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Gendering Tradition and Rewriting Church History

Ulrike Gleixner

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, women's active contributions to the Pietist movement, the most important Lutheran reform movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have been excluded from Lutheran church history or reduced to private practices of piety. The historiography on Lutheran Pietism in particular produced a male genealogy, and the Pietist movement appears in retrospect as a crystallization of pure manliness. In other words, exclusion from and inclusion in the Pietist tradition has been organized by gender.

If we seek to reconstruct women's contribution to the most significant reform movement in Protestantism using an approach one might describe as archaeological, the parallel processes of exclusion also become visible. The findings are clear: Unpublished and published sources alike reveal women's active participation in Pietist groups and networks. Although they never held church office, were excluded from formal theological training, and were subordinate to men in the gender order, they helped shape this Protestant lay movement in its formative phase, and even represented a numerical majority of the movement.

If we look closely at the Lutheran Pietist movement in Württemberg, we see that in the eighteenth century, the new Pietist mode of communication even gave women the opportunity to act in public—in village or town Pietist circles, as the jurist and politician Johann Jakob Moser describes in his spiritual biography of his deceased wife Friederike Rosine Moser. In the 1730s, the couple met in Stuttgart to prepare for Communion with Moser's mother, his siblings and their partners and other friends. He referred to the circle as a *Geistes=Gemeinschaft* (Spiritual Community; Moser 1775, 9). There are additional references to socially closed Pietist circles of high civil servants in Stuttgart in the eighteenth century, in which we find married couples and also widows. The minister and superintendent Philipp David Burk and his wife Maria Barbara née Bengel also held a conventicle with friends at their

house (Burk 1771, 26). Aside from charismatic individual leaders, family, kinship, spiritual friendship and similar social status could form the basis for women's participation in small devotional groups. We even find women who led conventicles for women. In the mid-1730s, Deacon Koßmann Friedrich Köstlin held a group for men in Blaubeuren, while his wife organized the women's conventicle (Fritz 1954, 82). Finally, Pastor Philipp Matthäus Hahn (1739–1790) divided his parish's overflowing conventicles by sex and social status. Every other time his so-called *Weiberstunde* (Women's Hour) met, it was run by two women of the parish. Decades later, his daughter Beate Paulus née Hahn led a small conventicle with other village women (Gleixner 2005, 116–118). Although there has been no detailed examination of women's roles in Pietist conventicles thus far, we do find many references to their participation. In spite of the existing records, they have been neglected in the narrative of church history. Since the focus was not on a history of women's active contribution to the Pietist movement, nobody paid attention to the sources.

This situation has led me and a few other historians, above all my co-editor Erika Hebeisen, to document the process of exclusion and reinterpretation between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. It is entitled *Gendering Tradition. Erinnerungskultur und Geschlecht im Pietismus* (Memorial Culture and Gender in Pietism; Gleixner and Hebeisen 2007). The anthology brings together fundamental critiques of the literature on Pietism and points to new ways of treating the old research traditions.

In Germany, scholarly interest in the history of the Christian religion has been influenced less by social history than by church history. One of the reasons for this research design is that German social history has long been highly skeptical of religion as a topic in modern history, and has largely left the field to church historians. This is particularly true of the devotional movement of Pietism.

Let us begin with the two lines of tradition formation: on the one hand, we have scholarly church history and on the other the culture of memory within Pietist groups. While in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the two traditions still pursued different goals, in the nineteenth century they not only became more similar, but also mutually reinforcing in their efforts to organize the past according to new points of view.

I would like to sketch these two lines of tradition formation—church history and group-internal memory—using a few examples and then offer some observations. In recent years, extensive reflections upon the ways in which memory operates have led to more precise descriptions of the active dimensions of this cognitive process. For the issues that interest us here concerning the *gendering* of historiography, it is central that traditions are formed and invented with the objectives of at once stabilizing and legitimizing identity through an interpretation of the group's history (Halbwachs 1992; Scharfe 1982; Assmann 1992; Samuel 1994; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1993; Weigel 2005; Gleixner 2007). Traditions are not static in this process, but subject to change, which occurs when the group's understanding of itself changes. In cultural systems, memory always constitutes a link between the past and the present (Assmann 1992).

