

Women Participating in the Reformations and in Congo Today: Some Aspects

Mulheres que participaram nas Reformas e no Congo hoje: alguns aspectos

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RESUMO

As mulheres sempre constituíram uma parte significativa da igreja crista, participando de todas as comunidades e em cada século, mas muitas vezes elas foram negligenciadas, pois seus papéis quase sempre foram subordinados e, geralmente, menos valorizados. O que elas fizeram também foi pouco documentado, tornando difícil percebê-lo. Considerando estes aspectos, este artigo apresenta uma visão geral da participação das mulheres nas Reformas do século XVI e na África Central hoje. Ele começa com uma breve nota sobre o fim da Idade Média e as

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reformas católicas romanas e, em seguida, fala sobre as mulheres nas reformas protestantes e anabatistas, concluindo com algumas observações sobre as mulheres na República Democrática do Congo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Mulheres. Igrejas Cristãs. África Central.

ABSTRACT

Women have always been a very significant part of the Christian church, participating in every community and every century. They have often been overlooked, however, because their roles have almost always been subordinate and usually less valued. What they do has also been much less documented so it is hard to see. This paper is a brief overview of women's participation in the Reformations and in central Africa today. It begins with a short note on the late middle ages and Roman Catholic reforms; it is followed by a longer section on women in the Protestant and Anabaptist reformations; it concludes with some limited remarks on women in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

KEYWORDS

Women. Christian Churches. Central Africa.

I. Late Medieval and Catholic Women

In the medieval Roman church there were two main categories of participation for women. One was as nuns. These women took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to live in cloistered communities out of the world, devoting themselves to prayer. Taking religious vows gave nuns and monks and priests a higher rank of holiness than ordinary people. The second category of participation for women was in ordinary family and village life; this was a kind of second class Christian lifestyle. They attended Mass in their local parish churches and shared religious processions such as Corpus Christi. They memorized and prayed the Latin prayers, especially the Ave Maria, and taught them to their children. They might vow to go on a pilgrimage to gain God's favor or to do pen-

ance for a sin. Because women prepared the food they were responsible for seeing that their households observed fasts. If a woman helped with childbirth she might baptize a sickly baby. These women were not considered holy because they were married. Sexuality was seen as sinful and negative. Since women's main occupation was bearing and rearing children, attitudes toward women were also often negative.

In the 16th c. there were many people interested in reforming the church, including ones who worked from within. The idea of holy life remained the same, and there was new fervor. Teresa of Avila is the most famous mystic reformer. She established a reformed order of nuns called the Discalced (Barefoot) Carmelites. For them, reform meant practicing the religious rule in its full rigor of poverty and prayer instead of comfortable living. However, some reformers had a different idea of what they should do. Instead of praying in their convents, these women wanted to serve the poor in the world. They were particularly interested in teaching poor children and caring for sick and needy people. Two examples: Angela Merici founded the Ursulines to teach street children; Louise de Marillac founded the Daughters of Charity to be nurses. To do their work these nuns would have to go into ordinary society. However, the Council of Trent was afraid that if the women lived among ordinary people they would not be able to remain chaste and holy, so the Council said that if the women wanted to be nuns they must live enclosed in convents. The Ursulines reluctantly accepted this and took girls into their convents to teach them there. The Daughters of Charity said they would not take permanent religious vows or be officially recognized as nuns because they wanted to follow their calling to care for sick people in hospitals. So in the Catholic reforms there were old ideals of poverty, chastity and withdrawing from the world but also some new ideas of how women could participate faithfully.

II. Protestant and Anabaptist Women in the 16th Century

Many people across Europe were eager to reform the church. Those who broke with Rome changed many aspects of both the ideals and the practices. Perhaps the single most important difference for women was

the new status of marriage as a good way to serve God. This was based on the revised view of what constitutes a holy life – a teaching called the priesthood of believers. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others clearly said that the only way to be holy, to be set apart to God, was to be justified by faith and grace alone, by God’s sheer gift in Christ. No human works could help. This meant that taking religious vows of celibacy did not bring a person closer to God or earn God’s favor. In fact, if people trusted that they were especially holy because of fasting or vowing celibacy or going on a pilgrimage or hearing Mass every day – those people were actually displeasing to God because they were trusting in their own actions.

