. They offered something for free: the grace of God, the love of the Saviour and eternal life as a daily renewed gift. They trained people to think, reflect and act and they stressed the responsibility of the individual and offered humble members of society personal dignity even in the eyes of “the world”.

An intriguing question is why women have more than men turned out to be the great spiritual personalities in Schartauanism? It can be because the women had an important part in society: to bring up the children and be responsible for the Christian upbringing, especially by their own example. Further they had to take care of the everyday work for survival when the men toiled away at sea or, say, walked to southern Norway to work on the brickyards for months on end to supplement the farming. The men might not walk to Norway anymore, but the role as supplementary bread-winners and a

1 Especially on the coast “stockholmers”, people from the Swedish capital, have come to stand for people from the outside who mix in what is no concern of theirs.
great sense of responsibility remains with the women. Not until illness or age forces you, should you stop your daily toil and let your hands rest.

Miriam, Selma and Rebecka are in total agreement over this: You have a special vocation which you must fulfill. To be able to do so you must turn to your Saviour for your daily support and reassurance. You are not alone in your worries and all your demanding tasks. Your life has an ultimate meaning, you are steadfastly on your way and in doing so it is your special duty to be an example for others. To these women the Saviour (Frälsaren) or Jesus as they might call him fills a lot of needs: To have a loving, trustworthy friend, who never abandons you, to have a daily supporter, who gives an ultimate answer to all your questions of why and when and how. You have been brought up to be strong and silent about your own needs and not show your feelings, to keep you composure at all times. “Your heart may cry, but your eyes are dry.” But talking to Jesus you can let your guard down and give went to all your feelings and your tears. “He is all I have.”

Second interesting question is what makes these women so different from other women in the secular Swedish society today? First of all their calm, absolute dedication to find the will of God about their vocation and to stay steadfastly where they “are placed”. As shown above, Miriam had no doubts about “her way”, Rebecka kept a few dreams of a different life on her own, Selma had a long time arriving in her “place”, but once convinced all three women stayed in their vocation and did their utmost to fulfill their duties.

The ideal is that you should remain in your station in life, not trying to better yourself, but working hard in your day-by-day tasks not interfering with other people’s. You should try to steer clear of “the world” and its temptation and not fall in with its sinful habits.

The Schartauan women remain aloof to the “world” when all the time working in the secular world, not taking exception in their daily work to people not being of their faith. In fact that is a way for them, silently to spread the gospel, since women should not preach.

They consider themselves responsible for their secular life. They should support themselves by their own work. To receive subsidiaries is adverse to their world view. In fact, to be forced by unfortunate circumstances to receive subsidiaries is thought of as “a trial by God”. To be poor or to be rich is of no consequence for your salvation, only the way you handle what is entrusted to you “be it more be it less”.

Even the youngest generation of mothers with professional training wants to stay at home to bring up their numerous children, being adverse to day care centers “although it might be right for some”. Staying at home bringing up your own children is frowned upon by most people in Sweden today and these women say that they suffer somewhat from the disdain shown them. Far from being oppressed by their husbands, it is rather the husband who has to adapt to the needs of his large family, by being the breadwinner and then
Helping in the home. There is no newspaper and no slippers awaiting him when he returns from work but rather quite a few domestic chores.

The Schartauan women do not believe in priesthood for women, but have no personal dislike for women “acting as clergymen” in the Church of Sweden, only pitying them since they “are misguided”. Many, but not all, informants do not consider it necessary to have a special profession as deacon or deaconess, since “everybody should be a merciful Samaritan” to people they meet in daily life. They take great exception to the secular people employed in the administration in the Church, “going to meetings, attending conferences and spreading papers and ridiculous little books around them”. They have, too, a rather dim view on most bishops, “we do not need bishops but faithful, simple shepherds”.

The Schartauans “know about each other” but have no congregation to live in, except what they call the “congregation of God”, e.g. the people who attend the services in church and use the same prayer books. One of their “trials” may be that to get to church they must attend services where a “right sermon” is missing. Then they spend the time while the sermon is lasting to pray for themselves and others. They have a rather special view on prayer and answer to prayer: “Already in the act of praying your prayer is answered in a way God finds best.”

My informants have a balanced view on contraception and abortion. There are cases when they consider that especially the health of women call for contraception and they do not want laws against abortion. “Christ is more merciful than man.” Sexual joy within marriage is considered a great gift of God. All the gifts of God, even alcohol, are considered good, when used with moderation and responsibility.

They believe in a dual end to life and in a personal evil force. They believe in angels, not as intermediaries, but as messengers from God and for the protection of human beings. Several of the informants have seen angels. “Not everybody has a guardian angel”, they claim but add “that only God knows who does”.

They have a deep dislike and fear of everything Roman Catholic, especially the look upon the Pope as “a mere man”, the Virgin Mary as “a good but ordinary woman”1 and the saints, “there is no need for intermediators between God and man”. Secondly they abhor Communism because “it preaches a godless sermon”. And as mentioned above about Selma, they avoid the free churches which, they claim, have false, superficial teachings. To find a “right sermon” they are willing to travel rather far.

They show independence, aloofness, self-reliance in their daily work. They have an air of resting in themselves, keeping others at a distance, an attitude that can be hard to take for the surrounding. This they combine with

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1 The Schartauan way of considering the Virgin Mary I have developed in great detail in a paper presented at an international symposium in Vadstena (Lewis 1996b).
an almost childlike humility to and reliance on God whom they mostly refer as Frälsaren, e.g. the Saviour.

They want to remain “at home”, preferably where they were born but otherwise as close as possible to their childhood home, living the way Mamma did. Their foremost duty is to be a Christian “Example” first of all to their own children, to their schoolchildren or the children in the families where they serve as housemaids.

The third issue is why do the Schartauans act contrary to the surrounding Swedish society? They claim that the family is of utmost importance. The women do not want to be forced out on the labour market, they want to stay at home when the children are small even if it means staying there for a long time and going to a lot of hardship economically. They are against day care centers: “Should I bear children for other women with other values to bring up?”

The home is a woman’s real platform, be she married or unmarried. Homemaking and all the female specialities are kept in high regard. As mentioned, the women have been ingenious in finding wage-earning to combine with their homework. To create a Christian home where you can find spiritual nourishment as well as physical is her real aim in life. They try to turn their homes into miniature models for what they would like society to be. This goes for the ”enlarged homes” too, that is the small places, where especially the unmarried women earn their living. With Miriam it was the classroom and with Selma the homes of others where she were a housemaid.

The Schartauans have a special relation to material possessions. There is no merit in being poor or rich, but what you have you should take good care of. As one of my informants (born in 1955) said: “I suppose I could handle a lot of money but I would not be jubilant if I inherited a lot. Just think of the responsibility and the time it would take from other things.”

You do not want society to rule your life more than is absolutely necessary. You want to keep yourself as far as is ever possible, and not rely on subsidies. But as a special trial you can be forced to accept subsidies. It is considered as a part of the “undressing”. It is hardest for my oldest informants who have worked their way some of them from extreme poverty. Among my informants nobody is actually poor and they six who have died since I started this work, have not suffered loneliness or insufficient care. Among the Schartauans you do not have a firmly formed congregation but “you know of each other” and you keep track of each other so nobody should be alone and ill. It is an ideal from before the welfare state, from the early days in Lund when the poor women in Schartau’s congregation looked after each other.

This private help from human to human is probably why it took them a long time to accept the deaconate: “Everybody should be a deaconess, a merciful samaritarians, to her neighbour, you need no salaried profession for that.” And I have noticed in the interviews that for their daughters to become
deaconesses is still not highly appreciated by mothers. “Better to have her own family to look after.”

“You should not obey an unjust authority” be it bishop, government or head of a firm. And “you must obey God more than man” at all times and at all cost. There are several examples of that in the interviews. It might be that they hide refugees or guard an area on an all-around-the-clock arrangement to keep it clear of nuclear waste.¹

References


¹ An example is that an immigrant family threatened with eviction was hidden by a “right teacher” supported by the entire congregation in the south of Bohuslän for several weeks in 2000. When Kynnefjäll, a wide mountain area in the north of Bohuslän, was chosen for dumping of nuclear waste a local group formed to resist this threat. They kept a well organised chain in existence for 20 years. It was dissolved in 2007.
“Mother Mary Comes to Me” – An Essay in Constructive Feminist Theology

Cristina Grenholm

When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be,
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.
Let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.
(Paul McCartney)

This Beatles song comes to my mind. As a teenager from a Protestant tradition, I did not have a relationship to Mother Mary. It is not until the last few years that she has really come to me, but I have not experienced her words as words of wisdom. And she does not say “Let it be”. Rather, she brings with her an oppressive ideal of motherhood and other ambiguous models of femininity.

Mary returns

Mary is an object of growing scholarly interest. Mary is present in Latin America and in Southern Europe (Vuola 2006, Gemzoe 2000). She was also important in medieval Sweden as in the case of St. Birgitta (Witt-Brattstrom 2003). The Reformation assigned Mary a marginalized position. For example, in the national shrine of Sweden, the cathedral of Uppsala, her chapel was changed into the tomb of Gustavus Vasa and his three wives. Vasa united the nation state of Sweden and the Lutheran religious movement played a major role in this project. In this light it can be interpreted as a powerful symbolic act that Gustavus himself replaced the virgin.

For a long time, Mary has been a remote figure in Swedish public life. She has been associated with charter tourism and visits to impressive, cool cathedrals with glowing candles. The old statues of Mary have been put away in our home churches. Mary has been like a foreigner, a distant acquaintance surrounded by an air of remarkableness rather than awe or wonder.
However, things change. In the revised Swedish Hymnbook of 1983 new Maria hymns were introduced and the Sunday before Christmas was dedicated to Mother Mary (Den svenska psalmboken 1986).1 Her image is again brought to the fore, spiritually and literally. Mary has also returned to Uppsala cathedral in the form of Anders Widoff’s sculpture, The Return of Mary. Mary is here in her forties, dressed in timeless clothes. She is placed just outside her old chapel, as if she was passing by. As she is sculptured in natural size, she can easily be confused with one of the many tourists strolling in the colonnade. There is no altar, no candle holder. Mary returns, as it were, in a Protestant way.

Who is this Mary who comes to us in the hymnbook and in contemporary ecclesial art? The connection to spiritual tradition and religious praxis is loose due to the long-term effects of the Reformation. It seems as if Mary is equally present among the conservatives and post-Christian feminists. The prayer Ave Maria can be heard in a Swedish church and people are invited to celebrations of Mary, which resemble the worship of a goddess, an alternative to the familiar and resented patriarchal Father God (cf. Edgardh Beckman 1995).

Neither of these two alternatives seem acceptable to me. I am even prepared to say that I am not sorry she disappeared from our church – although I do not approve of the methods that were used. Some say we blocked out a feminine side of Christianity, but it is also true that we have not been constantly confronted with one of the strongest models of femininity, affirming the virtue of obedience in virginity and motherhood. We were liberated from an oppressive ideal mother. What are we to do when she returns?

Christianity and feminism: A problematic relationship

Instead of providing critical descriptions of today’s Mariology among women in different parts of the world, as for example Lena Gemzöe and Elina Vuola do, I ask how a contemporary view of Mary should be constructed in feminist theology (Vuola 2006, Gemzöe 2000). There is a clear point of connection between the two kinds of endeavours. Neither of us take church dogma as a point of departure or standard for describing what is going on among contemporary women in their religious life. Our critical analysis from a gender perspective concerns the normative standards set by a patriarchal system. However, as a feminist theologian, I want to add a constructive task to the descriptive. Can that be done without, at least implicitly, accepting those patriarchal standards?

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1 The theme is “The Mother of the Lord” and it replaced the earlier theme “The Lord is Close” from 1937.
Some understand feminist theology as a contradiction in terms. Generally speaking, Christianity has been regarded as one of the main producers of the symbolic universe constructing and maintaining the oppression of women. This has created an abyss between Christianity and feminism, further reinforced by the general view that secularism is an integrative part of any modern society.

Several things complicate this picture. Historically, it is not the whole truth that Christianity has provided an ideological basis for misogyny. Christianity also formed part of the first wave of the women’s movement. In England, Elizabeth Cady Stanton used biblical material for her arguments in the suffragette movement (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998). In Sweden, for example, Fredrika Bremer did the same (Hammar 2000). Women’s emancipation was not only promoted by rejecting theological arguments, but also by using them, emphasising women’s rights, since we are also created in the image of God. The alleged abyss between feminism and theology needs to be put in question. I do not deny that there exists a tension between feminism and religion, but there are nuances that need to be brought into the debate.

A religious turn: A call for feminist theology?

The idea that religion was to disappear with modernity, i.e. the secularization thesis, clearly put forth by Max Weber, has also been long challenged and even refuted by José Casanova, Grace Davie, Danièle Hervieu-Léger and others (Weber 1992, Casanova 1994, Davie 2000, Hervieu-Léger 2000). The general picture has changed with what is commonly referred to as 9/11. Nobody is denying that religion is still an important factor in society. In her book *The Mighty and The Almighty* former Secretary of State in the United States, Madeleine Albright, testifies to a change of mind. With a family background in Czechoslovakia, she used to believe in the strength of secular politics. However, gradually it became obvious to her that today’s conflicts need to take religion into account (Albright 2006).

Progressively, it has also become apparent that Western secular societies to a large extent remain under the influence of Christianity. Our understanding of religious tolerance presupposes, in several important aspects, a Protestant Christian view of religion as primarily a private matter. As Charles Hirschkind says, secularism appears to be built on Christian premises, affirming, once again, the universal claims of the West – and I may add of
Western men (Hirschkind & Scott 2006). The problem of relating religious difference to political democracy remains unsolved. Scholars from different disciplines take religion into account. It is time to speak of a religious turn.

We have a new situation where the need for taking religion into account is apparent and the question of how to do it is unresolved. Gender scholars have also turned to the topic of religion, for example, Judith Butler who has recently shown interest in the theme of messianism. However, this situation neither equates a call for feminist Christian theology, nor a development of a feminist image of Mary. Still there is a common ground. Women’s religious practice – its content, variation and creativity – offers a largely hidden resource for both critical and constructive endeavours by scholars of religion and theologians.

**Pluralism within Christianity**

The view of religion as a disappearing phenomenon has proved not to hold good. The general view of Christianity has also been put into question. Although “secular theology” was a movement already in the 1950s and 60s, we are now facing a situation where the fact that there is a positive connection between Christianity and secularism is a lived experience – and quite a disturbance – in the West. It seems that our view of secular society is dependent on the special form of Christian religion prevalent in the West with a focus on the individual and private instead of the collective and public dimensions of this diversified phenomenon. The view of Christianity needs to be critically analyzed on new premises.

Several kinds of analysis are needed. We need better descriptions of what is going on and we need critical reassessments of the relationship between religion, politics and everyday life. The pluralism of religion needs to be taken more seriously and its relationship to the presupposed neutrality of the modern states needs further reflection.

While pluralism is an acknowledged fact in many existing religions, I perceive a tendency to neglect it within Christianity. The women Lena Gemzöe studied in her book *Feminine Matters* are not primarily related to

1. Charles Hirschkind described this at a lecture at the conference Religion on the Borders, Stockholm 070420, Theologies of the Secular: Debates about religious difference and democratic pluralism in Europe today. Scott and Hirschkind summarize Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz work: “[Rather,] the very idea of religion as a universal category of human experience owes directly to developments within seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theology, and specifically to the emergence of the concept of Natural Religion – namely, the idea that religion is a feature of all societies, evident in the universality of systems of belief, practices of worship, and codes of ethics.” (Hirschkind & Scott 2006:6).

2. At the Annual Meeting of The American Academy of Religion in San Diego in November 18 2007, Butler gave a lecture with the original title of “Messianism and the Critique of State-violence”.

3. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Friedrich Gogarten and Harvey G. Cox.
the Christian institutions which, according to Weber’s prediction, have lost power and influence in modern society (Gemzöe 2000). Their religious practice belongs to the so called private sphere of the life cycle from birth to death. However, this is an obvious case where the notion of the private sphere is misleading. The prevalent view of Christianity as something which should be understood as private needs to be challenged. The “feminine matters” that these Portuguese women attend to have consequences for society and public life. For example, the absence of legal abortion testifies to the fact that pregnancy and birth are not considered as private matters, but are clearly kept within the influence of the church as an institution. Gemzöe’s description of how women handle this situation religiously and practically shows the gap between mainstream Christianity and religious praxis.\(^1\) The kind of critical description that Lena Gemzöe is offering is characteristic of feminist work in the field of religious studies. The general view of Christianity is challenged and pluralism within Christianity affirmed. Women’s theology, which does not equate with but still connects to feminist theology, needs to be taken into account.

**Why does religion prevail?**

What about the constructive task? Do we really need new interpretations of religion? Let me answer that question before I turn to the question of whether this should also be a task for academics or not. Why does religion remain? An apologetic answer is that it reveals a truth otherwise inaccessible to humans. As many others, I do not consider this a sufficient argument. The religious truth claims are contradictory and the quest for truth is quite complicated.

A sceptical answer is that religion always serves interests of power. As long as religion can be used in the service of supremacy, it will be used. There is no denying that. However, it is not clear what conclusions to draw from such scepticism. Some think it is best to leave religion aside, but not taking it into account will not make religion disappear in my view. Others take the presence of the political power of religion as a reason for dealing with the phenomenon. This is the road I choose. Politics may degenerate to mere power struggles and wars. This is what makes public debate on religion necessary. The discussion needs to be kept alive. Since times change and new challenges present themselves to us, there is also a need for new interpretations of religion that offer responses to those challenges.

There is also a third answer to the question. Provided that religions give answers to eternal questions, the need for religion will remain. Eternal ques-

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\(^1\) One telling, although not typical, example is that one woman prays to Mary when she is about to have an illegal abortion, Gemzöe 2000:91.
tions are, on the one hand, those to which we can find no certain answers and, on the other, those which we cannot refrain from continuously answering. Are human beings good or evil? Each pedagogic program provides at least an implicit answer to that question. Answering the eternal questions is necessary for finding an orientation in life, be it on an individual, social or global level. For me, this is the most important reason for the constructive task of theology.

Eternal questions do not require religious answers, but religious answers are given along with other responses. Generally speaking, a variety of answers provide a cultural repertoire, accessible to those sharing a culture – no matter how it is defined, be it in distinct or more intersectional terms. We need alternatives in order to find our ways through life, but also in order to put up clear alternatives to, for example, fundamentalist and misogynistic answers. Responses to eternal questions are not just a matter of individual preference; they are issues of common concern. Religious traditions provide a resource in this endeavour, provided that religion is seen not as a separate phenomenon, but as an integrated part of our constantly changing cultural repertoire.

The task of contemporary academic theology

It seems obvious that Christian churches should deal with this cultural repertoire in a constructive way. What about the academia? As many Swedish systematic theologians, I regard Christianity as a special case of the general phenomenon of views of life, providing answers to eternal questions. I consider views of life as complex phenomena, consisting of different parts that are differently understood and interpreted and that can be related to one another in different ways. That is, I do not consider any view of life, be it Existentialism or Marxism or Christianity, as a solid system, but affirm their pluralistic character.

It is an important task for academic theologians not just to analyze different answers to the eternal questions critically, but also to outline and suggest such answers. While a church congregation may require these answers to be

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1 Ekstrand & Martinson 2004:19: "If the tradition of dogmatics can be characterized by fides quaerens intellectum, the idea that the faith of the church continually has to be developed and reformulated in order to show its universal application from one time to another, the new research on views of life can be understood to have a similar character: one analyzes the views of life of human beings with the wider purpose of saying something about the advantages of deepening and developing personal beliefs and views in dialogue with scholarly knowledge and various faith traditions through history." Martinson, Sigurdson & Svenungs- son 2007:16, where the contribution of systematic theology is identified as “…presenting critical and possible ways of thinking in the light of contemporary challenges”. (My translations.) The same attitude, although in slightly different forms, can be found globally. Cf. Livingston & Schüssler Fiorenza 2006.
put forth in a prescriptive way, academia calls for this to be done more openly by offering options for addressing today’s issues on the basis of a multifaceted heritage. It is important to be aware of the fact that this heritage should not be described as “our common heritage”, since affirming pluralism and complexity is crucial to this approach.

The task of academic Christian theology today is to dialogue with contemporary issues of life for the sake of providing material to the ever ongoing negotiations – open and (more often) implicit – of our views of life, determining (not in a deterministic, but in a generic fashion) our life possibilities (cf. Grenholm 2005).

The task of feminist constructive theology

The aim of academic feminist Christian theology is to accomplish this task with a focus on gender. Views of man have been shown to be just that, views determined by male gender. It is also clear that Christianity has been a resource for maintaining patriarchal views and values (see for example Borg 2004, Nahnfeldt 2006). The veneration of Mary bears witness to this. At this time of her return to Swedish public life, it is important to make an effort to remove her from the patriarchal circle and its restrictive effects.

There is also another reason for feminist theologians to provide new interpretations of Mary. In an indirect way, a traditional view of Mary still influences the lives of contemporary women. Several Swedish feminist writers refer to Mary as an oppressive ideal, for example the feminist philosopher Ulla Holm who writes:

A patriarchal monotheist society like ours has “demanded” that its mothers shall have the ideal mother Mary as their role model, she who unconditionally obeys her almighty Lord – lacking a will of her own – carries out his orders, worships and serves both him and the Son. (Holm 1993:257, my translation)

I think it is justified to understand Mary as a presupposed icon of motherhood also in contemporary – relatively secular – Swedish society. Furthermore, it is widely agreed that motherhood is idealized to the point of fiction (see for example Cooey 1999). The Good Mother is hardly possible to envision as a normal mature adult.2 There is a need for approaching the theme of

1 As Susan Starr Sered has insightfully put it: “As a highly charged symbolic category, Woman (and women’s bodies) easily becomes the battlefield upon which secular and religious institutions combat.” (Sered 1999:203). In my view, Mary is closely related to this “Woman”.

2 Cf. Cooey 1999:238: “Being a good mother by definition precludes acting like an ordinary, mature adult subject to moral and emotional complexity.”
motherhood from a feminist point of view. In this context, alternative interpretations of Mary are needed.

In addition, the feminist Christian community asks for such a reinterpretation. Mary is both a concrete and an abstract icon in religious praxis. There are statues and images of Mary present in public space. Furthermore, Mother Mary is an expression that makes sense far beyond the walls of the churches. This icon is a cornerstone of patriarchy. As Sallie McFague has pointed out, the primary model of Christian faith is God the Father. The image of Him and His Son requires a Mother. However, the mother has been given a marginal position so as not to take the focus away from the more important Father and Son. The mother is thus hidden behind them, yet interwoven as a concealed presupposition (McFague 1984).

Mother Mary is thus a theological icon – in the broad sense of the word – and a female stereotype. In other words, she is a gendered icon in theology. While her virginity makes children, “the common man” and academics ask questions, her motherhood is less in question. The fact that Mary is found at the intersection of Christian dogma and gender stereotypes makes her a complex object of analysis and reconstruction. From a feminist theological perspective the Virgin Mother is in need of some kind of iconoclasm. However, although different kinds of deconstruction are necessary, it is not enough. We also need outlines of new understandings of mother Mary, since questions of motherhood belong to the eternal questions, in constant need of answers. Such answers should not exclusively be searched along paths not formed by religious tradition, but also along the paths of reinterpreted Christianity.

Under what premises can such alternatives be constructed? Christian feminist theology is revisionist by definition.1 It deals with a specific tradition and somehow intends to stay within its limits. Still, alternatives can be constructed along a scale ranging from weak to strong revisions. While weaker revisions accept much of the boundaries and parameters set by tradition (see for example Beattie 1999, Johnson 2003), the stronger revisions are freer in choosing starting-points. Consequently, the strong revisions are not necessarily compatible with Christian tradition affirmed by the majority of Christians. In the case of Mary, the issue of her virginity is a good example. While weak revisions may affirm that the point of Mary’s virginity is her independence in relation to men rather than her sexual purity,2 strong revisions may reject her virginity altogether (Schaberg 1995). It is important to acknowledge that the point of such strong revisions need not be the chal-

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2 An interesting version of this interpretation is found in Rigby 2002:145–158. The point is that Mary shares in an act of creativity with God.
lenge of tradition per se, but rather the quest for a viable contemporary feminist theology.

My contribution as a feminist theologian is that I want to give an answer to the question of which Mary to invite to speak to us. How should a contemporary view of Mary be constructed? I aim for a strong revision, rather than a weak one. This raises methodological issues. How can such a strong revision be accomplished? The answer needs to be helpful to the feminist Christian community and thus critical towards tradition, while still not losing contact with the roots of Christian faith. What can I say when the gendered icon, Mother Mary, comes to me, giving me worries? How can I cope with the fact that she challenges me both as a feminist and as a Christian?

A helpful model

Many struggle with this kind of issues. Feminist theologians draw on gender theories of different kinds and share the theological methods of other scholars (cf. Chopp & Davaney 1997, Soskice & Lipton 2003). How can the constructive task of providing strong revisions of the Christian dogma avoid being determined by patriarchal tradition? In my view, what is needed is a multifaceted method that simultaneously deals with Christian dogmas and gendered stereotypes.

In order to accomplish this I use a model of the process of biblical interpretation which I developed with the biblical scholar Daniel Patte. It consists of three parts: (a) theological concepts, (b) normative texts and (c) contextual factors.¹ In this case (a) the theological concept under discussion is Mother Mary, (b) the normative text I will refer to is the story of the annunciation in Luke 1 and (c) the contextual factor highlighted will be the need for a critical and constructive assessment of female role models.

A new interpretation of Mother Mary relates (a) traditional theological dogmas, to (b) normative texts of the church and to (c) contemporary cultural circumstances. Traditional dogmas (a) need then to be cracked open, so that the longer stories and reflections they summarize can become accessible for further theological development. Well known texts (b) need to be reread with contemporary methods and in dialogue with critical analysis of those texts. Contemporary issues (c) need to be brought into the interpretive proc-

¹ Originally worked out with Daniel Patte concerning the process of biblical interpretation, but used by myself in Grenholm 2005:73–98 to understand the wider process of doing theology. See Grenholm & Patte 2000.
ess and not be postponed until the results of the theological analysis have been presented. Contextual factors always form part of the process.¹

Concepts of gender can be understood as results of a similar process of interpretation. There is in fact a correspondence between dogmas and gender stereotypes (a). For some, they both constitute a given starting-point for understanding the world. Gender stereotypes (a) relate to normative texts (b), such as marriage legislation. They are also related to specific contexts (c), which tend to become obvious in times of change, since contextual factors are usually taken for granted until they do not apply any longer.

When approaching the constructive task of suggesting a feminist interpretation of Mother Mary, the dogma surrounding her, the biblical texts telling her story and the need for role models in contemporary church have to be related to the parallel gender issues. The gender stereotype of the Mother needs to be cracked open. The normative texts surrounding contemporary mothers, telling them about good motherhood, need to be kept in mind. Finally, we need to take into account that the political goal of the women’s movement aiming for women’s liberation is challenged by conservative concerns for “the family”.

I thus use a model of theological interpretation combined with a model of the process of forming views of gender. Both focus on the same constitutive parts: dogmas/stereotypes, normative texts and contextual issues. Both affirm that these parts interact in processes of interpretation. In order to answer the question how a contemporary view of Mary should be constructed, both theological issues and gender issues must be dealt with (Grenholm 2005:97).

Pluralism and change

These models emphasize that Christian theology is a pluralistic phenomenon. They also clarify that it is continually changing. Like understandings of gender, Christian theology is constantly being reproduced.² Thus, I disagree with those claiming that theology does not – or should not – change over time. For example, the dogma that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human is explained to young people in terms of percent: He is a hundred percent God and a hundred percent human. However, originally the dogma requires the philosophical concept of essence. Even when a dogma (a) is maintained through reference to the same texts (b), the context (c) has changed. Since

¹ A traditional theologian will not agree. He will claim the dogma is fixed in content, that normative texts have univocal meanings and that the original situation provides the correct context for understanding what theologians should teach today. As is clear form what I have said so far, I disagree with all these claims, since they constitute in fact false presuppositions.

² The models can be used both for analysing existing theologies and understandings of gender and for the constructive task of offering new material for the ongoing discussion of views of life.
the three dimensions of the interpretive process interact, we must say that even stating the same dogma implies a change in relation to an earlier belief.

Contexts change, what about texts, dogmas and stereotypes? Obviously text references (b) vary. For example, it has been pointed out that the birth story in The Gospel of Matthew (1:1–17) creates a genealogy of exceptional mothers (Nahmfeldt 2006:116, Mattila 2002:60ff., Schaberg 1995:23ff. and Wainwright 1991 60ff.) However, none of them are said to be virgins. This observation leads to the question whether the birth narratives could be intended not to stress Mary’s virginity, but something else. Also, the need for using not only biblical texts, but also feminist critique as relevant texts for the understanding of Mary, clarifies her iconographic function. One way of putting it is to say that she seems to be made in the image of patriarchy rather than in the image of God.1

How can the dogmas and stereotypes (a) be approached? We need to acknowledge that both dogmas and stereotypes are simplifications of complex phenomena. In theology they typically hold together a tension, for example the triune God or the two natures of Christ (McFague 1984:37–40). Concerning Mary, the tension is gendered when she is venerated and referred to as the Virgin Mother. The combination of the two gender stereotypes, the Mother and the Virgin, is recurrent in literature and art. The dogma contains a theological abbreviation of a longer biblical story. It is also an abbreviation of a dogmatic development. The controversy concerning whether it was correct to refer to Mary as the Mother of God (theotokos) or not, confirms the interpretive process, gradually adding emphasis to Mary’s innocence and purity.2 The theological interpretive process and the process of forming gender intersect.

Where do reflections on the question of how a contemporary view of Mary should be constructed take us? First, we need not accept the limitations of tradition as absolute and normative for our reflection. They are the results of complex processes that can be re-opened for debate. Second, we may focus on the underlying tensions of both dogmas and stereotypes. This implies that we have the possibility to crack them open. Reinterpretation can begin and alternative concepts can be used. We can suggest new theological concepts which are neither determined by tradition, nor by gender stereotypes. However, this does not imply that they are unrelated to tradition.

The models I propose make it possible to approach normative texts in new ways, relating them to important issues of our time, while simultaneously challenging traditionally gendered theological icons.

In the rest of this article, I will focus on dogmas and stereotypes. However, with the models I have presented, they must be understood as results of interpretive processes, also involving textual and contextual factors. The

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1 Cf. the quotation from Holm 1993:257 above.
2 For a different interpretation of this development, see Jenson 2004:49–57.
normative texts as well as the feminist critique of them and the contextual awareness of the oppressive function of the icon of Mary (alongside a more supportive side) in the concrete lives of women through history and in our time underlie the subsequent analysis and interpretation.

Mary among stereotypes and dogmas in contemporary feminist theology

Before offering my own interpretation of Mary, I will give some examples of how she has been interpreted by feminist theologians (cf. Grenholm 2007). Although many strategies are used and both texts and contexts vary, these examples do not simultaneously challenge dogmas and stereotypes. Some hold that Mary is not only a mother, but also – and first and foremost – a believer. She is then a mother in a more figurative sense as Mother of all believers. This strategy is, for example, used by Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Roberts Gaventa 2004). Getting rid of Mary’s stereotyped femininity and her concrete motherhood in order to describe her in less gendered terms often turns out to be just another way of putting her back into tradition, which in turn again promotes gendered stereotypes. This strategy lets Christian theology determine interpretation, although with a feminist twist. Thus, Mary remains within the borders set by traditional dogmas and concrete motherhood is left outside the scope of the theologian. Neither stereotype nor dogma is challenged. The icon of Mary remains much the same, although put under new light.

Others provide positive interpretations of Mary’s motherhood and let her keep her status as a role model. The traditionally gendered stereotype is challenged and reinterpreted. Bonnie Miller-McLemore underscores what Luke repeatedly says about Mary, namely that she ponders, as an expression of the good practice of maternal thinking in Sara Ruddick’s sense (Miller-McLemore 2002:106, cf. Ruddick 1990). The same strategy is adopted by Tina Beattie in a major Roman Catholic contribution to the debate, which explicitly challenges androcentrism by developing gynocentric narratives (Beattie 1999:9) However, traditional dogmas remain intact to a large extent, although reinterpreted.1 By reinterpreting Mary, Beattie achieves “a new appreciation of maternal body as salvific symbol and the sexual body as a symbol of the manifold goodness of redeemed creation.” (Beattie 1999:10) This strategy does not challenge traditional dogmas, but sets up complementary alternatives. The analytical effort is focused on confronting the stereotype of motherhood by means of reinterpretation. The icon of Mary is not traditionally gendered, but it is still kept within the traditional dogma.

1 “The maternal flesh, which, in a world of sin is associated with corruption and death, becomes a sign of purity and life in a world redeemed.” Beattie 1999:103.
A third strategy is adopted by those who explore the icon of Mary by using alternative theological concepts. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan leaves motherhood behind and presents “Proud Mary” in a dialogue with a rock song, sang by Tina Turner. Mary is a powerful and brave person. The problem with this strategy is that, although it is helpful in other respects, it does not confront or critically discuss the stereotype of Mary’s motherhood. However, this interpretation moves beyond traditional Christian teachings in seeking hermeneutical keys that do not originate in Christian tradition. This strategy does not confront the stereotype of motherhood, although it confronts the dogma. This icon of Mary is primarily related not to dogma but to contemporary culture, i.e. the present context.