Tradition Formation in Pietist Groups

Religious groups, particularly those without a central institution, organize their memorial culture biographically (Kolakowski 1969). All Christian devotional movements have used the genre of biography to strengthen group identity,[1] as has also been the case in Islamic societies (*Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures* 2003, 143–144).

Published accounts by Pietist authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as Pietist family memoirs, whether printed or in manuscript, biographies, funeral sermons or so-called final hours descriptions (*Sterbestundenberichte*) all document Pietist devotion as a movement supported by both sexes. If we examine two examples of influential middle-class Pietist milieus—the academically educated middle class of Württemberg and the Pietist milieu of Basel, Switzerland, we see that both cultivated a politic of memory through biography (Gleixner 2005; Hebeisen 2005). In biographical accounts, the individual life story blended with Pietist ideals. The writers of these texts read their own longings and desires into the past. All Pietist biographies were consciously written for posterity, and were intended to document the salvation history of the Pietist collective (see Köhle-Hezinger 1994; Schlientz 1995; Witt 1995; Gleixner 2001; Hebeisen 2002).

An analysis of this biographical tradition, in combination with letters and autobiographical sources such as diaries and the obligatory autobiographical *Lebenslauf*, reveals Pietism to have been a communication space that encompassed women and men of all ages. Regardless of sex and age, one was

1 That was also the case for the dissenters in England and the Jansenists in France.

supposed to prove one's personal piety in one's own life, and communicate one's experiences with the struggle for true piety to family, friends, and the wider group. Pietism brings together individual devotional practices with collective exchange about them.

While the publication of Pietist periodicals and biographies was expanding in the early nineteenth century, women were increasingly excluded from the history of this Pietist milieu. In Protestant South German Pietism up to the end of the eighteenth century, we find documentation of women's active role in the biographical section of funeral sermons and printed eulogies as well as in other devotional biographies (see Rieger 1730; Moser 1775). In the early nineteenth century, popular Pietist tradition formation began to aim for the greatest possible proximity to Protestant church historiography, which honored the achievements of men exclusively. Nineteenth-century Pietist periodicals in Württemberg do contain conversion accounts by anonymous women, in the narrative tradition of pious example. It was only men, however, usually pastors and Pietist leaders, who warranted a biographical appreciation of their pious life achievements. Overall, the intentions of the Württemberg Pietist authors since the nineteenth century were to create a predominantly male tradition of piety reaching back to the seventeenth century, which established a continuous salvation history and ignored changes within the group. Unlike the Pietist biographies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the reconceptualized historiography of the nineteenth century excluded examples of female piety, with a few exceptions. An exclusive 'father cult' emerged, in which biographies established a collective identity of transhistorical male piety (Gleixner 2005).

The *Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft* (German Christianity Society), founded in Basel, Switzerland in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, was one of the most important Pietist societies in the transregional movement of religious revival. Although by the beginning of the nineteenth century the society already had more female than male members, the history of the Christianity Society was passed on solely in terms of its male protagonists (Hebeisen 2007). Over the course of the nineteenth century, authors no longer took up older biographies documenting women's contributions, and biographies written by women fell into oblivion.

It was not only the medium of biography that constituted group identity through role models; pictorial representation was also a component of in-group memorial culture. Among the Moravian Brethren, a Pietist settlement established by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the 1720s at

Herrnhut in Saxony, women and men were incorporated equally into the pictorial culture of memory. Women held leading positions in the so-called Sisters' Choirs, which were part of the *Gemeinde* or community's organization into gender and age groups (Mettele 2007). Persons of both sexes who had performed pastoral functions in the community had their portraits painted, and hundreds of these pictures hung in the *Gemeinde*'s central rooms. Even the depiction of facial expression, a slight smile, was the same for both sexes. Only with Zinzendorf's death in 1760 were the portraits of women relegated to the community archives. Parallel to this, a process also began in which women were pushed out of mixed-gender councils and replaced by men.

Church History

The well-known and learned Pietist women writers of the seventeenth century did not disappear completely from the tradition formation of church history. Instead, their contribution to Pietism was reinterpreted.

