

Hester Venter (b 1750): The woman who loved Jesus

3.1 BOER WOMEN THROUGH THE EYES OF EUROPEAN WOMEN

3.1.1 *Julie Philippe Augusta Uitenhage de Mist*

Information on rural Dutch women in South Africa at the beginning of the eighteenth century comes from a European Dutch woman touring the rural areas with her father at this time. In July 1802 the eighteen-year-old Julie Philippe Augusta Uitenhage de Mist sailed to the Cape of Good Hope with her father, the famous J A de Mist of the 1804 Cape Church Order. During 1803 she and her father undertook a tour of the interior. Augusta Uitenhage de Mist was charmed by the Boer women (De Mist 1954:27, 34, 37) and their orderliness, their prosperity and their friendliness. However, although they spoke the same language, De Mist did not record in her diary any conversation with Dutch women, only with Dutch men; the women remained in the background when conversations took place.

3.1.2 *Lady Anne Barnard*

Another female ego-text provides more information. Reflecting on her journeys through the rural areas around Cape Town between 1797 and 1801, Lady Anne Barnard remarked in her letters and diary on the Dutch Boer women she met on these journeys. Apparently the women were not very communicative and kept in the background. However, they were very hospitable and served excellent meals (Barnard 1924:176). The

women had many children, at least half a dozen each; they were strikingly overweight and fairly sloppy in appearance, she recorded, even the young women were without front teeth. Barnard found that these women had no interest in pleasing their husbands with their appearance, only with their cooking (1924:207, 222). Barnard did not want to paint these women in negative colours. She was puzzled by their reserved behaviour, although she complemented them upon their talents in home industries like the processing of food and the making of clothes (1924:235).

One remark in particular about a Boer woman summarises Lady Anne Barnard's general yet significant observations, namely the short description of a Boer woman in the Waggonmaker's Valley (Barnard 1924:53):

The *vrouw* sat like Charity tormented by a legion of devils.

This image of a woman trying to please while being tormented by mental depressions provides the best paradigm for understanding the piety of Hester Venter.

3.2 THE WOMAN WHO WAS BORN TO FALL IN LOVE WITH JESUS

While Catharina Allegonda van Lier expressed her disappointment in life by fantasising about sin, a local Dutch woman abandoned life for the love of Jesus.

3.2.1 How to become Jesus' mistress

Hester Venter was born in the middle of the eighteenth century. She was baptised on 1 February 1750 (De Villiers & Pama 1981:1007). She married Hendrik van der Walt in 1766 at the age of sixteen. He was the son of the first Van der Walt who came to South Africa and they farmed in the Swellendam district, second-generation white pioneers.

Hendrik van der Walt fathered ten children, but Hester Venter, who wrote her diary under her maiden name, refers (Venter 1852:4) only in brief terms to her husband without mentioning love. In 1796, three years after the birth of her tenth child, the 46-year-old Hester Venter fell in love with Jesus.

What triggered her romance with the divine? It was a Dutch pietist of the Second Reformation. According to Venter (1852:6), once on a visit to Cape Town, she entered a shop and asked the attendant to recommend a

book to read and he gave her a copy of one of the surplus books of the Dutch pietists that had been sent to South Africa. This book, or set of two books, was *Het gekrookte riet* (The broken reed, first published 1744) by Bernardus Smijtegelt (1665–1739), a prominent Dutch pietist of the Second Reformation. Copies of the 1744 publication of this set of books are still extant in the library of the University of Cape Town and in the public library in Middelburg in the Cape. This indicates that this book must have been fairly widely read in the Cape Colony (Van Zijl 1991:189).

3.2.2 *Venter's encounter with a Dutch pietist*

Hester Venter had very little formal schooling. In fact, as a child she had attended school only for three months, but her mother had taught her to read and to write (Venter 1852:1). Linguistically Venter's diary was unpublishable and therefore was rewritten (*overgeschreven*) by J D Ackerman in 1830 (Venter 1852:200). However, in spite of her linguistic disabilities, Venter was a prolific writer. Her published diary comprises 200 pages.

Unfortunately Venter does not appear to have been a prolific reader. Her memory of biblical content appears to have been the only source for her monotonous self-meditations. She confesses that she did not read all of Smijtegelt (Venter 1852:6). She does relate, however, that when she opened his book her eyes fell on a passage which changed her outlook on life from a fear of damnation to the acceptance of her fate. It is possible that Venter read only the full title of Smijtegelt's book, which reads as follows:

Het gekrookte riet, of Honderd vijf en veertig predikatiën over Matth XII:20, 21 waarin een zwak en kleingeloovig Christen opgewekt en bestuurd wordt, om op den Heere Jezus te hopen, mitsgaders verscheidene gevallen en zwarigheden van het gemoed worden opgelost en beantwoord, tot derzulker vertroosting en aanmoediging, om met blijdschap, al strijdende, den weg des geloofs naar den hemel te bewandelen, en aan de eeuwige gelukzaligheid te zijner tijd deel te krijgen. (*The broken reed, or 145 sermons about Matthew 12:20,21, through which a weak Christian of little faith is revived and governed to hope in the Lord Jesus. Different difficulties and depressions of the mind are thus explained and answered for comfort and encouragement, so that with happiness, even though with a struggle, he may walk the path of faith to heaven and participate in eternal happiness.*)

Apparently Venter was attracted to this, or a similar, passage by the concept of hope in difficulty and a state of mental depression on the one

hand and, on the other, the concept that happiness accompanies struggle. These concepts appealed to her because she needed hope in the dangerous circumstances of a border situation and also because she needed support for the mental depression caused by her social isolation on the farm. She was also in need of a piety, not the type by means of which happiness could be achieved quite easily but a piety which demanded a struggle as well as a certain degree of achievement from her.

3.3 THE NICE WOMAN TORMENTED BY A LEGION OF DEVILS

3.3.1 Sin has no name

Her conversion through Smijtegelt did not cure Venter from her obsession with sin. According to her ego-text sinfulness was the best way in which to define herself.

Like Catharina Allegonda van Lier, Venter never defines her sins. They are nameless. Smijtegelt, for instance, provides lists of sins explicitly named, some so exclusive to the Dutch pietist mind, that a translation is impossible (e.g. Smijtegelt 1856:49): *hoogmoed, kleinmoed, menschenbehagers te zijn, vreesachtigheid, nijdigheid, geveinsdheid en gemaaktheid, gierigheid, ijdelheid, leugentaal, achterklap (Lev 17:16), zichselven te prijzen, toornig en boos te zijn zonder oorzaak, en wraakgierigheid.*

However, as far as Venter was concerned, 'sin' meant her sinful nature.

In what follows, four aspects of Venter's concept of herself as a sinner will be explored:

- Venter expressed her fears of physical danger in terms of religious anxiety.
- In her search for salvation from religious anxiety, she was, in fact, attempting to escape her own mental depression.
- Venter empowered herself with her belief in the God of sinners. She tried to escape from her fears and her depression by emphasising her own sinfulness as the cause of her problems.
- Sexual loneliness forced her to humble herself as a sinner before Jesus her saviour and lover.

3.3.2 Fear expressed as religious anxiety

Venter lived in dangerous circumstances on farms on the border of white habitation. At least one of her children had been murdered (Venter 1852:96) and several others died from diseases (:6, 94). She begins her diary by sketching her emotions before her conversion to pietism (1852:4-6): '[dat] ik voortliep van zonde tot zonde, en met snelle schreden naar de hel voortholde' (I proceeded from sin to more sin, speeding towards hell, 1852:4). 'Wanhoop' (despair) and 'benaawdheid' (anxiety) constituted the main characteristics of her daily emotions.

Venter described her fear of her physical circumstances in religious language. By calling herself a 'helleprooi' (prey of hell) and dwelling on her fear that 'dat ik verloren zou gaan', she, in fact, used religious terms to express her fear of being murdered or of having a member of her family die of illness. However, conversion (through Smijtegelt) freed Venter from the fear of losing her sick daughter (Venter 1852:6). After reading a paragraph in Smijtegelt she accepted that her dying daughter would die happily. To her salvation in Christ meant salvation from fear of death.