Finally, a fourth strategy puts forth negative interpretations of Mother Mary. This is what Jane Schaberg did in her much discussed book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (Schaberg 1995, cf. Sakenfeld 2002). Mary can be seen as a single mother protected by God. Schaberg is aware of the danger in promoting the idea that God somehow uses the sexual violation of a young girl for the higher purpose of human salvation (Schaberg 1995:90, 94f.). However, there is another risk with her thought provoking interpretation. Is not the androcentric gaze still given priority? Does not the interpreter have to accept the prevalent view that mothers cannot guarantee the legitimacy of their children by themselves? Gender stereotypes prevail, while Christian teaching is indeed challenged (Grenholm 2005:99–126). This strategy involves a confrontation with dogma, without confronting the patriarchal stereotype of motherhood.

Although we must consider all of these interpretations as valuable alternative answers to the question of how a contemporary view of Mary should be constructed in feminist theology, none of them simultaneously confront both gender stereotypes and dogma.

**Motherhood beyond stereotypes**

In my iconoclastic endeavour, I will proceed in two steps: first confronting the gender stereotype of motherhood and then challenging the Marian dogma.

A reinterpretation of the stereotype of motherhood is necessary from a gender perspective. Swedish philosopher of religion, Kirsten Grönlien Zetterqvist, holds that giving birth cannot be made understandable within a Western philosophical context, nor can its sharp borderline between activity and passivity be applied, nor the distinction between subject and object (Grönlien Zetterqvist 2002). Sara Ruddick agrees:

> Birth, more than any other experience except perhaps sexuality, undermines the individuation of bodies. The growing fetus, increasingly visible in the
woman’s swelling body, an infant emerging from the vagina, a suckling infant feeding off a breast, the mother feeding with and of her body express in dramatic form a fusion of self and other. Any man or woman might fear the obliteration of self that such an experience suggests. (Ruddick 1990:191, my italics.)

How can this be interpreted outside the limits of the stereotype? This threat against the self is not, in my opinion, to be interpreted in terms of women’s natural inclination towards self-sacrifice. Rather, it is to be understood as an expression of lack of control (heteronomy), which is an unavoidable life condition along with self control (autonomy) and being part of the social web of life (relationality). Heteronomy, autonomy and relationality are the terms I use for these different aspects of life. I want to underline that heteronomy is as much a life condition as autonomy and relationality. Furthermore, heteronomy is clearly visible in, but not exclusively or essentially related to, giving birth and motherhood (Grenholm & Patte 2000, 2005). The limitation of heteronomy to the stereotype of the Mother needs to be criticized.

Heteronomy often has a negative connotation. Lacking control is something we try to avoid, a position we fear. For this negative side of heteronomy, I use the word exposure. In a heteronomous position, a person lacks control, and somebody may choose to take advantage of such a situation. For example, a person who is seriously ill may be deprived of her assets by mean relatives. Those who lack political and economic power may be oppressed by the powerful and wealthy. Heteronomy thus has a negative side, exposing an individual or a group in an oppressive way.

Motherhood is characterized by heteronomy and may thus also be described in terms of exposure and oppression. In a patriarchal society, a mother is dependent on men for her social status. Her maternal work is not paid and her working hours are irregular, giving little or no room for her own preferences. In addition, she is valued in relation to how well she is understood to perform her mothering tasks.

However, heteronomy also has a positive side. It is not only a negative concept; it is rather ambiguous (Grenholm 2005:165–168). Lack of control can be a very good experience. In order to relax, we must let go of control – just let things be. When we stop worrying about something we trust that there will be an answer and we can let it be. The expression “fall in love” connotes heteronomy – letting go of yourself, getting involved in an experience you cannot control. Psychotherapy aims at a situation of letting go of

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1 For example, Tillich’s concept of heteronomy is a negative category overcome by theonomy. Tillich 1964:163–166.
2 Cf. Rich’s definition of two meanings of motherhood: “...the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.” Rich 1986:13.
the self, in order to regain it with new strength. Human vulnerability handled with care belongs to the most precious experiences of life. I use the word vulnerability for this positive side of heteronomy to distinguish it from its negative side, exposure.

Motherhood is characterized by heteronomy and thus not only by exposure, but also by the experience of vulnerability being met with love. Getting pregnant is to be set off on a journey that you cannot control, but which may anyway become a good experience of the gentle presence of the father-to-be and the happiness of friends and relatives. Motherhood also provides great opportunities for handling the vulnerability of the baby with love. It makes mothers experienced in the good heteronomy. However, when faced with a careless father-to-be or the harsh conditions of motherhood in a patriarchal society, she is likely to run into many problems and disappointments. Her vulnerability risks being turned into exposure when the oppressive structures of patriarchy become visible.

If we use the concept of heteronomy we can reach beyond the limitations of the stereotype of Motherhood. What about the Christian dogma? Can the ambiguous concept of heteronomy also help us reinterpret Mother Mary?

Motherhood beyond dogmas

When confronting the icon of Mary, which dogma should be our target? The idea of the virgin mother is a candidate, as this icon strives to hold together two incompatible concepts. Virginity is heavily inscribed in a cluster of notions of purity and control of fertility. Virginity is the opposite of maternity in several aspects, but they are both subordinate positions in a patriarchal society. Both virgins and mothers are under the control of those who either let them be virgins or make them mothers. Both virgins and mothers are characterized by heteronomy and in tradition it is its negative side that has been highlighted from a feminist perspective. Is there also a positive side hidden behind the icon, vulnerability as well as exposure?

If motherhood is interpreted in terms of heteronomy as a life condition instead of being at somebody else’s control and disposal as the patriarchal system dictates, new possibilities open up also for a theological reinterpretation of Mary. In fact, the concept of heteronomy in theology has wider implications, on which I will briefly comment.

Heteronomy can be understood as the very core of the act of faith (Coakley 1996, Grenholm 2004). According to Christian theology, human beings ultimately lack control. We cannot add an inch to our lives. We cannot put ourselves outside this world, but are exposed to its tragedies and evil power plays. The central question of faith is whether life ultimately lies in the hands of a good power or not. Christian faith says it does. Human heteron-
omy may be exposed, but eventually our vulnerability will be cared for and wounds will be healed by God.

In contrast to what has been the case in much traditional theology, the distinction between exposure and vulnerability needs to be highlighted. When the power of God and the powerlessness of human beings are emphasized, the distinction is often blurred.¹ Heteronomy is characteristic of Christian faith, but that does not imply that it should be accepted in any form. Neither slaves nor women should accept being exposed to the vicious control of others in the name of God. It should not be said that mothers and children are characterized by their vulnerability, while others are not. I admit that it is a delicate matter to distinguish between exposure, which should be confronted, and vulnerability that needs to be accepted. However, I can see no way around this problem if heteronomy is really the life condition I believe it is.

The ambiguous concept of heteronomy is thus useful in confronting the dogma of the virgin mother, opening up possibilities for new interpretations both of the stereotype of the Mother in general and of the specific dogmatic icon of Mother Mary. More could be said about how this concept relates to normative texts as well as to my analysis of the context. However, by highlighting the relationship of the concept of heteronomy to both the process of reinterpreting the Christian dogma of Mary and challenging the gender stereotype of the Mother, the other constitutive parts of my model will remain in the background. Still, they are present and they can be detected from what I have said so far.

A reinterpretation of a well known story

I will turn to one biblical story, namely Mary’s encounter with the angel in Luke 1:26–40. Within the constraints of stereotypes and dogmas, this is the story of how the virgin became the mother of our saviour. How can the story be interpreted if we approach it when the iconoclasm has taken place and the stereotypes and dogmas have been cracked open? What does it say if it is understood as a text about motherhood and the ambiguous phenomenon of heteronomy?

First, I need to retell the story. This of course involves interpretation. I want to avoid using dogmas and stereotypes from tradition. Still, I want to remain within the world of the story. This is thus not a demythologization of the text in every respect. I do not ask the question whether Mary really met an angel. Rather, I interpret the story as an expression of religious experience that raises many questions. However, my interpretation is a demythologization in the sense that my focus concerns the existential meaning of this text. To be more precise, I aim at an existential interpretation that does not

¹ This is one of my main critiques of Nygren 1982. See Grenholm 2005:127–163.
ignore the physical side of the story, but rather understands Luke 1:26–40 as a story about pregnancy and how God is believed to relate to a mother-to-be.

Mary meets an angel. It is just the two of them in seclusion. Mary is frightened and perplexed, but she is told not to be scared. She receives a message that she will give birth; but instead of asking when, she asks how this will happen. This is remarkable. She is betrothed to Joseph, but does not understand the message as being about their future child. She says she has not been with a man, although she has her future planned with Joseph. The angel speaks of Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High. The angel does not mention Joseph, but points to Elizabeth. It is to her that Mary turns after the angel’s visit.

This biblical passage can be interpreted as a story of a woman’s heteronomy in terms of vulnerability rather than exposure. In this interpretation, the story is not about the absence of the father or the virginity of Mary. A central theme is that, like many other women in her situation, Mary cannot be sure of the presence of the father. The story puts us in front of the delicate distinction between vulnerability and exposure. Will Mary receive some kind of protection and thus remain vulnerable? Or will she be exposed to religious or social conventions? Mary is promised the protection of divine love in terms of the Holy Spirit. This is the core of the story. In my interpretation, it means that her heteronomy is ultimately cared for by a loving God. The ambiguity of heteronomy is present and the delicate distinction between exposure and vulnerability is brought to the fore (Grenholm 2005:99–126). History shows that the claim for women’s obedience of male rule – and thus oppression – is close at hand. The necessary care for a vulnerable human being is a different thing. This story shows that human vulnerability needs to be met with love in order not to start the vicious circle of oppression and exposure.

This interpretation implies both a challenge of the stereotype of motherhood and virginity, and a challenge of the subordinating dogma of Mary. She is not the obedient servant of the Almighty Father, but can be seen as a vulnerable human being threatened by oppression within patriarchy, but also in the position of being able to remain vulnerable in the presence of divine love.

In this interpretation the readers are invited to acknowledge the distinction between exposure and vulnerability – pondering the position of Mary. They are further called to consider the importance of the approach of the beholder – do we take advantage of Mary’s heteronomy and make her an exposed woman? Feminists and conservatives alike have that possibility. Or do we avoid turning Mary into an exposed creature by approaching her the way the angel does, affirming her vulnerability and her need of love – as a young woman, a mother-to-be and a human being?

Although we could be tempted to proceed along this line and say that the biblical story ends as a love story, as Joseph eventually accepts the social fatherhood of Jesus, we should remain alert. Joseph’s fatherhood is heavily
inscribed in the patriarchal circle and calls for another critical analysis and possible reinterpretation. However, that is a different story.

Conclusion

Mary enters the biblical story by being chosen to give birth. We can choose to see her as vulnerable rather than oppressed, although the ambiguity of our heteronomous life condition is present. However, not only beauty; but also the alternatives of love and oppression, lies in the eyes of the beholder. It is the beholder who turns Mary, the mother-to-be, into either an exposed or a vulnerable human being.

What does Mary say, when she approaches us in times of trouble? She does not preach an unreserved “let it be”. Rather, she whispers that we should make sure that our vulnerability is not turned into exposure by those who want to oppress us, for example by claiming that we should obey them or God as they define God.

When we struggle with the issues of women’s oppression and Mary comes to us, I can imagine that she sits down and sighs. Then she starts to tell us the story of being constructed in the image of patriarchy – as an obedient virgin mother. She shows the mechanisms at work. Human heteronomy is inevitable, but oppression is not. Since we live in this world, we experience both exposure and vulnerability. Exposure should be shunned, vulnerability should be embraced. Oppressors should be fought against. However, those who meet us with love and care, encircling our vulnerability with attention, are those who make us grow and give us strength for our struggles.

References


PART II

Women’s Everyday Religion and Gendered Spaces in Vernacular Catholicisms
The Home, the Sacred Order and Domestic Chores in Premodern Russian Orthodox Karelia

Marja-Liisa Keinänen

As mentioned in the introduction, historians of religion have habitually viewed the religious landscape from the horizon of formal religious institutions, with the result that the lived religion of ordinary people has fallen outside the scope of religio-historical studies. Seen from this scholarly perspective, religious practice proper has been located in public, male-dominated spaces, such as synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, monasteries, or various kinds of centres of religious learning. As a consequence of this, the significance of the home as a religious arena has come to be overlooked. This is a serious oversight since, in the everyday life of ordinary people, the home is a ritual scene which, if not surpassing, at least equals the public religious establishments in importance. Seen from women’s perspective, the home and its immediate environs tend to be the most important arena for religious practice, since women’s participation in the official religious sphere has been restricted in many ways.

As Kathryn Rabuzzi has pointed out, the home is both a central religious symbol and an important ritual locus in many traditions. As a symbol the home has important ordering functions; often embodying cosmic order (2005:4104). The Hindu home provides the most striking example of the importance of the home as a symbol and religious scene. Brenda Beck has contended that not only is the home conceived as a microcosmos but also as a shrine, which “provides a necessary center for all social and religious life” (2005:2403). Granted that the home may not be as pivotal in all religions as it is among the Hindus, it still serves as a key symbol and important scene for family rituals and calendric celebrations as well as for other religious observances in many cultures. Shlomo Deshen writes about the significance of the home among Jews:

For all Jews, certain ritual customs (minhagim) and rabbinic laws (halakhot) actually require a domestic setting. These rituals may be divided into those that are held on specific occasions of the Jewish calendar and those that are a constant presence in daily life (Deshen 2005:2397).
Furthermore, correctly performed domestic observances are not only a precondition for the proper religious performance, but are also intrinsically linked to the religio-ethnic identity of the family members. Anne Betteridge’s description, which crystallises the religious significance of women’s domestic chores in a Muslim home, has validity even in other religious traditions. She states:

As managers of the home, women are responsible for creating and maintaining an environment conducive to proper Muslim behavior for all family members. Consequently, conventional domestic tasks take on religious significance. Ritual purity (taharah) is an essential precondition for acts of worship. Clothes to be worn for prayer and other religious observances must be ritually pure. The vessels in which food and drink are cooked and served should be scrupulously clean as well. Some women devote a great deal of time and energy to these tasks: cleanliness is indeed next to godliness and often a prerequisite for it. (Betteridge 2005:2401.)

In many cultures food has great religious significance and plays an important role in defining religious and ethnic identity and social status. Food preparation itself may have religious overtones. In Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist cultures – to mention a few examples – daily food or food partaken during the fast or religious holidays has great religious (and social) significance and its preparation can even be seen as a religious merit (e.g. Betteridge 2005:2401; Sered 1992:88; Khare 1992; van Esterik 2004). Women, who tend to be responsible for food and its preparation, play a key role as “agents for ritual and religious knowledge and food offerings”, to use Carole Counihan’s words (2004:5). Campo and Campo have summarised women’s roles as cooks and the ritual significance of food in the Arab states – a description which again has great validity even elsewhere:

The daily observance of Jewish and Islamic dietary rules is largely in the hands of women, which gives them a significant degree of religious authority in the conduct of family affairs. At life cycle events such as birth celebrations, circumcisions, engagements, weddings, and funerals, as well as Jewish bar mitzvahs and Christian baptisms, women usually prepare the large quantities of food shared with guests. (Campo & Campo 2006:105.)

Thus, as my brief overview shows, the home is not just a physical shelter and domestic chores are not merely practical, mundane activities whose sole aim is to ensure hygienic standards and the physical wellbeing of the household members, but the home and domestic activities are also endowed with profound religious meanings and significance. It would, therefore, be misleading to separate practical, technical or instrumental activity from ritual activity, as often is the case. Susan Sered’s claim, based on her study of elderly women in Jerusalem, that “the holy may be totally embedded in the everyday world” is also applicable in other cultural contexts. Sered writes:
The women described in this paper inhabit a hallowed universe; their understanding of the nature of God’s relationship with humans sacralises almost every aspect of their daily lives. The basic building blocks of their religious world include shopping, sorting, cooking, serving, and cleaning – tasks that are simultaneously and inseparably essential to both physical survival and spiritual fulfilment (Sered 1992:89.)

The aim of my paper is to examine the religious significance of the home and women’s household duties in premodern Russian Orthodox Karelia. Building on William E. Paden, I will view home at a microcosmic level as a “religious world”, which is for its members “simultaneously a) a set of objects imbued with transhuman power or significance and b) a matrix of obligations which upholds the world of those objects”. A religious world is structured by culturally defined, sanctified order, which “is maintained through a system of obligations and threats of punishment” (Paden 1996:4, 6). In the following I will view women’s everyday chores which involve ordering, cleaning, washing, and cooking, as means of protecting the inviolability of the sacred order which the home embodies.

Developing on Mary Douglas ideas, the social anthropologist Jorun Solheim states that cultural order is created by a production of cognitive distinctions. By means of symbolical demarcations, things which according to the cultural logic, belong to a certain category are kept apart from things which do not belong to this category. Transgressions or violations of these symbolical boundaries give rise to ideas of impurity and purity. Separating and sorting out activities play an important role in the maintenance of these boundaries between the categories (Solheim 2001:47). Moreover, even though these symbolic distinctions are cognitive by nature, they are made manifest in concrete bodies and the physical environment we act upon (Solheim 2001:73–74). Domestic chores and observances are one way of materialising the cultural order. As Mary Douglas has observed, the unity which women “create by their separating and tidying is not just a little home, but a total universe in which all experience is ordered” (1976:68–69), or at least that unity is the goal of these activities.

This study is largely based on the folkloristic materials which are stored at the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki (FA).2 I have also used the collections of the Ethnological Manuscript Archive at the

1 I am aware that the term ‘pre-modern’ is problematic in many senses, and I therefore wish to acknowledge that the process of modernisation was under way even in the rural areas of Karelia. In spite of this, during the period that my study covers the “traditional” culture was still quite vital, albeit in a process of change.

2 The references to the archive materials should be read as follows: Parish, village: Name of the collector < name of the informant, age or the year and sometimes also the place of birth (occasionally also the source which the informant acquired the information from); the acronym of the archive, year of deposition/collection, the collection and the item number.
National Board of Antiquities in Helsinki (MV:KTKKA) and the collection of Orthodox vernacular traditions at the department of Comparative religion at Helsinki university (HYUL). I have also used materials from the ethnological archives at the Academy of Science, in Petrozavodsk in Karelia, Russia (IJI). The Finnish collections mostly date from the period 1890–1945 with the exception of the HYUL collection, which was compiled 1971–1973. The Soviet Karelian collections were mainly compiled during the 1970s and 1980s. I have collected some data on these issues myself by interviewing women born 1917–1936 in various parts of Russian Karelia during the years 1995–1999. Ethnographical publications have also been an important source for the present study.

The setting

Geographically my study covers the rural areas of Russian Orthodox Karelia, which roughly coincide with the area of the present Republic of Karelia in north-western Russia.\(^1\) With the exception of the Karelian Borders, the region north-east of Lake Ladoga, the area once belonged to Imperial Russia and after the October Revolution became part of Soviet Karelia. The Karelian Borders, on the other hand, were a part of Finland until the end of the Second World War when it was ceded to the Soviet Union. The study largely covers the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of twentieth century, people in rural areas supported themselves mainly by farming, livestock keeping, fishing and hunting. Since a household could not support itself on these forms of livelihood alone, particularly in the north, men often took seasonal employment away from home during the winter months. In many areas peddling was a major source of income for Karelian men, who left their villages in the autumn returning at the beginning of the farming season. Since women alone were in charge of the farm while men were away, they consequently enjoyed considerable independence and authority over domestic matters.

Family organisation in Russian Karelia underwent a radical change in the late nineteenth century. Even though the system of large extended families had rapidly declined in Olonets, the southern-most part of Karelia, it still had a stronghold in Northern Karelia. The residence pattern was virilocal, that is, a married couple lived in the household of the husband’s parents. Besides the master and the mistress of the farm, a large extended family could also comprise their sons and their families. Such an extended family could be made up of as many as twenty-five, in some cases, even forty persons. The most common type of residence was, however, a household consisting of a two-

\(^1\) For a map of Russian Karelia see, http://kaino.kotus.fi/kks/kkskartta.html.
three-generation family, where the parents lived with one of their married sons and his family. In the present study I will view household practices in the context of an extended family, since much of the source materials on which my work is based have been documented from members of such families. This is perfectly natural, as the extended family was an effective unit for the transmission and preservation of old traditions (Pentikäinen 1987:65–66).

Gendered religious spaces in Russian Karelia

The vernacular religion of the research area was a synthesis of Russian Orthodoxy, Old Belief and indigenous religion. During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century there were still minor Old Believer enclaves, the descendents of the refugees who had fled the persecutions of the opponents of the seventeenth century religious reforms.

The Russian Orthodox Church was exclusively a male-dominated institution which, in several respects, circumscribed women’s access to the official, public religious space. Firstly, the Orthodox Church denied women clerical office. Secondly, during certain bodily states, i.e. menstruation and the postpartum period, women were excluded from the church communion. A menstruating woman was not to partake of the Eucharist and a mother was considered impure for a period of forty days after parturition and was not to enter the church until the priest had blessed her. In addition, women were at all times denied access to the sanctuary (Valmo 1935:216, 271, 320). However, these restrictions notwithstanding, Karelian women were not just passive onlookers in the official, male-dominated religious sphere. Given the fact that the church was rather loosely organised in rural Karelia, villagers were quite self-sufficient in religious matters. There were churches only in the parish centres and the priest, who often did not master the language of his parishioners and vice versa, provided his services at the village prayer houses only sporadically. The religious self-sufficiency of the rural inhabitants allowed women greater participation in the activities of the village prayer houses, and, increasingly, even at churches in the community centres, as Ritva Saarikivi’s study (1974), which covers the Salmi region during 1917–1939, shows. This relatively weak priestly control over the parishioners, at least outside the community centres, was also conducive to the continued existence of indigenous religious ideas and practices. This favoured women, who had a strong position as ritual leaders within this domain.

1 The Orthodox Church does not teach that the parturient is impure, but the blessings explicitly address her impurity and people generally held a woman impure until blessed by the priest.

2 The Salmi region in Saarikivi’s study includes the parishes of Korpiselkä, Suistamo, Suojärvi and Impilahti.
The division of parish duties between lay functionaries largely followed the gender-based division of labour and the allocation of authority in the community. In women’s case, these duties were often an extension of their domestic chores. Men, quite expectedly, occupied positions of authority in official parish matters. They dominated the parish councils and acted as churchwardens and aldermen at churches and village prayer houses (Saarikivi 1974: 87; Koukkunen 1983:124). The incumbents of the offices of cantor, deacon and reader were all men. In the absence of the priests, the villagers, led by the local alderman, held the service of hours on their own. In some places women gathered on their own at prayer houses and held their services. Women teachers or girls who were literate could function as readers on these occasions. Saarikivi’s study indicates that women increasingly acted as readers even in parish churches. Moreover, some women in the Salmi area acted as cantors and women were particularly active as choir members (Saarikivi 1974:72–85). Karelians were also quite self-sufficient with regard to the performance of lifecycle rituals. Women were largely responsible for emergency baptisms and organising and leading wakes and the rituals around death (Keinänen 2003:225; see also Keinänen 2002:104–105).

Women also contributed to the practical chores at churches and prayer houses: these chores too were an extension of their household duties. In the Salmi region, a few pious women were in charge of baking the Host. Women were also responsible for the decoration of the church. Throughout Karelia, they supplied the chapels with embroidered towels, tablecloths and cloths for cleansing the sacred objects. Many of these home woven fabrics were votive offerings. Women brought in willow branches on Palm Sunday and picked and arranged the flowers, recent innovations in Salmi area. The warden, assisted by his wife and children, was in charge of the weekly cleaning of the church premises and a couple of times a year some volunteers, mainly young girls and widows, cleaned the building thoroughly. Maidenhood and widowhood were stages in a woman’s lifecycle which were associated with sexual purity (see Keinänen 2003:84, 87). Because women were not allowed to enter the sanctuary, the warden cleaned it himself (Saarikivi 1974:62–71).

Besides the church and the prayer house, the cemetery was an important ritual arena, especially for women, who regularly visited the graves of their family members and performed memorial ceremonies.

As this brief overview shows, the church, the prayer house and the cemetery filled an important function in the villagers’ religious lives. It seems, however, that the home and its immediate environs including the bathhouse were the most important arena for the daily ritual practice in rural Orthodox Karelia.

The home-centredness of Northern Karelian vernacular religion is well illustrated in the following description by Santtu Marttinen. Drawing on his father’s extensive folklore collections (Vuoristo 1992:159), he reports that in
the Vuokkiniemi area in Northern Karelia both Old Believers and the mainstream Orthodox primarily practised religion at home. Even though we should be wary of his exaggerations and somewhat scornful tone and his obvious downplaying of the importance of the churches in the area, his description captures the religious self-sufficiency of the peasantry rather well:

There have been churches with Russian speaking [ummiiko] priests anddeacons in Karelia for hundreds of years, but people have never cared about their churches.¹ Sometimes they have gone to listen to the priest’s chanting just for fun. With the exception of the few peddlers and those who have travelled “about the world”, and in so doing might have picked up some Russian, people did not understand what the priest chanted. Not even the Worldly [the mainstream Orthodox] visited the church in devotional purposes. “Why bother?” “We have the icons on the wall at home and the rosary hanging from the hook. /---/ Hence, the religious practice of both Old Believers and the “Worldly” took place at home. Even in the smallest of village there was a prayer house but people went there mostly to pray on the holy day mornings.²

The icons and the rosary at home can be seen as the symbols of the religious self-sufficiency of the North Karelian peasants. The following description from Suistamo, Ladoga Karelia, presents a similar picture of the home-centredness of the vernacular religion:

The devotional life at the Lepitsä family consisted of brief prayers both in the morning and in the evening in front of the home altar or the “obrasa” [the holy icon], where people made the sign of cross. It was not to be neglected and even children were taught these devotions. On Sunday and holy day mornings the whole family gathered together in the great corner for their prayers. The grandfather lit the candles in front of the “obrasa”, took an incense ladle from the “obrasa” shelf, put some incense on the charcoal and incensed the food with holy smoke. At these devotions people bowed down to the ground. Vasil Pehkoranta, the first literate person in the family, often read passages from the Bible or a prayer book on these occasions.³

Besides morning and evening prayers, prayer before and after meals, prayers on religious holy days, devotions were held in the icon corner at important phases in the agricultural cycle and particularly on important family occasions such as funerals, betrothals, weddings and memorial days for the dead family members.

Usually the master of the house led the formal family ceremonies, but women acted as ritual leaders of the life-cycle rituals, which usually took place at home. The indigenous life-cycle rituals were closely intertwined with the church rituals – the latter often making only a minor, formal part of

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¹ People’s reactions to the closing of the churches during the Soviet period demonstrate that they were not indifferent to the fate of their churches (see Keinänen 2002:100–101).
² Vienan Karjala: Santtu Marttinen FA 1926b: p. 58–60. The brackets are mine.
the overall ritual complex. Women were the principle organisers of wakes in homes, praying for the soul of the deceased and singing psalms. The lamentor performed the mandatory dirges both at home, on the way to the graveyard as well as by the grave. Women also organised the memorial feasts when both the living and dead members of the family were invited home for a festive dinner. Besides individual and calendric memorial feasts, women could commemorate the dead every day in front of the icons and regularly visited the cemetery for the same purpose. At weddings, the lamentor, together with a male patvaska, led the ceremonies.

The bathhouse was another important ritual scene within the domestic sphere. The birth assistant performed there the vital postnatal rituals for a new-born, the mother often being confined there during part of her childbed period. The bathhouse was also the central setting for healing rituals. A tie täjä, i.e. a wise-person, or an ordinary healer usually bathed the patient there. Although it seems that the great wise-persons were mostly men, the ordinary, everyday healing of family members was part of women’s responsibility as mothers and grandmothers (Keinänen 2003:26). The bathhouse was often the place for performing love magic, which was predominately a female affair.

As the description above demonstrates, it would be fallacious to regard the domestic sphere as synonymous with the private sphere. Many of the ritual performances transformed the private home into public space.

The house (pertti) and sacred order

In their introduction to House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe, Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga contend that a house is more than a setting for activities of production and reproduction. Houses are not to be seen merely as physical structures but also cultural constructions, which define “a place that ‘belongs to’ a particular set of people and also defines, through co-residence and shared usage, the set of people that ‘belong to’ a particular place” (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999:3–4). The authors also assert that “[t]hrough their capacity both to signify appropriate behaviors and to accommodate them, house forms and their resident social groups are mutually constituting” (1999:4). They have found Bourdieu’s notion of habitus useful, since it emphasises the importance of the material circumstances for inculcation of the “system of predispositions”. This means that the residents of a house do not merely act upon their physical surroundings, but that the house itself constitutes its residents through their constant interaction with their material surroundings, in which cultural, social and moral conceptions and values are encoded. Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga also ascribe agency to the house and material artefacts in it. Quoting Alfred Gell, they define agency as “attributable to those persons
(and things…) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events” (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999:8). I will view the Karelian house and the artifacts it housed as structured and structuring structures, which inculcated and maintained gendered dispositions in their residents. The house, which embodied sacred order, inscribed this order in a concrete manner in the bodies of the residents. The house and the artefacts supervised their compliance to the norms which protected the inviolability of the order.

Like the Russian premodern peasant house (izba), the Karelian pertti was also a multifunctional space. The main room was used as living room, kitchen and at night as a bed room. Pertti was a sacred place, which was consecrated by indigenous house-warming rites and by priestly blessings when the family first moved in. The patriarchal social order, which was divinely ordained, was inscribed in the gendered division of space in the main room. The room was divided into female and male compartments, even though these compartments were not exclusively restricted to the respective sexes. “The great corner” (suuritšuppu) or “the corner of god” (jumala-tšuppu), that is, the farthest corner on the men’s side of the room, was the most important place in the main room. This corner which housed the holy icons, called in the vernacular “gods”, and other sacred items and substances, was the centre of the domestic cult, objects of which were Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints as well as the ancestors. The master of the house usually sat in the corner area. The opposite corner, on the women’s side, was called the perätšuppu or soppitšuppu and was reserved for women, whereas the “side corner” by the door was a common area for both sexes (Keinänen 2003:22).

As Irma-Riitta Järvinen has observed, the heavenly and earthly powers intersected in the corner of god. The position of the patriarch of the family in the immediacy of “the gods” in the upper part of the main room, as “god” or head of his wife and family was analogous to the position of God as the head of humankind (Järvinen 1998:312).

As the vernacular term “gods” aptly implies, the icons did not only represent the sacred personage, but also embodied them. The icons were seen as agentic beings and were also treated as such. The holy images were to be shown respect. When passing by them a person had to make the sign of the cross and say a blessing. People were not to turn their back to the icons or swear or smoke in a room where they were kept. Neither were the icons to be left in a cold room (Paulaharju 1995:83). Martta Kuha has also pointed out that the icons were to be kept covered during sinful activities, such as sexual intercourse.¹ There were also some gender-specific regulations as to the conduct regarding the icons. A woman was not to expose her bare head

to the holy images. Kuha stressed that a married woman was not to comb her hair in front of the icons: “A woman may not spread her hair in front of God’s face; God held it a great sin”. This proscription may be explained by the fact that women’s loose hair alluded to sexual looseness (see Keinänen 2003:74). The opposite was expected of men, that is, they had to uncover their heads indoors: “A man wearing a hat in an icon room was held to show contempt for the icons and through them for God.”

As Santtu Marttinen’s description indicates, the “gods” in the great corner were assumed to watch over the behaviour of the residents:

Formerly, people sought to keep the living quarters so untainted that God could feel at home as people’s protector. “Opresa”, i.e. the face of the Saviour, the Virgin Mary or some other holy man [sic] was hung on the wall before people moved into the house. They believed that the Creator hated sin, for instance smoking, swearing, dancing, wearing a hat indoors etc. Because such behaviour would drive away both God and the guardian angels, people abstained from such practices in an “opresa room”.

If the icons were not shown due respect, it was assumed they would take revenge by striking the guilty party with a sickness called “the anger of icon” (oprasannenä) (KKS 4; Stark 2002:178–179). Some icons were believed to be more powerful than others and their punishment for a person’s negligence or disrespect was thought to be particularly harsh.

The oven and the conjoined hearth – often located diagonally opposite the great corner on the women’s side of the room – can be seen as a polar place for domestic cult. The kitchen area, with its oven, was the centre of the physiological and social reproduction of the family. There was a symbolic correspondence between the female body and the large womb-like oven. In the same way as the female body created and sustained life, the house sustained family life in its physical, social and psychological aspects (cf. Dubisch 1986:195; for more detailed analysis, see Keinänen 2003:59–60).