One consequence of justification by faith and grace alone was the teaching that there are no special holy people. Everyone who is right with God by trusting God’s mercy is equally acceptable to God and does not need a human priest to intercede. There is only one Mediator, Jesus Christ. All those who are saved by Christ are equally fitted to pray to God through Him, lay people and clergy are all equal before God. This priesthood of believers meant that women as well as men could have the priestly function of praying for others. Another consequence was that every person can have a holy vocation right where they live. A tailor or a baker, a nurse or a teacher, a mother or a magistrate, can be just as holy, just as much set apart to God, as a priest or nun. Protestants also taught that marriage is God’s good gift, so being married does not make a person less holy. This had an important effect on women because now their daily lives as wives and mothers were considered a religious vocation.

These new teachings inspired many women to get involved in the Protestant and Anabaptist reforms. Some actions could be done by any woman. We may not have many stories about individuals because they did not leave records, but you might say they voted with their feet. Ordinary women could show their trust in justification by faith and grace alone by breaking the fasting laws and feeding their families meat on Fridays.² They could show that they did not pray to the saints by break-

² Usually reform is studied through words, but social historians have shown that ritual actions are a good way to uncover what ordinary people were doing. See SCRIBNER, Robert. “Ritual and Reformation”, in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*. London: Hambledon, 1987, p. 102-22.

ing statues of the saints, or by baking or cleaning on a saint's day when they were not supposed to work. They could stop using the Latin prayers, but instead learn the new prayers and hymns and Psalms in their own language and teach them to their children. They could read the Bible for themselves and sing in church. If they were literate, women might write and publish pamphlets, or letters. In fact, many women learned to read so that they could read the Bible for themselves. They could also teach or preach what they learned from the Bible to anyone who would listen. Protestant men did not like women claiming to preach but some women defied the church or state authorities to speak in public. Women who believed they had been inspired by the Holy Spirit might tell their visions or make prophecies. Women could also become martyrs; they might be forced to go into exile or they might even be killed for what they believed.

If they had vowed to be celibate, these women could break those vows by marrying. In fact, marriage was an important way to identify a Protestant.³ Many priests had not been able to keep their vows of celibacy; they lived with their housekeepers as concubines, and these women were despised as prostitutes by the general society. Protestants read texts like 1 Tim. 3 which speaks of "the bishop as the husband of one wife" so they believed pastors should be married, as a way of showing that they followed scripture instead of church tradition. So priests who became Protestant had to find wives. Those who were already living with their housekeepers married these women and made them legitimate wives in Protestant eyes. Others had to find women who were so sure of salvation by faith that they were willing to marry priests and risk having traditional church members consider them prostitutes. Together, these women established the completely new role of pastor's wife.

Publishing a booklet or marrying a reformer or defying the authorities were the kinds of actions which are well documented, so I would like to tell you a few stories. Katharina Schütz was a very devout young woman in the city of Strasbourg, about twenty years old when the

³ See PLUMMER, Marjorie Elizabeth. *From Priest's Whore to Pastor's Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012.

Reformation began. Katharina had tried to please God and had vowed to be celibate.⁴ (She stayed in her own home; she thought most nuns did not keep their vows well. Also it was expensive to enter a monastery and she did not have the money.) However, even though she was determined to live the most holy life possible, Katharina still was not sure of her salvation. Then she heard her parish preacher Matthew Zell preaching the new teaching of justification by faith and grace alone. Then she rejoiced in the new assurance of salvation which she now read in the Bible. She immediately became active because she believed God had called her to be a “fisher of people,” to act to help other people learn the gospel as she had. As a statement of her faith, one of her first public acts was to marry Zell! He needed a wife and Katharina believed strongly that this was what scripture told her to do, so she became the first respectable woman of Strasbourg to marry a priest! She broke her own vow of celibacy to be one of the first pastors’ wives. People started saying scandalous things about Matthew because he broke his priestly vows. So Katharina wrote a pamphlet to defend clerical marriage on Biblical grounds. Her pamphlet made the bishop very angry. However Katharina quoted scripture to show that she had the right and obligation as a Christian to defend her neighbor against false witness. She wrote it for Matthew’s sake but especially for the sake of his congregation! The slander against Matthew was making his people reject his preaching. For Katharina, to love her neighbor as herself meant showing that Matthew was following scripture, so that the people who heard him would trust the truth of his preaching and be saved.