3.3.3 Salvation from depression

To Venter salvation from sin also meant an escape from depression. When she did not accept the fate of her physical circumstances, the death and illness of herself and her family (Venter 1852:8), she convinced herself that she was guilty of sin. Suffering from depression on an isolated border farm without expecting divine salvation is a sin. In fact, Venter's state of mind seems to hover constantly between stages of religious anxiety or religious happiness (1852:8, 9):

Ik bleef in dien bekommerden staat de geheele maand, tot op den 28sten van die zelfde maand, toen de Heer zich aan mij ontdekte met een volle blijdschap. Het duurde bijna den halven dag, dat ik in zulk eene geestelijke blijdschap was met mijn ziele. Ja, ik was zoo onkundig in geestelijke zaken dat ik zelf niet wist in wat voor een blijkschap ik gekomen was. O ja, de geestelijke blijdschap was mij zoo zoet; en was zoo bedroefd, dat ik wer verduisterd werd. (I have been in an anxious state all month until the 28th of the same month; until the Lord revealed full happiness to one such as me. This lasted almost half a day and I was in such spiritual joy in my soul. Yes, I was so ignorant about spiritual matters I myself did not know into what happiness I had

Ja, een liefde hemel vlam,
die mijn ziel geheel in nam,
Met een godlijk liefde oog,
Die mijn ziel geheel doorvloog;
Jezus had voor mij geleden.

(And the kiss of his mouth, flowed from the sacrifice of Jesus. I am wholly and altogether wasted. Yes, one love burnt in heaven and took possession of my soul. With one god-like love in view, my whole soul flees to him – Jesus having suffered for me.)

3.4 VENTER'S PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD/JESUS AND SATAN

Relationships with the divine are experienced but not explained in Venter's ego-text. She has no dogmatic explanation for the principles on which she based her relationship with God/Jesus and Satan; she simply describes her close experiences with the divine ones and with the evil one. These close experiences took on the form of visions and fantasies.

3.4.1 Trances

Het was mij alzoo ettelijke malen gebeurd dat ik met liefde getrokken werd, dat ik niet wist in welk eene zoete hemelsgestalte ik was (Venter 1852:11). *(It often happened to me that I was so overwhelmed with love, that I was configured into a heavenly being.)*

Venter often used words like these to describe her state of ecstasy while she experienced the proximity of God. One day she was actually four times in succession swept into these states of ecstasy (1852:13):

[T]oen (omtrent tien uur) stond mijn geest stil, doch in verrukking kwam ik weer bij. Toen het voor de tweede reis kwam werd ik bevreesd en dacht niet anders dan dat het sterven was; maar, om het lijden van den Heer Jezus, gaf ik mij gewillig over, al was het tot den dood toe. Het gebeurde mij tot vier keer dat ik in verrukking kwam, en zulk eene geestelijke blijdschap smaakte, met sterk geloof en vertrouwen op mijnen God en Zaligmaker, dat ik den Heere loven en danken en God verheerlijken moest. Ik leefde zoo in de nabijheid van den Heere Jezus, door zijne genade en door een vast geloof voor eenen tijd van drie weken; waarop ik weer in eene zware bestrijding raakte met den Satan, die mij gedurig betwistte dat in al mijn werk geene waarheid was. Ja, dit tastte niet alleen mijne ziel aan, maar ik

was krank naar ziel en licghaam. (*At that time, about ten o'clock, my soul stood still but I came to again, going into a trance. Then I had a second journey, which I had feared and thought that was nothing else but death, but with the guidance of the Lord Jesus, I gave myself over willingly, even if it was to death. It happened four times that I fell into a trance and taste such spiritual joy with a strong faith and trust in my God and Sanctifier that I praised and thanked the Lord and greatly glorified God. For a period of three weeks, I lived close to the Lord Jesus as a result of his grace and my firm faith. I was then involved in a difficult struggle in which Satan continually disputed with me that there was no truth in any of my work. Yes, it did not only touch my soul but I was sick in body and spirit.*)

A state of deep depression always accompanied these trances as can be seen from this quotation. She constantly described these depressions as the consciousness of personal sin (Venter 1852:11). Soon after experiencing the joy of Jesus' proximity, Venter would experience a mental lapse, which she called the sudden realisation of her sin:

Maar in zulke zoete gestalten kwamen mij weer mijn zonden voor't gezigt, en schenen zoo groot en zwaar voor den Heer dat ik dacht, nu zal de Heere niet weer naar mij omzien, ja, dat ik mijzelve voor een walglijk zondig monster aanmerkte voor den Heer met mijne zware zondenschuld. (*But in such a sweet way it came to me again that my sins were so big and heavy before that Lord that He will never again consider taking care of me. Yes, I saw myself as a despicable and sinful monster before the Lord with my heavy load of sin and guilt.*)

(Venter 1852:12)

3.4.2 Sin, physical pain and physical love

Hand in hand with this realisation of sin goes physical pain, such as heart palpitations (Venter 1852:12). Her struggle against Satan affected not only her soul. She wrote (1852:14), 'maar ik was krank naar ziel en licghaam' (but I was sick in body and mind).

The experience of Jesus' proximity, on the other hand, was accompanied by the sensation of love which she often describes in physical terms. 'My soul embraced the Lord lovingly' (Venter 1852:18) is often extended to an embracement of soul and body (:44):

Jezus lief, hier is mijn hart,
Jezus lief, hier is mijn ziel.
Jezus lief, hier is mijn ziel en licghaam beide.

*(Jesus love, here is my heart;
Jesus love, here is my soul;
Jesus love, here are both my body and soul.)*

The love Jesus displayed in his suffering is described in erotic terms in one of the many poems in her ego-text (:101–102):

*O Liefde, minne gloed,
Vloeit uit Jezus offerbloed
Door Jezus mond gekust
Was ik van eeuwigheid bemind
(O love, ardour of lust,
flowing from the sacrificial blood of Jesus,
Through a kiss from Jesus' mouth,
I was loved from eternity.)*

The image of the kissing Jesus abounds in Venter's mind and in her writing (:113):

*Gloeijende koolen van Christus liefde,
Mijn hart en ziel geheel doorgriefde,
In de kussen van uw mond,
Toen ik u mijn Jezues vond.
(Burning coals from Christ's love,
my heart and soul are completely pierced.
In the kisses from your mouth,
I find in you my Jesus.)*

An intertwining of love and thanksgiving towards the beloved Jesus takes place, to keep this love in a religious sphere (:109): 'door uwen geest gezuiverd, mijn lieve Jezus, mijn beminde God ... Heere, in hartsmelende liefde en dankzegging voor uwe groote genade'.

3.4.3 The nearness of Satan

Venter, of course, also had a personal relationship with Satan. 'I not only have to fight my sin' (that is, her sinful nature), she said (Venter 1852:9); 'I have to fight Satan.' Satan, as was said before, it was who brought her to despair and darkness (e g 1852:9). In other words, Satan caused her depression.

According to Venter Satan attacked her personally and constantly (e g :12, 13). Satan wanted to deprive her of her joy in the proximity of Jesus, replacing it with loneliness and depression (e g :14). He attempted to convince her that there was no truth in her yearning for Jesus (e g :14).

Satan personally appeared to her pretending to be an angel (:14):

Het was in eene diepe verlating voor mijne zielsgesteldheid, toen ik des avonds ging liggen, dat de Satan zich inwendig aan mijne ziel vertoonde, doch in de gedaante en met die werkzaamheid van een' engel des lichts. Ja, ik meende in het eerst dat het van den Heere kwam: maar spoedig bemerkte ik zijn booze pijlen. Het was alsof ik vast in een net getrokken was, en ik wist niet achterwaarts noch voorwaarts. (*There was a deep forlornness in my soul when I saw the evening light going; then Satan showed himself inwardly to my soul, but in the shape and with the reality of an angel of the light. Yes, at first I thought he came from the Lord, but I speedily perceived that it was really the form of the devil. It was as if I was drawn into a net and I could go neither backwards nor forwards.*)

The attacks by Satan brought Jesus closer to her. Jesus became the hero who saved her from Satan, from death and hell and, of course, from depression. She shared with Jesus a common enemy, and this brought them into closer proximity.

3.5 THE LETTERS OF MAGDALENA JONKER

The piety of Hester Venter as expressed in her diary can be compared to the contents of the letters Magdalena Jonker (1765–1831) wrote to women relatives during the same time. The comparison is relevant because of a possible accusation that the piety of Hester Venter was that of a neurotic single woman. The claim of this book is the opposite, namely that the piety of the women described here cannot be blamed on the mental state of sick individuals, but on the negative influence of the local Dutch-Afrikaans society on its female subculture.

Magdalena van Zyl married Johannes Jonker when she was eighteen years old. Like Hester Venter and her family, they farmed in the Swellendam district. Poverty forced them to leave this farm with their first eight children for another farm in the Roodezand district, where several more children were born and some died. Here also, her husband died. She died on 14 November 1831 aged 66. Her letters, together with a short biography, were published in *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode* (GK) during 1850 and 1851, probably by the Reverend Robertson. Jonker's piety is very similar to that of Venter, and the publication of her letters by a local (male) minister as instructive to a Dutch Reformed readership indicates that this type of female piety was acceptable in the male dominant culture.