In contrast to the great corner, the oven area was largely coupled to two non-Christian beings and supernatural forces, the fire (and Ukko, the God of Thunder) and the earth spirit who in Karelia also served the function of house spirit. The few sources we have indicate that the oven and the cellar below were in some respects treated as equivalents to the great corner as ritual space. Fire in the oven was to be treated with the same respect as the holy icons: “It was not allowed to turn one’s back or make other disrespectful gestures to icons or to the fire in the stove…” (Heikkinen 1998:39).

When a building site in Vuokkiniemi was “bought” from the earth spirit or

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1 Tuulemajärvi, Kolatselkä: Helmi Helminen < Marfa Jogorov b. 1873; FA 1944: 2636.
“mother earth”, a coin was put both under the great corner and the corner where the oven would be located (Virtaranta 1958:512).

Like “the gods”, the earth spirit who resided in the cellar under the oven, also functioned as the guardian of the house and supervised the morals of the residents. The earth spirit did not tolerate disorderly life, for instance swearing and quarrelling\(^1\) and neither did fire.\(^2\)

Thus, there were in the house two polar centres of supernatural power from which the order of the house was supervised. On the women’s side of the main room, the fire and the earth spirits, both associated with the oven complex and on the opposite, the great corner on the men’s side, the “Gods”, together with the ancestors, monitored the behaviour of the residents. Between these two centres of power, there was in the main room an intermediary ritual object that was considered sacred, namely the table.

“God’s palm” – the dinner table

The dinner table, often located with the upper end pointing to the central window on the back wall of the house, divided the room in the middle (Pauhaharju 1983:144; Virtaranta 1958:519). It was a sacred object, generally called “God’s palm”, and was blessed by a priest (Forsström 1895:166). A number of prohibitions surrounding the table set it apart as a sacred object from the rest of the furniture. Joosef Ragnoff from Northern Karelia says:

The table was called there God’s palm. One was not allowed to sit on the table or scrape it with any kind of edge tool. It was an unpardonable sin. One who scraped a table during his lifetime would be punished in the otherworld.\(^3\)

One of Helmi Helminen’s female informants maintained that the space occupied by the table was, after the oven, the most important place in the room.\(^4\) The space under and around the table was charged with supernatural power and was used in divination and healing (Lavonen 1996:203–207).

Bread, “God’s grain” or “the good of God”, and food in general were sacred and were to be treated with respect. Food was therefore never served on a bare table, but a table cloth was always spread first. As Nina Lavonen has shown, the table cloth also served important ritual functions. Before it was laid the sign of cross was made and only then was the food laid on the table. After dinner the cloth was shaken above the table and the crumbs were collected and fed to the cattle. Every crumb that fell on the floor was immedi-

\(^2\) Reference missing from the archive record, but judging by the idiom and way of noting it looks like Paulaharju’s note from Anni Lehtonen in Vuokkiniemi, Northern Karelia.
\(^3\) Jyskyjärvi: Osmo Niemi < Joosef Ragnoff, 40 years, recorded in Pälkäne, Finland; FA 1936: 597.
ately picked up and put on the table, because it was considered a great sin to step on “God’s grain” (Lavonen 1996:190). Nasti Aittavaara from Akonlahti tells that, after dinner, the floor around the table was wiped clean from crumbs with an old woollen glove (Virtaranta 1958:207; cf. Greece in Hirschon 1993:79). Lavonen sees these practices both as an expression of the veneration of bread and food in general and also as respect for the table and the space surrounding it (1996:190–191).

Some ethnographers who have studied domestic observances in Greece have interpreted the sanctification of food, especially bread and, in some villages, drink, as every meal being patterned on the Eucharist (e.g. du Boulay 1974:54–56; Hirschon 1993:79). Even though the connection between an everyday meal and the Last Supper was not as explicit in Karelia as it was in the town Hirschon studied, where the icon of the Last Supper usually hung on the wall near the dinner table, the sanctification of bread and partaking of food was just as evident. Before each meal, people washed their hands and made the sign of the cross saying their prayers. The same was repeated after the meal. These rites defined eating as a sacred activity setting it apart from mundane activity. Santtu Marttinen’s description clearly shows that hand-washing before eating did not primarily serve hygienic purposes but was clearly of a ritual nature:

It may be that the hands don’t look clean in the ordinary sense of the word, but if they were washed with “pure” water or if some water was just dropped on them, they had reached the purity demanded by the religious conceptions, and were considered suitable to handle God’s grain.1

Building on her fieldwork in a suburb of Athens, Renée Hirschon views the table as “the embodiment of a set of notions interweaving the divine associations of commensality, family unity, the values of hospitality and the opposition of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ realms” (1993:80). Susie Scott has further stressed that “the act of ‘breaking bread’ together (the literal meaning of ‘companionship’) expresses the group’s communality, and is used to form or consolidate social bonds”. Communal meal also confirmed the social order and the family symbolically reproduced itself and reaffirmed its core values (Scott 2009:93, 97). Hirschon’s and Scott’s observations are also valid in the Karelian context. A joint meal defined the boundaries and the social hierarchy of the domestic unit. The seating order at table strictly reflected the hierarchical social order within the family. The master of the house usually sat at the “upper” end of the table on the bench at the back wall. The rest of the grown-ups sat on the flanks of the upper part of the table; men often on the men’s side and the women’s on the women’s side. Children sat at the “lower” part of the table (KKS 5: 524, 525; Virtaranta 1958:201–202, 519).

The centrality of a communal meal in the rites of integration at lifecycle rituals as well as in memorial feasts for the deceased and in religious festivals, makes evident the importance of its social functions. As Catharine Bell has observed, a festive meal defines the boundaries of the community:

Shared participation in a food feast is a common ritual means for defining and reaffirming the full extent of the human and cosmic community. Whether that community is conceived to be rigidly hierarchical or fundamentally egalitarian, the principle of sharing food marks it as a community. (Bell 1997:123.)

Even though the food itself played an important symbolic role at ceremonial meals in Karelia, the Karelians perceived the table as the element that concretely joined the participants together. Since both the living and the spirits of dead gathered around the table at memorial feasts, on these occasions this and the otherworld intersected at the table (Jetsu 2001:151–152). In religiously mixed families, Old Believers demonstrated that they were not members of the spiritual community of the mainstream Orthodox by eating separately and not joining them at the dinner table.

**The horizontal division of space in the main room**

According to Gustav Ränk’s study of the Northern Eurasian house, the main room was divided horizontally into three zones: the upper, middle and lower regions, which were valued differently. The upper, that is the part furthest in was the purest and most highly valued – the place where the great corner was located. The middle area was neutral, while the zone at the door, whose boundary was marked by a *matica*, “mother beam” in the ceiling, was the most impure part of the room (Ränk 1949:59). According to Keynäs, the door zone, which often contained the oven, was a common area for both men and women. It functioned as a zone of transition and transformation. In this area the dirty was transformed into clean and the raw into cooked. There was usually a table by the door wall, where food was prepared and the dishes were washed. The hand-washing dispenser and the slop pail under it, which was considered particularly impure (*pagan*), stood at “the door corner” of the room or, in the summertime, in the hallway. Litter was brushed into this corner and the brush was kept there in the winter. This corner was therefore also called “the corner of litter” (*rikkatšuppu*) (Virtaranta 1958:720; KKS 5:101).

The door zone functioned as a transition zone, a social sorting area, where incomers were categorised according sex, age and status and social belonging (Frykman & Löfgren 1983:107). Entry into a house was ritualised and

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1 *Vuokkiniemi*: V. Keynäs MV:KTKKA 962, 1912:25.
the manner of entry distinguished a Lutheran from an Orthodox. An Orthodox visitor, standing by the door, first bowed to the great corner making the sign of cross and after that greeted the household members; the master of the house first (Branders 1893: 84; see also Forsström 1895: 166, 171–172; Virtaranta 1958:519). A visitor would never cross the area marked by the matica beam on his own accord but would stay by the doorway until invited further in. An honoured male guest was led to the great corner, and a female guest to the women’s side (Ränk 1949:62; Virtaranta 1958:519).

In the Karelian field of symbolic meanings, the home represented sacred order, cleanliness and propriety whereas miero, the profane world, represented disorder, dirt, filth and sin (Tarkka 1998:19–20; cf. Dubisch 1986:200). The threshold made a symbolic boundary, which separated the inside from the outside, “our own” (omat) from strangers (miiero) and home from the world. The common prohibition against stepping on the threshold marked its significance as a symbolic boundary. According to Domna Huovinen, stepping on the threshold was as serious a breach as stepping on an icon (Virtaranta 1958:719).

Dangers threatening the order of the house

The powers of chaos epitomised in the figure of the Devil constantly threatened the order instituted by God at the Creation. The Devil, who incessantly tempted people to sin, waited for an opportunity to sneak in through the openings of the house. The vernacular notion of sin, reähkä,1 which constantly preoccupied the minds of the people, was much wider than the Christian concept of sin. It denoted also “blasphemy, impurity, vexation, or the evil or injury that seems to come in answer to curses” (Pentikäinen 1987:114). I will use the term ‘sin’ in this extended sense.

The notion of reähkä served as the basis for a vast and complicated system of norms which regulated human conduct in the minutest detail. Some of the norms echo the Ten Commandments, such as the prohibition against breaking the Sabbath, fornicating or stealing. Although people saw all the reähkäs as being part of the Christian moral code, a vast number of them originated from the customary law. These norms regulated people’s appearance, gestures, behaviour, and dress code. The reähkä rules restrained women’s behaviour in greater detail than men’s behaviour. Most of these rules were not given a particular motivation in everyday parlance, but it was simply established that doing “X” was a sin. Some of the norms were sanctioned by reference to the Creation or by the exemplary behaviour of Christ and the Prophets. Breaking these norms implied defying the divine order and

1 From the Russian greh’, ‘sin’. Since there is no standard Karelian, I follow the orthography of the Dictionary of Karelian Language and use the Northern Karelian form of the word.
joining the forces of the Devil who served as a negative model in this norm system. The norm breaker could also expect a punishment for the infringement in the afterlife, or see his/her fortune, i.e. health or wealth jeopardised (Pentikäinen 1987:114–115).

The notions of reähkä and impurity partially overlapped, but we could view the former as the sanction of the purity norms. A violation against the sacred order, which was guarded by reähkä norms, caused pollution and was punished as a sin. The noun ‘pagan’ (pakana, pagana, pakanus etc.), besides referring to the “the unfaithful”, i.e. those outside the religious community of humans, was also used of persons who were in a state of impurity. Firstly, both partners were considered “pagan”, impure after sexual intercourse, sometimes referred to as “making sin”, and had to purify themselves. K.F. Karjalainen’s description of the purification rite shows that the ritual cleansing was more extensive for women.² Secondly, a childbearer was held “pagan” for six weeks after the delivery until she had received the priest’s blessing or, in a village with no priest, until she had herself performed the purification ritual (see Keinänen 2003:137, 141–144). Thirdly, during her menstruation, a woman was held to be dangerous to her surroundings, particularly to men (Paulaharju 1995:16; Keinänen 2003:100). Fourthly, the order of the house was further threatened by various kinds of substances and animals, which were classed as “pagan” and were therefore to be avoided.

Thus, a person in certain bodily states, certain animals and substances were perceived as impure and therefore threatened the order of the house. The danger the deviating element posed was eliminated by setting it apart, either symbolically or physically. Thus, a defiled person was classed as a pagan and was temporarily excluded from the community of “Christian folks” (ristikansa).

Besides things classed as “pagan”, impure, in an Old Believer house there were further sources of defilement or spoiling, which threatened the sacred order, namely “profanation”, “becoming worldly” (mieroutuo). The verb is derived from the noun miero, which among other things denoted ‘the world’, ‘strangers’, ‘village’, and ‘folks’. “Worldly” (miero or mierolaine), was also the term the Old Believers used pejoratively of the mainstream Orthodox (KKS 3:318–319). Finnish Lutherans were also reckoned among the mierolaine, called in Orthodox Karelia ruottšis, in verbatim “Swedes” – an ethnonymic survival from the period when Finland was part of Sweden. Thus, a ruottši implied both ethnic and religious affiliation. Consequently the verb “to be profaned” came in certain contexts close to verbs ruoštšakoittuo or ruoštšiutuo, which denoted “Swedification” (i.e. “Fennofication”) as far as the customs, religion and language was considered (KKS 5:190–191).

A person could also be profaned by deliberately or accidentally breaking the fast, i.e. eating *arki*, non-fast food during a fast. This form of profanation was expressed with verbs *arkeutuo* or *arkevuo* (KKS 1:67).

Finally, certain elements and phenomena in nature such as fire, earth, forest, water, iron and stone were believed to be imbued to varying degrees with a supernatural power called väki, which was contagious and therefore a potential source of pollution. A corpse and the objects that had been in touch with it, as well as the cemetery, were charged with the highly dangerous, supernatural power, kalma, which could infect a careless individual – especially a woman during her open bodily states (Stark-Arola 1998:236–237). These different supernatural powers interacted with each other in varying ways. Uno Holmberg (later Harva) has characterised the mechanisms of these supernatural powers as follows:

> The powers which imbue these phenomena vary both in their nature and their strength. They appear to be mechanical, like the forces of nature. They are lifted, grasped and laid down. They likewise rise, strike and adhere. They are singularly fragile. One power can with ease make another ineffective. /…/ A host of measures are taken to prevent one power from “spoiling” another (Holmberg 1917:8, translation James Bingham).

These supernatural forces and the various forms of pollution were often perceived to have quite material effects. According to Franz Steiner pollution is as “a blemish that adheres physically to the unclean person or object, which can be transferred, or communicated through contact, or removed by cleansing” (1956:114). A person who came in touch with various kinds of *väki* and kalma, would contract an ailment called *vihat* or *nenä*,1 “wrath” or “anger”, qualified with the source of the infection, for instance “the wrath of water”, “the wrath of fire”. A successful performance of household duties, including healing, demanded knowledge of how these immaterial powers interacted as well as how they were to be manipulated to practical ends.

**Women as agents of purity and cleanliness**

In the previous section we saw that women of fertile age were seen as a potential source of pollution which threatened the order of the house. However, as a number of scholars have observed, women, in spite of their being seen as potential polluters, in many cultures also functioned as the very controllers of pollution (e.g. Balzer 1981:852; Dubisch 1983:197–198; Lawrence 1988:117). Some scholars have seen female impurity as the very reason for women being allotted the inferior role of cleaners and controllers of purity (Oakley 1976:40).

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1 The verb *nenätäkseh* means to ‘take offence’, ‘get angry’ (KKS 3:476).
Because there was a strong symbolical link between a woman and the
home/house on the one hand, and between the cleanliness of the house and
the morals of the mistress of the house on the other, we could indeed inter-
pret Karelian women’s excessive preoccupation with cleaning as a strategy
to underline and demonstrate their purity and propriety. As Jorunn Solheim
has asserted on the basis of her Norwegian study, a home that is spotless and
in order indicates the physical and moral spotlessness of the mistress of the

The Karelian adjective töläkkä, ‘dirty’ denotes both these aspects mean-
ing both physical dirtiness and sexual uncleanness (cf. pakana) as well as
obscenity (KKS 4:383). A number of sayings recorded in The Dictionary of
Karelian Language clearly suggest the connection between the cleanliness
and propriety of the mistress of the house and cleanliness and propriety of
the house and these both aspects were coupled to social order: “The woman
is dirty, the house is dirty, such a bad order.”1 The best compliment a mis-
tress of a house could get was being called tšistakka, “cleanly”. The follow-
ing saying condenses the above ideas: “In that house they have proper ways
and a cleanly mistress”;2 However, the definition of cleanliness varies cultur-
ally. According to ethnologist Pirkko Sallinen-Gimpl’s study, the central
criterion for cleanliness in Karelia was the cleanness of the floors and bed
clothes. A house was considered really clean first when these surfaces were
clean (Sallinen-Gimpl 1994:182–186). Aleksi Orjatsalo’s report from Salmi
confirms her observation. The farm mistress’s cleanliness was judged by the
cleanness of the floors: “If the floors glowed and the mats were clean, the
mistress was praised as cleanly [ziistakko emänty], no matter how disorderly
or unclean the rest of the house was.”3

These symbolic associations also explain why it was in the interest of the
matron as the female head of the household to check upon the cleanness and
morals of the household members, especially those of the women. Our
sources indicate that, in an extended family, it was the elder women, espe-
sially the female head of the family, who acted as the principal controller of
pollution and the reähkä norms. Karjalainen has reported from Northern
Karelia that Old Believer women enforced the observance of the
reähkä rules with great severity (1918:171). Old Believers were extremely strict as
far as the observance of the purity and reähkä rules was concerned, but there
is no reason to doubt that mainstream Orthodox women too assumed a simi-
lar role as the controllers of these norms within their households (Heikkinen

Building partly on social anthropologist Jorun Solheim’s ideas, I will
view cleaning, washing and ordering as ritualised activities since these ac-

1 “Akka on töläkkä, huoneh on töläkkä, kui on huono ruokko” (Porajärvi, KKS 6:383).
2 “Šinä talošša on puhaš eloš dai emäandi tšistotka.” (Tunkua, KKS 6:195).
3 Salmi, Ylä-Luuksu: Aleksi Orjatsalo, electrician, b. 1894; FA E139, p. 11.
tivities did not always stand in proportion to the concrete demands of hygiene, and were performed in a kind of repetitive, fixed and ceremonial way (Solheim 2001:46). If we analyse Karelian women’s cleaning activities, they agree fairly well with these criteria. Sallinen-Gimpl, who has compared the concept of cleanness among Karelian refugees in Finland with that of their Finnish neighbours, maintains that the Karelian view of cleanness was dynamic, which means that its maintenance was assumed to demand constant thorough cleaning, whereas the Finns had a static concept of cleanness, which implied that the daily efforts concentrated upon upholding a previously attained state of cleanness. The Finnish neighbours of the Karelian refugees found the Karelian women’s zeal in cleaning quite extraordinary and deemed it to be exaggerated, unnecessary, and even damaging for the surfaces.

Thus, we may agree with Kathryn Rabuzzi, who has underlined that it “is not what is done but how it is done that makes housekeeping chores rituals” (1982:96). As Catherine Bell has pointed out, ritualisation is a way of “creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’” (Bell 1992:74). The ritualised nature of cleaning, cleansing and ordering indicate that they were not merely an instrumental activity but, they were also charged with symbolic meanings. They materialised and protected the integrity of sacred order by demarcating the boundary between inside/outside, us/them, clean/dirty and sacred/profane, and also transformed dirty/impure into clean/pure and profane into sacred.

Therefore, it would be far too simplistic to reduce women’s cleaning and ordering activities to a mere expiation for their impurity and assumed moral inferiority. As we shall see, these activities were embedded in a complex web of symbolic meanings and can also be rendered meaningful within the framework of women’s ethics of care. Jill Dubisch’s observations of Greek women’s religious activities at home are also valid in the Karelian context:

Within the context of the family, women have important sacred roles, roles which reflect, or are aspects of, their social roles as nurturers, caretakers and guardians of the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of the house and its occupants (Dubisch 1983:190).

As mentioned above, symbolic pollution was often assumed to materialise as dirt. Insofar as pollution and moral breaches were thought to have material effects, their consequences could be neutralised by washing and cleaning. Sexual pollution, for instance, was removed by ritual washing and the object of the purification was not the genitals but face and, in women’s case also chest. Also the sin caused by a breach of reähkä norm could sometimes be neutralised by washing. The photographer Inha describes how the old mistress of theirlodgings carried her brass icons to the lake shore and rubbed them clean with sand, because Inhas’s travelling companion philologist K.F.
Karjalainen had defiled them by smoking in the room they rented (Inha 1921:151). In Vieljärvi there were purportedly houses where the rooms were washed if somebody had smoked or sworn there. Sickneses, which were often perceived to be the result of a breach of norm, were a physical form of “dirt” and could either be eliminated by an apology ritual or healing ritual where rinsing the patient was an important part.

As housekeepers, women maintained the sacred order of the house by making sure that potentially polluting substances, persons and objects were kept in their proper places within the house or did not cross the threshold at all. There were five principle ways of preventing and dealing with pollution, reähkä and other elements that threatened the order of the home. First, sin and impurity were prevented by, for instance, monitoring the observance of reähkä norms and various kinds of purity rules. Secondly, the elements that might potentially create disorder were excluded. Therefore the Devil, the representative of Chaos, who constantly lurked by the openings of the house and the orifices of the human body, was warded off by guarding these openings. The openings of the human body as well as those of the house were closed from the Devil by words of prayer and the signs of cross as well as by protective objects (Tarkka 1998:25). This was a standard procedure in many houses every night. If the devil or some other evil forces managed to invade the house, it was a complicated procedure to rid the building of them (see e.g. SKVR I4:1970, I4:1993, I4:1969). Since evil influences were particularly active after sunset, nothing was to be brought indoors after the sun had gone down. During critical transitional phases, for instance, when there was a corpse or a new-born in the house, the entries and exists were closely guarded.

Thirdly, women sought to prevent impurity, contagious diseases (e.g. nenäs, vihat) and disorder in general by keeping apart substances, objects and beings, which were either inherently impure or were potentially so in certain situations or in conjunction with certain substances, objects and categories of beings. An element that transgressed a forbidden symbolic boundary was “out of place” creating disorder and was to be restored to its proper place or be removed either symbolically or physically. Fourthly, the effects of various types of väki, i.e. nenäs, vihat, were neutralized by using an appropriate väki which neutralized the effects of the first or by a special “apology” ritual. Fifthly, an object or person who had become profaned or “paganised” was resanctified, when it was considered possible (see Pentikäinen 1987:114).

The order was frail, since the powers of chaos constantly threatened the structure both from outside and from inside. Women were therefore con-

1 Tulomajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Akim Lomojev b. 1874; FA 1944: 2590.
stantly preoccupied by their efforts to keep the disorder at bay. In the following passages I will describe what this implied in the everyday life of the rural Karelians.

Cleaning the house

Cleaning, as we have seen, was not a purely instrumental activity which only aimed at meeting the culturally defined hygienic standards, but was also imbued with symbolical meanings. Purity and order were the preconditions for the godliness and sacredness of the house and women’s cleaning activities maintained the inviolability of the order. Marttinen’s statement quoted earlier (see p. 130), serves as a key to the interpretation of the religious significance of cleaning. Were the living quarters “untainted” – both in a physical and moral sense – God would be obliging and guarded the house. If disorder prevailed, God would abandon the house, leaving its reign in the hands of his antagonist, the Devil. The presence of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, materialised in the holy icons, sanctified the house and their continued presence depended on the virtuousness of the house and its dwellers.

Katri Markström from Salmi expressed the same idea of sanctification when describing the rituals of death. She cited the sinfulness (räähkäisyys) of the house as the reason for what in the vernacular idiom was called the “interruption” of death, meaning that a person was dying but did not expire. The fetcher of the spirit, which in this case was assumed to be the Saviour himself, would simply not enter a sinful house. As mentioned earlier, the term sinfulness partly overlapped with the notion of impurity and impurity and sin could materialise as dirt. Therefore dying was facilitated by keeping the bed clean, by changing and airing the mattress often. If this did not help the whole main room was thoroughly cleaned. Windows, doors, door handles, thresholds and even the holy icons were washed carefully and the floor was scrubbed clean. Finally, the house and the sick person were incensed clean with holy smoke. After this the doors, damper, and in summer even the windows were opened with the prayer: “Let the power of the Saviour come and fetch. We already washed the home clean”; “Let the power of Saviour come into the entire home”.1 Cleaning in a concrete manner contributed to the creation of pure, sacred space.

Cleaning also demarcated the shift from ordinary time into sacred time thereby functioning as a rite of transition. This is in agreement with van Gennep’s observation that the transition is often staged in spatial, material terms (1965:15–20). The frequency of a thorough cleaning may have varied, but the point of time was the same: the eve of a holy day, either Sunday or a religious festival. Paulaharju writes that the house was usually cleaned every

1 Salmi: Maija Juvas < Katri Markström, 56 years; FA 1938: 33–35, 50, 84.
other week but in many places in the Karelian Borders every Saturday, although there were houses which were properly cleaned only before the greater holy days (1983:154). Such holy days were Easter, Christmas, the saint days and the memorial days of the dead. Among Orthodox Karelians, the Great Thursday (Holy Thursday) was the day of the most thorough cleaning of the whole year. Every corner of the house was washed clean (Vilkuna 1978:80–81). Klaudia Niikko reports that even the holy icons were washed on this day.2

The idea that cleaning created sacred space is exemplified in the descriptions of the memorial day preparations. Six weeks after a death, the forty-day memorial feast took place, demarcating the final transition of the deceased to the community of the family dead. The preparations for this feast started with a thorough cleaning of the house. According to Akim Lomojov, the dirty clothes were first washed. Then, the oven was whitewashed and the ceiling, walls, benches, and floors were all scrubbed clean, often with sand. The cleaned house was then incensed several times with holy smoke. A bed was prepared for the dead visitors. The straw in the mattresses was changed and clean bed clothes were put on the beds.3 The preparations were similar at Christmas and other festive occasions.

Solomanida Petrov’s description of the preparations for the celebration of Memorial Saturday in the autumn clearly demonstrates the ritual nature of the cleaning:

‘The tenth Saturday of the non-fast period in the autumn [syysargi] is Memorial Saturday. Then all the dead of the family are commemorated and they are fetched home for a night. Everywhere they wash the house and all the rooms. The threshold is wiped once again in the evening, and also the door handle. ’This is for the dead to come.’ They say: ‘poor things please come tonight.’ If somebody is so poorly that she cannot wash the whole main room, she at least washes the threshold.4

The repeated cleaning of the threshold and the door handle signals that we are not dealing with ordinary, everyday cleaning but with ritual preparation and demarcation of sacred space. Martti Haavio’s informant also mentioned the washing of the threshold in connection with the memorial feast. The preparation of this feast took six weeks and during this period the threshold was wiped after every visitor, with the explanation that the spirit “could be able to move”.5 In another record there is a belief that the spirit of a dying

1 Ilomantsi: Aimo Turunen KKSA 1932.
2 Impilahti, Metsäkylä: Klaudia Niikko, teacher, b. 1883; FA 1957 KJ 36: 15652.
3 Tulemajärvi, Kolatselkä, Keikkulan kylä: Helmi Helminen < Akim Lomojov, b. 1874; FA 1944: 3795.
4 Tulemajärvi, Ahin kylä: Helmi Helminen < Solomanida Petrov, b. 1862; FA 1944: 3452.
person would not exit through a dirty door which has been used by sinful people, but through a clean chimney.\(^1\)

Sacred time demanded purity from the house and its inhabitants and cleaning was prohibited during periods of sacred time: the more important the day, the stricter the prohibition. During sacred time people were to refrain from work, especially from dirty work such as cleaning. The Epiphany, Christmas day and Good Friday were all “precious days” and people were not to spin, mash, grind, wash or bathe, or use an axe.\(^2\) Another such particularly precious, sacred point of time was the two-week period between Christmas and the Epiphany (svätkit or synnynaika). During this liminal period, people were to refrain from chores that involved handling dirt: “Then you were not allowed to wet the floors, do the laundry, or pour the dirty water outdoors.”\(^3\) The same was the case during the period between midsummer and St. Peter’s day (veäntöinaika) (Lavonen 1996:201; KKS 6:581). Breaking the Sabbath by working would be punished by God or the saints.

I mentioned earlier that the threshold marked the boundary between the house, representing sacred order, and the impure, disorderly world. Women’s keeping the threshold clean emphasised its importance as a symbolic boundary. The clean threshold at the memorial feasts described above served as a metonymy for a clean, sacred house: “The whole house is a sacred place for six weeks”,\(^4\) i.e. during the transitional phase. Keeping the threshold clean could also demarcate the boundary between “us” and “them”. The zeal with which Karelian refugee women scrubbed their thresholds in Finland (Sallinen-Gimpl 1994:185), could have been a reaction to their having to settle down in a foreign, often even unwelcoming environment.

Handling water and fire in housekeeping

Fire and water, two quite indispensible elements in housekeeping, were according to North Karelian Anni Lehtonen “pure” and “sacred” elements, created by God and therefore to be treated with respect.\(^5\) Since fetching water was women’s work they had to know how to deal with the spirit of water as well as how to treat water itself properly. When fetching water from a river, lake, or a well, it was important to pay homage to the spirit of water with a hailing rite (Keinänen 2003:245–248). This rite can also be seen as a means of activating the cleansing power of the water. A wise-women Marp-

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1 Suistamo: Martti Haavio FA 1935: 274.
4 Suistamo: Martti Haavio, FA 1935: 2032.
pu Miettinen used to say the following prayer when she collected water for washing: “Lord bless, Christ! / Righteous water, / Golden king of water, nourisher. / Wash, save, make clean!” If she was washing clothes she added at the end: “Cleanse the clothes of the human being N.N.” She was convinced that if the prayers were not said, the water would not cleanse.¹

Water and fire were also thought to be imbued with a supernatural power which was dualistic in nature, i.e. they were useful but when not properly used were harmful, making it important to handle them in a correct way. The northern Karelian sources show that water in its natural state was perceived to be in some sense impure, “pagan”,² and had to be ritually purified before becoming suitable for human use. In order to protect the household members against impurity, reähkä or “wrath of water” the housekeeper had to follow strict reähkä and purity rules which regulated the handling of water, the hand-washing dispenser and the pails and tubs used for carrying and storing it. Santtu Marttinen stressed that one was not to take water from the tub before a piece of a board, a log or a shingle was placed on it while one said a prayer. If the board was removed, water would become pagan again.³ Anni Lehtonen described (1915) the procedure as follows:

> When a tub of water is brought in, water is first poured into the hand-washing dispenser saying: ‘Lord bless!’ Then the tub is covered with the same words of prayer. Only then may one take water from the tub, not before (SKVR I4: 2019).

Thus, the impure, pagan water was purified by blessing it with a prayer and the tub was symbolically closed to the Devil. If the rules were not followed, the water would turn impure again. Anni Lehtonen maintained: “A water ladle is not to be left in a water tub, but is to be hung outside. It’s a sin to leave it there. It is equivalent to leaving an unbaptised child’s head in the tub.”⁴ In Impilahti the ladle was to be taken out from the tub in the evening, “lest it lie there overnight as the head of a horse”.⁵ The tropes with an unbaptised child and a horse express a severe degree of impurity.

Considering the number of norms governing the handling of a hand-washing dispenser and the ritual nature of hand-washing, the dispenser was also considered a sacred object. When filling it with water, a blessing was to be said. The ladle had to be emptied completely even if the dispenser was already full. The superfluous water was not to be poured back into the barrel or be thrown out on the yard: “It is too precious to be drunk or stepped

¹ Salmi, Rajaselkä: Marita Pelkonen < Marppu Miettinen (Zakki’s Marppu), ca 68 years, who had learned it from her mother; FA 1940 (1935): 488.
⁴ Vuonninen: Samuli Paulaharju < Anni Lehtoni, 43 years; FA 1911: 4673.
⁵ Impilahti: Jaakko Härkönen < Matrona Paulow; FA 1908: 22.
upon." Water would also become impure if it was poured in the dispenser with the back of the hand first. The dispenser was not to be left standing empty over night but was always to be filled with water in the evening.2

The norms which guided the handling of the metal dispenser were sanctioned by the threat of an "infection of iron". If the dish was handled improperly, for instance if a person swore or rinsed a child’s bottom under it, the swearer respectively the child would catch this infection. After being sullied the dispenser had to be thoroughly purified by being washed three times and dried over a flame in the hearth.3

As mentioned above, fire too, was to be handled with great respect, with "words of God". When the fire was kindled it was always blessed. In Porajärvi the kindler said: "Christ bless, I kindle the fire in the hearth",4 whereas in Tulomajärvi the kindler prayed: "The angel of fire, nourisher, look after us, protect us."5 In the evening at bed time, fire was placated with prayers. When a fire in the wooden splinter, which functioned as the source of light in the room, was put out in Kivijärvi, they said: "Let the angel of fire sleep, the angel of water stay awake."6 One of Martta Pelkonen’s female informants from Salmi was convinced that the respect which formerly was shown fire, explained why there were supposedly so few accidents with fire: "Formerly there were fewer fires than today. When a spark flew on straw, it died out right away."7

The purity of fire was also protected by a number of prohibitions. First of all, fire was not to be handled with dirty hands. Before kindling the fire in the morning the person performing the task had to wash her/his face and hands and say prayers.8 Moreover, one was not to soil the fire by throwing into it dirty objects or litter, or stirring it with a dirty poker.9 Finally, fire was not to be disgraced by blowing, spitting, or even worse, urinating in it. A common belief was that fire would avenge the defilement by causing diverse bodily ailments such as rashes, infections or herpes on the lip.

