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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# RENEWAL OR REJECTION OF FAITH: THE CASE OF WOMEN IN THREE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Loreen Maseno

Department of Philosophy Religion and Theology, Maseno University, Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the options of renewal of faith by women who join New Religious movements and the option of rejection of Christian faith to follow Krishna Consciousness. It considers how women are opting to be part of New Religious movements due to discontents in leadership, decision making and a partial perspective of the human being, all of which are partly addressed in New Religious movements. The choice to join these movements as this article attempts to show is a choice on the part of women to either renew or reject the Christian faith. In so doing, women who join the African indigenous churches and the unification Church are renewing their Christian faith. This paper will also look at those who reject the Christian faith and opt for religious movements that are deeply rooted in Hindu tradition. This paper will not look into total rejection of all faith.

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\*Corresponding author: [loreenma@yahoo.com](mailto:loreenma@yahoo.com), [loreenmas@gmail.com](mailto:loreenmas@gmail.com),

## INTRODUCTION

How is one to relate to a male saviour who represents a male God who is invoked to legitimate the claim that maleness is normative for humanity? (Schneiders 1991:3). When women are left asking such questions they end up in problems of embodied spirituality and of what they believe in. Women experiencing problems in spirituality and in their lived experience of faith within mainstream missionary church settings tend to have stress, anxiety and depression. What is considered in this paper is embodied spirituality, where the woman is seen as a whole, the body and soul are concerned for in a wholistic manner. This article begins by looking at some problems in spirituality that

women within some church settings may encounter such as depression, self-depreciation, isolation and stress owing to their efforts to reconstruct or transform these very churches and as a result, some choose to either renew their faith or reject the Christian faith

### Depression

It is common knowledge that the devil and the church are not allies, but are archenemies. Women within mainstream missionary founded churches desiring a reconstruction and a transformation have been branded the "devil's agents". These women undergo a state of feeling sad. This is marked especially by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in

thinking and concentration. Indeed, just like Cady Stanton's work "The woman's bible" was accused of being the "work of women and the devil". (Fiorenza 1983:9) so is the resistance to date. The women branded names, end up with symptoms of depression. They are left suffering in anguish as their mental health fails. Such accusations frustrate the efforts of women to come out strongly and boldly, rather they are made to become cowards in fear of such animosity. Transformations are viewed with suspicion and any attempt to try and initiate it, especially by those in the pews who are to be silent and are treated less than minors are not condoned. Being branded names and excommunication awaits those who dare to transgress. In each passing day there will be more obstacles to overcome.

### **Anxiety and stress**

"In theological contexts, resistance to male domination is always liable to be mistaken for resistance to God, seeing that the subject position within theology is fundamentally male/masculine". (Erickson 1995:150). There is therefore no way that a contention that is dubbed resistance against God can generate support from the clergy. Women in this case develop a fearful concern over an impending or anticipated ill. They see themselves as enemies to God, and cannot loose themselves out of this. Such is the case for some women and this builds up to levels that there is self-doubt about one's capacity to cope. Anxiety sets in and the women's health is in jeopardy.

### **Isolation**

In an attempt for some women in mainstream missionary founded churches to arise, what effectively happens is that the women become divided into camps and fight each other. Those two camps are of those who are for the change and those who are against the change. Where there is such a conflict we end up having women in both the two camps isolated against each other. They are unable to relate to each other as friends any more. They become each others' enemies. The build-up of this state of isolation affects their health. Often the real cause of the factions between within the women is not addressed, that of how the church understands itself. It means that the women who

are for the transformation loose their focus as they try to keep at bay the women who are pitted against them.

### **Self-Depreciation**

Using Paulo Freire's work (Freire 1970:40-58), failure by women to seize the moment, they will self-depreciate within mainstream missionary founded churches. They will internalise opinions that the clergy hold of them and these opinions are not likely over the years to improve. Over the years they will diffuse a magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the clergy, so that even their presence will be terrifying. They will fatalistically accept what they have been made to think of themselves.

In some mainstream missionary founded churches the potential of women remains under-utilized. Women are relegated to services and duties that the male dominated clergy care less to perform. In this manner are made use of so that their creative, theological and decision-making contribution in the Church is hindered. Hindering ones full development hinders the attainment of wholeness, which in this paper refers to all aspects of a person's welfare. Human development involves nurturing one's talents and potential so that they are fully-grown, but women in mainstream missionary founded churches are unable to achieve their dreams and ambitions, rather they are muzzled and delayed. The ability to have room to dream positively and far enough is negated. Women are merely passive and are expected to respond positively to such a structure.