Like Venter, Jonker received little formal education (GK 1850:119). Her favourite, if not only, book was, behold! *Smijtegelds Keurstoffe*. From this book her daughter read to her on her death bed (GK 1850:208). She became converted to this type of piety at the age of seventeen and the first thing she then noticed about herself was that she was 'een hoop vuilnis' (a heap of rubbish). God, she recognised, loved her not for herself but for His Spirit which He had placed inside her.

Jonker recalled (GK 1850:121) that it was her father who inflicted a terrible fear of God in her and that the only person who could comfort her from this fear was Jesus. She feared God especially when she was heart-broken and filled with disbelief every time one of her children died (GK 1850:132). Through these hardships she came to believe (by means of the Reverend M C Vos, who was ministering at Roodezand) that one suffered when one loved oneself more than the Lord (GK 1851:170). It was the Lord who showed her that her children were idols whom she loved more than Him (GK 1851:148). And when her husband died, it was Jesus who took his place. 'I can say with confidence,' she wrote to her sister (GK 1851:184), 'that Jesus is my husband and my bridegroom.'

Jonker seems to have shared the following with Venter: love for the Dutch pietist Bernardus Smijtegelt; the seeking of religious answers after the death of a child; the experiencing of a God who wanted to be obeyed unquestionably; depression after the death of a child, expressed as an attack by Satan; and comfort in the arms of Jesus as the substitute and eternal husband who will never go away.

SUMMARY

Two themes emphasised in Hester Venter's ego-text were to become prominent in the pious self-expression of Dutch-Afrikaans women. The first is the verbalisation of mental sadness and joy in terms of a religious consciousness of guilt and salvation.

Hester Venter underscored a second topos in the piety of Dutch-Afrikaans women, a topic already introduced by Catharina Allegonda van Lier and expressed in the letters of Magdalena Jonker, namely women's love for Jesus. Although they expressed it as a yearning for spiritual salvation, this love should be seen as a longing for salvation from the isolation reigning in their female subculture on the one hand and their physical isolation on the farms on the other.

This love for Jesus eventually became a prominent theme in the ego-texts of Dutch-Afrikaans women during the nineteenth century, when they trekked through black territory and when they were thrown into concentration camps by the British at the end of that century.

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Matilda Smith (1749–1821): Our virgin of grace

A product of the late eighteenth century, Matilda Smith was a contemporary of Catharina Allegonda van Lier and Hester Venter.

4.1 A MALE CONCEPT OF FEMALE PIETY

4.1.1 Female piety is like a peaceful river, without the depth of the ocean

In the introduction to the *Memoir of Mrs Matilda Smith*, Dr John Philip, of the London Missionary Society at Bethelsdorp, expressed the following views on the limitations of female piety. These views confirm the findings of this research regarding the ideological as well as the actual restrictedness of pious females:

In the economy of nature and grace, man and woman being differently constituted, are obviously intended to occupy different spheres of usefulness. The path of female piety is more limited, and therefore apparently less efficient than the laborious open road assigned to man.

(Philip in Smith 1824:133)

These restrictions on the usefulness of female piety are, of course, romanticised by John Philip (in Smith 1824:133):

The influence [of female piety] in society may be compared to the silent but fertilizing course of some peaceful river, which diffuses

blessings on all around, turning the wilderness into the Garden of Eden, and causing the desert to blossom as the rose, although it has not the depth, the extent, and the fame of the commanding ocean.

Thus wrote the man who published Matilda Smith's memoir: female piety is as fertile as a peaceful river, but lacks the depths, the extent and the fame of the commanding ocean.

4.1.2 Why should a man publish women's ego-texts?

Kicherer was suspected of publishing Van Lier's diary to have his own name on the front page, and there is the same suspicion regarding John Philip and Smith's memoirs. Philip's reference (Smith 1824:vii) to the many female biographies published in his time accentuates the fact that a lively market existed in Europe for this type of literature. By publishing Smith's memoir, Philip was attempting to explore this market.

Embarrassed because he was presenting a rather uneducated woman to his European audience, Philip explained that Smith had many 'native talents', and that her religiosity could be traced to the religious society to which she was exposed. 'We are not perhaps always aware how much of our piety we owe to the society in which we move,' he wrote prophetically with regard to our present thesis (Smith 1824:v). Philip consequently took pains to show how Smith behaved in terms of the piety in her female subculture and to point to the characteristics she shared with other pious females around the world whose diaries have been published.

According to Philip, Smith's work could be published because it testified to her missionary spirit and her compassion for the miseries and sufferings of the human race (Smith 1824:viii, ix). 'One of the most interesting aspects under which Mrs Smith is presented in the following pages is,' he boasted (:ix), 'that in which she is seen in her new field of labour, surrounded with her female attendants, imparting to their minds the elements of Christian instruction, whilst she is teaching them knitting, and sewing, and the common decencies of life.'

4.1.3 Matilda Smith as the ideal pious woman

The image which Philip wished to portray was that of Smith teaching black women to be useful and decent. In this, he claimed she was an example to missionary wives (Smith 1824:x): 'The character of Mrs. Smith forms a fine pattern for female imitation in general, and particularly to such as may become the wives of missionaries among the heathen.'

And indeed the life and piety of Smith fit well into the seclusions of what John Philip called the Garden of Eden, another name for the female subculture. During the first 37 years of her life Smith was intensely surrounded by death, losing as a result of illness eight of her nine children as well as two husbands. At this point she was converted by Helperus Ritzema van Lier. Although she had been a Christian, this conversion helped her to accept her fate with religious submissiveness. When her remaining daughter and her grandchild died, she committed herself to work full time at different missionary stations, especially Bethelsdorp, where her usefulness was directed at working with women.

It is to be noted, however, that there was a distinct difference between the piety of Smith and that of her female contemporaries, Van Lier and Venter, because after her conversion to pietism, Smith exchanged her mental depression and her self-hate for an active missionary life in which she exuded a positive view of God and her fellow people. Instead of mothering sin and guilt, she became our virgin of grace.

4.2 THE STORY OF HOW MATILDA SMITH CAME TO GRACE IN HER SUBCULTURE

4.2.1 *The vital statistics of a suffering woman*

Mrs Matilda Smith was born as Machteld Combrink (Kornbrink, according to John Philip) at the Cape of Good Hope, on 17 August 1749. She was baptised two weeks later, on 31 August 1749 (De Villiers & Pama 1981:154). Matilda is the English form of the name Machteld. Her father was German, her mother Dutch. Machteld Combrink married Johan(n) G J Grabe, who came to South Africa as a soldier. They were married in 1770 and he died a little more than five years later, in 1776. Three children were born during these five years; the two boys died and the girl reached marriageable age. Two years after Grabe's death, Matilda married Johannes C Smith (Schmidt), another soldier from Germany. They had six children, four daughters and two sons, who all died in infancy. This marriage lasted for nine years until the death of Smith's second husband in 1787. Smith was matriarch to a Dutch family and all her children bore Dutch names.

She wrote the part of her memoir which comprises the first 37 years of her life when she was 49 years old, after her 'conversion'. As should be expected, this history moves within the framework of 'before' and 'after' she discovered the truth of submitting herself to the will of God.

4.2.2 Smith looking back on the time before she was 'converted'

... I have not been incited to the following Memoir by human impulse, but by the actings of Divine Grace

(Smith 1824:7)

Thus Matilda Smith wrote at the beginning of her memoir, pointing to 'grace' as the main attribute of the Divine. In interpreting her *historia calamitatum*, her history of calamities, Smith saw 'grace' not as a spiritual attitude of God, but as his providence, his help in physical and earthly pain and sorrow. Throughout her memoir, Smith shows a preference for referring to God as 'Providence'.

Smith relates the numerous deaths of her children and husbands according to her simple system of belief: affliction is the result of sin and deliverance is achieved when God graciously grants forgiveness.

At the beginning of her memoir, Smith describes the causes of her own illness and her recovery when she was six years of age. At this point a woman of almost fifty years, she claimed to have experienced the connections between sin and illness, recovery and forgiveness at the age of six (Smith 1824:8):

Soon after my recovery, an uncle of mine asked me, 'How it happened that the Lord had laid this affliction so much heavier on me [it is, you] than on the remaining part of the family?' to which I answered, 'That my sins were more numerous'. – 'Well,' inquired he, 'what way will you take, to be delivered from your offences?' I replied, 'that I would pray to God for forgiveness.'

While she was still a small child, Smith was once saved from drowning and at another time from suffocation (1824:9). Looking back on her life, Smith interprets these close escapes from death in terms of divine grace and salvation from sin. She records (:9) that at the age of nine she was so much under the influence of the Bible that for her even bad weather was a pointer to Christ's coming judgement.