As we have seen, the power of both water and fire was used for ritual purification and for neutralising of the effects of other supernatural forces. We

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1 Vuokkiniemi, Kivijärvi: I. Marttini < Sandra Marttini; FA 1911: b) 1325.
2 Vuonninen: Samuli Paulaharju < Anni Lehtońi, 43 years; FA 1911: 4672.
5 Tulomajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Marfa Jogorov, b. 1873; FA 1944: 2279.
6 Vuokkiniemi, Kivijärvi: I. Marttini < Santra Marttini; FA b) 1911: 1327.
7 Salmi, Miitala: Martta Pelkonen < "Tsubarim Mari", ca 59 years; FA 1936: 169.
8 Salmi, Miitala: Martta Pelkonen < "Tsubarim Mari", ca 59 years; FA 1936: 169.
saw that fire was used for purifying the water dispenser and we shall see that 
the force of fire in the form of ashes, charcoal or the flame itself, was used in 
housekeeping for cleansing defiled objects and persons. Ashes and charcoal 
were also used as protective substances, for instance against the evil eye.

### Cooking and purity

Building on Susan Sered’s study of Jewish women in Jerusalem (1992:88), I 
view Karelian women’s food preparations as inherently ritual activity in the 
sense that it was regulated by both Christian and indigenous dietary rules 
and followed the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church. Food also 
played an important role in defining ethno-religious identity in the border 
areas or villages where the population was partly Orthodox and partly Lutheran. Dietary rules and eating regulations were also an important marker of 
sectarian identity in the Old Believer areas. Food preparation was also an 
expression of women’s familial concerns and these concerns embraced both 
the living and the dead members of the family. Food gifts, largely bread, was 
a means of practicing charity and thereby a source of religious merit for 
women who distributed food to the poor. As Laura Stark-Arola has shown, 
food served also as social currency (2001).

As cooks, women were responsible for their family members’ following a 
food regime appropriate to their religious status, which, besides ordinary 
food and food of fast, comprised a number of food taboos. Breaking the fast 
was considered a sin that might endanger the individual’s fate in the afterlife, 
implying that, as cooks women carried the ultimate responsibility for the 
salvation of the family members (see Keinänen forthcoming).

Orthodox Karelian cuisine was organised in a fundamental way by a con-
stant rotation of days of fast (pyhä) and non-fast days (arki). There were two 
weekly days of fast – Wednesday and Friday – and several annual periods of 
fast of varying length. This means that there were more than 180 official 
days of fast a year, even though we may assume that their observance varied 
in practice. On days of fast all animal products, with the exception of fish 
and honey, were forbidden. On certain stricter days of fast even fish was 
banned.3

Since breaking a fast as well as the violation of other food regulations 
would lead to sin and profanation, i.e. turning pagan or worldly, it was 
women’s responsibility as cooks to make sure that household members did 
not consume forbidden substances, i.e. eat arki, ordinary, non-fast food during 
a fast (pyhä) or meat that was classed as impure (pagan). The arki–pyhä

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1 According to Virtaranta some women when baking reserved a part of the bread to the beg-
gers (1958:545). The distribution of food, especially to the poor, was an important part of the 
remembrance practices in Karelia.
dichotomy compelled a detailed organisation of women’s daily household chores. *Arki* food had to be kept apart from *pyhä* food, as were the utensils used for their preparation, and the bowls used for their storage (for more details, see Keinänen forthcoming).

Besides observing the rules of fast further food restrictions had to be followed in order to avoid profanation or defilement. The cook had to avoid substances and animals that were classed as impure (i.e. *pakanaelävä*) and therefore inedible (KKS 4:121). Some of these prohibitions echo those of Leviticus. According to Ulla Muistama, meat of non-ruminating animals, such as horse, was forbidden: “If people heard that somebody had eaten horse meat so it was like ‘yak’! – the eater was an utter pagan!” (Virtaranta 1958:217).

Karelians ate mainly beef, mutton and veal whereas pork and chicken were quite rare on their menu – not because these animals were tabooed but simply because Karelians usually did not keep pigs¹ and chickens were kept only for eggs.² Karelians, like Russians, did not eat the meat of a newborn calf (Manninen 1932:444). If a newborn calf was not kept or had to be slaughtered for some reason, its meat was fed to the dogs (Virtaranta 1958:217; Sallinen-Gimpl 1994:211).³ The sources do not give a reason for this but Paulaharju mentions that eating animals younger than a year old was generally held to be “sinful” (1995:163). For the same reason blood was never eaten and was consequently not collected at slaughter (Sallinen-Gimpl 1994:205).⁴ According to Anni Lehtonen, meat was rinsed of blood three times in order to prevent sin (*reähkä*).⁵

Moreover, there were a number of rules which regulated the handling of milk. Firstly, milk had to be protected against the evil eye, which could easily spoil it or stop it from churning into butter etc.⁶ Secondly, the milk of a newly calved cow was impure and was not to be used by humans until the cow had been purified after a certain length of time.

There were also restrictions concerning the consumption of game. According to Vilho Jyrinoja, five fingered animals such as bear, squirrel, and hare were forbidden (Virtaranta 1958:217). Eating bear’s meat was formerly held particularly “sinful” in Karelia. According to Ivan Hermonen people in Koštamuš did not kill bears but sold the hunting grounds to the Finns. If they were for some reason or other forced to kill a bear the meat was fed to the

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¹ In Porajärvi pig-keeping was introduced first by the kolhoz (Helmi Helminen < Olga Teulonen, Himola; MV:KTKKA IV: 23).
⁵ *Vuonninen*: Samuli Paulaharju < Anni Lehtońi, 43 years; FA 1911: 4806.
dogs.¹ The prohibition is quite generally explained by the bear’s human likeness or by the belief that a bear originally was a human being who was cursed into a bear (Virtaranta 1958:313 and 1978:97). Forest birds were widely consumed with the exception of the swan which was classed as a prohibited animal. Nastja Rantsi has characterised the swan as “a pure bird”, which had not been created to be eaten.² In northern parts of Karelia, the swan was also said to be of human descent and people were not allowed to shoot it, eat its eggs or gather its feathers (Virtaranta 1958:353, 724 and 1978:175).³

The dishes and utensils

The concern that a household should follow a proper diet and not eat forbidden substances also demanded purity from the dishes, cutlery and utensils which were used for food preparation and eating. We have already seen that there were separate utensils and storing bowls for ordinary and food of fast. According to Martta Pelkonen’s overview of the Salmi area, dishes for milk and fish were to be kept separate. Milk and the dishes where milk had been stored were not to come in touch with fish. Milk was not to be poured into a dish where fish had been kept and milk dishes were not to be washed in the same basin where dishes from which fish had been eaten were washed. If milk came into touch with fish, it became viscous and it would not cream as easily. The viscosity of the milk or scarcity of cream could also be due to the fact that the milk had not been handled or stored with the necessary cleanliness. A third possible reason for milk’s bad quality was that a cow had breathed into the milking pail. Restoring the quality of milk demanded that the milk utensils were cleansed properly either with juniper or, if this did not help, with holy smoke.⁴

The milk pail was to be cleaned thoroughly at certain intervals. According to Solomanida Petrov, the pail had to be cleansed with juniper water on the Great Thursday (Holy Thursday) and Easter morning. The pail was firstly scrubbed with snow or ice, and then filled with water, salt, flour, some leaves of alder, juniper branches and incense. The mixture was heated up with hot stones and the pail covered with a tablecloth. This procedure made sure that milk would not get sour in thundery weather and would also pro-

¹ Porajärvi: Helmi Helminen < Ivan Hermonen; MV–KTKKA I:1. Towards the mid-twentieth century the ban was getting lax and people ate even bear meat (Virtaranta 1978:97).
² Salmi, Karkku: Martti Haavio < Nastasja Rantši, 49 years; FA 1934: 1635.
³ Porajärvi, Kuutamolahti: Helmi Helminen < Maša Kottarainen, 52 years, b. in Soutarvi; SKS 1943: 1544.
mote the creaming process and increase butter production. Some women stored this water and rinsed their pail with it as required.¹

As mentioned, bread was sacred and consequently the baking trough was too. Solomanida Petrov has stressed that the trough was shown as much respect as the holy icons. If there was a fire in the house one should rescue the icons and the baking trough first, then rest of the valuables. She relates that not only the icons but even the trough had to be covered if some sinful acts were performed in the house. As we saw above, one was not to swear in a room where an icon hung. Similarly, one was not to swear near the baking trough otherwise the dough would not proof but got spoiled.² Kuha also stressed that the trough was so “holy” that it was not to be placed on the floor but, for safety, was to be kept on a chair or the like.³ If it was kicked,⁴ or moved with the foot or stepped over, the baking would fail.⁵

A piece of dough was always kept in the trough as a starter for a new dough. The baking trough was never to be left completely empty. Martta Kuha has asserted that if the trough was scraped or washed clean, the house would run out of bread: “There were houses where they still had their granny’s tub, which had never been washed.” If you had to wash the tub, you had to do it in a current, i.e. in a ditch or a river. You were not to scrape the trough with a knife, but just leave it soaking in the water.⁶ Bread was not only sacred food that tied the family together at a meal, but the dough starter also symbolised the continuity of the family, linking the past and present generations.

Whereas Finns could use the same dishes for different purposes, for making dough, washing themselves, dishes or clothes, or for giving the animals water, Karelians were strict about using specific dishes for specific purposes (Sallinen-Gimpl 1994:184). Because dishes and cups were a major source of impurity or “profanisation”, the bowls and cups used by different categories of people, and those used by humans and animals, had to be kept strictly separate. Thus, separate dishes upheld boundaries between different categories of people and set the animals apart from the humans.

Old Believers maintained a boundary between themselves and the mainstream Orthodox and Finnish Lutherans by means of taboo regulations of which the most conspicuous was eating separately and using the separate cups and bowls. This is why the Orthodox called this religious sect for “the faith of cup” (kuppiviero). In practice this could mean that, in families where

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¹ **Tulemajärvi, Ahin kylä:** Helmi Helminen < Solomanida Petrov, b. 1862. FA 1944 (1943): 3212.
² **Salmi Karkku:** Ulla Mannonen < Martta Kuha 52 years. FA 1936:1393, 2764, 3418.
³ **Salmi Karkku:** Ulla Mannonen < Martta Kuha 52 years; FA 1936: 2764.
⁴ **Olonets:** Matti Moilanen < J. Avoketo, 35 years; KRA 1937: 2923.
⁵ **Suojärvi, Riuhtavaara:** Martta Kuikka, farm mistress, b. 1921; FA KJ 34, 1957: 14954.
⁶ **Salmi:** Martta Pelkonen FA 1935, E126: 90.
⁷ **Salmi, Karkku:** Ulla Mannonen < Martta Kuha 54 years; FA 1937: 1393, 3418.
there were both mainstream Orthodox and Old Believers, even although the food was cooked in one pot, the latter did not eat from the common bowl but sat on their own using their own dishes thus marking their affiliation to another religious community by abstaining from sharing in a common meal with unbelievers (Lavonen 1995:127–128).

Santtu Marttinen writes that, in his home region, nearly every family was of mixed faith and were therefore required to have two sets of bowls, plates and spoons. The “profaned” (mieroutetut or mieron) wooden spoons were marked by a carving so that they would not get mixed with the spoons of the Old Believers.1 On visits, the Old Believers took their own cups with them (Lavonen 1995:127–128). When a stranger passed by a house and asked for water to drink, the host or hostess inquired of the visitor’s religious affiliation.2 The bowls and cups were also washed separately (Lavonen 1995:127–128).

Keeping the dishes separate was a vital concern for the Old Believers, since drinking or eating from a bowl of a “worldly”, was believed to profane the dish and in extension, its user:

> It was a great sin for an Old Believer to drink or eat from a “Worldly bowl” – even by mistake. But, if a “worldly” used a dish of an Old Believer no sin was committed – the dish just turned “Worldly” [mierautui] and was subsequently used only by the Worldly.3

In reality, people could not always afford to abandon the defiled dishes, but just purified them. Some washed their spoiled cup in a lake with sand and others cleansed it with ashes.4

Separate dishes further demarcated the boundary between ordinary people, and people who were classed as impure. Unchurched women were held impure and their dishes were to be kept separate from those used by the rest of the household. In Vuokkiniemi, even the midwife had to eat from separate bowls until purification (Paulaharju 1995:53). One of my interviewees had been told by her grandmother to wash her mother’s plate and spoon separately when the mother was laying in childbed. She was not to mix her plate with those of the rest of the family.5

After the childbed period was over, the childbirth’s dishes were cleansed with holy water or were incensed clean (Paulaharju 1995:53; Virtaranta 1958:167). Holy water, which was taken from “the Jordan” – river or lake consecrated by a priest – or from the baptismal font before a child was bap-

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tised, was an indispensable substance in every household and women stored it in bottles (Virtaranta 1958:584). Baptismal water was, of course, extraordinarily well suited for removing “paganity”. Besides the mother’s dishes, her breasts were also washed with holy water as well as the child’s pacifier, the straps of the cot and everything else that had to do with childcare.1

According to Santtu Marttinen’s manuscript, an essential purity rule in Karelia was keeping apart the dishes used by humans and animals. Marttinen seems to have viewed this as a central marker which upheld Karelian ethnic and religious identity distinguishing them from the Lutheran Finns. Iivo Marttinen, who lived most of his life in Finland, stressed that the relationship to animals in general and the strict view of clean and dirty dishes distinguished the Karelian religious conceptions from the Finnish.

For a connoisseur of Karelia it is a well-known fact that old Karelians despise the religion of the Finns, “the Swedish faith”, primarily because they know that the Finns sometimes eat, or use for eating, dishes from which an animal, a horse or a dog, has eaten.2

According to Marttinen, Karelians found quite revolting the habit of the Finns to let a dog or a cat lick a plate clean or their let a horse drink from a pail used by humans.3 North Karelian refugee Okahvi Mäkelä, who lived in Finland, said: “There [in Karelia] they did not let a cat or a dog eat from the same dish as a human being like they do here” (Virtaranta 1958:584; brackets mine). This Finnish habit was held to be so bad that even a “Worldly” Orthodox would refuse to eat from the same bowl as a Finn. “One had at least to wash the dish thoroughly after a ‘Swede’”, “perhaps even roast it with burning charcoal”.4

When defining the word “pagan”, my few sources mention the dishes of the domestic animals as an example of impure objects. When Marttinen describes the purification rite which was performed after a sauna bath, he defines pure water as water that had not been in a dish of an animal. The tub for storing clean water was to be kept apart from the tub used for giving water to animals. Quite naturally, pagan dishes were also those which in a way or another had been in touch with human or animal excrements.5

Marttinen says that the impurity caused by an animal could not be removed from a dish by washing, since “the dish will never reach the purity that is required by old Karelian religious conceptions”. A dish or a water tub, from which an animal had eaten or drunk, was permanently defiled and was

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2 Viena Karelia: Santtu Marttinen FA 1926 b: p. 10. As mentioned, Santtu Marttinen’s manuscript builds on Iivo Marttinen’s notes.
3 Viena Karelia: Santtu Marttinen FA 1926 b: p. 11.
5 Viena Karelia: Santtu Marttinen FA 1926 b: p. 4.
never to be used by humans again but was used only for cattle. Earlier, people did not compromise with this idea, but he admits that the regulations were becoming lax.\(^1\) However, even in this case, people were quite pragmatic when it came to throwing away their rare cups and utensils, as the following episode from Iivo Marttinen’s childhood shows:

One Sunday morning, when my sister and I ate at the table by the door, a spoon fell into a calf’s bucket under the table. Our only metal spoon brought all the way from Sweden [=Finland]! In a poor home there were not many spoons, least of all valuable, metal spoons.

We knew from experience that our mother – if she found out – would tell us to throw away the defiled spoon. After some deliberations and having washed the spoon we decided to trust the secret with our father, since we knew that he wouldn’t be particularly strict even in this matter of faith. Father gave us a piece of good advice: ‘Don’t tell anything to your mother. Take the spoon, wash it clean and roast it with glowing charcoal.’

Since it would have been a great pity to throw away a valuable spoon, we convinced ourselves that roasting would remove the defilement from the spoon, although eating with it felt somewhat revolting \([\text{tuntui pakanalta}]\) in the beginning (Vuoristo 1992:15–16; my parenthesis).

Besides roasting, holy water could be used to purify defiled dishes. Aforementioned Okahvi Mäkelä recommended holy water for purifying a dish that had been licked or sniffed by a cat or a dog. Her husband, however, found their living in a Lutheran community in Finland problematic since there was no holy water available for cleansing defiled dishes. Okahvi was more flexible and believed that in such case the lacking holy water could be replaced by a thorough scrubbing (Virtaranta 1958:584).

Summary

The Karelian house was a gendered sacred space which embodied the divinely sanctioned social order. This order was inscribed into the residents’ bodies through their interaction with their material surroundings and the artefacts therein. Some of the artefacts were treated as agentic beings that monitored the behaviour of the residents and punished for the breaches of norms. This punishment often materialised as various kinds of sicknesses.

The sacred order, which was instituted by “gods” was constantly threatened by the powers of Chaos epitomised in the figure of the Devil. This order was guarded by various kinds the \(\text{reähkä}\) and purity norms. Because there was a strong symbolic bond between women and the house and the house was the centre for women’s activity, their role in the maintenance of the order was central. They maintained order by keeping the Devil, who

\(^1\) *Viena Karelia: Santtu Marttinen FA 1926 b: p. 11.*
constantly tempted to sin, beyond the bounds of the house. Women pre-
vented sin and impurity which led to sin, by keeping defiling, spoiling or
profaning elements, substances, objects and beings in their proper place at
home or making sure that they did not cross the threshold.

Women did not only passively maintain sacred order but also created it.
By their ordering, cooking and cleaning activities women produced sacred
time and space. By putting the Church regulations into practice, women pro-
duced by their cooking different types of time: ordinary time, fast and sacred
time. Cleaning and cooking activities marked the transition from ordinary
time to sacred time.

In the final analysis the proper performance of the domestic observances
ensured the household members their proper ritual status and concretely
maintained their ethno-religious identity and belonging. A failure to observe
a proper diet or the purity norms could lead for example to sickness, impu-
ritiness, profanisation or “fennification”, i.e. to a symbolic or concrete loss of
one’s membership in the ethno-religious community. Ultimately, these fail-
ures or accumulated sins could jeopardise the Salvation of the household
members. Viewed against this background, women’s domestic chores, which
often are seen as menial activity, appear to have profound religious and so-
cial significance. As Betteridge formulated it aptly in the introduction,
cleanliness is “next to godliness and often a prerequisite for it”.

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Gendered Religious Spaces among the Mari in Central Russia

Helena Ruotsala

We continued our journey over the pasture for some distance towards a hill, below the slope of which there was a small wood. It was surrounded by a blue fence and the gate was open. Salbika Petrova, who was dressed in the Mari national costume, went ahead carrying a bag. Also, the director of the kolkhoz had brought along a bag containing the juice, lemonade and disposable cups he had obtained from the café. We followed. We had to wash our faces and hands in the drinking fountain situated in the fenced-in enclosure and at the same time toss a coin into it. Salbika did it first, then us visitors and the villagers. Not all were able to wash themselves, because there was so little space and so many people. Salbika took from her bag two cloths, laid them on the ground, placed bread, a pie or peremetch, juice and the disposable utensils on the cloth, and took cups of a shelf beside the fountain. At the same time she recited prayers in a low voice as she glanced up from time to time at a large leafy tree on the upper slope. She filled the cup with water from the fountain, swallowing the contents, a little of which she threw away and then sat down on the cloth. She put a board on which she had placed three torches (beeswax candles), one of which was laid by Mari\(^1\) on our behalf, at the back of the cloths. The bread was blessed and eaten. Salbika cut it three times, on the third occasion cutting off a lump and biting it three times. After that everyone got a turn at biting the bread, and after it had gone round it was placed again on the cloth. The peremetch, juice and lemonade were eaten at the same time. After this, Salbika went off to the large leafy tree,\(^2\) and made a gesture to Ildikó and me to follow her. When she got to the tree she touched it with both hands, kissed it, leaned against it and uttered a prayer. We were expected to do the same. After this, we returned to the fountain and consumed the food we had with us. We were told that nothing must be dropped on the ground or left there, that everything had to be eaten up and the place left in the same condition as that in which we had found it. Finally, Salbika said that because we had come so far and would not necessarily come back again, we should again drink sacred water from the fountain well and ask a blessing for the journey home and for the future. As a final act she cleaned up after us carefully, whittled the molten candle wax off the board and placed the enamel cups back on the little shelf that was in the birch tree next to the fountain. So doing it would be impossible to trace visitors to the sacrificial grove. Last of all, she took some lottery tickets out of her bag,\

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\(^1\) Mari is also a Finnish name and here means one of our participants.

\(^2\) At the time I didn’t notice whether it was a birch or a lime tree. In their own field notes the participating students had called the tree a birch. Both the birch, the oak and the lime may be considered sacred trees.
which she steeped in the water with care in order to multiply the chances of success, and then put them back in her bag. When we left our driver and a couple of other locals took a jugful of that sacred water along with them. Many of us fieldworkers filled our drinking bottles at the fountain, also perhaps because the water tasted fresh and good.¹

The vyd-ava ritual, performed for the Goddess of Water, was one of those rituals I attended while engaged in fieldwork in the Meadow Mari village of Untsho. When planning the expedition I had not intended to study the religion and its associated traditions, since the main objective of our research project² was to determine how the modernisation process has affected the daily life of Mari women since the Second World War.³ But as early as the first period of our fieldwork in June 2002, I noticed how important a part in the everyday life of women was played by preparation for festivities and various religious celebrations. Religion was also evident in daily affairs, in everyday situations in Mari households, since in every house opposite the main entrance was the Sacred Corner,⁴ in better cases even two, one in the farmhouse living room, the other in an area that more resembles our living rooms.

As an ethnologist I am not going to deliberate here on the boundaries that separate folk religion and religiosity, because this is an question that takes us further than the original purpose of this research, that is, beyond gendered spaces and places.⁵ The scientist of religion Tuija Hovi has defined religiosity in her doctoral thesis as a concept to which belong both an individual’s internalised conviction, and the behaviour and religious commitment im-

¹ TYKL/SPA/141, field notes 18.6.2002.
² The research project in question is that conducted by Associate Professor Ildikó Lehtinen and me “The effect of the modernisation process on the daily life of Mari women since the Second World War”, in connection with which we carried out fieldwork during three-week periods in both 2002 and 2003. We were accompanied by students of ethnology from both the University of Turku and the University of Helsinki. We engaged in cooperation with the Mari Scientific Research Institute (MarNII). The 2002–2003 project was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Albert Hämiäinen Fund. I continued the research on my own in 2004–2005 funded by the Kone Foundation and the Academy of Finland (decision SA 208289). I should like to thank all of my sponsors as well as those colleagues and students that shared in the fieldwork.
³ Another, perhaps in the earlier stages more significant, reason was that the folk religion of the Mari and other nationalities in Russia had in the eyes of outsiders, the Finnish media and new-age adherents, received an exotic stamp with its animal sacrifices and sacrificial groves.⁴ The Sacred Corner referred to in this article is comparable to the Icon Corner in Orthodox homes.
⁵ The question for this research “found” me, since during the first period of fieldwork I noticed that the village and its life were quite noticeably gendered. My first impressions of the folk religion perhaps strengthened this view even more. (See more Ruotsala 2005, 48–55.) During my fieldwork and thereafter, I have, nevertheless, been forced to ask myself questions such as those posed by Kaija Heikkinen in her work that considers the religion of Vepsian women in Russia: is the invisibility of men in the village and in its social life only an erroneous conception caused by my way of looking at things? (See Heikkinen 2006, 51.) This is a question I cannot answer in this article.
posed by that conviction (Hovi 2007:12). Bearing this definition in mind I shall concentrate here expressly on those spaces that relate to the Mari folk religion insofar as they have become apparent to me from observations of religious behaviour and in fieldwork. Nevertheless, I shall next present the religious domain of the Mari, and the changes that have taken place in it since the 1990s. After that, I examine the religious spaces of the Mari folk religion and how they are gendered. Finally, I focus on the role of women and their space.

The Mari and their religion

The Mari belong to the Finno-Ugrian nationalities that live in Russia. At present there are 604,800 Mari of which half reside in Mari El, which is an autonomous republic in the Federation of Russia. The Mari comprise a minority of Mari El’s inhabitants (43%), while Russians are in a majority (47%). The third largest ethnic minority are the Muslim Tatars (6%). Of the population of the Republic of Mari as many as 60% live in urban areas, although the majority of Mari people live in the rural areas (60%). On the basis of language, cultural ecology and history, the Mari can be divided into four different groups. The River Volga separates the Republic of Mari into two parts, and the most westerly group, the Hill Mari, live on the right bank of the Volga in the north-western hilly areas of the Republic. The Meadow Mari reside in the localities on the left bank of the Volga. A small group of North-western Mari can still be distinguished as a group of its own. They do not have a literary language of their own and have become merged with the Russian population. The forth is the large group of Eastern Mari who live outside the boundaries of Mari El in the Urals and in Bashkortostan (Saarinen 1985:196; Ruotsala 2005:13–15). Mari is divided into the Meadow and Hill literary languages. Of the Mari about 70% speak Mari as their mother tongue, although the language is mostly in use in the rural districts. Those moving to the urban areas often change their language to Russian.

As with many other Finno-Ugrian nationalities in Russia the Mari have lived for hundreds of years with both Orthodox Christians and Muslims as their neighbours, just as they have lived beside the adherents of other indigenous religions. For example, in the same administrative district as the village of Untsho there are also Tatar and Russian villages and in adjacent Tatarstan there are also Mari villages.

The influence of neighbouring nationalities is evident not only in many different cultural features, but also in the religion of the Mari. The Hill Mari, who comprise 10% of the Mari population, are Orthodox, but the Meadow Mari, and the Eastern Mari in the Diaspora living outside of the Republic of Mari who originally fled to avoid payment of taxes and forced conversion to Christianity, practise their indigenous religion. They call themselves tšiš
mari, which means ‘pristine Mari’. For example, the Mari who dwell in Islamic Bashkortostan call their sacrificial priest the mulla. The vernacular religion of the Mari contains features of the dominant religion in Russia, Orthodoxy, and the syncretism of their own religion, marla vera (see also Anttonen 2003:27).

This religion is often called nature religion, and the animating of nature is certainly illustrative of this. Previously, about 140 different godly beings or spirits that influence not only the forces of nature, but also the fate of humans and the more important activities, have been counted as belonging to the religion of the Mari. Of these can be mentioned, for instance, a kind of “highest god”, Oš Kugu Jumo, the unique creator of the universe and Šhočynava Jumo, the giver of all life (Toidybekova 1997, passim; Toidybekova 1998:253). This religion has adapted over the decades and centuries to the different changes and in the course of time many of the spirits have sunk into oblivion. For example, a male informant born in the 1920s said his grandfather prayed in the spring to the guardian spirit of the bees, mükš-kawa, but his father and he no longer did this. Beekeeping was the work of men earlier and the appropriate prayers were also recited by men. Nowadays, women can also participate in this activity.1

During the Soviet period both the Mari national culture, for example the national costume and religion, were the subject of fierce opposition and political agitation. The places in which the indigenous religion was performed, the sacrificial groves and the practising of religion were severely proscribed. In the 1930s local sacrificial priests were imprisoned and executed. The Mari religion provides clear evidence of those phenomena that opposed the Soviet ideology under the conditions of a strict political ideology, during the entire Soviet period. It survived in villages like Untsho in spite of the severe coercion during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, prayers and sacrificial ceremonies were arranged in places in secret in defiance of intimidation and punishment. Only at the end of the 1940s were the Mari granted permission to arrange a ceremony in honour of the victory achieved in the Second World War by the Soviet Union (Luehrmann 2005:38 > Ks. Sanukov 2000:129; Krasnov 1959; Štšipkov 1998). My colleague Ildikó Lehtinen, who has been engaged in field work among the Mari since 1986, related that it was only after several years that people began to talk about their indigenous religion even though she had seen and recognised objects that were related to worship, such as a white sacrificial cloak used by a priest that hung in a clothes shed (Lehtinen 1999:100).

According to Kimmo Kääriäinen, since the growth of atheism or religious apathy, which was intentionally promulgated by the Soviet administration and which was part of modernism, the course of ideological development has changed, almost making an about-turn. Along with the collapse of the

1 Holmberg 1914:42–45; TYKL/SPA/141, Field notes 15.6.2002.
Soviet Union and communist ideology religion began to interest people. At the beginning of this millennium a greater proportion of the population were believers than at the beginning of the 1990s. Correspondingly, the number of acknowledged atheists has fallen considerably (Kääriäinen 2004:92). Interest in astrology and many other forms of paranormal phenomena has grown rapidly. According to the Russian scholar Irina Sedakova, “the several decades of totalitarian aggressive atheism have failed to destroy the folk religion” among the peoples in Russia. Thus the attempts of the politicians to create a new religion with new “saints”, rituals, values and formulae were successful only for a limited period of time (Sedakova 2001:132).

This post-Soviet development is clearly visible in the religious sphere in the Republic of Mari. The status of the Mari indigenous religion became consolidated in the 1990s and the sacrificial ceremonies became one of the most noticeable manifestations of Mari identity. Beginning in 1991 – after almost 50 years – common prayers and sacrificial services were once again being arranged in many places in the Republic of Mari and in the Diaspora, only now this was being done publicly. The Mari people’s own traditional religion was officially recognised as a religion and those places that had formerly been in danger of being destroyed, over 300 sacred groves in the country, were registered and given protection.

The reinforcing of customs related to the indigenous religion has been a part of building Mari identity in the same way as has the fostering of the mother tongue. The Mari intelligentsia have played an important role in fortifying the ethnic religion. For example, texts of prayers and rituals have been collected from archives and published as a book (Popov 1991). In 1991, the religious community responsible for the practice of the Mari ethnic religion, Ošmarij – Čimarij (The White Mari – The Pristine Mari), was officially registered in Russia (Toidybekova 1998:253).

It has been shown in the article written by Pekka Hakamies on religiosity in the ceded territory of Karelia how categorical membership of a religious group is: one either belongs to the Orthodox Church or one does not belong to it, and membership of other religious organisations was not encountered in the field research (Hakamies 2007:170). On the other hand, among the Mari it is common for the same family to include baptised Orthodox Christians and followers of the indigenous religion, and for both groups to participate in each others’ worship. In our fieldwork those interviewed stressed how members of various religious groups, both indigenous religion adherents as well as Orthodox and Muslims, have lived side by side in the villages and respected the faith of others.

Me, I am a pagan, but my husband was baptised as an Orthodox. We both go to the grove in the summer, my husband accompanies me to the sacrificial
This was the reply of a 65-year-old woman in June 2002 when I asked her to which religious organisation the family belonged. I met the same couple in July 2005 at the Petro’s Day celebration, on which occasion the husband approached the sacrificial priest and asked for a blessing.

According to information from 1995, 5–7% of residents in the Republic of Mari were bona fide followers of “the nature religion”, and 60% were syncretists. The proportion of Orthodox was then 30%, and most of those were ethnic Russians (Toidybekova 1998:262 > Šabykov & Isanbajev 1995:126–128). However, the Mari only enjoyed a tailwind for a short time, because in the 2000s it has run into opposition and is on the way to forfeiting the official status it has just attained. To some extent this is because – as evident from the previous citation – young people only participate a little in the observances of the indigenous religion, and to some extent for administrative and political reasons. For example, a Yoshkar-Ola priest was accused of agitation against a national group when he published a pamphlet entitled Onajeng ojla (A priest speaks). Those distributing the pamphlet were also accused. These charges were later dropped in 2007.

From the point of view of the Church the pursuits of folk religion include heretical and pagan features (Heikkinen 2006, 248 > Štšipkov 1998, 98–124, 187–188). As the Orthodox Church reinforces its position it will probably mean that in the rural districts of the Mari Republic also there will be increased control, normalisation and hierarchy. This has already become evident, according to villagers, in the proselytising of the Church for instance, which takes place in the centre of the raion. During the last couple of years, the Orthodox Church has also gained new members among young members of families who are followers of the indigenous religion, which in turn gives reason for disappointment and unrest among the older tšij Mari inhabitants. “Orthodoxy is now such a fashion, attractive golden crosses just glitter around the neck”, as one 58-year-old female interviewee expressed it in our conversation on why the young no longer visit the village sacrificial grove. In her opinion the visible symbol of Orthodoxy, the crucifix necklace, was one persuasive reason for conversion. She thought the young converts to Orthodoxy wore the crucifix necklaces far too blatantly.

In the village of Untsho Orthodoxy is seen nowadays in, for example, the processions of the cross, and icons placed in the Sacred Corners of houses. There is no church in the village today, and a building from the 1930s originally intended as a church is now a cultural centre and discothèque. The nearest church is situated in the administrative centre of the district of Morki,

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1 TYKL/SPA/141, Field notes 17.6.2002.
2 See as an example and for more information on the headwind www.mari.ee.
where a mosque was built in 2004. Since the beginning of the 1990s several other churches and sects have established centres of activity in the Republic of Mari and perform proselytising (see e.g. Väliaho 2004). The representatives of other churches, missionaries of the Finnish Church for instance, have also been welcome to visit the village for the Petro’s Day sacrificial ceremony in the summer.¹

The collective spaces of the tšij Mari

The sacrificial grove, oto, is the common sacred place of the Mari, where sacrifices and prayers related to, in particular, the agrarian economic cycle and the welfare of the family and individual are performed. These collective religious spaces that are part of the folk religion are clearly visible to the visitor on arrival in the Mari village. The visitor in the 2000s is greeted by the same scene as that met by Uno Holmberg (1914:65) on his visit to a certain Mari village at the beginning of the 1900s:

Reaching the Pagan Cheremiss² settlement the first thing the traveller notices are the dense copses, very often in the middle of a large patch of land. Except for the burial grounds and beekeeping plots, these are mostly sacrificial woods. In areas where there are many Cheremiss villages clustered together large numbers of these can be seen (Holmberg 1914:65).