"What we ask is that.... the church keep pace with the other agencies that are according her (women) a new status and new opportunities for development and achievement....The church, because of her own conservatism and lack of vision, is allowing trained, talented, spirited women to slip away from her into other lines of activity. Awake thou that sleepest." (Herzel 1981:5). The women who would like a transformation in mainstream missionary founded churches, after being branded names, fighting with other women, and still trying to keep focused find

themselves in health hazardous and dangerous situations. These situations of stress, anxiety, depression, isolation to mention but a few as we said earlier directly affect their health. In an effort to have a change from within mainstream missionary founded churches the women will continue to expose themselves to these health hazards and they directly affect the woman as a whole, her embodied spirituality.

“Depatriachalizing is dangerous work, for failures invites continues rationalization of subordination and violence against women.” (Russel 1995:107). When the playing field is not level then remaining in that arena to keep playing is to the disadvantage of the women. By the time a woman has spent her energies struggling to be heard, she barely has enough energy to say what she wanted to say (Oduoye 1996:13). Some women in protest have opted out, they have had an exodus and that exodus has led them into various New Religious Movements.

Women in New religious movements according to Ursula King is not commonly studied (King 1987: ix). “New religions” has been used in relation to ancient or old traditions i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism and the preliterate religions. Several New religious movements had their roots in the Asian traditions of Philosophy and religion. To the African’s, Christianity and Islam were seen as new religions. New religious movements is used in relation to the main world Churches or religions. They are an outgrowth of religious developments and religious change. They are in relation to an already existing older Religious tradition. Social scientists supplied the term New religious movements to the spiritual upsurge in the 1960’s. The New Religious movements are classified into 2 main Categories, namely the cults and sects. Both carry a negative connotation and their members do not like to be seen in that way. That is why the term new religious movements was supplied to them. In my view a cult is any group stigmatised as a cult. “In general both cults and sects are seen as culture rejecting religious organizations as opposed to “churches” that are seen to be culture accepting. There is a danger of generalizing what constitutes of cults and sects. It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between a cult and a sect”. (Lecture

notes University of Nairobi). At one time Christianity was considered a sect after breaking from Judaism and also seen as a cult by the first Century Jews.

There are various theories that explain why new religious movements arise. One is Moral ambiguity and value confusion. This is often in situations where new values are presented where there has been a lack of collective moral values. The New religious movements rise with their own set of convincing moral values. Women in mainstream missionary founded churches have noted that they are full humans, not deficient and that it is immoral for them to be treated otherwise. So, they have opted to leave. In these movements, there are alternatives, model figures and moral authority, evidenced in the language that they use in words like mother, father, brother, sister etc. Secularisation has also been used to explain the rise of New religious movements. When mainline religions fail to deliver the spiritual services, other groups will arise (Lecture notes University of Nairobi). I will briefly highlight on women in African indigenous churches, the Unification Church and the Krishna consciousness. The latter two have their origin in the East (Korea and India respectively) but have a considerable following around the world. “While the beliefs and practices of the unification church are predominantly shaped by the Christian tradition, Krishna Consciousness is deeply rooted in the Hindu tradition. Both share a universal outlook” (King 1987:107).

### **Renewal of the Christian Faith**

For this study, reference will be made to African indigenous churches and the Unification church which in my opinion facilitate the renewal of women’s Christian faith. Women who opt to stay on in the Christian faith are hopeful of the wider truth of the Christian gospel and it’s ability to be the gospel for women. This is an option that is available to as many that would welcome it and offers an alternative. It is a decision to keep and renew one’s faith in a new community, which is not perfect as it were but is a preferable option. In Kenya the African Indigenous churches have provided such an opportunity and are growing in large numbers by the day.

## **African Indigenous Churches**

The African indigenous churches is a place that the Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches have resorted to. After the missionaries had planted different Churches of different denominations, there have been walkouts. In the words of J.S Mbiti, the African indigenous churches are “protest churches”- that is protest against the domination which has shown itself on the African scene in many forms (See Bediako 1995:305). These African indigenous churches vindicate the integrity of the African Christian consciousness and experience. To Mbiti, these African indigenous churches represent a massive African rejection of imported and imposed forms of the Christian life (See Bediako 1995:305). Women who have joined these churches find that an excessive exploitative use at least consciously of inevitable societal inequalities between the sexes is reduced.