Katharina Schütz Zell was a remarkable woman! And her work did not end there, by any means. She took refugees into her home and spent much time doing pastoral visiting. She also continued to write and teach and preach, informally but very effectively. She published a number of booklets to teach the new understanding of faith. Sometimes the problem was persecution and she offered Biblical consolation. In 1524 she wrote

⁴ MCKEE, Elsie Anne. *Katharina Schütz Zell: Volume One: The Life and Thought of a Sixteenth-Century Reformer*. Leiden: Brill, 1999. *Katharina Schütz Zell, Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Trans./ed. E. A. McKee. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006.

to women who were suffering under their Catholic rulers, to encourage and praise them for their faithfulness. Katharina was very worried about the need for Christian education. The old songs and prayers to the saints were not Biblical but at first there was not much else to sing. To help mothers teach their children the right way, Katharina published a hymn-book with new Biblical hymns in their own language. She also wrote an exposition of the Lord's Prayer and meditations on some Psalms. When Matthew died she preached at his burial to remind his congregation of his teaching.

Katharina recognized that some people misunderstood what Luther and Zell had taught. Even the reformers themselves disagreed over what she thought were relatively minor points. Katharina was very clear about the need for the fundamental teaching on justification and following the Bible. However, she did not like to see the reformers fighting each other. Once she wrote to Luther himself to rebuke him for a lack of charity to Zwingli. Other times she talked or corresponded with other reformers who were quarreling in order to persuade them to be reconciled, or at least to accept each other. She was a very committed Protestant, but she was also convinced that not everyone had to agree on every detail. Katharina's foster son Rabus attacked her as a heretic because she was friendly with people he thought were heretics. She tried to explain things to him so he would tolerate Anabaptists as Zell had. When Rabus refused to listen, Katharina published a history of the early Reformation; she wanted to be sure the next generation understood Zell's and Luther's teaching as she had experienced it. She thought that telling the truth was the best way to show her love for her neighbor. She called herself a "church mother" and she certainly played that role in Strasbourg.

Another special woman was Idelette de Bure.⁵ She is remembered particularly because she married John Calvin, but she deserves to be known for herself. She is also a representative of many other women who chose to go into exile from their homes in order to follow their faith. Idelette and her first husband were Anabaptists in the city of Liege (Belgium). To say they were Anabaptists means that they were very strongly

⁵ Most biographies of Calvin mention his wife, and there are some short articles about her, but not as much scholarly study as for some other women.

determined to follow scripture alone. They read the Bible in their own language, very literally, so they rejected the idea of infant baptism because it is not stated in the New Testament. In their home in Liege, Idelette and her family were considered heretics. They fled to Strasbourg, which was Protestant and friendly to people who were persecuted. Idelette and her husband were ready to uproot their children from their home and lose their possessions and go into exile, in order to worship as they believed the Bible teaches.