Both the sacrificial grove at present in use and the nearby graveyard are an essential part of the mental landscape of the village of Untsho. Furthermore, the former locations of sacrificial groves, no longer in use, are known. For example, a reminder of this is a lone lime tree standing in the middle of fields which belong to a collective farm on the other side of the highway near the buildings of that collective. Every attempt is made nowadays to protect the groves, by establishing colonies of bees near the grove or by building a fence around it, to prevent encroaching roads and pasturage from eroding it piece by piece.

There are many strict behavioural regulations in the groves. It was also made clear to our group that we as visitors would not be allowed to go to the grove without permission, although a promise was made to show us the grove later. On the Day of the Holy Spirit 24th June one of the sacrificial priests, kart, gave a more detailed description of how to behave, when introducing the grove. These sacrificial priests have held a key position in ensuring that the Mari people’s own religion has been preserved through oral tradition, because its content, prayers and rites have been passed as a tradition

¹ Oral communication, August 2005, from a Finnish worker in the Yoshkar-Ola congregation.
² Cheremiss is the former name of the Mari. The name used today, Mari, has been taken from their own language.
from one priest to the next safeguarded from outsiders. When he showed us the grove the sacrificial priest was dressed in priestly attire, a white hand-embroidered shirt and white felt cap. According to him, people respect the grove. The social structure of the community is also maintained through the imposition of sanctions, and thus those entering the grove in dirty garments or an unclean mind are turned back in order to clean themselves up and change their clothing (cf. Douglas 2000:166).

There must be no rushing around the grove without cause. Nothing should be picked up off the ground, no sacrifices, no flowers or branches; otherwise the one taking them in will be contaminated. Those entering the grove should be clean, having taken a bath in the sauna and changed into clean clothes. If anyone does come in unclean, that one is told to go away, wash and change clothes. The sacrificial gifts expose anyone who enters the grove in an unclean state. Further, those of other faiths are allowed in on condition that they are clean and have a conciliatory attitude.¹

On this summer day as we got to know the sacrificial priest and with the help of the Chairperson of the Village Council became familiar with the sacrificial grove, and wading through the tall grass riddled with nettles, everyone could feel for themselves with their legs burning from the nettle pricks that the vegetation had not unnecessarily been disturbed. The trees, branches or other plants in the groves had not to be destroyed, and the trees were not to be touched until they had fallen to the ground of their own accord. After that, they could be chopped up and used to make a fire for sacrificial purposes. The Chairman of the Village Council has particular responsibility for the sacrificial grove and has, together with the sacrificial priests, planted saplings in place of already fallen trees and pays a visit of inspection to the grove twice a month.

According to their function, the sacrificial groves themselves have their own hierarchical order. Some of them are dedicated to the highest gods, others to lesser gods or they are used for the performance of agrarian rites of the calendar, at which the sacrifices are only grain, milk and egg produce. For example, for the large and communal joint sacrificial celebrations, the tumja kumaltys, there are groves in which these collective Mari sacrificial celebrations are performed in the administrative district, and villages have their own sacrificial groves for village and common prayer ceremonies, the jal kumaltys. Furthermore, a family or kinfolk may have a sacrificial grove for their own prayers, the jel kumaltys (Holmberg 1914:65–66; Toidybekova 1998:253–354). Nowadays, those belonging to different faiths can visit the groves and are also welcome to attend the sacrificial ceremonies. In earlier times it was completely forbidden for women to enter certain groves, the so-

¹ TYKL/SPA/141, Field notes 24.6.2002.
called *keremet*, for instance. These days one can also go into the grove alone to pray; for example, a woman or a married couple who have waited in vain for a pregnancy may come, if they need to, even on their own to the grove to pray or ask a blessing before departing on a journey.

In addition to sacrificial groves, graveyards are also important places of remembrance for the Mari. They can even be distinguished from a long distance in the wide expanses of field as a fenced copse. It is also a custom to plant trees, and on this account graveyards resemble sacrificial groves. On approach, the Mari – and especially the *tšij* Mari – graveyards differ from the Orthodox to the extent that they have a national style of their own, since on the Mari graveside monuments the deceased is often depicted in national costume. The Mari hang an embroidered towel on the graveside monuments or on a tree next to the grave, whereas the Orthodox, for their part, put a cross on the memorial. Visits are made to the graveyard in remembrance of the deceased on certain days after the death and additionally at the *Semyk*, in June, which is the special day for remembering the deceased (for further details, see Ruotsala 2007; Molotova 2003:78–80).

The religious spaces of the individual

Before I got the chance to visit the Untsho sacrificial grove and the two village graveyards one of which was the graveyard of the *tšij* Mari, I became acquainted with a Mari house and its gendered spaces. The spaces in the house can also be viewed from a religious perspective and sacred space is found here, too. The ethnic religion of the Mari is evident in everyday domestic life, not only in the Sacred Corner, but in many other ways still today even.

Marja-Liisa Keinänen, who has studied the Karelian vernacular religion, writes that the Karelian house can be considered a micro-cosmos, which mirrors the religious and social organisation of the community, the cleanliness of which is essentially the responsibility of women, which is also entirely true of the Mari house. In both, the religiously sanctioned space can be divided into vertical and horizontal zones. On the vertical dimension, the house is separated into women’s and again, men’s parts where the Sacred Corner is located; the women’s part, conversely, contains the stove. This is not a categorical separation, because it is possible to move about in the area belonging to the other gender. The division into women’s and men’s space in today’s Mari house does not appear to be as inflexible as it still was in the childhood days of the pensioners I interviewed. On the other hand, on the horizontal dimension space is divided into three parts, of which the farthest

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1 For the Mari the *keremet* has meant both a demon being and the grove or forest in which it dwells (see Kalijev 1998:276).

from the door is the most venerated and cleanest area. That is where the Sacred Corner of the Mari is situated; for the Karelians the equivalent space is the jumalsuppu, where the icons are kept. The middle zone is neutral and, then again, the zone beside the door is the unclean area. This is a common area frequented by both women and men (Keinänen 2006:234 and this volume p. 128; Ränk 1949:59; Ruotsala 2007).

The stove situated in the women’s part is the heart of the dwelling house and therefore largely determines the interior decoration and other matters. The stove is the central point of existence, for preparing food, baking and boiling water. It is also a source of warmth and light. According to Marja-Liisa Keinänen, in the Karelian house the women’s part is the reproductive centre of the dwelling and the baking oven is a symbolic womb, which in the oven-baking culture fed the members of the household and also kept them warm (Keinänen 2006:236 and this volume p. 128). The women also cook the sacrificial food offerings for the sacrificial festivities and prayers at home, with the exception of certain sacrificial grove meals, which the men had to prepare. For the Mari, fire has been a friend of mankind, because it produces warmth and food. Fire cleanses, but it should not be polluted nor angered. Special sacrificial words have been recited to the Mother of fire at the sacrificial feast (Holmberg 1914:53–54).

From the point of view of the welfare of the family important prayer and sacrificial rites have been performed at home, as, for example, is the case with a part of the memorial feast for the deceased, Semyk. The women’s role is important from the standpoint of the successful performance of these, since purity and maintaining cleanliness are an important part of the daily activities of women. Their tasks include fetching water and cleaning, just as much as cooking. The home – as also clothes and the body – are kept clean and before celebrations the cleaning is done and purification takes place. Abnormal phenomena, objects and animals that have taken on an anomalous meaning are often regarded as unclean, forbidden and dangerous. The symbolic significance of anomaly is to remind the community of its own limits, within the structures of which social values are renewed. According to Mary Douglas, there is symbolic value in those contacts that are considered dangerous. The purpose of concepts related to separation, purification, the setting of limits, and sanctions for contravening them is to create order for experiences which are not of themselves comprehensible. In general terms, purity and cleanliness help understand and control the surrounding changing world and also proffer protection against evil spirits (Douglas 2000:49–51; See also Lehtinen 2006:33, 38).

Like fire, water is considered to belong to those forces that can destroy the power of magic. The renewal effect of both water and fire has been used to advantage in various forms of worship and rites, such as weddings, funerals and Semyk, the memorial ceremony for the deceased. Contact with the dead spread danger and had to be protected against by washing. Purification
was also a means of preventing or curing illnesses. As a general rule, someone moving from one space to another, such as a woman about to be married, is in danger and also endangers others. The first task of a newlywed woman in a new home was to fetch the water on the day after the wedding. In this way she would appear before the goddess of the spring or well, offering as a sacrifice a coin or beads (Eliade 1958:194; Douglas 2000:159; Immonen 2009:105).

In the traditional Mari dwelling used in the past, a wooden hut, there used to be a shelf on the back wall reserved for objects and utensils sacrificed to the Mari household deity, and blessed in sacrificial ceremonies. This shelf and the objects on it were denied to women. Moreover, visitors, as well as women, were forbidden to approach this shelf (Holmberg 1914:31; Jevsevjev 2002:36. See also Minniahmetova 2003:32.

The shelf does not exist in the dwelling of the Mari Nowadays; rather it has been replaced by the Sacred Corner. In the Sacred Corner behind the cloth there may be both an image of a saint, or torches blessed at a sacrificial feast, a branch, an egg or piece of bread as a token of the folk religion. The master of the house lights the torches in the Sacred Corner, but the cloths covering the Sacred Corner are the achievement of the hands of the women. Upon entering the new house, a young daughter-in-law will also change the cloths in front of the Sacred Corner to those she has embroidered herself.

The boundaries of the use of space in households are not as clearly defined as they were even in the 1950s, according to those interviewed. The stove no longer demarcates the spaces of men and women so strictly, although the preparation of food still remains mostly the work of women and girl (see also Dragadze 1993:159). According to interviewees – 60-year-olds speaking of their youth – the seating arrangements at the dining table were strictly defined. The most highly regarded place was in the Sacred Corner, where visitors are still seated. The mistress of the house had been seated near the stove, so that she could bring the food to the table quickly. The master of the house or head of the family, for his part, used to sit at the head of the table and the younger couple beside the window, in such a way that the male was closer to the Sacred Corner.

The Sacred Corner is still in use, although its meaning has changed a little, perhaps becoming more secular. In recent decades the television has become widespread and found its own place in almost every household in the Sacred Corner of the auxiliary living room, since there is, so to speak, an empty space awaiting it.

The spirits watch over those asleep

Prayers and sacrificial rites are examples of a number of means by which protection is sought from threatening dangers. Protection and security is
brought not only by the blue colouring of the walls and corners, but also by juniper branches placed on the doors and wall posts in the entrance to the sauna for instance, as well as by lucky symbols such as horseshoes on the threshold. Coins fastened to the ceiling in the construction phase ensure that the household will continue to be prosperous.\(^1\) Embroidered protective patterns in women’s clothing also protect against evil spirits.

In the former Mari houses the door was in the eastern wall, because the Mari said their prayers towards the sun, through the open door (Sepejev 2005:139). The protection afforded by the gods is apparent, for example, in the arrangement of the beds and in the sleeping order. According to the Mari beliefs, people should sleep in bed so that the head is either towards the rising sun (east) or on the day side (south), not so that the head would be on the evening (west) or night (north) side. If possible, while sleeping, the head should be towards the Sacred Corner. Nor should the legs be towards the Sacred Corner during sleep. The sleeping order is also regulated – at least in principle, since changes have taken place for practical reasons. The man should sleep towards the room as if protecting the woman against threats from outside and evil thoughts. One example is my interviewee Elizaveta, born in 1950, who said that, personally, at first she slept beside the wall but, for practical reasons, after the birth of the children she began to sleep in the room, in order to quickly attend to a crying baby.\(^2\)

There are also places inside the house where no-one should sleep. In the living room, entrance and on the hatch leading down into the cellar situated in the summer room. The cellar hatch is a dangerous place, because while walking up and down the stairs the world above and the world below meet. People face many dangers in the world below.

### The place of women in religious rituals

As I have already mentioned, in the early decades of the last century women were not permitted to enter all sacrificial groves. On account of the possible supranatural danger in sacrificial groves and other holy places, these are not authorised to all members of the community or they should be avoided in the evenings, for example. Furthermore, in earlier times it was only permitted for males to attend some of the sacrificial rituals (Holmberg 1914:38, 69). The Mari indigenous religion has been a male-dominated religion, in which men have been the leaders and experts, the performers of rites, and women have been in the shadow, ignored (Nenola 1999:9).

The narrative at the beginning of this article describes the sanctification rites performed for the water goddess at the well of Apakir Pamash near the

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\(^1\) TYKL/SPA/169, Field notes 21.6.2005. See also Holmberg 1914:55.

\(^2\) TYKL/SPA/169, field notes July 2005. I wish to thank my Udmurt colleague Tatjana Minniahmetova PhD for drawing my attention to the Mari sleeping order.
village of Untsho. Water plays an important part in the life and daily affairs of the Mari, especially Mari women. The water goddess, vyd ava, is so important to the villagers of Untsho that even though the place of sacrifice is situated across the border in the neighbouring, predominantly Islamic, Republic of Tatarstan, and the Mari are no longer allowed to use it, they defy this prohibition. A few years ago two Tatars of the Islamic faith were buried in the sacrificial grove and the villagers are of the opinion that this was done in order to make them relinquish the spot. They are reminded of this by the Islamic symbol of the crescent moon on the gate.

This sanctification rite performed for the water goddess differs from other collective rituals of the Mari insofar as it is carried out by a woman. Traditionally only men have acted as sacrificial priests (kart) and conducted prayers and sacrificial feasts. Nowadays, women can also conduct prayers, those at least which men, for various reasons, have no longer been able to perform, for example because they do not remember the procedure or the wording of the prayers (e.g. Kalijev 1998:296). Actually, the wording of the prayers and sacrificial rites have now been published as a pamphlet, so that even texts that have been forgotten can been used again. These printed texts are used directly in sacrificial services, and what was formerly an oral religion has gradually taken on a written form.

Prayers which are said at home, such as for instance those connected with the memory of someone deceased, can also be performed by women, since those reciting these have been elder members of the family. For example, in the celebration in memory of the dead, Semyk, the remembrance and the associated prayers are managed by the appropriate family itself. The first to recite the prayers is the one who is remembers them best. When necessary, other members of the family can substitute for the one conducting the rites, so that everything is duly performed in as correct an order as possible. Every member of the family in turn participates in this rite.1

At the largest communal feasts, such as the Petro’s Day sacrificial feast in July organised once every three years, it is the men who have the visible role as sacrificial priests and preparers of the sacrificial food offerings. In addition to the customary sacrificial priests there are also assistant priests and other males from the village who prepare the sacrificial meals which consist of cooked meat and cereal. Most of the participants, however, are females. The women also have a background role to play, since they have prepared the blinis, breads, cottage cheeses and drinks, and sewn and embroidered the cloths brought as a sacrificial offering at home. They have also ensured that before the feast the place will be cleaned and clean clothes will be worn.

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1 TYKL/SPA/141, field notes 12.6.2002. See also Kaija Heikkinen (2006:13) who gives an account of Vepsian women’s rituals where, at the end of the ceremony, the performer of the rituals asked the other participants whether the proceedings had taken place correctly and what else might be added.
They sit on benches at the side in the sacrificial grove until the meal is ready, the sacrificial priests have said the prayers and blessings, and the meal can be enjoyed together.1

Many scholars have drawn attention to the increasing visibility of women in the religious domain and their role as elders, as well as to their increasing influence in the community. For example, in the opinion of Lidia Toidybekova who has studied the Mari indigenous religion, the women have keener religious insight. Women are better at remembering the prayers and rituals, which has enabled them to undertake a new role (Toidybekova 1998:267; Siikala 2000:83). The role of women in the present-day Mari community is in many ways decisive, because the cultural future of the community is also in their hands. Women make plans for and organise various ceremonies at which their own ethnic identity is created and renewed. These rituals, for their part, express the structure of social relations in the community. They bestow on these relations a visible form, and thus enable people to recognise their own community and feel that they are a part of it. During the last decade religious rituals have been transformed into important ethnic feasts, at which the Mari identity is on display. Ethnic costumes are an important part of this public ethnic identity; they are also used in the religious rituals.

The changes resulting from the process of modernisation are reflected in the status of women and also in the expansion of the religious domain. For example, Sarah Ashwin has shown in her own studies that masculinity has been in a state of crisis in post-Soviet society. During the Soviet period both men and women had their own important roles as builders of communist society. The woman’s role was that of a working mother with responsibility for going to work, raising future generations and taking care of domestic affairs. Men had a more confined role, although of higher status, in the public space. The State reduced men’s responsibility as fathers and protectors. Thus, according to Sarah Ashwin, “/----/ masculinity became socialised and embodied in the Soviet state, the masculinity of individual men being officially defined by their position in the service of the State” (Ashwin 2000:1, 17). The concept of masculinity was based more on work than individual patriarchal authority. Men were paid better wages than women during the Soviet era, so that it was considered “natural” for the man to be the main provider, and this was never questioned (Kiblitskaya 2000:55–56).

Nowadays the situation is different, because it is easier for women to find work and ways of providing for the family, or women have taken on those responsibilities that earlier belonged to the State. Family farming, which means that survival depends on a couple of cows, a vegetable garden, mainly for potatoes, and the products of beekeeping has, in the hands of women, proved to be an effective strategy for earning income even in the village of

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Untsho. The women of the village are kept employed, looking after the home and children, and they attend to the practical matters and accept responsibility for the family. So men that remain without gainful employment are left without authority and responsibility for family and everyday affairs, and this is at least one reason for the lack of visibility of men in their own community. It may be that the distorted demographic structure of the rural villages, the dominance of older women, strengthens female independent initiative both in the domestic sphere and in ethnopolicy, a feature characteristic of several different Finno-Ugrian communities in Russia. Women, however, are visible and responsible for the family life, bringing up children and doing the housekeeping. They also accept responsibility for the culture and identity of the community and transfer this from one generation to the next. The activeness of women as, for example, spectators at religious festivities is also related to supporting the community as a whole. Aili Nenola refers to this when she writes about the custom of women to attend to the traditional rites for the deceased, whereby women thus maintain “those forms of communal behaviour abandoned by the public authorities” (Nenola 1986:126).

Female-dominated religion?

I have here examined the gendered spaces and places in the village of Untsho, and on the basis of my fieldwork religious space is one of the community’s most important spaces. Further, religious space is undoubtedly gendered (Nenola 1990:11). Susan Sered has, among others, considered the religion of women and female-dominated religion, through which different forms of religious behaviour and thought can be characterised. She regards the spiritual and organisational leadership of women and, in particular female participation, as typical features of this. According to her, women’s religious leadership is less hierarchical than in religions dominated by men. Women attain the position of a religious leader only after a slow process, often involving sickness, whereas men are quickly able to become religious leaders. Women concentrate on everyday matters important to them and religious activity that furthers the welfare of family and relatives. According to Sered, women’s religiosity is bound together with the everyday, and the religion of women is closely connected to food rituals. In her opinion, women deal with human relationships in their religion, whereas for men regulations, symbols and knowledge are important. Women even make religion homely by emphasising those rituals and symbols that are taken directly from everyday life (Sered 1994:237–243; see also Heikkinen 2006:20–22).

All of this fits the Mari vernacular religion very well. The Mari folk religion of today can be seen to a large extent as a women’s religion, despite the fact that officially it is men who are the sacrificial priests and this task is handed down from men to men. As the rulers of everyday matters, the
women also rule a significant part of the performance of their own folk religion. In the case of the Mari it is also a question of something other than religion, since it is through religion that the Mari ethnic identity is created and renewed and ethnopolicy is formulated. The boundaries of the gendered spaces that have earlier been strict and difficult to surmount have, in the last few decades, become reduced and began to fade, but still exist.

(Translation: Dennis Estill)

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Roses and Chrysanthemums – Women and the Materiality of Religion in Portugal

Lena Gemzöe

One aspect of everyday religion in Portugal with a marked gendered character is the extensive use of religious objects. What are the implications of the relation between materiality, gender and religious worship in the Portuguese context? In this chapter, I will discuss these issues with particular focus on women’s varied use of flowers in everyday religious practices.

In exploring women’s involvement with religious objects, their responsibilities in the domestic sphere are a useful starting point. The ethnography in this chapter is based on fieldwork carried out during the 1990s in Vila Branca, a small pseudonymous town on the north-western coast of Portugal.¹

In north-western Portugal women are especially connected to houses. It is common practice to let the youngest daughter of a household inherit the house. Bonds between mothers and daughters are strong, and the matrilateral patterns of inheritance have contributed to women’s traditionally strong position (although this position is being undermined by the diminishing value of agriculture). Women’s responsibility for houses is thus connected to their being the owners of valuable property, at least in rural neighborhoods.

Women’s roles as caretakers of the house include responsibility for the material aspects of the house, for cleaning and decorating. A large number of religious objects exist in many homes. These objects, paintings with religious themes, rosaries, crucifixes and statuettes of Mary and the saints, are simultaneously objects of decoration and of devotion (cf. Barna 1994). Women are more involved in the handling of these objects than men are, and this seems to be related to both the decorative and the devotional function of the objects.

The task of decorating the home is linked to the traditional feminine arts of making crochet and embroidery. Although it is mostly older women who carry on the art, even younger women appreciate these products and might buy them from older women whom they know. It is common that a house,

¹ The periods of fieldwork and study in Portugal were funded by The Swedish Institute; Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse; Stiftelsen Lats Hiertas minne; Svenska Sällskapet för Geografi och Antropologi; Wallenbergstiftelsens jubileumsfond and Crafoordska stiftelsen. The writing of this article was made possible by funding from the European Science Foundation as part of the project Europilgrim, Norface program “The reemergence of religion as a social force in Europe?”
especially if it is inherited from the older generation, is decorated almost exclusively with religious objects, complemented by works of crochet and embroideries. In the bedroom it is very common to have a crucifix or a rosary hanging on the wall over the bed or the bedstead. In the bedrooms one also finds paintings of Mary and Christ. The themes of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary are common. Younger couples and more modern oriented families reject such religious paintings, associated as they are with a rural, old-fashioned milieu. One type of object, however, which is still popular are little statuettes of Mary and the saints. Such statuettes are called *santinhos* (little saints).

*Santinhos* are brought home from pilgrimages and so remind the owner of the trip. They are bought in the special shops which sell *artigos religiosos* (religious artifacts). Statuettes of Our Lady of Fátima are extremely common and found in almost every house in Vila Branca. The older houses with a religious tradition might posses an *oratório* (a home altar) – a small cupboard where the *santinhos* are guarded in front of which the family prays. Those who do not possess an *oratório* place the *santinhos* on a commode either in the living room or the bedroom, thus creating a home altar. A common place to put the *santinhos*, when they are not used as devotional objects and have become mere decoration, is on women’s vanity tables. Thus, it is not uncommon to see a statuette of Our Lady between lipsticks and bottles of perfume.

Cleaning and decorating, and handling religious artifacts in the home give women a special relationship to the material culture of Catholicism. But in the public religious sphere, too, women pay a lot of attention to the material and sensual dimensions of religion. There is one type of object that is exclusively handled by women in public religious contexts, one which combines the visual, tactile and olfactory dimensions of religious artifacts in a perfect way. This object is flowers.

**The feminization of religion**

Before I go into an exploration of women’s floral culture of Vila Branca, I will point out some general features of religious life. As many ethnographers have noted for local communities in southern Europe, women seem to predominate in religious practices. However, the analytical implications of this observation have not been fully explored. In Vila Branca, what I call a feminization of religion, i.e. a predominance of women in religious practice, is clearly observable. Women predominate in the cult of Mary and the saints and more often than men make pilgrimages to sacred sites such as the shrine of Our Lady of Fátima in the middle of Portugal. Women also make more vows to Mary and the saints than men do (a vow is a conditional prayer to a
holy figure). In fact, some men declare that they leave all interactions with Mary and the saints to their wives.

Women’s numerical predominance in various manifestations of the Marian cult in Portugal entails a feminization of religion in another sense: a process of interpretation in which religious themes and modes of expression rooted in women’s concerns and experiences are elaborated. Women’s involvement in the Marian cult is embedded in their everyday activities of mothering and caring for their families, in fact women’s devotional acts can be seen as spiritual expressions of concrete activities of mothering and caring (cf. Gemzöe 2000, 2005).

The feminization of religion as distinguishable in the Marian cult in Vila Branca, is in similar ways recognizable in death-related practices. Death-related practices have a central place in social and religious life in Portugal, as in cultures of the Atlantic fringe (Feijó & Pina-Cabral 1983, Goldey 1983). In Vila Branca, women predominate in rituals for the dead such as prayers at the moment of death, cleansing and dressing the corpse and prayers for the dead at the tombs in the cemetery. Similarly to women’s practice of making vows to Mary their religious roles in death-related practices are embedded in the activity of caring. Care for the elderly, the dying and the dead is assumed mainly by women, and death-related rituals reflect and express the activity of caring. (cf. Gemzöe 2000, 2008). As I will discuss further, women’s involvement in the cult of Mary and the saints and in death-related rituals forms the religious context in which the floral culture is expressed.

Gender and the culture of flowers

Building on a large cross-cultural and historical material, Goody (1993) makes some generalizing conclusions on the subject of what he calls the culture of flowers. Goody offers rich ethnographic evidence on what he sees as one of the general features of the culture of flowers: its centrality to worship. In a variety of cultures, flowers are offered to the gods and to the dead, thereby becoming a material manifestation of the link between humans and the divine.

Goody gives multiple of examples of the associations of flowers with women and femininity (although the connection is not universal). Writing about Greek antiquity, which is where he places the origins of the European culture of flowers, Goody describes the garlands of flowers used in Greece to adorn the statues of gods (among other things). He cites Sappho who writes: “It’s always the girls, who weave the garlands of flowers” (1993:59). This remark by Sappho could be made about contemporary Vila Branca: it is always the girls or the women who make the wreaths, bouquets and flower arrangements so abundantly used in religious contexts.
However, in Vila Branca women not only create the flower arrangements, they are also in charge of the way the flowers are used in religious ceremonies. The usage of flowers in Vila Branca can be characterized by Goody’s description (richly evidenced in ancient Rome and Greece and later during the Renaissance): flowers are used as gifts to the gods (saints) and to the dead. However, in his analysis of the culture of flowers Goody does not incorporate the significance of gender. But, if we bring together the two central aspects of the floral culture in Vila Branca, its centrality to worship and the fact that it is women who are in charge of the use of flowers, it becomes clear that the floral culture can be seen as one more dimension of the feminization of religion. Vila Branca women use flowers to accompany their prayers to the saints and to the dead; the flowers are the material manifestation of their relationship with the divine. Goody writes that, cross-culturally, flowers are used “…above all in establishing, maintaining and even ending relationships, with the dead as with the living, with divinities as well as humans” (1993:2). The richly elaborated floral culture in Vila Branca is a medium through which women establish and maintain relationships with the saints and the dead.

**Flowers for the saints**

Women’s use of flowers can be seen as both decoration and as worship and has to be approached from both these angles. At one level women’s use of flowers in the religious sphere is an extension of their role as caretakers of houses. As women are responsible for houses, they are responsible for the cleaning and decorating of churches and chapels, of tombs, niches and stone crosses. For these purpose, women grow flowers in their kitchen gardens.\(^1\)

Flowers constitute the most important means of decorating churches and chapels; they are the material means by which the church is transformed and renovated. The task of decorating statues, paintings and altars is institutionalized in the female role of *zeladora* (from *zelar*, intense commitment, zeal) and represents a type of female religious expertise. *Zeladoras* are women of all ages, normally recruited as young girls if they show interest in assuming some voluntary task in the church. Assuming the task of *zeladora* implies a special responsibility. A *zeladora* has to take special care of her garden where she grows flowers. Sometimes she has to buy flowers. The church contributes money for the flowers, especially at major festivities, but the work of the *zeladora* is unpaid.

\(^1\) In Vila Branca, as in other rural cultures of Europe, the use of flowers in the secular domain, typical to urban milieus of Europe, is not common. The yards surrounding Vila Branca houses (with only a few exceptions) do not contain gardens where flowers are grown for display. The flowers women grow for religious purposes are sown in a corner of the kitchen garden, with no particular attention to how they are planted.
A zeladora has to be someone who attends mass regularly and who has a special talent and a sense for the aesthetic qualities in a flower arrangement. For major religious occasions, a zeladora will need knowledge of techniques of flower arrangements and of different qualities of flowers. The most experienced zeladora possesses a good deal of this knowledge and might well compete with the professional florist that are occasionally hired by the church for major feasts. Among the older women there are zeladoras who have tended the same altar for a lifetime. These women have an intense devotional relationship with the saint whose altar they see to (a devotion explicit in the word zeladora “one who feels zeal”). One informant said that formerly there were even those who chose not to marry to be able to carry on with their duties as zeladora.

Vila Branca has one church with seven zeladoras, each one responsible for one altar with an image or statue. The chapel of the town’s patron saint, Our Lady of the Calm Weather at Sea, has three zeladoras. Further, the two smaller chapels, Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes and Chapel of Saint Sebastian, have one zeladora each.

Usually, the zeladora of church and chapel do their decorating on Saturday morning, so that the statues and images will be surrounded by fresh flowers at Sunday mass when the parishioners come to the church. The flowers surrounding the image of Our Lady are an important part of the sight that meets the devotees at their attendance the church and at their prayer in front of the images. Zeladoras are very conscious about this responsibility – it is their duty to ensure that the church and chapels radiate the beauty and cleanliness that everyone expects of a sacred place. The zeladoras with the most prestige are those in charge of chapels that receive many visitors de fora, i.e. from outside the community. This is why the zeladora of Our Lady of Lourdes has a very important task. The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes is visited by people who come by car on Sundays, and during the summer is one of the places recommended to tourists. Entering the Grotto, the sight of the statue surrounded by flowers and the smell of herbs is one of the experiences of beauty that visitors enjoy. Zeladoras themselves take great joy in the task and admire and compare all the flower arrangements of the church.

One spring evening I bumped into a zeladora and her friend outside the church in the rural area. They asked me to step inside the church as they were just going to take a final look at the flower arrangements. On this occasion the church was decorated in part with mimosa which was uncommon, as wild flowers are seldom used. We sat down for a while and enjoyed the sweet odor of the mimosa that filled the entire church, admiring this unusual arrangement.

There are no rigid rules concerning which flowers can be used in church decoration, but different colors have different symbolic associations. White stands for purity and flowers of this color, preferably roses, are always given to Our Lady, sometimes combined with pale pink roses, which are associated
with innocence, youth and femininity. Traditionally at weddings the bride should offer a bouquet of white flowers, symbolizing her virginity, at the statue of Our Lady at the end of the ceremony, but nowadays young brides put different colors in their bouquets, something which is interpreted as a sign of the diminished importance of virginity. A zeladora commenting on this said that even if the bride is a virgin, the aesthetic qualities of the bouquet and the desire to have a “chic” wedding have become more important. She added that it does indeed look nice with a bouquet of for example marguerites in different colors.

Purple flowers are used for funerals, for example to decorate the coffin. Purple stands for sorrow. It is a sad color, zeladoras say, and always use it to decorate the statue of Our Lady of the Sorrows, whose gown is purple. Red flowers are associated with both love and suffering and are used to decorate the images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus or the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The month of May is the prime month of flowers. It is also the month of Mary, who is especially connected to flowers. In Vila Branca, many asserted that May is Mary’s month because Our Lady allegedly appeared on the 13th of May at Fátima, Portugal’s major Marian shrine. However, Warner (1990) traces the origin of May as Mary’s month to Naples in the eighteenth century. The tradition in Catholic countries of adorning statues of Mary with flowers on the first of May constitutes a successful incorporation of earlier secular and pagan rites into Catholic worship, according to Warner. In antiquity, the Romans pelted each other with flowers, celebrating Flora, the goddess of harvest and fruitfulness, at the beginning of May. In medieval Europe on May Day, the Queen of May was crowned and celebrated. These ancient pagan fertility rites were absorbed into those aspects of the cult of Mary that associate her with fruitfulness, joy and flowers.

On the first of May, zeladoras are especially artistic, and abundant arrangements of flowers frame the images of Mary in church and chapels. The image of Our Lay of Fátima is given extra attention. White flowers dominate, creating a sense of light and purity around the familiar statue of Our Lady of Fátima. Inside the house, images of Mary might be decorated with flowers too.¹ The floral culture associated with the coming of summer on May Day has another expression in the tradition of making maias. Maias are wreaths of flowers that are hung on the front door or on the fishing boats. It is women who make maias and this is done on the first of May. When zeladoras decorate the images of Mary in churches and chapels, ordinary women decorate houses or boats with maias made of wild-flowers. However, the tradition of making maias is not associated with Mary. When asked, people say that the maias serve as protection against the devil or pre-

¹ This custom seems to have disappeared in Vila Branca, but in a neighboring village people showed me that during the month of Mary they hung flowers around their paintings of Mary and Jesus in the home.
vent witches from entering. Or at least, this is what people believed formerly, they add.