At the age of fifteen, the Bible was the main guide in her life (1824:9): 'I employed much of my time in reading the Bible, after which perusal, I could readily relate any event therein contained.' After her catechism she became a member of the Dutch Reformed Church in Cape Town. This was the year 1764 and the congregation was the same one in which Helperus Ritzema van Lier would become a minister twenty-two years later.

According to Smith her religious life during her late teens consisted mainly of studying the Bible, praying and fasting. This was not the correct way to achieve righteousness, Smith claimed (1824:10). To read the Bible filled her with a tremendous fear and 'I was afraid to close my eyes night and day' (:10). While reading about the Lord Jesus' suffering especially, she felt like a 'condemned criminal' (:10).

On 30 December 1770 at the age of twenty-two Smith married Grabe, a religious Lutheran. Her first son, Godfried Hermanus, who was born two years later, died after two months (Smith 1824:12). Smith attributed the misery she suffered during his short life and in mourning his death to her rebellious heart which did not want to 'bend with submission to the Divine Will' (:12). Only after she had accepted God's will did she awaken from her mental wretchedness, and did her body grow stronger daily (:13).

God then gave her a daughter, Maria Magdalena (Smith 1824:13), and this was the only one of her children who would live long enough to marry and have her own child. At this stage Matilda Smith's husband died, 'leaving me extremely ill, with one orphan child, and the expectation of another' (:14). Her second son, Jan Godfried Jacob, was born two months after his father's death. She experienced this early death as yet another of God's efforts to bend her stubborn heart.

Smith describes the rest of her so-called unconverted life in identical terms. Every time the divine will took away a child or afflicted her with illness she experienced it as an act of Providence in preparation for her conversion. In 1778, then 29 years of age, Mathilda married Johannes Caspar Smith. 'I declined the offer of the man of property, and chose him who had little or no possessions' (1824:17). The next year (1779) their twins were born, but both died within a few months. 'Yet the Lord in mercy enabled me to bow to his will' (:18). Another set of twins were born a year later (1783), but they too died after a few months.

Then Smith knew that her children were dying because of her sinfulness and unrighteousness. At first she suspected that her husband blamed the deaths on her sins alone, but he assured her that they were equally responsible: '[Y]our sins and mine have deserved the chastisements of the Lord' (1824:19). This burden of sin became so great a weight on her conscience that she fell into a state of severe depression after the birth of her ninth and last child, a daughter (1785). Of course, Smith described her depression, or rather her fear that this child would also die,

translated into religious terms, as anxiety over the whereabouts of the souls of her deceased children (1824:20):

[A]fter the birth of our next child, and on occasion of her temporary illness, I passed many months in a most wretched state, like one driven to and fro without a refuge, feeling the wrath of God upon my own soul, and awful apprehensions respecting the souls of my family - looking down, as it were, into the regions of eternal torment, and almost realizing in my own breast some of the feelings of the condemned.

It was the end of her child-bearing years and Smith's life was spent in anguish over the salvation of infants, of whom she had lost eight. In 1787, when Smith was 37 years old, her second husband died.

Smith then relates her meeting with the Reverend Helperus Rit-zema van Lier, the brother of Catharina Allegonda van Lier, minister to the Dutch Reformed congregation in Cape Town from 1786 until 1793. He had the answers to all her questions about life and death. He also introduced her to the writings of the English revivalists. On 8 April 1806 Smith entered the following in her diary: 'Providentially the second volume of Newton's Letters (Cardiphonia) fell at this time into my hands; and the first seven letters to the lady in distress were blessed to my comfort and edification' (:111).

A new phase in the life of Matilda Smith had begun.

4.2.3 Conversion to mental peace through the Reverend H R van Lier

Matilda Smith met the Reverend H R van Lier at the house of a relative (1824:22). 'I felt that his discourse was exceedingly well adapted to the state of my soul,' she wrote (:22). And indeed, the Reverend Van Lier brought comfort to the suffering woman. He told her that Jesus was available day and night to listen to her problems and her fears and he put her mind at ease about the fate of her deceased children and husbands: '[T]hus was I mercifully and lastingly released from the restless anxiety which on that subject had so long oppressed my spirit,' she testified (:28).

Van Lier's message allowed Smith to believe that Jesus had suffered for her personally, and that thought brought great security into her life:

O! I had peace with God – peace with my own conscience – peace with angels – peace with men – and in a word, peace with all created nature.

At the time of her 'conversion' three of Smith's children were still alive, the daughter from her first marriage, and two children from her second marriage. But these two girls, Elisabeth and Anna Catharina, also died. Smith, now converted to the comfort of God, reacted to yet another tragedy by confessing (:40): '[T]hus to a Christian, sorrows and bereavements are tokens of paternal favour.'

Smith's only surviving child married, gave birth to a son and died. Once again the newly converted Smith reacted joyfully (:45): 'Thus, through the grace of God, my dear daughter's death was, I trust, a happy one.'

Then her baby grandchild died. Her son-in-law married a niece of Smith, and the niece also died. The Reverend Helperus Ritzema van Lier died.

In reaction to all these tragedies Smith wrote in conclusion to this part of her life (:46): '[I] was strengthened, as heretofore, to bow with submission to the will of the Lord.'

4.2.4 *Mental happiness through the Reverend M C Vos and Jesus' salvation*

It was indeed a happy moment in the life of Matilda Smith when she became engaged in missionary work. She felt herself empowered ('strengthened', e.g. Smith 1824:57) by God, victorious over her depression, and also useful to God's church.

Initially, according to her narration, Providence called her to Roodezand, approximately 100 km from Cape Town, where the Reverend M C Vos was ministering. It was the same Reverend Vos whose influence over her was also attested to Magdalena Jonker.

Michiel Christiaan Vos (1759–1825) was born in Cape Town on 31 December 1759 'from European and Asian parents' (Vos 1911:1). Concerned about the souls of the slaves at the Cape, he sailed for the Netherlands in 1780 to study at his own expense to become a minister. However, once his studies had been completed he was not called to South Africa 'because he was considered to be a fanatic [*dweper*]' (Vos 1911:51). He ministered to various congregations in the Netherlands, describing him-

self as a disciple of Voetius' pietism (Vos 1911:51). Van Lier died and Vos was sent to the Cape, where he delivered his inaugural sermon on 8 March 1794, after which he started his career in Roodezand.

Vos and Helperus van Lier never exchanged religious ideas, but Vos's piety corresponds with Reverend Van Lier's. In the first instance the contrast between the wretchedness (*rampzaligheid*) of the godless and the blessedness (*gelukzaligheid*) of the believers is manipulated by an optimism concerning God's control of reality and his goodwill towards Vos personally (Vos 1911:9), that is an optimism that God's plan for Vos concurred with the actual route his history followed.

In the second place, according to Vos's positive view of God and himself, God is regarded as the *prima causa* of all occurrences, but a *prima causa* benevolent towards Vos and hostile towards his enemies. Vos projects the simple contrast between good and bad onto people: his friends are good believers, his enemies are bad sinners. 'The world does not like me, because I do not like the world,' is his explanation of people's reaction to his 'fanatic' religiosity (Vos 1911:48).

It is interesting to note in the third instance the reaction of women to Vos's preaching. In his 'Remarkable story' (1911) Vos often refers to women who became converts to piety because of one of his sermons. It is of special interest that these women apparently reacted to the negativity in his sermons of contrasts. One day while preaching in Amsterdam, a woman screamed loudly in the middle of his sermon: 'O my God, I am forever lost, forever lost!' (O God, ik ga eeuwig verloren, eeuwig verloren!) (Vos 1911:58 et seq). A second female reaction to his sermons is that women sought security in his messages. 'Now I know in whom I have placed my trust; now I am sure that my security lies with Jesus and that it safely awaits me there,' one woman confessed on behalf of herself and others after one of Vos's sermons (Vos 1911:57).

Apparently Smith fitted into this religious circle headed by the Reverend Vos. In her diary her moods and religious self-image are represented as dependence upon submission to God. Smith's submissiveness to God, however, is not only self-centred, but is also fixed on her service to her fellows. Honouring the pietist contrast between the heavenly and the earthly, the spiritual and the temporal, she tends to see the temporal needs of the hungry and the desolate as reminders of the wickedness of human nature and the wretchedness of the unsaved. Still clinging to the values of her subculture, that is submissiveness and overemphasis on sin, Smith was beginning to develop a social consciousness.

eventually left [Bethelsdorp] because of Van der Kemp's disapproval of her conservatism regarding slavery'.