At this time Calvin came to Strasbourg to be the pastor of the French-speaking religious exiles. Idelette's family heard his preaching and how he explained the Bible; they changed their minds about infant baptism and joined Calvin's church. Then Idelette's husband died. Calvin was looking for a wife, because as a Protestant minister it was important for him to marry. Then he decided to marry this good widow in his church. Both Calvin and Idelette had chosen exile in order to follow what they believed God wanted them to do. This meant they shared the most significant basis for marriage in the Reformation: a commitment to their faith so deep that they were prepared to turn their lives upside-down for it. When Calvin moved back to Geneva in 1541, Idelette moved again to another new place to be a pastor's wife where her husband was not popular. We do not have many words from Idelette as we do from Katharina, but her actions tell us how she participated in the Reformation. She left her home and country because she read the Bible and wanted to follow it exactly. She married a Protestant pastor and followed him wherever he was called to serve, she welcomed guests into her home and went out to do pastoral visiting of the sick. In addition, she supported the work of the church in all the quiet ways that women do. She shared in regular worship, in home devotions, and helping her neighbors.

Another woman is the Anabaptist Elizabeth Dirks in Rotterdam, a friend and follower of Menno Simons.⁶ Like other Anabaptists Elizabeth insisted on the literal meaning of scripture. She was arrested as a heretic and in her trial she answered with scriptural logic. When she was questioned about the Mass, Elizabeth denied the doctrine of

⁶ Her story is told in the Anabaptist martyrology, BRACHT, T. van. *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs' Mirror*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987, p. 481-83.

transubstantiation. She asked, “What did [Jesus] give [the disciples], flesh or bread?” The inquisitors answered, “Bread.” Elizabeth answered, “Did the Lord not remain seated there?” She meant that the bread did not become Christ’s flesh. After two examinations, Elizabeth was tortured and then killed.

These are a few of the ways women participated in the Reformation.

III. Africa

In some ways it is a big jump to move from sixteenth-century Europe to twenty-first century Africa, but Christian women in Africa have many things in common with Christian women of earlier times. One might ask why would Africans become Christians? African religions believe in both a high God and many spiritual beings, including especially the spirits of the ancestors. Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana emphasizes that what Christianity brought was the knowledge of Jesus Christ, not the knowledge of God.⁷ For many Africans, the teaching about Christ meant freedom from the power of evil spirits, a Savior God who was more powerful than the spirits and who could be trusted unconditionally.

First I want to say a few words about the earliest famous woman Christian in sub-Saharan Africa, Beatriz Kimpa Vita.⁸ Roman Catholic missionaries from Portugal came to sub-Saharan Africa by the late fifteenth century. One place was the Kingdom of the Kongo in what is now part of the DRC but mostly in Angola. There the king and others became Christians, but there were conflicts between Christian Kongolese and traditionalist Kongolese. In the seventeenth century the most famous woman from this Christian church was a prophetess named Beatrice Kimpa Vita. She taught that Christ was born in her country and Mary and Joseph and Jesus were black. Many people followed this visionary woman, which angered the Catholic clergy. A part of Kimpa Vita’s

⁷ ODUYOYE, Mercy Amba. *Hearing and Knowing: theological reflections on Christianity in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986.

⁸ THORNTON, John K. *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

message was based on her celibacy, a traditional Catholic sign of holiness. When she became pregnant the Catholic clergy attacked her and she was executed as a heretic. Her movement was eventually crushed but her memory remained as a sign of the deep conviction of faith among Kongolesse Christians.

To speak of Protestants in Africa, I will concentrate on the Dem. Rep. of Congo today because that is the place I know best. Access to the interior of central Africa was for a long time very difficult because of the geography, so in my part of Congo the first time people heard the gospel was in the 1880s and 1890s. For others it was not until the early 20th century. There were both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. My grandparents came to Luebo in the Kasai in 1911. My grandfather and my father have told many stories of the amazing African Christians they have known, including the wonderful Christian women. I was born and grew up in Congo and came to know outstanding Christian women myself. That has shaped my faith and given me very important role models for serving God. What I say here is based on some of those stories.