The feminine religious culture of flowers is not restricted to fresh garden flowers or wild-flowers. Women also make *palmitos*, which are artificial flowers made of a metallic paper, multicolored or monochromatic. *Palmitos* vary in arrangement between one flower and up to one hundred flowers held together with a bow. The most important religious context when *palmitos* are used is the religious feast. In Vila Branca, the feast of the town’s patron saint, Our Lady of Calm Weather at Sea, is celebrated in the beginning of September. During the feast, all the statues of Mary and other saints belonging to the churches and chapels in Vila Branca and its surrounding villages are carried in procession through the town. All the stands on which the images of Mary and the saints are carried are covered with arrangements of bright multicolored *palmitos*, which contribute to the splendor of the feast. A common votive gift in connection with Mary’s feast is to pay for the decoration with *palmitos* of one of the stands of the procession.

In these ways, flowers serve as vessels of relationships with Mary and the saints in the feminine religious culture of flowers. The pattern is repeated in death-related practices in Vila Branca. In this religious context, the cemetery becomes an arena in which the feminine floral culture is expressed.

Women are responsible for the maintenance of the family tomb. The women belonging to one household can also take over the responsibility for graves belonging to relatives. Usually women clean and place fresh flowers at the tombs on Friday evening or Saturday morning. As with houses, there is an element of competition between the women regarding the appearance of the grave. The family grave has to look good in front of the others, women say. Women are aware that the family grave is on display to the rest of the community and a visible sign of the qualities of the women of the household.

The cemetery as a place is considered to be beautiful, maybe the most beautiful place in Vila Branca. When I arrived for the first time to Vila Branca during the summer, and was regarded as a tourist, I was told to go and see the cemetery because of its beauty. On another occasion, I showed a lot of photos of different settings in Vila Branca to two young girls: street photos, processions of the feast, and, photos on the tombs at All Saints’ Day. After studying closely all the photos they said to me: “The most beautiful are those of the cemetery.”

Most gravestones in the cemetery are made of white marble. On sunny days the visitor is met by a dazzling sight: the white stone reflects the sun and creates a glaring light, which illuminates the floral splendor at the tombs. When women visit, they wash and sweep the tomb, and if necessary they pour water over the whole site. Faded flowers and leaves from the olive trees growing outside the cemetery are removed and fresh flowers are arranged decoratively. “We choose the largest and best flowers we have for the
cemetery”, women say, “but sometimes we have to just put the flowers we have, beautiful or ugly, many or few”. Going to the graves to put flowers is always accompanied by praying for the souls of the deceased. “One prays when one goes there to put the flowers”, one woman explained to me.

In their preparation for All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day (November 1 and 2), women exert themselves to their utmost to create a profusion of flowers at each tomb. The most commonly used flowers at this feast, chrysanthemum and aster, which bloom in autumn, are often referred to, not by their botanical names, but are simply called flores dos santos (flowers of the saints), or flores dos fieis (flowers of the faithful).

On the evening of the 31st of October I watched Lígia make her flower arrangements for All Saints’ Day. Lígia places all she needs for the flower arrangement on the large table in the living room. She has ordered the flowers in advance from the greenhouse: chrysanthemums, lilies, roses and orchids, and stones and sponges to arrange the flowers in. The year I watched her (1997) she was making the arrangements for five different tombs.

Lígia devotes special attention to the tomb of her mother’s family, which is the family of the house she lives in. Her mother’s parents, brother and sister-in-law are buried in this tomb. With the aid of sponges, she makes a small cross with miniature yellow chrysanthemums for this tomb.

At eight o’clock the following morning, the 1st of November, Lígia, her mother and I load all the flower arrangements into Lígia’s car and drive the five hundred meters to the cemetery. At the cemetery, there is already bustling activity. Taxis arrive, letting out women, loaded with flowers in buckets, brushes and soft soap to clean the gravesites; other cars are waiting for people to return. The cemetery is full of women busying themselves with the flower arrangements, sweeping the tombs, running back and forth with buckets of water and shouting to each other: “Ah, olha para isto!” “Vem cá!” “Onde estão as flores para a tia Emília?” (Oh, look at this! Come here! Where are the flowers for aunt Emilia?). Small talk and greetings are exchanged as one runs into acquaintances. In the midst of the noise, other women stand praying silently at their families’ tombs.

Lígia starts to arrange the flowers at her mother’s family’s tomb. She places two arrangements in sponges with white and yellow chrysanthemums in the upper part of the rectangular stone and the small cross of yellow chrysanthemums is laid beside them. In the middle of the stone she places a bouquet of pink roses with one purple flower from the garden, and finally one orchid is placed directly on the stone. All the time, her mother gives her advice on how to arrange the flowers, to take away a flower higher than the others or to place them closer or further from each other. After watering and picking away all loose leaves, and sprinkling water on the cross of chrysanthemums and the orchid, Lígia continues with the tomb of her father’s family. When finished, Lígia says that she hopes that it will not rain; they had said on TV that perhaps it would rain in the afternoon. Lígia’s mother replies

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that they might say things on TV, but the one who decides is Him, and then she makes a gesture pointing upwards to the sky. After short prayers at both tombs we go off by car to the cemetery of the neighboring village. There both Lígia and her mother first pray for a few minutes in front of the tomb, and then Lígia arranges the bouquets of flowers. After this, it is time to hurry home to prepare lunch, since like many others in Vila Branca, Lígia and her mother have family members coming from far away to participate in All Saints’ Day. Now everything is prepared for the feast of the living and the dead of the community. In the afternoon, the women will return with their families for the ceremonies, and the cemetery will be admired by everyone participating in the celebration; a celebration, which is, as Vila Branca residents say, “so sad, but so beautiful”.

Worship and femininity

Different gendered notions seem to run together and reinforce the femininity of the culture of flowers. The domestic tasks constructed as feminine, such as cleaning, decorating and beautifying are transferred to the public sphere of religion and women are assigned the tasks of cleaning, decorating and beautifying churches, altars and tombs. Cleaning and decorating in the domestic sphere is very seldom carried out by men, indeed these tasks are perceived as feminizing. That women clean and decorate churches and tombs is taken for granted by the priest of Vila Branca and many men. There is a mutual reinforcement here between different parts of the construction of femininity; women’s responsibility for the decoration of churches and tombs binds them to their religious duties; “one prays when one goes there to put the flowers”, as one woman said. Analogously, men’s exclusion from the handling of flowers gives them fewer opportunities to worship at the cemetery or in the church and chapels. The act of worshipping has become gendered, perceived as more appropriate for one gender than for the other.

From one perspective, women’s tasks of cleaning and decorating in religious contexts could be seen as the roles of female helpers in a male-oriented system. It could be claimed, as Wolf (1984) does, that women’s roles in the Catholic church remain auxiliary. Such a view, however, overlooks certain things. Whereas the male leadership in most public religious roles is undeniable and serves to perpetuate ideas of male authority in religious affairs, in practice only a few laymen play leading roles. Compared to ordinary men, ordinary women have defined roles in preparing for feasts and celebrations. As Sered writes about Jewish women, Vila Branca women have “the power to make or create, not simply to participate” (1992:102) in the celebrations.

Vila Branca women feel free and unbounded by religious authorities in their expressions of the floral culture, something they demonstrated continuously to me when showing me how things were done. When inviting me to
see and smell the decoration with mimosa of the church, when showing me the elaborate flower arrangements for a tomb, women’s perspective is the one of creative subjects. Women who become zeladoras or continue the tradition of fabricating the maias do this because it offers them, not only meaningful religious tasks, but also pleasurable, sensual experiences and artistic satisfaction. It is the style and shape of these feminine traditions that are brought to the church and creates part of the atmosphere of the mass. For women themselves, these aspects are vital to the experience of a religious celebration. When asking why women participate in religious celebrations, we should take their own words about the beauty of the religious events seriously.

Change – some general trends

The attitudes to objects constitute a dividing line between popular Catholicism and the official Catholicism as promoted by Vatican II. One of the aims of Vatican II was to erase the forms of popular religion viewed as idolatry. (This battle between religious orthodoxy and popular devotional forms has been fought throughout the history of Christianity). Thus, Vatican II called for a removal from churches of religious images, which could be considered to “offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or by lack of artistic worth, mediocrity and pretense” (Second Vatican Council 1966: 57 cited in Behar 1990). Younger, committed “modern” Catholics (of which there are only a few in Vila Branca) reject the extensive, popular usage of objects in the religious sphere. The official view of the church coincides with a more general trend of abandonment of religious objects, which has to be seen in the perspective of secularization. The younger generation chooses to decorate their houses in a style less dominated by religious objects. Even young people, however, keep some santinhos and a rosary in their house. Also, they continue to bring home religious objects from Fátima or other sacred sites they have visited on pilgrimages.

However, a change in meanings is manifested in the different social and religious contexts where objects are used. In recent years the tourist bureau has organized a contest to designate the most beautiful maia. The winners of the contest are celebrated at a ceremony in the tourist bureau where the wreaths of wild-flowers are exhibited. The maias hung on doors to scare away the devil turn into pieces of popular art to be judged for their artistic value. Likewise, the statuettes of saints, to a lesser degree used in devotion in the homes, gradually turn into objects of mere decoration at women’s vanity tables. Interestingly, in both these recontextualisations the femininity of the objects, deriving from the gender of their user, remains. In fact, it becomes more conspicuous in the new context; the vanity table is exclusively female in contrast to the traditional oratório around which the family gath-
ered in the evening. In the public context of *maias* it becomes visible that only women create them; when the *maia* is just hung on the door it does not assent that it has been made by the women of the household. The competition of *maias*, however, is a female event. Only women participate in the contest and mostly women come to watch the exhibition.

There is also a certain change in the flowers used for decoration of tombs. But here the trend seems to go towards a more extravagant floral culture. People often comment that more and more money is spent on the flower arrangements at the cemetery, especially at the feast of All Saints’ and All Souls’. Women in Vila Branca say that fortunes are spent on extravagant flower arrangements at some tombstone at All Saints’. This trend probably has to do with people becoming wealthier in general. Since All Saints’ is an occasion when many people return to Vila Branca from other towns or even from abroad, it is an occasion for celebrating one’s origins and bonds to ancestors, as well as showing off the wealth of one’s family to others. The element of showing off to the rest of the community is often perceived as antithetical to the religious purposes of the activities connected to the tombs. Sometimes it is said that the flowers look good to the living, but to the dead they mean nothing – it is only the prayer that counts (even if the same people who say this consider it to be shameful to have a tomb with faded or no flowers). According to Goody, such ambivalent attitudes accompany the extensive use of flowers in various settings. There is always a worry about their non-utilitarian nature; “their beauty is evanescent and the investment of time, energy and money in them may be at the expense of less transient, less luxurious alternatives” (1993:301). These connections, however, are also influenced by the gendered nature of the culture of flowers. Since it is women who are the creators of the flower arrangements, they become the target of the criticism of the excesses in the use of flowers. An elderly, much respected man who had been a practicing Catholic all his life, told me in sour tones that what “those women” did at the cemetery was something they had invented and it had more to do with competing with their neighbors than with religious devotion.

The view of this man observed only the element of competition, and displayed an attitude of incomprehension towards women’s forms of worship. When Ligia and her mother pray and place flowers at their family’s tombs, at All Saints’ and throughout the year, the religious meaning is clear to them; the rituals serve to remember their ancestors and to care for both their ancestors’ spiritual well-being, and their own. However, they are also aware of public appearance and their responsibility to maintain the status of their household. Especially at All Saints’, the flowers serve to show others that they take care of their dead, and that they do so in a decent manner. Vila Branca women who visit the cemetery all year round and who have set a standard for flower arrangements among themselves do not necessarily want to participate in an escalation of the use of flowers at All Saints’ brought
about by wealthier families mostly living outside the community. Thus, they sometimes reproach those families for wanting to show off their wealth and for lacking in religious devotion (much in the same way that the male informant cited above criticized women in general).

**Women and the materiality of religion**

Goody demonstrates how the religious use of flowers within Christianity, during periods that were critical of material representations of the divine, was associated with paganism (1993:73–74, 166–205). At the time of my fieldwork, the use of flowers escaped this kind of criticism in Vila Branca, but the kind of sensual religion it represents is at odds with the view promoted by the church since Vatican II. The criticism of the modern church against popular usage of religious images and statues represents a rejection of the materiality of religious popular forms. The decoration with flowers of statues and images both reflect and enhance the centrality of these material representations of the divine. Since women are more involved with these material dimensions of popular religion, the tension between the modern church and popular religion also has a gendered dimension: feminized popular religious forms stand in contrast to the modern view of the church establishment.

A view that sees women’s preparation and decoration of religious constructions as mere routines devoid of meaning or as mere competition with neighbors overlooks the fact that these activities in themselves are acts of worship. The material form of worship is not antithetical to the religious meaning of the rituals. To Vila Branca women, the floral culture is the bearer of the basic elements of their religious practices. Through flowers women establish and maintain relationships with the saints and the dead, thus continuing what Goody has argued is the most general dimension of floral culture in Europe since antiquity. The roses given to Mary in May embody and concretize women’s prayers to Mary for health, life and fertility. The white and yellow chrysanthemums given to the dead are visible manifestations of an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead and the efforts on part of the women to maintain that relationship. Flowers are excellent vehicles of meaning for women associated as they are with fertility, beauty and life, but also with the fragility and shortness of life. Flowers, like relationships, need to be nurtured to live.

In his novel *Todos os nomes*, ("All the names") José Saramago writes about the Civil Register where births and deaths are recorded. Saramago describes the odor of the paper on which the dates are written as an odor of "half rose and half chrysanthemum". The flower symbolism associating roses with life and chrysanthemums with death is an integral part of religious culture, but it is women who keep this culture alive.
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PART III

Women’s Everyday Religion and Gendered Religious Spaces in Vernacular Islams
The Spirituality of Work and the Work of Spirituality: Women Agriculturalists in Tunisia

Katherine Platt

May You Be With People!

“May you be with people!” is the English translation of the heart-felt Tunisian blessing, Itnassu. Social encounters in rural Tunisia are liberally sprinkled with many greetings customized for the current location of the greeted ones in their own and their family’s developmental lifecycles. “May you be happily married!” “May you become pregnant!” “May your children be well!” “May your children succeed in school!” “May you go on pilgrimage to Mecca!”

Each one of these greetings anticipates the next stage in the expected cycle of life and ritual events that the interlocutors face. Just as the greetings stretch into the ritual future, they also stretch across the social present by including repeated inquiries about family members near and far. “How is your husband? And the children? Are they all well? And what about your mother?” And so on…

Each one of these greetings invokes a person’s core network and connotes an entire sequence of good things, accomplishments, and obligatory passages, which together form a shared map of life processes. This codified yet mundane gesture is underwritten by a constellation of important cultural values.

The most generic and all-purpose blessing that applies to all people at all times, no matter where they are in their life cycle is, itnassu, “may you be with people!” This is a wish that implies many wishes: may you have a big family, may you have a big family who live nearby, may you have many friends, may you have many people to cooperate and reciprocate with you, may you have children who care for you in old age, may you have community and respect, may you never be alone! “May you be with people!” is a fundamental wish. It is a vital expression of a core cultural value. This invocation to sociability, companionship, community and respect resonates at many levels of rural Tunisian life: in religious practice, language, child rearing, work styles, and the built environment, to name only a few.
The Built Environment

This paper focuses on the last of these: the built environment and how two settings, which are particularly critical in women’s everyday lives, support the expression of this key cultural value and how the practices which specify these locales provide occasions for women to legitimate their accounts of themselves. The two settings are women’s collective work spaces and the shrines of local walis or marabouts. In this paper the word accounts refers both to the sum of a woman’s economically and spiritually productive efforts as well as her version of herself. Accounting, in the sense of narrative, depends not only on the action of representation, but also on a reciprocal action of social recognition. There can be no story without at least a possible listener. Socially, the settings in question have a centripetal quality, strongly manifesting the spirit of itnassu. They provide the recognition and acknowledgment upon which a woman’s account of herself depends.

I take the concepts of the built environment from the work of Amos Rapoport, one of the co-founders of the field of environmental behavior studies. This relatively new field is an interdisciplinary collaboration of social scientists, historians, architects, and environmental and urban designers focusing on the cultural, social, and instrumental meanings and functions of human spatial organization and its visible expression: the built environment. The built environment can be understood as the systematic organization of space, time, meaning and communication.

The built environment provides material, although not necessarily fixed, cues that “act as mnemonics, reminding people about the situation and hence about appropriate behavior, making effective co-action possible.” (Rapaport 1994:462.) The culturally specific shared meanings of the built environment help to define systems or settings of human activities and their attendant predictable behaviors, roles, and associated values.

Rapoport specifies three levels of meaning that can be communicated by the built environment:

1. cosmological meanings, world views, philosophical systems, the sacred etc.
2. social meanings communicating identity, status, wealth, power, etc.
3. instrumental meanings consisting of material cues to the intended uses and implied appropriate behaviors of particular settings. (Rapaport 1982).

Rapaport’s framework is a useful tool for examining the sites and styles of women’s labor and spirituality on the Kerkennah Islands of Tunisia because it incorporates a kinetic view of the humanly inscribed material world. It is a
framework which takes the built environment out of the analytical background and restores intention and agency to the discussion of it.

The Kerkennah Islands

The Kerkennah Islands are a small archipelago off Tunisia’s eastern coast in the Gulf of Gabes. Two out of the five islands are inhabited with a total permanent resident population of 15,000, distributed in eleven villages. (This was the population in 1977–78 when I did the original fieldwork this paper is based on and remarkably, the steady increase in labor migration has held the population steady at about 15,000 up to the present.)

These islands are distinctive and unique in some ways, but they also manifest certain common patterns of special relevance. First, the Kerkennah Islands typify much of the rural Middle East and North Africa in that its local subsistence economy is subsidized by remittances from the large percent of the identifying population who are labor migrants on the mainland, in Europe, and the Gulf region. The year round population of 15,000 swells to some 50,000 during the summer months when labor migrant Kerkennnis return for vacations, Islamic and life cycle rituals, especially weddings.

The second pattern is a set of beliefs and corresponding social rules common to many conservative rural Muslim communities about the proper domains or spheres of activity for males and females. Both of these patterns reflect the size, composition, and organization of the population and are “legible” in the built environment.

The built environmental implication of the first pattern is that there are two types of domestic architecture that reflect the emergence of class distinctions between the resident subsistence component of the community and the migrating subsidizing component of the community. The traditional domestic architecture could be described as honeycombs of rooms enclosing open courtyards arranged in neighborhoods of related extended families. These homes have no public face, but they have extensive internal open space for collective work both within the individual family units and within the neighborhood or village quarter.

The new homes, or villas, as they are called in the local Arabic dialect, of the generally more affluent labor migrant Kerkennis have a very definite public face. However, they have no designated open spaces for collective work either within them or among them as part of a network of associated homes. These villas stand alone usually outside or on the periphery of the home village. These homes are symbols of material achievement in the modern market economy rather than instruments of material productivity, which their traditional counterparts are. Although they are both dwelling places, these two types of homes are qualitatively different and they dramatize growing class difference among the people who call themselves Kerkennis.
The built environmental implication of the second pattern is that while there is very little physical gender segregation or segregated facilities and no seclusion of the stereotyped sort, there are settings which are known to be the centers of either male or female dominated activities. Settings can be defined as much temporally as spatially. Spaces which are dramatically female during the day may become male at twilight. Genderless spaces can become gendered by the appearance of a particular activity with its associated roles and expected behaviors. In these cases, the material cues such as a threshing cart or an olive press, which connote a particular sexual division of labor, would operate as a centripetal signal to women and as a centrifugal signal to men.

Gendered Space: Male

Locales which are understood to be predominately male are the village square, the doorway of the general store/post office, the mosque, and the sea. In the Kerkennah subsistence economy, fishing is the domain of men. The islands are located on a very shallow submarine plateau, so shallow that during low tide one could walk a mile or more out into the sea and still be only waist deep in water. The adaptive fishing technology consists of extensive configurations of fences woven out of palm fronds and rope that are planted in the submarine plateau. Based on knowledge of the currents and the submarine terrain, fish traps are planted at strategic locations along these fences and once or twice a day, using sailboats or carts, depending on the tide, the fishermen empty the traps. One could almost say that the fish are being herded rather than fished.

The topography and hydrology of the submarine plateau are important categories of local knowledge. Usufruct rights to different marine locales are an important part of the property system. This technology, manner of exploitation, the social networks of labor and property, and the cognitive categories which make the sea comprehensible to the local community are systems of cultural meaning and make the sea very much part of the built environment. The sea is a space upon which meanings, myths, histories of use, and a technology of boundaries are constructed. These resources and meanings are primarily the concern of men.

Gendered Space: Female

Female dominated settings include the work spaces of the interior courtyards of the extended family compound and the open spaces between adjacent

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1 See Wright 1993 on the topic of diurnally shifting definitions of space.
households in the village quarter, the domed religious shrines or marabouts and all of those spaces associated with agriculture, including distant fields and palm groves, for this sphere of economic activity is the special concern of island women.

The two specific settings that I want to focus on are the open work spaces within or adjacent to the village quarters where the female processing of agricultural products takes place and the maraboutic shrines which I have just mentioned. Both of these spaces are every bit as much defined by the value of *itnassu* as they are by the rules and norms pertaining to class and gender stratification. It is part of my argument that focusing on the structures of class and gender uninformed by indigenous concepts such as *itnassu* yields a very skewed and isolating cultural image that would certainly not be recognizable to the people whose way of life is being described. I also argue that material provisioning is a central theme in a woman’s account of herself. It is important to her sense of wholeness and accomplishment. This earthly practical creativity, productivity and generosity are as much at the core of women’s spirituality as a transcendent relationship with the divine.

The Spirituality of Work

To discuss women’s work spaces and their spirit, it is necessary to provide a little background about women and agriculture. The land mass of the inhabited islands totals about 150 sq. kilometers. About one third of this area consists of red clay salt flats, called *sebkhas* that are often flooded during the winter. About 10% of the islands’ area is fertile enough to support only the most vigilantly and intensively cultivated kitchen gardens of tomatoes, parsley, onions, and legumes. Some of this area is devoted to small orchards of vines, olive trees, pomegranate and an occasional citrus or almond tree. On the remaining land, where the salty water table is more than a meter and a half deep, some cereals can be grown. The shallower and saltier land is devoted to palm trees and pasturage. This land is also scavenged for rocks to be used for construction. Some kinds of stone are also baked in large kilns to make lime for cement.

As they have of the submarine plateaus, Kerkennis have minute and meticulous knowledge of the land, its uses, legacies, historical associations and heroic mythologies. The customary inheritance system of this patrilineal patrilocal society makes property subject to minute parceling among male descendants. Because land is of unequal quality, it would not be uncommon for a father of five sons to divide his good land into five parcels, his poor

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1 The Tunisian legal system protects the right of women to equal inheritance, but by custom in many rural areas most women do not fully press their inheritance rights against the interests of their brothers.
land into five parcels and the trees growing on any of this land into five additional parcels and so on down the generations.

There are certain kinds of hedges against this kind of minute parceling that an extended family can make. One is to delay the distribution of the patrimony for a generation or more and exploit the property collectively. Another is for one or two sons to manage the island property on behalf of the family and for the other brothers to seek wage labor on the mainland also on behalf of the family. Another is for the sons to marry “close,” that is, to seek marriage alliances with patrilateral parallel cousins in order to consolidate property with known and trusted related families.

While I have been noting the customary male ownership and inheritance of property, it is the male owners’ mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters who carry out most of the agricultural activities. They plan and schedule the work, process the harvest, store it and make decisions about when and how to use these stores of highly valued food. The women have mastery and authority in this area of life. Food that is grown on the islands with one’s own labor is considered infinitely superior to even the most exotic and expensive imported foods. Islanders and especially labor migrant islanders often rhapsodize about the unique sweetness of Kerkennah figs and extraordinary hardiness of Kerkennah grain. I mention this because it indicates the high regard the islanders have for the products of female labor. Island women are seen and see themselves as important economic contributors and decision-makers.

The effort to delay the parceling of land means that many agricultural products are harvested and processed collectively and cooperatively by affinally related women. Groups of women without a common economic interest also often form cooperative labor units at high-pressure times in the agricultural cycle when more intensive labor is required. Cooperative labor exchanges are common among women; agricultural labor for cash or kind is considered pathetic, although it certainly occurs. Exchanges express the solidarity and egalitarianism of inassu, whereas wage labor undermines this value.

The olive and grain harvests are two such times of cooperative work. Essentially, everyone is harvesting and processing at the same time. The harvests are brought into the open spaces in the village quarters or the salt flats adjacent to the village. In these open “female” work locales, which we might think of as commons, a number of operations above and beyond agricultural processing take place. This is a massive opportunity for the female producers to display the quality and quantity of their harvests and to compare and comment on the harvests of their neighbors. It is a time when women help each other and scrutinize each other intensively. It is a time and place where women simultaneously collaborate and compete. More important, this is a time when they can publicly demonstrate their competence as agriculturists. This display of productivity could not be more different from the material display of the modern villa.
During these harvest work parties, many formulaic blessings and complements about the size and splendor of each other’s product circulate. Each standardized complement is quickly lobbed back into the praise giver’s court with a reciprocal blessing designed to diffuse any emerging and dangerous envy. For example, “Congratulations on your harvest!” answered with “Thank you, may yours be even bigger!” is a common exchange. Minute differences in productivity are minutely observed and submerged at the same time.

The grain harvest in particular is a very celebratory time. The threshing, winnowing, roasting and grinding of the grain before being prepared, dried and stored as couscous, the islands’ staple food, all take place in large work parties on the salt flats. Several generations are productively involved. Elderly women would never be excluded or exclude themselves from participation in preparing the harvest. Their skill and expertise based on long experience is treated as a valuable resource. In many ways, elderly women are at the peak of their social esteem and personal freedom. Children also include themselves in the harvesting process, riding the threshing cart like a merry-go-round and eating the sweet green grain like candy.

Environmental Meaning

Looking at these female collective work settings in terms of Rapoport’s instrumental level of environmental meaning, we can see that the public exposure of the year’s harvest provides an opportunity for all the concerned parties to take a visual inventory of what each household has produced. It is also an opportunity to make a general evaluation of whether the population as a whole is going to be well-provisioned until the next harvest or not. Because this is a society where redistribution in the form of alms sustains the needy, everyone’s relative well-being is of immediate material significance.

Shifting to Rapoport’s social level of environmental meaning, there is much such significance to these work settings. The networks of cooperation (and competition) visibly demonstrated in these settings almost draw a map of the current state of affinal and agnatic ties. Of course, this social map of solidarity and struggle changes every season, making it all the more interesting. Many other pieces of important social knowledge are also processed in these settings. Just as the agricultural fruits of the village are on display, these work parties also put the marriageable girls of the village on display for the evaluation of the older women who will be very influential in choosing brides for the young men in their families.

These collective work settings also provide an unusually extended integration (sometimes up to ten days) of the migrating and home components of the Kerkennah population. This social manifestation is also significant in that the instrumental agricultural goals and values of the island subsistence
economy predominate at this time over the more conspicuous material symbolism of the mainland market economy (for which the villa is a metonym.) In other words, this is a setting where class stratification is inverted or at least submerged in the ethic of \textit{itnassu} as landowners, poor relations, urban migrants, the esteemed elderly and the powerless young stand side by side and do exactly the same work.

The cosmological or spiritual meanings (Rapoport’s last level) of the harvesting party have largely to do with the Kerkennis’ identification with their home place. Many Kerkennis feel that simply being Kerkenni gives them a head start on being a good Muslim, that their social and physical environment aids them in following “the straight path,” \textit{el mustaqim}. It is not that they think of their islands as a sacred space, but rather that the islands provide them with an austere guide to a proper Islamic life. They also feel that other environments, especially the cities and Sfax, in particular, make it difficult for people to be good Muslims. Kerkenni say that the hardiness and simplicity of their diet of fish and grain that they catch and produce themselves makes them stronger than other people and more able to fast during Ramadan and still work hard, which is what God wants. They say that they feel closer to God because everything that they require comes directly from the sky, the sea, or the earth. The lack of anonymity on Kerkennah is given as the reason why people give alms readily. There are no beggars on Kerkennah, (unlike in the cities, it is also noted) and this also pleases God.

The collective work settings provide a regular opportunity for labor migrant and relocated Kerkennis to return and refresh their valued island identity. The association of agricultural production with God’s bounty and of Kerkenni work styles with God’s will charges these spaces with righteousness and self-confidence. These two attributes are not conventionally associated with North African Muslim women laboring in a subsistence economy. The relative importance of a woman’s contribution to the household economy, her knowledge and competence and her productivity are sources of pride and respect that might be easily overlooked unless one tries to integrate an understanding of economic structures with an understanding of experience.

The instrumental, social and cosmological meanings that define the women’s collective work settings are a road into their experience. They all express the core value of \textit{itnassu}, “may you be with people.” Or, more fully explicated, “may you be with people who know you on a face to face basis, understand your challenges and, at least occasionally, hold you in high esteem.”
The Work of Spirituality

The maraboutic shrines, of which there are several dozen throughout the islands, are another intensely female dominated locale and sphere of activity. The shrines vary in size and grandeur depending on their popularity and hence the charitable contributions which make up their budgets. Most shrines contain the real or fictive tomb of a revered figure thought to have performed heroic and religiously meritorious deeds. These wali, or saints, are often referred to as “friends of the Prophet Mohammed” and are thought to have supernatural power or influence. They are also often associated with some local historical event or site. In this way, the saints function as a link between a familiar and accessible parochial Islam and more abstract universal aspects of Islam. Women on these islands tend not to visit the village mosques even though they are technically permitted to, but they frequently visit local maraboutic shrines for a range of purposes.

Women sometimes use the shrine’s open space and the water resources of the shrine’s cistern to carry out a major collective or seasonal task such as washing and drying all the rugs and blankets of the extended family household once a year. These uses have most of the same attributes and meanings as the harvest events described above although they take place on a smaller scale. A kind of honor system partly based on mutual scrutiny, one of the manifestations of itnassu, moderates the use of these resources.

Women also go to the shrine to be healed by the sacred water in the saint’s cistern and perhaps to be treated by the guardian of the shrine who is often also a traditional healer. A number of different healing techniques are used including massage, infusions, amulets, chants, sitting in healing smoke and breathing the steam of pots in which Quranic verses are simmering. The saint’s power and grace, qadr and baraka, bolster each of these treatments. The shrines can also serve as an all-purpose spa which women visit as a health maintenance measure. Just as women use the marabout as an alternative to the mosque, they also use the marabout as an alternative and/or auxiliary to modern medicine. We can see in these practices some of the instrumental meanings of the shrines.

Casual visits to the shrines to chat and drink tea are also common. It can be a kind of club or cafe, the male version of which in the village square is unavailable to women. This function is especially popular for elderly women who have considerable mobility because they are free of child rearing responsibilities and perhaps more importantly, are no longer likely to dishonor their husbands and brothers. These elderly women are especially known for stretching the rules of propriety by telling lewd jokes and doing lascivious dances. These are places where a great deal of discussion about sex and the foolishness of men takes place. Just as the women’s collective work settings
temporarily invert class stratification, women’s maraboutic gatherings temporarily subvert gender stratification.

In this space, protected by the saint, many of the behavioral rules that constrain women in this society are suspended. For example, young girls who may not swim in the sea near their homes may swim at the shrines with impunity. The rules of propriety are relaxed. The shrines are also legendary as places of refuge for unwilling brides. Under the saint’s protection, she may not be removed and forced to marry against her will. In this way, the shrine is a platform, however contained, for women’s resistance to male domination. As such, it may also be seen as another leveling mechanism that moderates, even symbolically, the unequal distribution of power.

Labor migrant families often spend part of their summer vacation at the shrine of a saint who has been good to their family in the past. Having developed a special relationship with a particular saint, a family would then choose this shrine as the site for celebrations of life cycle rituals such as circumcisions, part of a honeymoon tour, or the successful conclusion of a dangerous endeavor. In this way, cycles of visits, pleas, promises, and feasts are established. Family traditions of favorable association with a particular saint get established and passed on over the generations. As in the collective work parties, maraboutic visits also temporarily integrate the labor migrant and resident Kerkennis in common purpose and the shared social meanings of this setting of the built environment.

The maraboutic shrines are a collective female locale in which women exercise their particular spiritual resources and maximize its potential for sociability. The most common purpose for a maraboutic visit is to implore the saint for favorable supernatural intervention in a woman’s life or her family life: to resolve infertility, make a husband faithful, help a son pass the baccalaureate, cure an ailment etc., mobilizing their spiritual resources to provide for their families. To show her loyal devotion to the saint, when a woman makes a plea, she also promises the saint that if he or she answers her prayers, she will come back and make a feast at the shrine by slaughtering a choice animal. She symbolizes this promise by tying a knot somewhere within the shrine. Popular shrines are festooned with hundreds of colorful shreds of cloth. When the woman fulfills her promise to the saint, she unties the knot. It is believed that if the woman fails to fulfill her promise to make a feast, misfortune or illness will befall her family.