As far as her concept of *sin* is concerned, Smith did not place herself in such a close relationship with Satan as her female contemporaries and she did not allow Satan to victimise her to the same extent as her contemporaries. However, Smith regarded herself as a sinner and she did not hesitate to point out to others, especially the so-called 'heathen', that all are sinners by nature. Concerning the behaviour of other people she exclaimed: 'O how strong is the root of evil' (:64). Her own private prayer was (:64): 'Lord, I take shame to myself; O cleanse me in that fountain which thou hast opened for pollution and for sin.'

During this time of her life, when the consequences of death no longer threatened her and while she was 'useful' in missionary activities, Smith's *concept of God* changed. He changed from God as Providence, who cared for her in times of illness and death, to God the Father, who loved and blessed her as a father loves a child (e.g. :58):

In the evening, I was for some time prevented from retiring to confess my sins before the throne of grace; but at length these hinderances were removed, and the Lord permitted me, an unworthy sinner, to speak to him as a child speaketh to its compassionate parent; and thus I experienced the truth of that blessed declaration, 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him'.

Smith, of course, wanted to please this Father (:62):

What blessed freedom did I consequently enjoy, in drawing nigh to God, as unto my reconciled father in Christ. I went up to his house, praying that I might be made useful in his service all the days of my life.

In 1808 Matilda Smith left Bethelsdorp and went back to Cape Town. In 1810 she launched 'The Cape Ladies' Society for the relief of the Poor' and in 1813 a 'Juvenile Missionary Society'. John Philip commented upon her work amongst the young as an interesting field of usefulness, 'peculiarly adapted to the female sex' (Smith 1824:135).

Matilda Smith could not escape the restrictions of her female subculture. Within her boundaries she made a remarkable contribution to religiosity at the Cape. She was, however, the co-founder of a type of female piety still prevalent among Afrikaans women. According to this piety God is viewed as the strong man, the One with power, whose

goodwill leads to improved spiritual experiences, the One who has to be pleased. This is a piety in which the self is seen mainly in terms of religious usefulness and service, and in which other people are seen as receiving the good news for spiritual freedom, even in the absence of social freedom.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the last three chapters that the foundation of the piety of Dutch-Afrikaans women was laid during the eighteenth century while many women suffered severe personal hardships, varying from restrictive physical and cultural circumstances in the suburbia of Cape Town (Van Lier) to isolation and the realities of illness, murder and death on border farms (Venter) and to exchanging family deaths for cultural-religious restrictiveness on the mission field (Smith).

Under these circumstances, the women read either the Dutch pietists of the seventeenth century or the English revivalists of the eighteenth century. Whatever their sources, they preferred a piety which could provide them with a means of survival in the dangerous and fearful circumstances in which they had placed themselves as white people in a black country. Dutch-Afrikaans female piety, therefore, started off as a piety in which white women empowered themselves through fear of God in times of illness and the murder of their loved ones. They also made themselves the *prima causa* of the calamities which befell them when they blamed their own sinful nature as the cause of disease. God is the blameless *secunda causa*, who afflicts sinners with bodily illness. God is, however, the *prima causa* in removing sin, and therefore of removing illness and side-stepping the coming death.

The Dutch-Afrikaans women of the eighteenth century empowered themselves by submitting their will to God in the belief that in doing so they were empowering themselves on a religious level to cope with the adversities of life. They were in fact adapting to the cultural restrictions of their female subculture whose main characteristic was submissiveness to the fate for which one is born.

Therefore, the piety of early Dutch-Afrikaans women empowered them to survive the hardships of their physical circumstances, simultaneously enslaving them within their female subculture in which submissiveness to God equalled submissiveness to a male dominant culture in which the maleness of God prescribed a negative self-image for women.

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Susanna Smit (1799–1863): Guilt fantasies and the Great Trek

5.1 MALE VIEWS ON THE FEMALE PIETY OF THE GREAT TREK

5.1.1 *Women on the Trek were illiterate instruments of God's guidance*

Willem Postma (1918) and Eric Stockenström (1921), as mentioned in the Introduction to this work, wrote histories of the Dutch-Afrikaans women as part of an ideological campaign against women's suffrage, coinciding roughly with the inauguration of the Women's National Monument. The historians wrote extensively on the virtues of the Boer women on the Great Trek.

Stockenström in particular emphasised the following characteristics of the Boer women on the Great Trek:

- The women were useful, that is in preparing food and ammunition (1921:71).
- The women were patriotic; they were eager and fervent to share the fate of their husbands (1921:70, 80).
- They were illiterate, and therefore natural and simple (1921:80).
- They were very moral (*zedelijk*; 1921:80, 81).
- They saved the men through God's guidance (1921:84).

- The women were willing to sacrifice everything for their freedom (1921:84).
- The women were fearless, mainly because of their faith in God (1921:92).

Stockenström refers extensively to the wife of the Reverend Erasmus Smit and her speech in 1834 when the Boer women confronted Henry Cloete, the English Commissioner in Natal, informing him that they would walk barefoot over the Drakensberg to reobtain their freedom from the English (1921:99):

Die vrou van Erasmus Smit het nie geaarsel om die verteenwoordiger van die Koningin van Engeland met sulke mannetaal toe te spreek nie. Die suigeling aan die bors van sulke vroue waaruit die vergadering bestaan het sou, waaragtig, g'n slawe wees nie! (*The wife of Erasmus Smit did not hesitate to address the representative of the Queen of England in male language like this. The infants at the breast of the type of women of which the congregation consisted would definitely not be slaves!*)

Although Stockenström did not know the name of Erasmus Smit's wife, he praises her as the ideal foremother of the Dutch-Afrikaners and he describes her as the average Dutch-Afrikaans woman.

The woman of whom he spoke was Susanna Smit. From her diary, as yet unpublished, it is clear that she did not fit into this picture of the Dutch-Afrikaans female which Stockenström erroneously presented to his twentieth-century audience.

Susanna Smit, sister of the Trek leader Gert Maritz and wife of the Boer missionary Erasmus Smit, was not illiterate, naïvely moral, fearless or merely a supporter of a male concept of national freedom, as Stockenström presented the Trek women.

5.1.2 The women were illiterate

In the 1930s fifteen neatly written numbers of Susanna Smit's diary were discovered in the attic of a house in Utrecht, Natal (Steenkamp 1939:68). That Smit was not illiterate is clear from her (as yet unpublished) diary written in fairly good Dutch, better than that of her husband. This is quite remarkable especially because it is suspected that she taught herself to read and write. Smit took many books with her on the Trek. Of course, these books were written mainly by the Dutch pietists whose work

flooded the South African market a century after they had been written. She also read the more familiar works of the English revivalists known at the Cape, such as John Newton. She names her sources as follows: 'Ab-rakel, Erschine, Mijsras, Emmens, Van der Groe, Newton, Herwijn, Bores, Molenaar' (see Roodt-Coetzee 1961:38). According to Steenkamp's (1939:75) sources Smijtgelt was also available on the Great Trek. Smit read the hymns of Hieronymus van Alphen, Catharina Allegonda van Lier's most popular poet. She also read the 'Leerreden' of Helperus Ritzema van Lier and the *Kerkbode*, the official journal of the Dutch Reformed Church. However, her main reading matter was the Bible, especially the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Smit was not illiterate, but she was literate mainly in seventeenth-century pietism and in a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible.

There are other extant female sources which confirm the occurrence of literacy amongst women on the Great Trek. Mrs Joubert (1830–1916), wife of General Piet Joubert (see Streutker 1991), joined the Trek with her grandparents at the age of six. She related that, whenever the opportunity arose, the children (male and female) were taught how to read and write. The children could read well although writing was seldomly practised because of a scarcity of ink which they themselves had to prepare (Rompel-Koopman 1916:11–13). Furthermore another woman, Anna Steenkamp (1939:26), concluded her memoirs of the Great Trek by stating: '[Ik] bende maker en schrij[ver] [van deze] boek maar vol voute.' (*Although it is full of mistakes, I am the author of this book.*)

5.1.3 *The women were moral*

Smit led a moral (zedelijk) life, although it does not seem as if she had an alternative in the small trekking communities in which she was the wife of the minister. Yet she fantasised about Jesus as her lover, as the hero who saved her from her enemies. 'I am like a woman engaged to Christ, my fiancé,' she wrote. Although the fantasies also seem to have an aura of decency around them since Smit saw herself married to Christ, the language she used to describe this relationship is slightly erotic, like that of her foremothers, Van Lier and Venter:

Zoo zaag Messias liefdebruid
vol liefdevuur in't rond
of zij ook elders hier of daar
een voetstap van hem vond.

