**Gender, Pentecostalism and Agency: A Timely Trinity**

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The main title of Miriam Smidsrød’s contribution to this special issue will probably be familiar to many readers of *PentecoStudies*: “For such a time as this” comes from the fourth chapter of the Book of Esther, and according to anthropologist Omri Elisha (2004) it is “among the most evocative and meaningful catchphrases in the language of evangelicalism.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The significance of the phrase, directed by Mordecai to Esther, comes from the intense dilemma that faces the eponymous hero of the Book: as an ‘outsider’ Jewish woman but also a Persian Queen, Esther must find her voice in order to save her people; and yet in speaking out she risks her own life. Ultimately, she makes a brave and pious choice, but not before her predicament raises questions that resonate beyond the story itself: What is the relationship between human and divine agency?; In what ways does gender role relate to voice, and thus to power and authority?; How should a woman such as Esther—placed in a position of structural contradiction—negotiate her way between self-assertion and self-sacrifice? Elisha’s analysis adds a further dimension to such queries. He talks of how the Old Testament phrase, when invoked by Laura Bush in an American, post 9/11 political context, blurs biblical time with that of the present-day, and so implies that the former period can act as guide, legitimator - and perhaps dramatic anticipation of - the latter.

Mordecai’s words also resonate with the themes explored throughout this volume. In examining the complex role of gender in Pentecostalism we meet informants who, like Esther, are faced with difficult and even contradictory ethical choices that cut across so-called private and public frames of action, and which sometimes juxtapose interpretation of text with (or against) spiritual revelation. Thus Nellie Chigamba, the itinerant evangelist described by Felix Nyika, suffers excommunication and police arrest on her path to becoming an apostle - a powerful calling confirmed by, among other things, a vision that her *husband* has of Jesus, signaling domestic as well as biblical approval of her role. We also encounter dangerous clashes between incommensurate demands of secular and religious imperatives - clashes that only potentially put Esther’s life at risk, but which actually do result in the tragic killing of Andrés, the young ex-gang member in Honduras, who is assassinated once he moves away from criminality and toward Christianity, as documented by Seungjin Son. Perhaps above all, however, we see gender roles in both the biblical story and these Pentecostal cases being renegotiated during times of potentially intense change: such debates over gender roles reflect, and in some cases contribute to, wider transformations in social, economic and cultural contexts. For instance, Linda Ambrose shows how the pioneering missionary Alice Belle Garrigus goes to work in a Newfoundland that has barely been formed in the Canadian Christian landscape or imagination, but which is taking shape very quickly; Nellie Chigamba responds to Chewa, Malawian, and denominational cultures that are visibly and painfully shifting; the Norwegian and Swedish churches chronicled by Smidsrød have already adopted a much more egalitarian stance - on paper, at least: but overt acceptance of new policies does not prevent the subtle operation of ‘micro-aggressions’ that indicate all too clearly the distinctions between precept and practice.

It is to the great credit of all the contributors that they explore links between gender and power, and sometimes combine analysis with advocacy, while avoiding over-determinist arguments. Their work is all the more effective for being nuanced. As the editors put it in their introduction, “the power that Spirit-filled Christians seek does not interact with gender in any predictable way”; but this point does not mean that such interactions cannot be studied to great effect by taking into account how gender blends with other categories that tend to be made salient in Pentecostal circles: not just agency, but also governance, personhood, voicing, embodiment, and transformation of both self and others. A theme that haunts the papers, explicitly or implicitly, seems to be that of complementarianism - the notion that women and men are ‘equal but different,’ and thus should have different roles in congregational contexts (see also Stewart 2016). This reasoning colors the attempt to reform but retain the gendered character of the ‘new masculinity’ of the PDC in Honduras, and it bolsters the male authority of the Nkhoma Synod in Malawi. Its existence is more ambiguously present in ostensibly egalitarian Pentecostal circles in Sweden and Norway, and it perhaps forms a background ambiguity in the life of Alice Belle Garrigus, who seems to bridge conventional expectations in her role as self-style ‘pilgrim’: a maternal woman, but unmarried; diminutive and deferential to God’s will, and yet able to place herself at the center of the narrative of the growth of Pentecostalism in Newfoundland. In reflecting on such cases, we may be reminded of Bernice Martin’s (2001) fruitful discussion of what she sees as the Pentecostal gender paradox, wherein the egalitarianism of a Spirit-led church tends to co-exist with de-facto support for patriarchal ecclesiastical governance. At the same time, such papers indicate that the shift to Pentecostalism may render the operation of gender relations and hierarchies open to varying degrees of overt reflection, and thus vulnerable to a degree of questioning. A still more difficult issue that is raised is the extent to which our very understandings of (and concerns with) gender, power and agency often reflect Western concerns and languages. The editors of this special issue raise this point through an invocation of the work of Saba Mahmood (2001) on Western feminist discourse and the operations of Muslim piety, and in doing so they indicate a further virtue of this collection: the potential it raises for comparison not only within and across Christian cases, but also across religions.