The first thing to say is that Christian women in Congo are the backbone and strength of the church! They participate in so many ways it is hard to count. They are witnesses to their husbands and families by the way they live. One example is a woman in a very rural area. She was barren, so her husband constantly beat her because she had failed to fulfil her main task as a woman, which was to produce children. She continued to serve him, to farm and cook and clean and carry water for him, despite his bad treatment. She bore all of his abuse patiently. Finally, he could not stand it! He demanded to know why she was so patient. She did not have words to explain her Christian faith but she told her husband to talk to the evangelist in their village. When the man came to the evangelist, he said he wanted the power that his wife had. This silent, illiterate and abused wife was such a powerful witness to God's grace that her husband was determined to discover and get that spiritual power for himself! For many women, the witness is not so dramatic but it is just as essential. Women live their faith in worship and in daily life. They make up a major part of most congregations, organizing choirs to sing, bringing their hard-earned offerings, praying for each other and the community, feeding pastors and orphans, collecting clothing for destitute widows or

money to pay for funerals. Christian women's support for the church often goes unnoticed until something happens and it stops temporarily. Then everyone realizes how much they depend on the church mothers!

Most Congo tribal groups are patriarchal, and this has been reinforced by patriarchy in the churches. There are, however, women who read the Bible for themselves; they take very seriously the teaching in Genesis that God created male and female in God's image. They claim their right as daughters of God to be treated as equally human and valuable as men. They also work to help other women claim their right as equal children of God. They help all Christians recognize that God welcomes women and the marginalized, orphans and people living with HIV/AIDS, everyone as equally valuable in God's sight. They work to help women read and understand the Bible for themselves. Not every woman understands this, but many have learned from the Reformation about the priesthood of believers and reading the Bible for themselves. My dear friend and sister Monique Misenga Mukuna is a woman of prayer, one of the most generous and loving and active Christians and one of the strongest people of faith I have ever met.⁹

Just a few examples: Maman Monique sees a problem – a malnourished child, an abused wife, a girl forced into prostitution because she is starving – and she responds by trying to help. She does not stop there: she organizes other people in her church to get involved. She leads women and girls to understand their situation, to recognize that they are just as valuable to God as men or boys. Then she helps them find ways to help themselves and to reach out to others who are caught in violence or destitution. Two short examples of typical situations in which girls and women suffer because of violence and poverty and patriarchy. One is the story of an orphan who was abused by her relatives. She was thrown out to survive on the street, caught TB, and was starving. Maman Monique took her in, got medical treatment, and when the girl was well Maman Monique helped her get a practical education so she could earn her own living with dignity.

⁹ To learn a bit about Monique Misenga Mukuna, see the website www.WomanCradleofAbundance.org Her autobiography is being prepared now and will be published in 2018-2019.

Another story is about the pandemic of AIDS. Of course it is spread in various ways. Some poor women catch it by caring for sick relatives. However, the most common way AIDS is transmitted is by sexual contact. Besides the violence of war, there is also domestic violence. Women are not allowed to refuse their husbands in anything and many wives are infected by their unfaithful husbands. In traditional African culture it is taboo to talk about sex. Maman Monique recognized that as long as the church continues to be silent there would be no way to stop AIDS. So she identified the problem, talked to church leaders and to women, and mobilized ways to respond. She trained women to recognize signs of AIDS and to help those living with the disease be tested, get medication and food. Some of Monique's friends saw a woman who had the signs of AIDS. They talked with her and urged her to be tested. The woman had to get her husband's permission. He refused because he knew that he had been unfaithful and he had given her AIDS. In fact, he threatened to take Maman Monique to court for causing his wife to disobey him. Maman Monique said "Let him!" She persuaded the woman to be tested. When the woman got the results, she wanted to kill her husband. Then Maman Monique prayed with her and counseled her and promised to help with medicine and food, and the woman ended by forgiving her husband; she regained her strength and continues to care for her children.

Maman Monique not only addresses individuals; she knows how to speak truth to power, like Katharina in the Reformation. She stands up to those who misappropriate money intended for the poor, to those who fail to protect the weak, to those who use their offices for gain instead of service. In fact, she was fired from her job and harassed in every way for her courage in speaking out for justice. But Maman Monique is faithful, teaching women and men that they are both loved by God, and helping them find hope and help. I wish I had time to tell you more about Maman Monique! For me she is the church mother of Congo.

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