Zij sweefde gedrongen door den min
langs heuvel dal en woud
en draagt een liefdebrand in d'zin
die haar het hart benauwd
Waar is mijn koning waar mijn vriend?
Die mij hebt onder trouwd;
Waar wandelt hij die mij bemind? Ik ben om hem benauwd.

(The lily bride of the Messiah runs around aflame with love, looking for one of his footsteps. Drenched by love, I look on the mountain, in the valley and in the wood for my king and friend who has married me. Where is my beloved? I cannot bear to be without him.)

5.1.4 The women were fearless because of their faith in God

Smit was never fearless. She did fear God's wrath. She also feared Satan. Like other Dutch-Afrikaans women in physically dangerous situations, she feared for her children, their safety and the whereabouts of the soul of her deceased son. She had nightmares, frightening visions of her son's soul in hell. She feared the Christ of Revelation and she feared that the English government would take away her husband's pension and that he would die, leaving her without a pension.

5.1.5 Such women did not want the vote

On the other hand Smit was not a submissive patriot who passed food and ammunition to a fighting husband. It would appear that she was physically as well as mentally his superior, especially because he was forced to leave various missionary sites because of poor human relations and his drinking problem. Susanna Smit eventually became famous because she uttered, on 5 August 1843, the famous words to the English Commissioner, Henry Cloete, that they would rather trek barefoot back over the Drakensberg than stay on under English rule.

In Afrikaner tradition these words have been attributed to the patriotic spirit of Boer women in general. However, since it has become known that they were spoken by Susanna Smit, more facts have come to light about her speech. According to women researchers (Roodt-Coetzee 1961:29; Cloete 1992:48) in her speech Smit referred negatively not only to English imperialism, but also to the patriarchal breach of promise amongst the Afrikaner men: the men promised the women suffrage in government

affairs as recompense for their contribution to the battles against the blacks. The Boer men did not keep their promise.

However, Susanna Smit's (partly) famous speech does not imply that she was a political leader of Boer women militantly seeking the vote. Neither Mrs Joubert nor Mrs Steenkamp refers to her in their memoirs, although they do make fond references to her husband. When the Boers eventually left Pietermaritzburg to flee English rule, Susanna Smit was one of those who remained behind. She stayed in Pietermaritzburg under British rule for the remainder of her life. Throughout the 25 years of her stay in Pietermaritzburg with her husband she suffered from the fear that the hated English government would terminate his pension. Bound by her husband and his pension, she was also bound by the financial and cultural restrictions of her subculture. When her husband decided to stay, she had to stay too.

In the next paragraph we shall look briefly at the history of Susanna Smit and at her view of the divine and the evil, of herself and of her fellow people. The findings of our research up to this stage suggest that female piety, in contrast to male pietist expression, favours a negative female self-image and, consequently, a domineering male image of God as well as an extremely negative view of other people. These findings, and the suggestion that female piety is the outflow of a restrictive female subculture, constitute a hermeneutical framework for interpreting the piety of Susanna Smit.

5.2 THE LIFE AND HELL OF SUSANNA SMIT

5.2.1 *Birth, childhood, marriage*

Susanna Catharina Maritz was born on 28 August 1799 in the district of Uitenhage where her parents farmed until 1811. Their farm was near Bethelsdorp, the mission station of the London Missionary Society where, amongst others, Matilda Smith and Erasmus Smit were missionaries. Matilda Smith, as was noted in the previous chapter, worked at Bethelsdorp from 1805 to 1808. During this time the very young (5–8 years old) Susanna Maritz met Matilda Smith who visited Susanna's mother as her friend in the faith. During this time the little girl also met Erasmus Smit who joined the LMS at Bethelsdorp in the same year as Matilda Smith. When Susanna was 13 years old, Erasmus Smit requested her hand in marriage and her mother granted the necessary permission. Erasmus was

Susanna's senior by 21 years. Her diary testifies that this unhappy marriage placed severe restrictions on her self-expression as a human being.

Immediately after their marriage in 1813, the LMS sent Erasmus Smit to Tooverberg (now Colesberg). During the next twenty years they moved several times to different mission stations, and usually Erasmus was asked to leave under humiliating circumstances. At Tooverberg their two children were born, George in 1814 and Salomon in 1816. In 1820 they were sent to Kookfontein (now Beaufort West). In 1822 Erasmus Smit broke away from the LMS and joined the Stellenbosch Missionary Society. He ministered at Stellenbosch for eight years. Erasmus Smit was never fully ordained and tension arose because he administered the sacraments. In 1830 Erasmus Smit left Stellenbosch to teach at Olifantshoek (now Alexandria, south of Grahamstown). In 1837 the 59-year-old Erasmus Smit and the 38-year-old Susanna joined the Great Trek with their son Salomon, leaving George in Uitenhage. The family were very poor and they trekked in a wagon borrowed from Gert Maritz. Their son Salomon died on the trek on 28 July 1837. Erasmus and Susanna Smit eventually spent their last years in Pietermaritzburg (Roodt-Coetzee 1961:31–32; De Villiers 1976: 731–732).

5.2.2 *Writing a diary in Pietermaritzburg*

The town of Pietermaritzburg was established by the Boers in 1838, and in January 1839 Susanna settled there with Erasmus Smit. Her husband hoped to become the Boers' official minister but he was forced to retire in 1841, although he lived in Pietermaritzburg with his wife until 1863, when Susanna died in her sixties, only eight days before the death of the husband to whom she had remained loyal although she had detested him every day since she married him as a child.

The part of her diary still extant was written in Pietermaritzburg between 1842 and 1858. It comprises 24 booklets of folio sheets, of which 15 are extant, joined in the middle with cotton. The original is in the State Archives in Pietermaritzburg (De Villiers 1976:730; Roodt-Coetzee 1961:30).

Susanna came to Pietermaritzburg when she was almost forty years old, and she considered herself to be old and dying. In that part of her (unpublished) diary written in Natal, she expresses her terrible fears of hell and she considers her miserable life to be God's punishment because she did not subject herself fully to God. Every now and then her self-chas-

tisement was interrupted, however, by a vision of the heavenly bliss awaiting her in the life hereafter. Susanna Smit did not experience life as a balance of contrasts between good and evil, with God leading the blessed to the right way of life. In her diary she contrasted this life completely negatively to the afterlife, which she regarded as her only escape from the restrictions of her subcultural misery.

The hypothesis of this study is that Smit read mainly pietist sources because they were available in the Cape Colony and because the contents appealed to her circumstances, and that she interpreted these sources according to the demands of survival in her subculture. There are, however, two questions pertaining to this hypothesis, namely: 'What did her female subculture look like?' The second question, which has already been partially answered, is 'What were her sources?'

5.2.3 The sources for Smit's conviction that life was hell

As has already been noted, Smit read mainly the Dutch pietists of the seventeenth century. Like her foremothers she was inclined to listen to their message of sin, guilt, hell and damnation. In the second place, Smit read Helperus Ritzema van Lier. Of course, she was particularly fond of his sermons on the suffering of Christ. She recalls in her diary that a woman friend visited her and that they cried after having read one such sermon on Jesus' martyrdom.

In the third instance it is to be noted that, orally, Susanna Smit was exposed mainly to the theology of her husband, although it is not easy to determine the extent of this influence. Erasmus Smit did not include the contents of his sermons in his journal (Preller & Scholtz 1988) but referred only to the verses from Scripture on which he preached. However, it is known that when training as a missionary, Erasmus Smit (De Jongh 1977:14) was primarily exposed to the thoughts, the preaching and the missionary example of Moravian missionaries. They taught, inter alia, the infallibility of Scriptures and the wrath of God for personal sins, that is all thoughts and deeds not in accordance with the letter of the Bible. This may have been a third possible source for Smit's constant fear of the hell for which the main source, as in the case of her foremothers, appears to be her own life: physical danger, emotional unfulfilment, poverty – and the death of a child.

5.2.4 *How limited was Susanna Smit's subculture?*

Smit's fear of hell, her overdeveloped sense of sin and her aggressive self-hate should be blamed on her personal circumstances in her subculture and on the influence her sources exercised on her. Can this hypothesis be tested against the ego-texts of other contemporary (white) South African women?

(1) Mary Moffat was also restricted to hell-fear

Mary Moffat (1795–1871), a contemporary of Susanna Smit (1799–1863), worked as a missionary with her husband, Robert Moffat, far north in Kuruman, and she displays the same fondness of hell-fear as Smit. Poverty, physical danger, deaths of children and a cultural belief in a divinely standardised role for women bonded Moffat and Smit in their thoughts on hell, sin and damnation. As a child Moffat, an Englishwoman, attended a Moravian school in England, and as a grown-up lived in a country surrounded by hell (Dickson 1989:44). Moffat proves that fear of hell was not restricted to subcultures in the Dutch-Afrikaans society.