Overall, these pieces show that a focus on the analytical trinity of gender, Pentecostalism and agency is highly productive, and they indicate the salience of gender not only in the operations of Pentecostal practices, but also in the academic *study* of such practices. This point emerges most clearly in Linda Ambrose’s contribution, where she explores the different dimensions, and constructions, of gender history and historiography in Newfoundland. Ambrose highlights the tendencies of past scholars to look beyond ‘Miss Garrigus’ and to attribute the success of Pentecostalism as institution on the island to the workings of men; in response, Ambrose analysis does not simply ‘redress the balance’ through providing a hagiography of a single, female figure, but rather aims “to advance our understanding beyond the contest between the institutionalization thesis and traditional feminist counter-narratives.” In the process, Ambrose illuminates what it means to write a theoretically informed historiography of the workings of gender within Pentecostalism—and one that takes into account different media through which actors have represented themselves, ranging from an iconic photograph to the autobiography of Garrigus herself.

There is much more that could be said about the contributions of these papers, but I want finally to highlight some of the themes that they do not explore directly, but prompt me to consider as I read within and across the case studies. In effect, I am suggesting here a number of future research topics that I think are being raised:

One relates to the role of female leadership in Pentecostal circles, and how it relates to gendered practice in more ‘lay’ circles. In other words, Nellie Chigamba and Alice Belle Garrigus are both iconic figures within their (very different) faith contexts, but how far does their iconicity extend into, and help transform, future practice among women (and men) who are not leaders but ordinary members of churches? Does such leadership become confined to, and domesticated within, the category of the ‘exceptional,’ or does it have wider effects? These questions raise further queries about the nature of both precedent and reproduction in Spirit-filled churches.

I wonder also about transformations of habitus as it relates to gender, and what Brahinsky (2012) calls the operation of Pentecostal ‘body logics’. We are used to thinking of conversion to Pentecostalism as involving new attitudes toward the body and to forms of self-governance (e.g. Eves 2016). But to what extent do changing attitudes to gender involve an internal reform within Pentecostal experiences of and indeed disciplining the body, away from dominant male attitudes, languages and orientations? This question may lie at the heart of Smidsrød’s case study from Scandinavia, where officially adopted policies do not (yet) align with less plainly articulated and yet still widely diffused forms of religious ‘logic.’ It also has potentially significant implications for much current work on Prosperity forms of Pentecostalism, where stable boundaries between secular and religious body logics are not always clear, and where the distinctiveness of pious practices based on disciplining through gender role may therefore be blurred.

Finally, I think there are interesting questions to be raised about the role of gender and Pentecostalism in diaspora. Here, I think of my and Katrin’s Maier’s (2011) work on the Redeemed Christian Church of God as it expands from Nigeria across the world, but many other examples could be raised. What happens when the same Pentecostal denomination stretches across very different cultural contexts, where different norms of gender deportment and authority are visibly in operation? How does such a denomination manage the ethical dissonances that may appear across such locations? And, indeed, who decides what is appropriate gendered behavior when such disparate norms are juxtaposed trans-nationally?

I do not attempt to answer these questions in this short afterword, but I thank the contributors to this special issue for their opening up what must surely become an expanding sub-field in future years.

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1. No page numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)