In fact there is evidence that archaic cultures did, indeed treat women more equitably than most later societies did (Carmody 1979:31). Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches for the African indigenous churches have found that they are better off unlike what they had experienced earlier where mainstream missionary founded churches holds to an uncompromisingly male outlook and uphold the highest value for society to be present in males. Elements of the African worldview have been able to inform the African indigenous churches so that they operate in a different way, repudiating the more obvious errors of the earlier Missionary churches. African indigenous churches have negated aspects of being church that are not consistent to their worldview.

The African attempt to allow for various feminine manifestations of Religion has been presented by the research of people like David Barret and John Mbiti. Unlike some Churches, where feminine manifestations have been reduced or cerebralized the African indigenous churches have allowed women to exercise their spirituality in a new manner. Accommodating the “strange” gifts of African women would have reduced the alternative schismatic tendency from mainstream

missionary founded churches. Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches have been able to assume positions of leadership in African indigenous churches. This is often the reassertion of a prophetic role which once characterised tribal tradition. It is in these African prophetic movements that these women have found extraordinary and quite exceptional ministries of leadership.

Thus we note that a considerable number of independent churches in Africa have been started by women (Herzel 1981:68). The prophet in African societies is a place of accepted leadership which must be religiously founded. The voice of God automatically becomes the voice of the people. The prophet is able to be in touch with the inner realities of any given set of circumstances and ask what the meaning of things is. Women have been able to see themselves in a different light as they participate in the African indigenous churches.

## **The Unification Church**

The unification Church formally known as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity considers itself a development of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Its founder, Rev. Sun Myung Moon was born in 1920. In Easter 1936, he saw Jesus who told him to complete the work he had started. In 1944, he began a mission and gathered followers. In the following years more members joined and were referred to as the Moonies and the movement has spread since then (Peterson 1987:158). This section will borrow from the writing of a member of the Unification church. This raises a problem of bias and subjectivity. Nevertheless my argument for doing so is firstly, that women in new unification church is a topic hardly studied. Secondly, the writer being a woman in the very movement should attach some measure of authenticity to her writing.

According to Petersen, a member of the Unification Church from 1973 and married another member in 1982,<sup>1</sup> the image of God as masculine

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<sup>1</sup> An introduction of Sarah Petersen by Ursula King. In *Women in the world's Religions*.

and feminine is affirmed in the pastors' sacraments of the unification church. Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches for the unification church have found that the unification theology breaks with the trend of both Protestant and Catholic spirituality in describing aspects of God as formed in part of femininity and masculinity which is non dualistic, complementary, equal and reciprocal. We saw earlier that the emphasis on dualisms in mainstream missionary founded churches has resulted in the legitimisation of patriarchy and consequently domination and subordination. Women who have joined the unification church have been able to be in an environment where sexism is reduced to some degree. Women participate in fasting, prayer, witnessing, and celibacy before marriage, without protection or regard for the "weaker sex". They may be out late at night and even learn martial arts. The tradition of relationality and mutuality is this time more influential to member's faith than that of substance and hierarchy (Peterson 1987:172). Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches for the Unification church have to some extent been able to resolve the dilemma of hierarchy, where their belief in the overthrowing hierarchies among humans has been accommodated.

In general we see that Women who have been able to join the unification Church after leaving mainstream missionary founded churches have been able to regain their self-respect and have opted for their personhood outside a resolutely patriarchal church. They find that they have a better place within the Unification Church because within the unification church, women are necessary to represent God's image on earth and in heaven (Peterson 1987:169).

### **Rejection of the Christian Faith**

Atheism, it is said is a rejection of a particular kind of theism. In this section I restrict myself to the rejection of the Christian faith for faith that is rooted in the Hindu tradition, the Krishna Consciousness and how it treats women. The international society for Krishna Consciousness or the Hare Krishna movement as it is better known was established in 1966. It is concerned to spread

the belief and practices popularised in India in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century by Chiatanya Mahaprabhu. As such, it comprises an active part of the Indian tradition of loving devotion to Krishna or Vishnu ( King 1987:114). Women in the Krishna consciousness need not practice male-oriented spirituality that demands of only women to be subordinated. Rather, all devotees, whether male or female, must in loving devotion to Krishna do acts of service. Unlike mainstream missionary founded churches where there are differences as to the tasks performed by males and females, in the Krishna consciousness women therefore are able to feel at home since what is practiced is a "female" approach to spirituality. All members in unison are to partake of all the tasks and not that there is a sexist criteria in the division of labour. This feminine approach is an advantage to some women who by virtue of their social and cultural conditioning, they are generally at home in surrender and service to others, and ultimately to Krishna.