When a woman returns to sacrifice a sheep or a chicken and makes the feast, she brings many of her relatives and it is incumbent upon her to share the feast with all other visitors at the shrine. In this way her good fortune becomes a collective good fortune. This is one of many mechanisms of redistribution that disguise or level inequalities that would undermine the spirit of imassu.

The shrines have many attributes in common with the female harvesting parties discussed above. They are the two forums of Kerkenni women’s pub-
lic life. They are not public in the sense that women are out interacting with anonymous institutions and populations, but public in the sense that these are economic/social/spiritual forums where women take decisive productive action on their own behalves and can demonstrate the results to the community of their peers. The harvesting parties allow women to competitively display their achievements and competence and to participate in a certain amount of evaluating and ranking. But this subsistence society, with its meager surplus, cannot tolerate a great deal of inequality. The maraboutic parties redress the balance and function as important leveling mechanisms. Through the redistribution of luxury foods, particularly roast meat, the values of community and sociability, *inassu*, are highlighted in the celebration of individual good fortune or emergence from a period of bad fortune.

Material provisioning is a core theme in a woman’s account of herself. It is important to her sense of wholeness and accomplishment. This earthly practical creativity, productivity and generosity are as much at the core of women’s spirituality as a transcendent relationship with the divine. When a woman sacrifices an animal, puts on a feast and feeds a crowd in the shrine of her saint, she aligns her material/social/ritual provisioning with the saint’s generosity. The woman stands alongside the saint as a co-host in their collaborative generosity. Through her generosity, she bears witness to the saint’s efficacy as a mediator and to the quality of her own character. Through her actions, she narrates herself as a trustworthy fulfiller of promises, someone “true” to her word, someone sound, *sahih*. This is an act of self-definition and self-representation.

Through her actions, she claims the authority to create this text of character. By linking her own productivity, sociability and generosity with the saint’s efficacy, she legitimates them both. She legitimates the saint, who, like all who lead by attraction rather than coercion, must be legitimated as a current and viable player in the arena of intercession and she legitimates herself as her own agent in the construction of her spiritual and social account. The Kerkenni woman symbolizes herself in her acts of devotion and generosity. She is legitimated in this effort by the group of strangers, friends and relatives who receive her generosity at the same time as they facilitate the saint’s reputation for efficacy, which will travel in the narratives this party brings forth.

The Paradox of Upward Mobility

Studying these two spaces where women pursue their individual and collective economic, social, and spiritual well-being is significant because this energetically disrupts the stereotypic image of what female domains in rural Muslim North Africa and the Middle East are all about. Clearly they are not secluded enclosures of isolation and devalued domestic labor as they are
often represented. Nor is the maraboutic shrine marginal to the mosque. It is the center of women’s own practices which they create and transform according to their own accounts. The analysis of gendered space will not mean much unless we inform our understanding with indigenous concepts such as *itnassu*.

It is significant to note that as women lose access to these cultural spaces where the spirit of *itnassu* reigns, that is, as their household group climbs the class ladder through labor migration to the mainland, their own personal autonomy, mobility, relative economic significance and opportunities for public action and expression are often greatly reduced. This is one of the reasons why the island spaces of *itnassu* beckon urbanized middle class women back. Paradoxically, in upward mobility, there is a lot to lose. A rising standard of living for the household is not always accompanied by an increasing quality of life for all members of that household.\(^1\) The dissonance between family economic mobility and women’s personal (physical, social and spiritual) mobility is a qualitative issue that most accounts of labor migration and economic development would miss. The relative percentage of a woman’s economic contribution and her mastery over that contribution are important variables in a Kerkeni woman’s sense of competence and well being. We can only know this by listening for her own account.

References


\(^1\) Although the current paper is a specific ethnographic account, a comparative ethnological reading of other studies which deal with women’s work sites, styles, and relative economic contribution to the family would be very worthwhile. The dissonance between family economic mobility and women’s personal (physical, social and spiritual) mobility is a dynamic that has been addressed in a number of ethnographies and area studies such as Ferchiou 1985, Friedl Draper 1975, Feinberg 1984.
Sitaat as Part of Somali Women’s Everyday Religion

Marja Tiilikainen

\[\text{Allow muxubada Ilaahay nagu miisow} \\
\text{Allow meexhaan marnaba nagu meeri diintaa} \\
\text{Allow diintiyo sharciiga deer nowgayeel} \\
\text{Allow na dhowee agtaadaa lagu dhargaaye} \\
\text{Kutala saaranaye Allow towbada nasuxay} \\
\text{Agtaadana laguma qado oo qaxar mayaalee} \]

God give more love to us
Wherever we go, teach us your religion
Make the religion and the law like a fence for us
God bring us near to you
We accept everything you say to us
Near you there are no difficulties and all our needs are fulfilled

The verses above are part of a *sitaat* song, religious poetry performed by Somali women. *Sitaat*, also known as *Nebi-Ammaan, Hawa iyo Faadumo* and *Abbey Sittidey*, is a unique expression of Somali women’s Sufi religiosity. *Sitaat* means Somali women’s *dikri*, where women praise God, Prophet Muhammad, Sufi saints, and, in particular, the distinguished women of early Islam such as the Prophet’s mother, wives and daughters. *Sitaat* is only sung by women and the events are organised and led by women.

Poetry in general is a central and highly valued part of Somali culture, and traditionally, it has been created and transmitted orally. Poems composed by women have not been collected or received publicity to the extent that poems composed by Somali men have (Jama 1991). *Sitaat* is part of religious Somali poetry (see Orwin 2001), but it is not well-known. Important studies of *sitaat* include the works of Lidwien Kapteijns (1996, 2007) and Francesca Declich (2000), both of whom have collected data on *sitaat* by ethnographic methods – Kapteijns in Djibouti mainly in the 1980s and Declich in southern Somalia between 1985 and 1988, that is, before the civil war that has brought profound changes in the Somali society on the societal, political as well as religious levels.

The aim of this article is to understand the role of *sitaat* in the contemporary lives of Somali women in north-western Somalia, often referred to as

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1 From Arabic *sittaat*, ‘ladies’ (Orwin 2001:81).
Somaliland. When and how are sitaat sessions organised? Has the practice of sitaat changed in the midst of the on-going Islamisation in Somalia/Somaliland?

The data for this article has been collected as part of my on-going post-doctoral study. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Somaliland in the summers of 2005 and 2006, and in the winter of 2007, for a total of four months. The fieldwork was concentrated mainly in the largest city, Hargeysa, and its surroundings. As part of the data collection, I attended sitaat rituals organized by three different Sufi groups, belonging to the Qadiriya order, in Hargeysa. Moreover, I observed sitaat arranged on other occasions at homes and women’s gatherings, altogether around twelve times. I spoke with participants of the groups and interviewed three sitaat leaders. All of the leaders were women between 50–60 years of age. In this article I use the Somali term Sheekhad (female religious expert) when I refer to these interviewees, together with their pseudonym names of Khadra, Nadiifa and Zahra. The smallest gatherings consisted of about twenty women and the largest of about a hundred. My Somali language skills are rudimentary, and hence, during the rituals as well as in the interviews, I was assisted by female assistants. I taped and video recorded part of the sessions. The material has been partly transcribed and translated to English/Finnish. I mainly use the Somali orthography. In order to pronounce Somali words properly, Somali ‘x’ can be thought to correspond the English ‘h’ and ‘c’ to an apostrophe [‘].

The theoretical approach derives from comparative religion. My position towards the data has been to understand the Somali Muslim women as social and religious agents in their life-worlds in post-war Somaliland. In Muslim societies women’s and mothers’ agency is constructed in relation to gender-wise different roles and expectations. At the same time, however, Muslim women question these structures, actively interpret Islam and use their own strategies to challenge experienced hardships and suffering (Abu-Lughod 1986; Mahmood 2004). Through Islamisation, male knowledge easily becomes normative, and women need to develop strategies to prevent the eradication of traditional female knowledge (Evers Rosander 1997:6–7).

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1 The aim of my overall study is to explore how transnationalism organises and gives meaning to suffering, illness and healing among Somalis in exile. The study is a continuation of my PhD research on the everyday life of Somali women in Finland (Tiilikainen 2003) and funded by the Academy of Finland. I thank Professor Janice Boddy for insightful comments. I also want to acknowledge the financial support given by the Nordic Africa Institute and the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth foundation for the fieldwork in Somaliland. I am grateful to Ibrahim Mohamed Hassan and Nasra Osman who helped me to translate and understand some of the Somali language material. Naturally, I am solely responsible for any errors.
Islam, women and daily life in post-war Somaliland

The population of the secessionist Republic of Somaliland, the former British Somaliland, is estimated to be around 2–3 million. Compared to the southern part of Somalia, the area has been relatively stable since the mid-1990s and it has been struggling to create democratic governance and improve the living conditions of ordinary people. However, Somaliland, as all Somalia, is among the poorest countries in the world. The unemployment rate is high and many households in Hargeysa are dependent on remittances sent by their relatives from the diaspora. Basic health care and educational structures as well as roads, water and electrical systems were ruined during the war, and continue to be severely under-developed.

The civil war has had an impact on urban households and the roles of family members. Traditionally, men have been responsible for earning the income for their families. As a consequence of the war, many previous breadwinners have died, or become disabled or mentally distressed. Moreover, the consumption of *khat*, the leaves of the *Khat* bush which have a mildly stimulating effect, has increased tremendously especially among men. This makes the economic situation of poor families even worse and is a source of continuous dispute in families. Women have been forced to take greater economic responsibility than before. For example, many women sell products such as clothes, tea, *unitsi* (incense), vegetables or *khat* in order to provide for their families (e.g., Warsame 2004).

Islam is a natural part of everyday life in Somaliland and gives it a certain rhythm. *Aadaan*, a call to prayer, can be regularly heard all over Hargeysa including Fridays, the holy day for all Muslims. Islam underpins the basic values as well as everyday chores and practices. Somalis are Sunni Muslims and they belong to the *Shafi’ite* school of Islamic jurisprudence. Traditionally, Somali Muslims have been Sufis. The most important Sufi orders in Somalia have been *Qadiriya*, *Ahmadiya* and *Salihiya* (e.g., Lewis 1998). Until recently Sufi orders have had a great influence in Somalia and Somalis have been moderate in their religious views. The rise of Islamic movements in Somalia began in the 1970s as part of the international Islamic revival, and as a reaction to Somalia’s tangled internal and international politics. Two main groups have been *Jama’at al-Islah*, which has identified with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and *al-Ittihad al-Islami*, which is close to the puritanical *Wahhabi* and *Salafiyya* movements of the Arabian Peninsula (Berns McGown 1999; Hassan 2003). According to Mohamed-Rashid Sheikh Hassan (2003), *al-Waxda*, the first Islamic organisation in Somalia, was founded in Hargeysa in the 1960s. On different occasions it had close relations to either of the previously mentioned Islamist groups, *al-Islah* and *al-Ittihad* (Hassan 2003:234). Islamic political activity in Somalia has increased significantly during the past decade (Menkhaus 2002:110). Islamist
groups have gained wide support particularly in southern Somalia, where no government so far has managed to establish stability. Islamic groups have gained support among ordinary people by providing schools, orphanages, aid agencies and services to poor people who have suffered tremendously during the war (ibid: 114).

As a result of these tendencies, Sufi practices such as the annual commemorations of popular Sufi sheikhs seem to be in decline. For example, I.M. Lewis described, based on his fieldwork in the 1950s and 1960s, how the annual pilgrimage, *siyaaro*, to the shrine of Aw Barkhadle outside Hargeysa attracted several thousand pilgrims from all over the northern regions and large numbers of livestock were killed for the feasting (Lewis 1998:89–98). When I visited the same *siyaaro* in the summer of 2006, only a maximum of 500 people participated and the event was hardly noticed in Hargeysa.

The reconstruction of the city of Hargeysa includes the building of mosques. According to a sheikh, before the war there used to be 60 mosques in Hargeysa, but now there are about 300. Only a few of them are Sufi mosques. Moreover, Islamisation influences the local healing traditions: a new phenomenon is the establishment of Islamic clinics, *cilaaj*, where sheikhs claim to heal by purely Islamic healing methods. According to Gerda Sengers (2003:146), healers in Islamic clinics in Egypt propagate the “Islamic” lifestyle and fundamentalist views stressing the role of women as wives and mothers. Islamisation is visible also in new ways of dressing, as an increasing number of women cover themselves with large veils, *jilbaab* and also face veils, *niqab*, which is a new dressing code in Somalia. Moreover, I have been told that an increasing number of women go to mosques to pray. What is the position of *sitaat* under these new religious conditions?

*Sitaat* in practice

**The setting**

I was introduced to three different *sitaat* groups by local friends, who had connections to people going to these groups. I visited mainly the groups of *Skeekhad* Khadra and *Skeekhad* Nadiifa. The third group had been initiated by a woman who had a personal interest in *sitaat* and wanted to create an opportunity for herself and other women to practise it. The group seemed to lack clear leadership, but *Skeekhad* Zahra was one of the main characters in the group. *Skeekhad* Khadra and *Skeekhad* Nadiifa had practised *sitaat* for about thirty years:

I started doing *sitaat* about twenty-seven years ago. I was born in Hargeysa, but I lived four years in Qatar. I was married and had four children. My husband did not like Sufis, but I started to study religion. Already as a young
woman I started to love religion, but my husband could not accept it. We argued a lot and then we divorced. I came back to Hargeysa in 1976. I started to visit xadras; I learnt more about religion and gradually I became a teacher. I also married a Sufi teacher. He used to make dikri. He had his own xadra, and we worked together. We had five children. He died in 1990. When the civil war started [in Hargeysa], I escaped to Ethiopia. I returned to Hargeysa in 1991 and after a year a group of women contacted me, and asked me to be their Sheekhad. The previous Sheekhad did not return to Hargeysa after the war, but went to Boorame. These women, who started at that time, still continue, and also new women come. Only two women left the group. (Sheekhad Khadra)

In her story the Sheekhad highlighted a long learning process, whereas another had gained knowledge of sitaat in a dream:

I have done sitaat for thirty years. I started after I had a dream, where Faadumo Rasuul [the Prophet’s daughter] appeared to me. In the dream I saw a drum and I started drumming. It was like I had always drummed, I made no mistakes. (Sheekhad Nadiifa)

The first group gathers at the home of Sheekhad Khadra, where a room is dedicated for xadra. The walls are covered with green and white silk textiles with Arabic writing and some pictures of tombs, in honour of Sufi sheikhs such as Sheikh Isaaq and Sheikh Madar. Along the wall there are long wooden rosaries, tusbax, which women use before the sitaat starts. The Sheekhad also has religious books with Arabic texts, some of which are recited during the sitaat. The same room serves both women and men. In the afternoons women have sitaat, and after they finish, men gather for their own dikri. The second as well as the third group pays rent for the room where they gather. Before each sitaat carpets are spread to cover the floor.

All of the three groups have regular weekly meetings, ranging from one to four times a week. I was told that the usual days for sitaat are Fridays, Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Specific weekdays are dedicated to different persons – Friday to the Prophet, Monday to the Prophet’s daughter Faadumo Rasuul, Wednesday to awliyo (saints, holy persons) such as Jiilaani, Sheikh Madar and Sheikh Isaaq, and Thursdays for awliyo in general. One informant mentioned that sitaat can also be arranged on Sundays, and then it is dedicated to Hawo (Eve) and Adam. The specific days, however, may differ according to a group. For instance, a woman explained that in the group that she knew best, Thursday was specifically dedicated to Sheikh Isaaq. Moreover, sitaat is arranged during specific periods such as the month of the death of Faadumo Rasuul.

1 Xadra and dikri mean ritual song of praising of God. The interviewed women used the term xadra also to signify the place where dikri or sitaat is performed.
A *sitaat* session usually starts after afternoon prayer, *casar* (around 3.30 pm) and ends with the prayer after sunset, *makhrib* (around 6.30 pm). In one of the *sitaat* groups women usually continue even after they have prayed the *makhrib* prayer together. Each participant contributes to *sitaat* by bringing a small amount of money, perfume, incense or food/drinks. They may also bring gifts to the leader of the group. Incense and perfume are an important part of the ceremony. As a woman explained: “Whoever mentions the Prophet’s name should smell nice.” Occasionally, a woman goes around with a bottle of perfume, *cadar*, and participants stretch out their hands in order to be perfumed. Moreover, an incense burner creates heavy smoke. Sweet black coffee, *bun*, in contrast to otherwise common tea, is served during a pause. Most of the women who arrive, are married, divorced or widowed women. I have been informed that unmarried young women usually are too busy with other things and they start thinking about religion more only after they have had children. The socioeconomic background of the women who arrange and take part in *sitaat* seems to vary. I have seen *sitaat* arranged in affluent homes and some of the women come from the upper classes, whereas some of the women are seemingly poor.

Women sit in a circle on the floor and all of them wear a large, covering scarf. One or two women beat a drum/drums with wooden sticks, and women begin to chant. Different groups may sing different songs or use different words, and the order of the songs may differ according to participating women’s desires. Moreover, women compose new verses and songs. First, however, women praise God and the Prophet. According to Lidwien Kapteijns (1996), after the Prophet, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, who was the founder of the *Qadiriya* brotherhood, and other *awliyo* like local saints or Sheikh Isaaq, the ancestor of the Isaaq clan that is a dominant clan in North Somalia, are praised. After these introductory songs, the main songs are sung to the distinguished women of early Islam: After greeting Aadan (Adam), Hawo (Eve), the first mother of humankind, is praised. Other women addressed and honoured in *sitaat* are, among others, the Prophet’s mother Aamina (Amina), his foster-mother Xaliimo Sacdiyya (Halima Sa’diyya), Xaajra (Hagar), mother of Ismaaciil (Ishmael), Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus, the Prophet’s wives and daughters, in particular Faadumo (Fatima) (Kapteijns 1996:126–128). One of my interviewees, however, stressed that in her group after the songs for the Prophet, they next praise the women, and only after that *awliyo* such as Sheikh Isaaq because women existed before the *awliyo* and were their mothers.

Daughters of Faadumo Rasuul: Religious and social experience

All the women participate in singing and clapping the hands. The language of the songs is mostly Somali, but also some Arabic songs and/or words are
One or two women may stand up and dance. When the songs pass, the atmosphere in sitaat becomes more intense and women become emotional. They swing their bodies in the rhythm of the songs, they may draw the scarf over the face, and gradually reach a religious trance, muraago or jilbo. A woman explained: “Muraago means a religious condition, a strong emotion. A woman feels deep love towards the person that is being praised. Sometimes she also may see this person”. The breathing becomes heavier and she may stand up and bend the body back and forth at the waist. Sometimes a woman over-reacts: she does not control herself any more, but movements get wider and wilder, and finally she may fall down unconscious.

“In sitaat we praise Hawa, the wife of Ibraahim, the daughters of the Prophet and the relatives of Ismaaciil. They are our ancestors, hereafter we may become neighbours with them”, Sheekhad Zahra reported. And not only hereafter, but Faadumo and other distinguished women and mothers, who are praised, are believed to be present among women who are performing sitaat. For example, Sheekhad Nadiifa said in a sitaat to participating women that Faadumo Rasuul was among them, but they did not know who she was. However, she could sit beside anyone and therefore everyone should be treated in a friendly way. At some point in the evening, women shook hands with women sitting near them – this meant that at the same time they shook hands with Faadumo Rasuul. The Sheekhad identified her group as “daughters of Faadumo Rasuul” and welcomed also the researcher to become part of it.

According to women, after sitaat a person may get what she desired or hoped for. Sheekhad Zahra related that she calls the names of awliyo when she needs something: “Awliyo have secret knowledge that normal people do not have. Awliyo are soldiers of God”. She told how she was arrested before the war. The soldiers asked her for money and called her a prostitute. They said that she should be imprisoned for six months. She started to sing for ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriya brotherhood. Soon some other police came and asked the policemen why she had been arrested, and she was released.

In addition to singing, participants also pray together. A leader of the group, or whoever feels like it, may read duco (prayer, blessing) and ask God, for example, for good health, a husband for unmarried and divorced women and good children for mothers. A Sheekhad also gives general religious advice and instructions. A participant may ask others to pray for her if she is ill or has other problems. Once I was present when a woman started crying and as a result other women gathered around her, prayed and patted her on the back. A Sheekhad explained:

First a sick person should go to a hospital. If she cannot get help, we ask God. God has the decision, whether he helps or not. When people gather
many times for the sake of God, other people may think that they are good people, and maybe God listens to their prayers. So, sometimes ill people come and ask us to pray for them. I do not use any other techniques than praying and reading the Koran, and often they get what they need. I have no other power to heal. I do not know if I am a chosen person, but God accepts the prayers of certain people more easily. (Sheekhad Khadra)

Women also discuss and interpret their dreams and visions together. Dreams may carry religiously important symbols and messages (in Egypt, see Hoffmann 1997). For example, a lion that appears in a dream is a symbol of awliyo. A sitaat group may also collect money if one of the women needs economic support. Each participant contributes according to her economic resources. The main purpose of the sitaat group is, however, to practise religion:

The only reason for the existence of a sitaat group is to praise God, to practise religion, to teach these ladies about religion and to warn about bad things. This is not for the tribe or personal interest; the main purpose is God. God said that if two persons gather because they love God, not because of personal interest, money or tribe, God will reward them. This is the only reason we come here. We do not care about colour or clan; we are equal. We like each other, because we all worship God. According to our religion, we have to respect all people, whatever religion they have . . . Unbeliever or believer, our religion does not allow us to harm another person. We have to live together in a peaceful way. We do not have to look at their origin or to abuse them because of it. It is not allowed that you eat yourself, if your neighbour is not eating. If someone is going to take your property or to harm you, regardless of the religion, you are allowed to defend yourself. Otherwise, give peace to existing people, of whatever religion or clan they are. (Sheekhad Khadra)

Unity between women and all humankind was often stressed as one of the basic values. In the case of a dispute between two women, the other members of the group may try to mediate. If that does not solve the problem, the Sheekhad has to interfere, and if needed, pronounce a punishment to the person who is creating problems: Sheekhad Khadra reported that in those cases they will arrange a celebration in xadra and read the Koran, and the person has to pay the costs.

Through sitaat itself Somali women also try to promote peace on a larger societal level. In the summer of 2006 I had a chance to follow an interesting discussion during one of the sitaat sessions. The discussion followed events that had taken place in Darroor, a Somali inhabited area on the Ethiopian side of the border between Somaliland and Ethiopia. Two clans, Ciidagale and Habar Yoonis, sub-clans of Garxajis, had been fiercely fighting over water resources and this upset the women in the sitaat group. In the group there were women from both tribes. The Sheekhad gave a speech to the women, where she pointed out that Ciidagale and Habar Yoonis are brothers and sisters. She told the listening women that they should collect women
from both sides, bring them together and make peace between these women. She also urged women to tell their boys that they should not continue fighting. In order to get God’s blessing, ajar, they should arrange a siyaaro\(^1\) in Hargeysa the coming Friday. Siyaaro would be arranged in honour of Sheikh Isaaq, the ancestor of all the Isaaq tribes. This raised a lively discussion among the women, and it was finally decided that in addition to Sheikh Isaaq, the forefathers of both fighting clans – Dacuud from Ciidagale and Saciid from Habar Yoonis — should be praised. Moreover, their father, Ismaciil, the ancestor of the whole Garxajiis clan should be honoured.\(^2\) Hence, women decided to bring the fighting clans of Garxajiis together by arranging siyaaro for all the important ancestors of the fighting clans, and ask for duco, blessing, from them. Further they decided how they could share the costs, the rent of the room and food expenses. The women’s act echoes an old Somali tradition. According to Judith Gardner and Judy El Bushra (2004:145), in Somalia there has been a tradition of collective prayer meetings, known as allabari that have traditionally been arranged at times of common need, such as drought. During the recurrent conflict in Somaliland between 1991 and 1996, however, women started to hold prayer meetings for peace.

Even though women in sitaat are active in trying to resolve on-going conflicts, they prefer to forget past conflicts. One Sheekhad explained that it is strictly forbidden to discuss the civil war, in Somaliland referred to as faqash,\(^3\) in a sitaat group:

> It is not necessary to speak about the past; it may hurt someone and people become emotional. It is one of our rules, not to mention the previous problems. Religion says that we have to forgive. If we discuss these problems, Shayddaan [Satan] gets a good opportunity to make the problems bigger. If I take an example: If you want a wound to heal, you should not touch it all the time. If you have a problem, it is better to forgive and not to discuss it all the time. (Sheekhad Khadra)

In addition to regular sitaat groups, sitaat experts can be invited when a woman is pregnant in her ninth month: sitaat is arranged in order to ask for an easy delivery and a healthy child. Sitaat can also be specifically arranged when someone is ill. Moreover, it is nowadays common to arrange sitaat when a woman from the diaspora visits Somalia and is about to return to a resettlement country: through sitaat a safe return and continuous blessing can be asked. The event is usually videotaped, and hence, can be remembered later back in the diaspora. I have also seen sitaat at a wedding, where it was more like a cultural performance, and played out together with tradi-

\(^1\) Siyaaro means a visit to the graves of awliyo, but also commemoration.
\(^2\) Somalis venerate the clan ancestors – whether historical personages or not – in the same fashion as they do Sufi saints (Lewis 1998:21–22).
\(^3\) Literally faqash means a dirty or corrupt person, and filth. Somalilanders use faqash to refer to the war starting in 1988, when the Somali government attacked the northern territories.
tional women’s dances. And once I also attended sitaat that was organised by a women’s association. I was informed that their association had been running only a few months, and they wanted to receive blessing for their new activities.

Sitaat and religious change in Somaliland

As a consequence of the increasing influence of new Islamic movements, political upheavals and civil war in Somalia, religious practices and interpretations in Somalia are changing. As mentioned earlier, Al-Waxda, Unity, was the name of the first Islamic organisation in Somalia, founded in Hargeysa (Hassan 2003). Nowadays, the term waxda is commonly used by Sufis in Somaliland to refer to supporters of new Islamic movements, or in general Muslims who are seen to be different from traditional Sufis in the ways they practise religion. Sufis claim that Sufis follow the right path, the original Islam. A Sheekhad explained:

Waxda do not want to praise Prophet Muhammed. Waxda do not get excited over the Prophet in the way we do. But they are wrong. Those who belong to waxda have not yet seen what we have seen. (Sheekhad Zahra)

Hence, Sufi women (as well as men) categorise religious people into two groups, waxda and Sufis who follow the original way of Islam and have a deeper knowledge of the religion. However, they admit that an increasing number of Somalis are followers of waxda. Sheekhad Khadra explained:

Nebi-Ammaan started when the Prophet moved from Mecca to Medina. Ladies welcomed these things [sitaat] and since that Nebi-Ammaan has been increasing. If you are asking about the situation compared to how it was before the war, the number of people doing sitaat is decreasing, because people are going to the other side, waxda. They say that you are not allowed to sing, celebrate or mention these things . . . You don’t have to make a great celebration for the Prophet, that is shirk [sin]. You don’t have to dance, visit his grave, to celebrate his birthday. You just pray five daily prayers, it is enough. During the Prophet’s time, people welcomed these things, they played durbaan [a drum]. We are like those people; we sing in both Arabic and Somali language. If you praise the Prophet, it does not matter in what language. Waxda says all this is xaraam [forbidden]. If we tell these waxda, bring your books and show where this is prohibited, they never come. Mainly they influence women and children. According to our culture, when someone dies, we slaughter animals and collect money to give his/her family. But waxda does not accept these things. We made more sadaqa [voluntary alms] before, not so much any more. (Sheekhad Khadra)

My views on whether the practice of sitaat is in decline or not are somewhat contradictory. On one hand, I have often been told that the number of wo-
men who take part in sitaat, is decreasing. This has been explained by the influence of waxda, who do not accept praising the Prophet Muhammad and awliyo. “Women and Somali people in general are forgetting their own culture and the historical way of doing things. Xadra was originally religious culture, not Somali culture. Nowadays most women are going to a mosque”, Sheekhad Khadra explained. Another explanation given is that many women, who used to practise sitaat before the war, are now either dead or have moved abroad. Moreover, a woman explained that nowadays women do not have time to attend sitaat regularly, because they have to work and participate in earning the family income. Hence, according to her, sitaat is mainly arranged when someone asks for it. On the other hand, I have been told that the number of women in sitaat is increasing. And indeed, in many celebrations that I have attended, we have been sandwiched in overcrowded rooms. One of the sitaat groups regularly attracted 70–100 women. The group had plans to raise funds and build their own house for sitaat. What could be the reasons for the continued practice of sitaat, even though the official religious views do not encourage it?

“Sitaat is part of being religious, part of being good”

“Sitaat is part of being religious, part of being good”, Sheekhad Zahra explained. She had practised sitaat since she was six years old. Once, ten years ago, she wanted to end her practice. Then she had a dream that an animal was slaughtered in front of her. In the morning a woman came and gave her a sheep. Then she understood that she could not stop doing sitaat, as it was an important part of religion. She also gave another example of the necessity to continue sitaat: Once she had been invited to a village. Nine pregnant women from the village had died and the women who were left were very worried. She saw in her dream a lion, the symbol of awliyo, and the lion said that women had to continue doing sitaat. Hence, practising sitaat continues to be an inseparable part of being a good, moral and healthy Somali Muslim woman.

“A sitaat group is a women’s mosque”

“This is a women’s mosque”, Sheekhad Nadiifa noted. “We only read the Koran, we gather, say good things to each other, give advice, make siyaaro. We pray if a person is ill, if someone is getting married; we try to help each other. Everyone can pay what they can. This group is open for anyone who wants to participate”. Another Sheekhad explained the difference between xadra and a mosque:

The mosque and xadra are different. The mosque is only for praying and reading the Koran. In a mosque it is not allowed to eat khat and you have to
be quiet. In *xadra* we can eat, sleep, we say nice things to each other; you can also eat *khat*. We teach each other good things. According to our religion, during menstruation it is not allowed to have sex, a man cannot touch the area between a woman’s knees and waist. She cannot read the Koran, she cannot fast or pray, go to hajj [pilgrimage], touch a Koran or enter a mosque. The man is not allowed to divorce her during menstruation; there are many rules. But in *xadra* a menstruating woman is allowed to join us; she can listen to the Koran and she can sing here. (Sheekhbad Khadra)

Any place where women gather to do *sitaat*, becomes a religious space. Moreover, a *sitaat* group is a unique female religious space, where Somali women can memorise and reproduce the chain of the “daughters of Faadumo Rasuul”. In *sitaat* women are the religious experts, who can define the rules and interpret Islam in a way that better takes into consideration the needs of women.

“*Sitaat has been renewed*”

I have been told that the performance of *sitaat* has changed after the war, and a new element, dancing, has been added. A participant in *sitaat* complained:

Before the war we did not dance in *sitaat*, it was forbidden to stand up. Every person had her own place where she sat, we did not watch others, we concentrated on ourselves and praising. But now a new generation has come; it does not know the tradition, they do what they want, dance.

Another woman reported:

*Sitaat* has changed, it has been renewed. When I left Somalia twenty years ago, there was no dancing in *sitaat*. People sat when they experienced *mu-raaqo*, they just swayed themselves sitting. At that time, women who came to *sitaat* were usually poor. But now everyone comes to *sitaat*, regardless of income or social class. Now there is also dance in *sitaat*, I was surprised when I came back nine years ago. *Sitaat* has become a party. I do not believe that *sitaat* is going away. When I came here [*sitaat*] today, I was stressed, but now I feel refreshed.

The *sitaat* sessions that I have observed have had very different levels of emotional intensity. On some occasions, indeed, *sitaat* looks like a party: women have dressed up in beautiful, expensive clothes, they have on make-up, they seem to enjoy themselves and they smile, dance, and have fun together. But even in this “light” *sitaat*, emotional feeling gradually grows. On other occasions, women seem to concentrate more on their inner experience, they sit down and sway their bodies. They do not dance, but stand up and bend the body rhythmically when they become very emotional. The leaders of the two regular *sitaat* groups that I followed most were quite strict regarding the way women can behave in *sitaat* and the leaders stressed the reli-
gious content and meaning as well as the seriousness of the ritual. However, modifications in *sitaat* and a party-like atmosphere may attract new women to participate. *Sitaat* is a rare place of relaxation and joy for women, who otherwise struggle with everyday stresses and worries. Moreover, *sitaat* has become not only a religious, but also a cultural performance that can be staged at weddings or other communal events. For women in the diaspora, arranging and attending sitaat while they visit their country of origin is also a quest for religious and cultural identity.