(2) Frances Colenso liberated herself from hell

Frances Colenso (1816–1893), the wife of the famous bishop of Natal, John Colenso, on the other hand had been exposed to intellectual thinking and historical criticism since her youth. While Susanna Smit was living in a tattered and leaking little house in Pietermaritzburg, dividing her anxieties between fear of God's wrath and fear of hell, Frances Colenso was living in comparative luxury in Bishopstowe outside Pietermaritzburg. Before marrying John Colenso, Frances Bunyon-Colenso was influenced quite extensively by a stream in English religious thought based on the theology of F D Maurice (1805–1872). He preached that God, who was universally present in all people, had already redeemed the whole of humanity through Christ. As a result Frances Colenso and her husband showed a definite resistance to threatening the 'heathen' with hell and eternal punishment. Hell-talk did not feature in Frances Colenso's personal thinking. In her letters to friends in England there is a total absence of traditional damnation: she does not even refer to her greatest enemies in terms of hell and judgement (Rees 1958).

Intellectual restrictiveness and physical powerlessness, then, are possible causes of the fears of Smit (and Moffat) which she expressed in terms of hell-fear. To prove this hypothesis, there is extant a non-Dutch

source on Boer women who settled further north after the Trek, albeit slightly later than Smit.

(3) *Elizabeth Lees Price testifies to the restrictions of Boer women*

Elizabeth Lees Price (1839–1919), wife of Roger Price and sister-in-law of David Livingstone, in her letters written in the 1860s from the northern interior, describes the Boers she and her husband met on their missionary travels. According to her the Boer men were dishonest, coarse and inhuman in their treatment of non-Boers. Her sympathies are with their wives, however, when she describes a typical Boer *noi* as 'Square – huge – coarse and uneducated ... but very kind and willing to help others' – and very motherly, even to black children (Long 1956:257). She notices that Boer women were very precise in whatever they did (Long 1956:252, 253), but she pities their restricted unvaried lives. Elizabeth complains that she is easily bored should she have to stay over on a Boer farm, 'for there is so little to interest one after one has once studied bread-making, etc' (Long 1956:253).

Elizabeth is particularly sympathetic towards their Boer neighbours' 'poor poverty-stricken thin weather-beaten wives' (Long 1956:269). These Boer women did some needlework for Elizabeth in return for some 'useful articles'. 'I think I never saw white people in Africa so poor. They are brown and weather-beaten as gipsies, and wear rags such as few of the women of this place who dress, would wear' (Long 1956:269).

The women described by Elizabeth Lees Price were of one generation later than Susanna Smit. Tradition describes Smit as 'heavily built' (Brink 1990:276), but as a foremother she belonged to the class and race of women described by Elizabeth Lees Price as culturally restricted and poverty-stricken. Susanna Smit apparently led the same impoverished and limited life. According to her own testimony, she was caught in a subculture of very little self-expression. Eventually her close experience of hell and her constant depressions because of feelings of guilt became the main features of self-expression in her ego-text.

Susanna Smit is a prime example of the influence of the doctrines of hell and *sola scriptura* on the uneducated mind of a person who forms part of a severely restricted subculture, and is exposed mainly to a hell-orientated, pietist form of religious expression.

5.3 SUSANNA SMIT'S EXPERIENCE OF GOD

5.3.1 *God the Father*

As in the case of those foremothers already discussed, the most important 'theological' question of the eighteenth-century Dutch-Afrikaans women was 'What happened to my dead child's soul?' Because they were not trained theologically, these women could not depend on books to provide answers. The religious books they did read, those by the Dutch pietists, did not teach them their piety, but they did support a piety already formed by everyday circumstances. These women were dependent upon a personal relationship with God to provide them with answers to their questions about death, salvation and damnation. Often these answers became quite personal, when God became personally involved through visions. God usually appeared as the Father in these visions, overtly powerful and male. It is therefore to be expected that Susanna Smit's vision of hell and an angry God was related to her burning question concerning the salvation of her deceased child's soul.

As has already been indicated, Susanna and Erasmus Smit had two children. While George, who eventually survived his parents, remained in the Cape when his parents moved northwards with the Boers, the other son, Salomon, went with his parents and died of fever on trek on 28 July 1837.

Seven years later, on the night of 5/6 May 1844, Smit wrote in her diary that she saw the soul of her dead son sinking away into eternity, 'gansch misvormd in stuiptrekkingen der helle'. Frightened out of her wits, she prayed for a sign to indicate whether her son's soul was with God or with Satan. Suddenly she realised that she had tempted God, and she visualised him pointing her out to his Son, struck down in her arrogance. But her Saviour, Jesus Christ, picked her up, 'bemorst met bloed en sluk'. She regained her calm in total acceptance of God's will. She reached for her folder of Bible verses and extracted Mark 4:40 with the message 'Why are you frightened? Where is your faith?' Knowing that this should bring comfort, she started crying because she still had no certainty concerning the fate of her son's soul. She thought about her child when still alive and searched for proof that he was saved. She did recall that he had asked her once, three months before his death, how he could be certain that he would be reborn. She had answered that God led the reborn and revealed his will through dreams and other types of consciousness ('dromen en gewaarwordingen'). She told him true Christians never experience peace, not in

this world, nor in God, until they have left the world behind. She recalled that it was the fear of hell on his face at that time which convinced her that he was near the Kingdom of God. He then told her how he thought about hell and judgement even as a small child while playing with his friends, and that he met the Lord in a bush at the river when he was fifteen. Remembering this, Smit related a new vision ('een geestelik gezicht') of her son in heaven, dressed in white and singing with thousands of other young men in a choir but with their backs turned to her.

From this description, which contains characteristics typical of her experiences throughout her journal, Smit's relationship with God the Father can be deduced. This relationship was indeed very close because Smit experienced God's will directly through visions. She did not allow God to comfort her in an easy way, however. When the chance for comfort arose, and reference was made to the mercy of God, she discovered something wrong in her behaviour towards God and envisaged God's wrath. For Susanna Smit God was very close, as well as being very demanding and threatening. She saw herself as a child of God the Father, a child who loved but also feared her father. She constantly felt guilty of unacceptable behaviour, that she had insulted her Father, humiliated her Saviour and saddened the Holy Spirit.

Believing in this Father whom it was almost impossible to please, Smit was not to be comforted and she hated herself. Time and again she fell into deep depression.

5.3.2 *The Son of God*

In her ego-text Smit displays different concepts of Jesus Christ. These concepts may appear incoherent yet coherent with the needs of her personal circumstances. We have already come across two of these concepts. In the first instance, Smit clings strongly to Jesus as her Bridegroom, as we have seen earlier. It is in Jesus the Lover that she finds comfort. Secondly, she identifies strongly with the suffering Christ. On the one hand she feels guilty for having been the cause of his suffering but, on the other, it is a source of comfort to her that her pain can be comparable to that of the son of God.

Smit experienced the Son as more forgiving, more 'saving', than the Father even though this forgiveness comprises a future salvation commencing only after this life of hell. On 22 May 1844, a few weeks after this vision of hell, Smit relates a conversation in which her sister's child had

told her aunt of her fear of Jesus. When Smit asked why, the child answered that it was because of the passage in Revelation describing the Lord's eyes as flames, and as a sinner she could not pray to him. On the other hand, the child was afraid that if she did not pray, she would go to hell and she wanted to know from Smit whether, if she prayed until the end of her life, the Lord would accept her as his child. Smit answered the child in the affirmative, because it was written in the Bible that Christ shall find those who continue praying. Smit proceeded to comfort herself with the idea of future righteousness through Christ.

According to Smit's fundamentalist reading of the Bible, comfort in Christ lies in the future. She used the Bible constantly and exclusively as if it contained magic words that would issue a warning, incite guilt and concentrate her attention on future bliss. Even biblical 'history' is seen as a reference to Smit's own spiritual life. II Samuel 1:23, for instance, concerning the war between the Philistines and Israel, is understood (Saturday 1 June 1844) as an attack by Satan through the Philistines of hell on Smit personally. This interpretation caused her great anxiety ('angst') but eventually she found comfort in the identification of her own pain with that of the suffering Jesus.

The moment Smit felt comforted, she immediately experienced guilt. She felt responsible for Jesus' suffering by being ungrateful and neglecting his love. To visualise the suffering Jesus, Smit read one of Helperus Ritzema van Lier's sermons (1806:8) on Isaiah 53:3 ('He was despised'), written approximately fifty years earlier. While reading she cried, convinced by the sermon that she was co-responsible for the suffering of Jesus.