Women who have left mainstream missionary founded churches for the Krishna consciousness have found that they are in a way better placed. In the "Krishna conscious" system, man and women are seen not only as spiritually alike but also materially alike in the sense that they are ultimately responsible for their own spiritual welfare (Friedhelm 1987:116). All the selves or souls (jira) are of the same quality and nature. It is the constitutional nature of the soul to be a servant of God. This is where the concept of equality has its roots, as seen in the writings of the devotees unlike mainstream missionary founded churches where there is in the understanding of the church that males are not females and these two are opposites thus not really the same. Within the Krishna movement the starting point is the equality of all souls before God, so that the prime characteristic of every devotee whether male or female is complete service and surrender to God. Unlike mainstream missionary founded churches where those we would call women devotees are those that are nuns and the rest are but ordinary members of the church, in the Krishna consciousness the female member is a devotee regardless of her marital status and what they are required of is the same. The important thing is that everyone is a servant of

God. All devotees whether male or female must practice and adopt an attitude- spiritual, mental and physical-of surrender and service to others and ultimately to Krishna. Reciprocity of surrender and submission by all devotees is lacking within mainstream missionary founded churches of which women have come to find. Whereas women in mainstream missionary founded churches are totally excluded from one of the seven sacraments, the holy orders and consequently from all real participation in leadership and decision making, in the Krishna consciousness movement this is not the case. Though earlier sociological studies have emphasised the inferior status of women in the Krishna consciousness movement, it appears that this has been a purely external, western, outsider point of view whereas a different reality is experienced by insiders, the committed members of the movement. Evidence shows that women from different social and educational backgrounds join the movement, and current leaders affirm that in principle women could become presidents of temples, take renunciation, or be guru's like men (King 1987: 107-108).

### **Remaining in Mainstream Missionary Founded Churches**

Whereas in my opinion there are reasons for women in mainstream missionary founded churches to be dissatisfied, some still opt to remain within it for various reasons.

### **Geographical Location**

There are some women who remain in mainstream missionary founded churches because often in some areas in Kenya it is the only church within a very large radius. So the women born in an area that is predominantly Catholic tend to remain Catholics since that is the only place which to them is available and is able to provide spiritual nourishment. Even if there were options they are inaccessible, and as a result these women remain confined to mainstream missionary founded churches.

### **Women with Vows to the Church**

There are the women who have taken vows to become nuns. These women have made up their

~~minds and will not change their minds unless otherwise.~~ By having made lifelong vows to be faithful to the church and in service to God in that way then these form a number of those women who continue to remain within the church. These are therefore in their convents and organize themselves, though the senior clergymen wield power over the way they conduct themselves in the convents. These women are trained and made to carry themselves in a manner that would maintain the status quo. They themselves are deeply entrenched in the structure that orders and fashions their way of life. As a result I do not see them able to stage and outright confrontation against the system. They risk excommunication and the withdrawal of all their privileges that they have accrued over, for most of them a lifetime.

### **Access to Services by the Church**

There are those women who would want to have services by the church, like infant baptism, marriage and burial. These services have a special significance in the lives of these women and as a result they keep ties with the church. To them these are rites of passage that they consider important not only to the individual but to the entire family. There are some women who are satisfied with the way things remain within mainstream missionary founded churches and see it as the right way things ought to be. This is their personal decision which cannot be taken for granted. Rather they are entitled to a difference of opinion. Some may attribute this to a low degree of feminist consciousness yet that is what they have chosen and that is what they are satisfied with.

### **Church related Employees**

There are those women who have senior positions in mainstream missionary founded churches projects and programmes and are thus given some degree status and privilege. These women may not be able to be carriers of change because they internalise the attitudes in the entire structure and consciously or unconsciously maintain the status quo. They themselves are content in their superior positions and thus they are unable to speak out against structures and patterns of the church. They could be said to be token women. They are not

oriented into the new vision of human relationships that alternative feminist ideology offers. Such women are unable to contend effectively from where they are because they are meant to conform to the structures of the Church.

### Conclusion

This paper has observed that the movement of women out of some mainstream missionary churches is evidence of there being discontents. Three discontents highlighted are namely, subordination in leadership, exclusion from decision-making and a partial view of the human person. The exodus as seen is in itself a protest and a manifestation of a problem in the embodied spirituality of the women involved. This paper has looked at how women leaving mainstream missionary founded churches in my context-Kenya, opting for New Religious movements. These movements are an outgrowth of religious developments and religious change. It has further gone on to indicate how the discontents in leadership, decision making and a partial perspective of the human being have been partly addressed in the New Religious movements. I have also taken note of the women who opt to remain within mainstream missionary founded churches citing their plausible reasons.

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