*A transfer from saar to sitaat?*

Spirit possession *saar* (*zar*) is a widely known phenomenon in the Horn of Africa as well as on the East African coast and its hinterland, in North Africa and the Middle East (see e.g., Boddy 1989; Lewis et al. 1991). Spirit possession refers to different states, where a spirit, for one reason or another, has entered a person. Spirits, in the Islamic world known as *jinn*, may cause various health and other problems. In Somalia *saar*, which includes many different cults and spirits, is common especially among women in all social classes. Different spirits have their own specific ritual practices, which may also vary in different areas and groups. Healing rituals often include the use of special incense, different dance styles, music and animal sacrifices (Ahmed 1988; Pelizzari 1997).

The aims for doing *sitaat* and *saar* are different as in *saar* the aim is to pacify a spirit that causes suffering and illness. However, both rituals share similar features: slaughtering animals and eating together, drumming, clapping the hands, singing, dancing, the use of perfumes and incense, and the togetherness of women. Moreover, both rituals may lead to trance. Lewis has also pointed out that there are similarities between *dikri* and *saar* dance, and he suggests a syncretism between the two ceremonies (Lewis 1998:28–29).

Today, Somali *ulema*, religious scholars, as well as many ordinary people, regard *saar* as a non-Islamic practice and hence, forbidden. Many Somali men, in particular, do not seem to be familiar with *sitaat*. They frequently regard it as not a proper Islamic practice, and also confuse it with spirit possession, *saar*. Somali women, who participate in *sitaat*, however, make a clear distinction between these two rituals, and stress that *sitaat* has nothing to do with *saar*. A Sheekhad explained:

> A *jinni* cannot come here [to *sitaat*], he will be burned here, he escapes this area. *Saar* and *mingis* are forbidden. We have here *dikri*, we have *nasri* [religious things; also success, victory]. *Jinn*, *saar*, *mingis*, *rooxaan*¹ do not come; they are *xaraam* [forbidden]! (Sheekhad Nadiifa)

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¹ *Mingis* and *rooxaan* are names for different spirits known in Somalia.
According to women in sitaat, muraaqo, religious trance, and a trance caused by jinn, are different states: a person who experiences muraaqo is not ill, but a person who enters a trance caused by jinn is. Most of the participating women seem to admit, however, that it is possible that sometimes a jinni inside a person becomes active during sitaat and causes a trance. This can be noticed when a woman reacts very strongly, is uncontrolled, screams, dances fiercely and finally falls down on the floor unconscious. A few times I witnessed this behaviour. Other women around then discussed whether the reason could be jinn. Sheekhad Khadra explained:

Sometimes when women come to xadra, some of them have jinn, something called saar; we do not know. When they are new to our group and the saar is with them, they may fall down with saar and become unconscious. But if they join us, saar leaves from these women. Saar cannot stay long with these women who stay with us. Saar is always looking for a group who likes it. Some jinn come with women and try to hide with them. Every group joins its own group. When saar does not find its own group here, it leaves. The person becomes normal. (Sheekhad Khadra)

Sheekhad Nadiifa also wondered if those women who were eager to dance in sitaat, had previously participated in saar. This suggestion makes sense to me. As the participation in saar has become strongly labelled as non-Islamic and hence, something to be abandoned, at least some of those women who used to attend saar rituals, may find in sitaat an alternative ritual setting. The similarities in rituals lead to similar reactions in both rituals (see also Tiilikainen 2010).

Conclusion

In this article I have described the organisation and the role of sitaat in contemporary Somaliland. On one hand, as a consequence of current Islamisation in the Horn, Sufi religious practices including women’s sitaat, seem to be decreasing. On the other hand, my data shows that sitaat still has a strong foothold in the everyday religiosity of Somali women: sitaat continues to be an inseparable part of being a good, moral and healthy Somali Muslim woman. A sitaat group also provides women a unique female religious space where they can be the religious experts, define the rules and interpret Islam in a way that better takes into consideration the specific needs of women. Moreover, sitaat can absorb new, modern elements such as dancing, which may attract new women. Sitaat has also been renewed as it has been staged as a cultural and religious performance at weddings and other communal events. Finally, I have suggested that some of those women who used to attend saar rituals, may find an alternative ritual setting from sitaat and hence, keep sitaat groups full and vital.
In analysing the data on sitaat, I found Daniéle Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) discussion on religious memory useful. She says:

In the case of religious memory, the normativity of collective memory is reinforced by the fact of the group’s defining itself, objectively and subjectively, as a lineage of belief . . . At the source of all religious belief, as we have seen, there is belief in the continuity of the lineage of believers. This continuity transcends history. It is affirmed and manifested in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future. The practice of anamnesis, of the recalling to memory of the past, is most often observed as a rite . . . (Hervieu-Léger 2000:125)

In sitaat, the female lineage up to the Prophet’s daughters, especially to Faadumo Rasuul, and to other distinguished women and mothers of early Islam is memorised and enforced. This is a significant notion in the Somali society, which is strongly based on patrilineal clans. This historical female chain as well as a connection to Prophet Mohammed and awliyo, animated in religious trance, muraqqa, empowers women and supports them in the times of present uncertainty and crisis. Moreover, mutual help and sharing of problems and emotions in a sitaat group strengthens the unity and collective female identity of all participating women in spite of the clan. Peace-making with the help of divine blessings is one of the common goals for all women.

Finally, sitaat, as a comprehensive bodily and emotional experience, may appeal to Somali women more than the new puritanical interpretations of Islam. In the midst of current political and religious change in Somaliland, the separate worlds of men and women may even help women to maintain and revitalize distinctive female religious traditions such as sitaat. My data, however, raises many questions that need to be studied in the future. One of the interesting issues is the meaning of clans for the organisation of the groups as well as for women’s religious identity.

References
Piety and Trade: A Somali Woman Trader in Dubai

Rannveig Jetne Haga

Now I have full faith. My life is better now than before. I went to jail, and in prison I did my prayers and became close to God (Aisha ca. 45).¹

Aisha is a middle aged, small-scale trader, who started trading thirty years ago² when she divorced her first husband and was left with a child to care for. After divorcing her second husband she became a successful trader for several years. Afterwards, she made a failed attempt to smuggle the mildly narcotic qaad plant³ across the borders to the Emirates and was sent to prison for five years. I met Aisha during my fieldwork in Dubai in 2005. At that time, she is attempting to build friendships and regain her reputation as a respectable woman after her stay in prison.

My paper is based on research carried out in connection with my PhD project, which is about religion and trade. I have used a qualitative method and focus on a group of fourteen women (including Aisha), who are traders in Dubai and/or in the capital of Somaliland/Northwest Somalia,⁴ Hargeysa, during 2004–2005.⁵ In this paper I focus on Aisha. I examine the way she represents her story as to how she became a successful trader and later is able to start trading again after losing substantial resources, both material and immaterial. The objective of this paper is to describe how Aisha attempts to regain a reputation as a respectable and pious woman. Because of her breach she lost the support of her clan, which is a serious drawback, since especially after the civil war and the collapse of the state, it is the clan which mainly provide Somalis with physical and economic security (Farah & Gundell 2007:312). Because my assistant, Sarah,⁶ who translates the interviews with Aisha, is one of the few friends Aisha has, Aisha’s presenta-

¹ Aisha is a pseudonym used in order to preserve her anonymity.
² It was thirty years ago at the time of my interviews in 2005.
³ For a thorough study of historic production and consumption of qaad see: Cassanelli 1986.
⁴ Somaliland is a secessionist state. I refer to it as Somaliland not as a political statement, but just as a reflection of what most of my informants called the region.
⁵ In addition, I had already travelled to Dubai in 2002 and interviewed Somalis there in what I refer to as my preliminary fieldwork.
⁶ Because my assistant was part of the network of women that I studied I refer also to her with a pseudonym.
tion of her actions can at the same time be seen as an attempt to build social capital.\(^1\)

During the course of my fieldwork Aisha is also gradually accepted by an increasing number of women and, therefore, her attempts to restore her reputation as a respectable woman seems to be successful. What will become apparent is that Aisha accomplishes this foremost by convincing her social group that she is a “good Muslim.” Therefore, piety is closely connected to respectability. Moreover, she associates her own story with the destiny also of other Somalis by referring to the devastating consequences of the civil war.

“State of Emergency”

Hargeysa and Burco,\(^2\) the two major cities of Somaliland, were captured in 1988 by the Somali National Movement, a clan based militia, in an attempt to oppose the oppressive military regime. As a response the government ordered brutal ground and aerial bombardment in order to get rid of the opposition (Warsame 2004, WSP International 2005:13). Hargeysa and Burco were bombed to the ground. Most people living in the towns and the surrounding area lost everything. Consequently, the majority of the citizens from these two towns, and a large rural population, fled to Ethiopia, where they settled in refugee camps. Fifty thousand people are estimated to have been killed and five hundred thousand are said to have fled to Ethiopia (WSP International 2005:13). The worst damages were done to the capital Hargeysa, where during one year the population of three hundred thousand was reduced to five thousand, and eighty percent of the city structure was destroyed (Haakonsen 2005:11).

The women in my study carry a vivid memory of this disaster no matter whether they were in Somaliland at the time or were already in Dubai, or some other place abroad. They understand this to be a complete break with their past, and express that a time ensued when they can no longer practice their traditions the way they used to. Even if Somaliland was a relatively stable region compared to the rest of Somalia, the government is not recognized internationally and it is, therefore, officially part of a stateless country

\(^1\) It is according to Pierre Bourdieu (1985) particularly when actors seek to enhance their social status that power structures are reaffirmed. The subconscious goal of every action is, according to him, to (re)fill the reserve of capital in order to enhance ones chances in the social game. Ones chances in the social world are pre-determined by ones embodied dispositions, and by striving to enhance one’s chances one helps reinstate existing power structure by reaffirming the rules of the game. Although I do not agree that enhancing ones social status is the only subconscious goal I find the theory useful for my purpose because I am interested in studying this aspect of social action.

\(^2\) In this paper Somali words are written with Somali orthography and the “c” is therefore pronounced similar to the apostrophe ‘ in English.
driven by civil war for almost two decades. Although their region has been relatively stable since 1997\(^1\) people are still very poor, and the unemployment rate is high. My informants argue that it is this “situation” that forces them to trade. I analyze this as a “state of emergency” because it is portrayed by the women as a temporary state which forces people to behave in exceptional ways in order to survive. I argue that the women of my study use such a concept strategically in order to make room for their continued trading activities.

The state apparatus in Somaliland has been described by researchers as weak (see Renders 2007, Jimcaale 2005:70). In the absence of a protecting and providing state only the clan alliances give people security. Although it is mainly the clan that is expected to assist, this is not the only form of alliance which could provide security. Alliances based on patrilineal lineage are highly flexible, since for instance they can be formed also on the matrilineal lineage. In the past women formed groups for spiritual and economic support (see Affi 2004). Today, the tradition of *hagbaad*, an economic rotation system where women contribute an amount of money every month, and each month one of the women collect the money (Olsson 1994:74), is being used by micro finance organizations in order to support women and their trade.

Moreover, there are also a number of Islamic revivalist groups, which provide charity and education. While the clan system and Islam have coexisted for centuries in Somalia there are today highly influential groups that propagate a “new” interpretation of Islam. While these groups have been present since the 1970s they have won greater popularity since the outbreak of the war. They denounce traditional Sufi practices, which have been widespread in Somalia, such as the *dhikr* (remembrance of God) ceremonies. Moreover, they generally claim that Somalis have been lacking in religious knowledge previously, as they have been mislead by Sufi “religious men”. Traditionally, “religious men” with basic knowledge of Islam are called *waadad*, while the more prominent are referred to as *sheikh*. At the time of my fieldwork many of those who are described to be “religious men” are influenced by revivalist movements. Although there are Islamic revivalists of different orientation in Somaliland, they have in common that they want to

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\(^1\) The Somali state collapsed in 1991, and in its place there emerged armed clan militias fighting for political power. While they are still trying to resolve this struggle in the South, the former British Somaliland has formed a relatively stable secessionist state. In May 1991 there was a clan-conference in Burco where representatives of different clans living in Somaliland met together with participants from other sectors of society, including artists, intellectuals, and business people (who financed most of the conference) (WSP International 2005). They reconciled and decided to form an independent state, labeled the Republic of Somaliland. In Somaliland a fragile peace was established and governmental and non-governmental organizations emerged, which started reconstructions. Even though the reconciliation that took place in Burco is understood to be the cornerstone of peace in Somaliland, the conference did not settle conflicts between the different clans and the different fractions of the society. They had to wait until 1997 for relative stability to be reached in the region (WSP International 2005:16).
establish an Islamic social order and, eventually, an Islamic state based on Sharia. Moreover, they wanted to get rid of the clan system which they think divides the Somalis. However, they have learned to work with it in order to make it possible to operate within Somaliland. The revivalists endorse a strict moral code, modesty in dress, and hard work (Renders 2007). While they maintain that men also should dress modestly, they are particularly concerned with the way women dress. Moreover, when they idealize hard work they speak of different and specific tasks for women and men. According to them, men should work outside the home and provide for the women, while women mainly have the responsibility for the home and child rearing.

Islamic revivalists have become highly influential, especially because they have been actively involved in providing charity and education. Moreover, many “religious men” become prominent and highly successful traders (Renders 2007 and Yusuf Ducaale 2005:149). Women among my informants usually have positive opinions to these “religious men,” who time and again are described as the only men that can be trusted, because they do not chew qaad.

The revivalists are against the chewing of qaad which, traditionally, has been done sparsely in all-night dikhr ceremonies, but which now has turned into a social vice. It is eating up the household budget, making men unable to work, and causing health problems, such as mental disorders (Renders 2007). Moreover, men can be blamed for causing war and suffering as well, while women are described to be working for peace. The women have taken a central role after the war and are presented as caretakers, who make it possible for the family to survive (see Warsame 2004). My informants are influenced by ideas expounded by the Islamic revivalists and usually argue that they want themselves to be housewives. However they argue that they have to continue their trade because their income is needed by themselves, and the relatives they provide for. They refer to a temporary “situation”, which I call a “state of emergency”.

When the women traders argue that the “situation” will turn to “normal” and that traditional ways will be reinstated as soon as the “state of emergency” comes to an end, they frequently embrace “new” revivalist interpretations of Islam. Still I label this effort as an endeavor to “re-traditionalize”; an expressed attempt to reinstate an idea of the past which is constructed as tradition, because according to them this is a type of reinstatement of a different past (the time of the Prophet Muhammad). By and large, the expressed goal is replication rather than change and invention. However, theories on social action maintain that whatever its goal every action uses impersonal forms, namely conventional or traditional patterns of action, while the very performance of an act inevitably entails a factor of invention and change

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1 The political scientist Ladan Affi (1997) states that there is ample evidence of Islamic movements arising in Somalia with an obsession on women’s dress codes.
Therefore, the possibility of agency is found within structures of power. After the war, revivalists who propagate a restricted and secluded role model for women are popular, at the same time as women are regarded by my informants as “saviors of the nation” and, therefore, their position as economical providers is generally positively viewed.

I analyze how Aisha works with the norm, and how she, thereby, creates new possibilities for herself. Aisha has not exactly lived up to the role as the responsible caretaker, which is an acceptable role for women. She tried to import to Dubai the drug which is blamed for causing so many problems. So how is she able to present herself as a respectable woman after all? Before embarking on the study of how she won the trust of other women in Dubai, I introduce the reader to the “Somali market.”

The “Somali market” in Dubai

In 2002 when I was in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates was known to be one of the few places in the world that accepted the Somali passport as valid. This has, however, changed upon my return in 2004 since it has become known that a Somali passport could easily be purchased on the black market in Nairobi, Kenya. Subsequently, only those Somalis who already have a visitor’s visa, or who have a passport of a nationality other than Somali, can enter the UAE.

There are approximately 20,000 Somalis living in the UAE in 2005 and about 10,000 are estimated to live in Dubai. Dubai is a state of immigrants, as is the case for many of the Gulf States; only about one fourth of the population is local. Dubai is a “plural” society in the sense that different people with their own cultures live side by side without mingling. The only way

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1 Saba Mahmood (2005), who writes about women’s mosque movements in Egypt, is critical to previous studies of Muslim women because according to her they presented agency as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendent will or other obstacles” (Ibid 2005:8). She attempts to find a way to understand those projects, desires, and discourses that are not captured within the binary opposition of resistance and subordination. According to her, desire is formed within discourse, and instead of taking for granted that a subject strives to become “emancipated” and “free”, one should seek to examine the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge. Thereby, she strives to find a theory that can make visible the agency of those who have a desire for submission to recognized authority, rather than a desire to subvert norms. However, as Butler argues in a response to Mahmood’s critique of her theories on agency, there is a difference between innovation that works with the norm, and a “transcendence” of the norm that works in the name of emancipation and freedom. Therefore, even if the expressed goal is not emancipation and freedom, their actions can still generate “new possibilities.” (Butler 2006:284).


3 There are no formal statistics available and the numbers are estimations made by Shariif Ahmed, the chairman in the Somali business council in Dubai in an interview 21/7 2005.
they interact is through buying and selling at the marketplace. This may be
true for most of the Gulf States but it seems to be especially true for Dubai,
which is reckoned to be a center of trade. My informants in Dubai do not
know any locals except for Somali women who have become locals through
marriage. They mingle with migrants outside their ethnic group only when
purchasing goods. It is, however, also possible to purchase goods only from
other Somalis as well, as most services and goods can be purchased from
other Somalis within Deira’s Al Ras which is unofficially labeled the “So-
mali market” (Souqa Somaliga) located on the outer edge of the jewelry
market.

My informants who are small scale traders in Dubai spent most of their
time in this part of the market. In the markets of Dubai nearly all of the Mus-
lim sales clerks are male, while in the Somali part of the market a large
number of the clerks are also women. A number of Somali women come
from different East-African countries where they have wholesale stores as
well. Especially during the humid and incredibly hot summer time there are
a number of Somali women from North America and Europe who are there
in transit, on their way to or from Somalia. These women are the most im-
portant customers for most traders in Dubai, and they can be found within
the “Somali market”. This is where Somalis also have cafes, restaurants and
hotels, where the owners and most of the customers are Somalis. Outside the
cafes a large number of Somali men sit and drink tea. Somalis call the place
Fadhi ku dirix, which means “armchair warrior”, because there they always
talk about clan-issues, which is thought to be the cause of the war. The So-
mali women are either on the go, or they sit inside stores drinking tea, chat-
ting and buying goods. The goods that are mainly purchased by Somali
women from North America and Europe are jewelry and a dress called dirca.

The Dress and the Jewelry

The dirca is two squares of garment sown together with openings for arms
and head, the garment is colorful with a variety of patterns. These direci (plu-
rals) can be made of different fabric; cotton and silk/chiffon, which are trans-
parent, while pure cotton and cheap versions of the dress only cost a couple
of dollars. Conversely, the transparent and lightest garment of best quality
costs about twenty dollars or more. Approximately every other week new
patterns and colors reach the market. When they arrive the stores change the
displayed direci with the latest versions. Because the dirca is so expensive,
and since one needs to be wealthy, especially if one wants to be fashionable,
the dirca is associated with wealth. The dirca is described as a traditional

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1 See Ahn Nga Longva (1993) description of Kuwait as a plural society.
2 Dubai contain of two parts Bur Dubai and Deira Dubai.
Somali dress (as it resembled the traditional dress). Because it is see-through it is seen to be improper to wear in public, also by those who wear them, even if they cover it with big shawls and wear underskirts.

Like the Somalis, the Sudanese also reject their own traditional dress, the tomba, as un-Islamic, as it is seen not to cover enough. According to Victoria Bernal (1999), this is a consequence of “orthodoxy as modernity” that is taking place in Wad al-Abbas because an increasing number of men have gone to the Arab world as expatriates. But while Bernal observes a direct association between wealth and “orthodox” Islam in Sudan, among Somalis this process seems to be more complex. There is an association between orthodoxy and wealth for men, as many “religious men” also are wealthy, and the type of dress worn by men can, therefore, also be associated with wealth. However, for the women this is not the case.

The full-covering and dark colored jilbaab,1 and to a lesser degree the abaye,2 are connected with “orthodox” Islam among my informants. In Dubai it is common among the young women that I encountered to wear the jilbaab and abaye. As these young women usually either are small-scale traders or work as maids for the older and more successful women the dress can partly be worn for economical reasons. It is cheap, and can hide a lack of jewelry and expensive clothing. Conversely, the successful traders usually wear the latest fashions of the expensive and colorful dirca, and visible jewelry. Additionally, the Somali women in Europe and North America, who are considered wealthy, are interested in buying dirca. Therefore, this dress, although seen to be religiously suspect, is connected to wealth among Somalis in Dubai. Aisha spends most of her days and afternoons searching the Somali market for Somali women who are interested in buying dirca and matching underskirts. Currently, I examine what Aisha has to say about why she became a small-scale trader.

Becoming a small-scale trader

Aisha has lived in the Emirates for twenty-seven years (in 2005). The great change in Aisha’s life did not come with the war, as it did for many Somali women who were forced to become traders after the civil war. Aisha had started trading already before the war when she divorced her first husband. When she married her second husband who worked in the petroleum company in Abu Dhabi she stopped trading for a while and became a housewife. After they divorced, before the war started, she started trading again:

1 The jilbaab is an Arabic style of dressing that is a two-piece dress used to cover other clothing. It consists of a scarf and a long wide garment that covers from head to knees, also often supplemented with a face-veil.

2 Abaye is also an Arabic style of dressing usually worn by the Emirate women; it is a long dress that is used to cover other clothing.
Before we got divorced he sent me to Somalia. He came after me, and we got divorced in Somalia. I was then living in Somalia for three years, while he went back to the Emirates. I gave my kids to my mother and sister, and said that they should take care of them. And I started business again.

I asked Aisha how she earned her start capital in order to start trading again:

When I came back to Dubai my relatives collected fifteen thousand dirham\(^1\) and said that I had to go back to Somalia and take care of my children. While I kept this money I got a job (…) as a housemaid. I got sixteen hundred\(^2\) in salary a month. I collected money. I sent one hundred and fifty dollars for my family (every month), the rest I saved. After one and a half year of collecting money I started my own business. (…) I rented a flat and I sublet the beds. I got two more flats after that and I got some money and started to sell in Hargeysa, I was sending cars and clothes. I was coming and going to and from Hargeysa with my business.

It is interesting to note, Aisha just mentions that she took the money that had been collected in order for her to go back and take care of her children, without making any excuses. This indicates that the women’s role as economical providers is accepted even when they are presented with another choice. A reason why she does not feel she has to explain this might be because it is common for Somalis to let a relative raise a child. As long as her children are with her mother and sister it is not necessary for her to justify that she does not go home to take care of them. Moreover, many Somali women in Dubai have left their children with their families in Somaliland. As is the case also for these other women, she took care of her kids and the rest of her family by providing for them economically. Moreover, she only mentions that she uses the money that has been collected for her in order to start trading again. This is also a priori accepted because she has found a way to provide for her family economically. Only when I ask her how her relatives reacted when she did not return to Somaliland after all, she recounts that it was problematic for them:

I refused to go back. My cousins were the ones giving me the money. They got mad when I refused to go back. I ran away and worked for my family. A hundred and fifty dollars a month I sent to support them. I rented a flat and I sublet the beds.

The cousins that she refers to here are members of her clan, who are closely related, and who we have seen provide Somalis with economic and physical security in Somaliland. In the diaspora, especially in a place like Dubai, where there are no social services accessible to immigrants, the clan is what provides them with economic security. In such a context the close clan

\(^1\) Ca 4300 dollars.
\(^2\) Ca 460 dollars.
member might not be present and, therefore, it is those who are closest to her who take the responsibility. The word “cousin” is highly flexible, and can refer to close clan members or to anyone who belong to the same clan. Moreover, it can, of course, refer to cousins on the maternal side; however, it is cousins on the paternal side who mainly are expected to be responsible for their security.

She continues her trade successfully for many years. In the late 1990s, about ten years after the civil war started in Somaliland, she decided to invest her money in the illegal qaad trade. When the police caught her the media also made her actions publicly known:

The day I was arrested they took my eighteen thousand dollars. They took pictures of me and the money and the qaad. They were putting one in the newspaper.

One of the inmates, an Egyptian lady, who was married to an Emirate citizen, helped Aisha pay for her ticket home to Somalia when she was deported. Aisha herself was bankrupt, and she informs me that if no one had helped her she would have “stayed in jail for ever”. Her clansmen (and women) had already been upset with her when she had refused to go back to Somalia to take care of her children, and after she went to prison they refused to assist her anymore. Perhaps if she had spent well the money she received from her cousins, continued to be creative,\(^1\) made her money grow, and continued to be a contributor for other relatives, they would not have minded so much that she did not go home as they had expected her to do. This is my guess since, as we have seen she does not express guilt because she has taken the money that they supplied in order that she could go back. Moreover, it is not until she took great risks by smuggling qaad, lost all her money, and her actions became publicly displayed that she lost the support of her clan-members. It also seemed that she is not aware of the risks she took because the loss of her extended family’s aid came as a shock to her: “I didn’t know life could be that hard. If you get sick or go to jail nobody will help you. Even the family doesn’t care.”

Having lost the support of those who were expected to help, Aisha formed friendships that gave her the aid she needed, like the Egyptian lady who helped her with her ticket. Aisha’s ex-husband and a Somali woman also assisted her when she wanted to start trading again. Her ex-husband remitted money to her so that she could go back to Dubai and work. When she was ready to go to Dubai her clan members in Dubai refused to take the responsibility for her. Consequently, she asked a Somali woman outside her clan, who had worked in the jail where she had spent the last five years.

\(^1\) The word used for creative is *hal abuur leh*, which literally means; ‘one who plants a seed’, and is used to describe a person who creates employment, creates music and in the case of traders referred to a person who knew how to invest the money in order to make it grow.
I couldn’t find anyone who would be a reference person for me. They refused to make a visa because the people I knew refused to take the responsibility for me. Then I tried with a Somali woman who was working in the jail that I was in. I phoned her and asked if she could take the responsibility for me. She said yes. *Alhamdulilaahi* (Thank God).

The Somali woman not only helped her get a visa, she also gave her a place to live, and a loan so she could start trading again. Aisha received help to get on her feet again but she lost the support of her network. She started to build a new network through her friendships with women. Traditionally, besides the security supplied by the clan, other women have provided fellow women with a sense of security. Aisha has become dependent on this type of support. According to the way Aisha continues her accounts, it seems that an important criterion for gaining the support of the particular group of women that she seeks to be accepted by, is a display of piety.

**A New Start**

Now I am more experienced then before. I believe (in God) stronger then before. I know now everything. I know the people. And I have been struggling but *Alhamdulilaahi*. Now I am thanking God. I saved money after I arrived here again and I am doing well. I am trusting God more than before. Now I have full faith. My life is better now than before. I went to jail and in prison I did my prayers and became close to God.

Aisha turned to God when she lost the only system for social security that Somalis had to depend on, whether in Dubai or in Somalia. Aisha says that before she went to prison her life was nothing, as she had not pursued “the straight path”. She says this while gesturing a straight line with her arms. She emphasizes her closeness to God by telling about how God helped her to survive her prison days:

> I went to jail. I went back to my room. I was praying a lot. I was having allergies, a running nose. I asked God to make ten years seem like ten days and to give me my health, I slept and after that I didn’t have any allergies. I didn’t sneeze again, until now I am not sneezing *Alhamdulilaahi*.

She says that in prison she started to “do her prayers properly” and to read the Quran, none of which she had done before. I ask Aisha if she also changed the way she dressed and she says: “I always dressed like now, with a big *shalma* (a shawl) and a *dirca*, but I was learning more about the Quran”. She dresses the same as Sarah and most successful traders with the expensive see-through and patterned *dirca*, with an underskirt and a large shawl which is loosely laid around her head. Emirate women who Aisha said “worked for the ministry of justice” came regularly to the prison to teach
them about the Quran and during Ramadan a religious leader had been invited from Saudi Arabia to teach the prisoners.

Because Islam has been spread through Sufi orders in Somalia, while the teachers most likely taught a scripture oriented and stricter version of the religion practiced in Saudi Arabia, I ask Aisha if what she learned in prison differed from what she had been taught during the time she grew up in the nomadic life. She says that when they grew up they already “knew about the religion, that we should not go out naked.” According to Aisha, her grandfather, who was knowledgeable in religious matters, a “sheikh”, used to teach the children. However, according to her not only her family, but all the people in the area she grew up in knew “how to pray” and: “All people covered in the area we grew up, and even in other places they were having shalma (big shawls).”

Aisha, as many of my informants, says that Somalis “always knew” about the religion, and associate the religion mainly with praying and wearing proper clothing. Thereby, they do not outright reject cultural practices in favor of “correct” Islam, which is common among Islamic revivalists (see Evers Rosander 1997, Malti-Douglas 2001, Bernal 1999). Instead they reinterpret their culture and claim that the Somali culture was a correct Islamic culture from the beginning. However, it is also commonly claimed that the Somalis have been ignorant in the past. The simultaneous appreciation of their cultural ways and an idea that Somalis have become better Muslims after the war becomes obvious when I ask Aisha more questions.

I tell Aisha that many of my informants maintain that the clearest sign that Somalis generally have become more religious after the war is that the women have started to cover more. She says: “But everybody was wearing scarves. Jilbaab and Niqab\(^1\) are popular now.” I ask her where this came from:

We lost our country, fighting each other. After that we ran away. Then everybody was feeling we did something wrong. Maybe we didn’t do it properly. We have to do it right and find out what God wants. It is a punishment from God. It is more proper to wear jilbaab, it is important. Better than this shalma and dirca (she shows with her hands her own shawl and dress). This is not right at all. We have to cover up to the hand and have it tight around the head. It is prohibited that someone sees your neck. I should wear jilbaab because this is not right, my arms are visible. If I have it tight then I will have headache, have blood pressure. I make it easy (for my self).

When I ask her where they sought knowledge when they realized they should learn more, she claims that Somalis always had people that were knowledgeable, but that people did not listen to them:

\(^1\) Face covering.
We were having religious people, those educated people, also before there were people coming from Arabic universities. Many people who were teaching about Islam. Before, these people were saying please you have to do your religion. But people were ignoring them, but when everybody lost their loved ones they started to practice Islam the right way. Everyone was begging God because all was destroyed. Now everybody is learning Alhamdulilahi.

When Aisha speaks about the bad consequences that Somalis experienced after neglecting their religion, she could just as well be speaking about her personal experience as she found that her negligence in the end excluded her socially and economically.\(^1\) As Aisha expresses it herself, God was all that she had left. The idea of God was her last resource, a resource, which can help her build capital and, thereby, regain access to resources that have been temporary lost for her. As worship of God is interpreted in specific ways by Somali communities, which she encounters in Dubai, her faith in God leads her to specific sets of norms, i.e. related to correct ways of dressing, praying and understanding her own activities, which are ways that she manifests her faith. Her gradual acceptance is gained through (re-)establishing herself as a “good Muslim”.

The networks that she attempts to be accepted by are already diverging from prevalent ideals expressed about Somali culture and Islam among themselves, as all of them are traders (work away from home) and as some even travel regularly without a husband or male relative, a *mehram*. As mentioned, it is common for my informants who are part of Sarah’s network to argue that they should not have been traders, but a crisis has forced them to trade. Similarly, Aisha refers to a time of crisis when asked if women should ideally work according to Islam: “I was working at home when I was married and (when we got) divorced it was a crisis and then I learned business.”

Eva Evers Rosander (unpublished) who studies Senegalese women traders in Spain observes that the Senegalese women as transnational agents mainly display a “fatalistic” or “resigned” form of agency, because for them it is more about surviving, and about enduring difficulties, than it is about freedom and transcendence. While this seems to be true for the women in my study as well, who often are forced into the role as breadwinners, they also seem to consciously use the idea about a type of “fatalistic” and “resigned” agency in order to continue their trading activities. By stating that they trade only because they are forced to, and that they ideally should not be as active as they are, they are reinstating power structures, by affirming the view of women as belonging to the home. At the same time, it enables

\(^1\) Marja Tiilikainen (2003), who studied Somali women in Finland, observes that while women often blame the men for the war and the misery caused by it, they also blame themselves because they did not follow Islamic prescriptions correctly. Tiilikainen suggests that this is a way for the women to endure the pain and suffering caused by the war as they become in control of their situation, as stricter adherence to the Islam religion is thought to be a solution (Ibid 2003:64).
the women by supplying them with an excuse to continue their activities. We have seen that Aisha, and the women she sought to be accepted by, express a desire for submission to recognized authority, rather than a desire to subvert norms. Although we could interpret this as their attempt to build capital and, therefore, as a way for them to reinstate existing power structures in accordance with Bourdieu’s (1985) theories, this is not sufficient. There is also a type of innovation involved since the women were resignifying what it means to be a decent woman by displaying that it is possible both to be a pious, decent woman and, at the same time, active trader and economical provider.

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Butler (1993) argues that a resignification of symbols is possible whenever a citational chain which has led to that a symbol has been imbued with a specific meaning is deviated (Ibid 1993:21–22). In the case of the women traders this means that if decent women were, previously, associated with the home and child rearing, while admired and decent women are during a “state of exception” associated with economical providers, then the citational chain has been deviated and new possibilities have emerged. The idea of how a decent woman can behave has expanded.


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