Smit felt guilty towards the divine who comforted her. In the sociology of the female subcultural experience, this guilt can be explained as the coherent fantasies of a strong woman with a wish to participate in life, but who could only fantasise about pleasing the divine. In her visions Smit was the one trying to please the Father; she was the one reaching out to Jesus the Bridegroom. This initiative towards male figures was not allowed within her female subculture. She therefore formulated her religious experiences in terms of guilt and rejection.

5.3.3 The Spirit of God

The wind lashing against her small hut, damaging trees, breaking young plants, tearing down fruit, reminded Susanna Smit of God's Holy Spirit

(Thursday, 16 February 1843). The Spirit of God blows whenever it wishes, but it can be heard mingled with the tears and the sighs of the penitent struck down by the divine wind. The Spirit of God tears down sinful fruit and leaves sinners damaged and 'ontzied'. But Smit believed that the heavenly farmer will water the penitent with pure water streaming from his throne and remove them from the terrible bush where they are tormented by his own spirit to transplant them in his inner garden. The Spirit lashes out at sinners, so that sinners as well as pietists suffer, although those who fear God will be blessed.

Not even the Spirit of God can comfort this world. Again, Smit refers to the Spirit in coherent ambivalence: on the one hand the Spirit rejects her as a sinner; on the other, the Spirit is very involved with her as the penitent who knows her guilt. As a sinner who humbles herself, the Spirit of God takes notice of her.

5.4 SUSANNA SMIT'S CONCEPT OF HERSELF

Susanna Smit used the following images to refer to herself: a pitiful worm ('ellendig worm', 8 Mei 1844), a frog ('een schurf pad'), a sick dog ('een kranken hond', 3 January 1848), an unworthy dog ('een onwaardige hondjie', 29 May 1851). She preferred in particular to refer to herself as a worm.

It is of special interest that in her journal Smit attributed to herself the leading role as the guilty party using descriptions of spiritual temptation. Her descriptions of how she was tempted and how she had been saved time and again usually contain three scenes: the enemy attacks her, the Lord saves her, and she takes all the guilt upon herself for whatever may have happened. Smit played the leading role in all the described scenes. On 17 February 1843, for instance, she described one of her guilt fantasies in biblical imagery: pagans pestered her with their merchandise, and when she did not heed them, they attacked her with stout sticks hitting her on the arm, disarming her and she had to flee. Robbers carried her off and left her in the middle of the broad road. Then the Lord appeared as a hero rushing to her aid. Her description reads: 'myn lieve Heer dat ziende snelt toe en den bozen rot vliegt als door een bliksem getroffen naar hunne holen en spelonken'.

Smit had this to say to her hero who had saved her: 'Lord, I am guilty' ('Nu Heere ik ben schuldig'). Part of a subculture with no active role allocated to her in real life, Susanna Smit escaped into a world of fantasies in which she became so important because of her sins that earth

and heaven were brought into motion to tempt her but also to save her. As a sinner, a 'lowly worm', Smit believed that she was noticed by the men of this world and the (male) Lord of heavens. Together they play-acted and she performed the leading role. To Susanna Smit this was the only way to participate from a crippled subculture in 'life'.

To retain her important role as sinner, Smit believed that to earthly sinners redemption could only be temporary (see 6 June 1845). This view coloured her interpretation of reality, visions and dreams (albeit she experienced them as very real) as well as her role as part of these realities. On Saturday 20 September 1845, she remembered the vision of a lion coming through a door to attack her, but an Angel prevented it. The lion wanted to devour her, but the Angel had the power to control it. Instead of deriving any comfort from this vision, Smit became convinced that the vision announced impending disaster. She accepted this implication, because she regarded herself as a worm, but God is almighty and has the freedom to do with her whatever He pleased.

In order to achieve a measure of status Susanna Smit regarded herself as lowly and demeaned herself in front of God.

5.5 SUSANNA SMIT'S CONCEPT OF HER FELLOW PEOPLE

Susanna Smit may have called herself a worm, but she regarded other people as wolves and buffaloes, godless sinners in need of Christ's redemption. Her journals are a flight into her own psyche and she seldom referred to anybody but herself. When she did refer to other people, however, it was because she experienced them as her enemies (see for example 24 February 1851).

Smit led a lonely life as a missionary's wife. Because of her husband's poor social relationships she led an isolated life even amongst the Boers. She took it upon herself to teach children to read and write, but from time to time parents removed their children from her classes. This Smit attributed to the sinful nature of people. She continually displayed mistrust and enmity towards other people, but she, in fact, was unable to communicate with them in a meaningful way. Her fiery speech to the British Commissioner in 1843, for instance, was more an outcry against her own subcultural restrictiveness than the words of a female leader amongst women.

Apparently Smit could not even communicate meaningfully with the Boer men from her dominant male culture. The only successful com-

munication according to her journals was with women from her immediate family, sisters or nieces. Her male neighbour called her an old bitch and Smit records that he had said 'zy is toen zy te Stellenbosch woonde zulk een loederbeest geweest' (21 February 1851). She used her religion as protection against him: How dare he call her names when she has feared and served the Lord since her eighth year?

Susanna Smit, therefore, had been socially isolated throughout her life. On Thursday, 2 July 1846, even though she was living amongst 'her own people', she recorded that nobody cared enough to enquire about her and her husband and whether they were able to survive ('geen mensch vraagt ons hoe gaat het, of waarvan leeft gy'). This caused Susanna's self-isolation. Yet, she often yearned to be alone, like a poor bird on a dry piece of wood. This may be a reference to her impoverished social circumstances and she yearned for silence ('Zo zat ik als een arme vogel op een droge stomp, hygende naar stilte', 30 January 1848). Her self-isolation served as protection against the insults of other people, but it also resulted in self-upliftment into a supernatural sphere.

Despite her social and self-isolation, Susanna Smit held important views on the behaviour of people who regarded themselves as superior. She criticised on religious grounds their attitudes and behaviour as well as her own. When she read *De Kerkbode* she was appalled that ministers continually referred to themselves with titles of honour ('By elken regel den naam Wel en Hoog Eerw niet vergeten', 14 June 1850). She remarked that this was not the way of Jesus or his disciples ('Waar vind men toch den Hoog Eerw Jesus, den Hoog Eerw Petrus, Paulus, Johannes?'). Furthermore, in her interpretation of Ephesians 5, she acknowledged the right of wives to resist their husbands should they act like sinners (23 March 1846).

Susanna Smit's most valuable contribution to the religious criticism of power relationships was derived from her own experience with one of her servants, the black woman Maria. On 24 May 1844 Smit writes that Maria had been reprimanded by Erasmus Smit for not doing her job properly and that Maria quite openly had made fun of him. This caused Smit to fly into a temper and she called the black woman 'you black offspring of Satan!' ('swarte Sathans telg'). Smit describes her fear because of her outburst. Maria might have been God's chosen; God might be her Father. How could she (Smit) call her the offspring of Satan? Smit wanted to send Maria away (isolate her), but then she remembered that she had raised Maria like a mother and therefore God would demand Maria's soul

from her. She felt so guilty that long after this had happened she was still plagued with nightmares. She had recurrent dreams that God called her a 'bastaard', that He rejected her as His child because she had called one of his children the child of Satan.

CONCLUSION

Susanna Smit belonged to the subculture of a dominant culture infamous for its racism, sexism and authoritarianism. According to her diary, she held important ideas on all these issues. She honoured the soul of a black woman; she publicly voiced the political rights of women to co-government of the people; she criticised the hierarchy of the Christian community. Susanna Smit had a message for this culture about the isolation, the pain, the rights of the subjugated.

She never delivered this message, and she could not communicate it effectively. There may be two reasons for this: because she was speaking from within a female subculture, she was not heard. In the second place she was unable to energise these insights because of the type of piety she internalised, a piety which centred on fear of the divine, a too personal and individualised relationship with the divine, and a very poor and paralysing self-image.

Smit was unable to communicate the message of her own pain or that of others to her people. Instead, she escaped into visions in which she formed part of the heavenly society. The most striking of her visions is perhaps the following because of the time at which it occurred: On Tuesday, 16 June 1846, Smit recorded a vision she had while her husband led the morning service ('huisgodsdienst'). She saw five choirs of heavenly beings in white, the women playing on golden zithers, the men singing. In the language of Revelation 20 she described the glory of the physical beauty as well as the beauty of the music of these people. However, at the very moment when she wanted to join them in their singing, her husband announced the song to be sung at the closure of the morning service and the vision disappeared. Once again she had been rejected.

Her captivity in a severely restricted subculture caused Susanna Smit to reveal certain psychotic abuses of religion: she found power in guilt and she used her personal relationship with God against people who did not like her. She escaped reality by means of religious visions in which she was empowered, not according to the view of this world but according to that of the life to come.

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