Because of her writings and support for eschatological models of millenarianism and apocatastasis, Johanna Eleonora Petersen (1644–1724) was as controversial as her husband, the theologian Johann Wilhelm Petersen. By selective reading, church historians transformed her into the pious wife of an important Pietist theologian (Albrecht 2007). With the passage of time, her published theological writings on the Christian doctrine of redemption were forgotten. As both a lay theologian and a woman, she was doubly excluded from church history. Her significance was narrowed and reduced through the medium of biography. While she was mentioned in biographical dictionaries of scholars in her own lifetime, the growing consolidation of Lutheran Pietism within the church saw her disappearance as a theologian from church histories written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Church historians held ambivalent views on the scholar Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678) because of her decision to join the religious community founded by Jean de Labadie and thus to give up her life as a learned author. The main adjectives used to characterize the visionary Antoinette Bourignon (1616–1680), born in Lille, France, were 'hysterical' and 'fanatical'. She was also branded a mystical zealot. The fact that both women belonged to an international Pietist network went unmentioned for many decades. Through

their correspondence, both assumed a leading position in transregional Pietist communication. Church historians have read the writings of these two theological authors solely as expressions of personal piety, but not analyzed them as theological and philosophical treatises. As a result, they have denied these women's leading position within the European networks of Pietism (de Baar 2007).

The Pietist Benigna Imperial Countess of Solms-Laubach (1648–1702), who is well known in the literature, was stripped of her political dimension by a deliberately highly selective publication of her writings. Only her Pietist *Lebenslauf*, her "mirror of virtues" (*Tugendspiegel*), and her meditations were published, leaving the impression of an unworldly, model Pietist mother rather than the self-image of a Pietist countess and co-regent that we find reflected in her own account of her political life (Taege-Bizer 2007).

The autobiographical account by the seamstress and wife of the Ansbach castle caretaker Anna Vetter was passed down in the context of radical Pietist tradition formation. Anna Vetter (1630–1703) became known for her visions around 1661, which involved her in such sharp conflicts with the Lutheran hierarchy in Ansbach that they temporarily kept her shackled in her own home. Her *Lebenslauf* shows that the early period of the Pietist movement was one of experimentation with religiosity that deliberately deviated from orthodox guidelines, including mystical currents.

For orthodox critics of Pietism, the autobiography of Anna Vetter, which has been instrumentalized within radical Pietist tradition formation, was used as ammunition to attack Pietist devotion as superstitious. Anna Vetter's attempts to preach from the pulpit were deemed particularly scandalous (Kormann 2007).

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Pietist circles, women's commitment tended to meet with approval, while at the same time opponents of Pietism, usually orthodox Lutheran theologians, used women's public activities to denounce the movement as fanatical, heretical, and indecent. The initially negative view of Pietism within Protestant church history as an 'effeminate' form of devotion was revised in the course of the nineteenth century in a process of disassociation from those currents marked out as mystical, fanatical, and radical. So-called inner-churchly Pietism was integrated into the history of Protestantism.

The Prospective Aspect of Gendering Tradition

By *gendering* the past, we normalize gender roles for the present and future of the time of writing. Cultures of memory always link retrospective, past-oriented aspects of piety with a prospective, future-oriented group identity (Assmann 1992). The gender-constructing effects of tradition represent one of the most important principles of Pietist memorial culture. The controlled biographical portrayal of active masculinity and passive femininity in a hagiographically sheltered past erases women's historical contributions. This is also done in order to fix a gender order valid for the present.

The religious awakening in East Westphalia in the 1820s, which was re-established on older Pietist foundations, shows how gender became one of the key formative elements of the neo-Pietist movement. The very different manner in which deceased pastors and deaconesses were remembered in writing and pictures contributed to the creation of models of masculinity and femininity for East Westphalian Protestantism. Knowledge of the Bible, independence, and vigor belonged to the masculine qualities expected of pastors. Model femininity, as exemplified by deaconesses, was narrowed down to the characteristics of humility, caring, and self-sacrifice. The gender order of the past in turn legitimized male dominance in the present. These gender stereotypes were instruments in power struggles in which men's and women's scope of action was negotiated in the late nineteenth-century Protestant milieu (Jüttemann 2007).

The Organization of the Archive

Unlike the texts of well-known male Pietists, most writings by women remained unedited and unpublished even after their deaths. Reception of these texts within the family, too, meant that it was mainly men's writings that ended up in the accessible archives. Since men's documentation of their piety tended to center on their profession, while women's writings were more family-oriented, from the nineteenth century on women's texts were viewed as irrelevant in a scholarly context. Those writings by women that did formulate public, political, and theological Pietist claims were deliberately excluded from the lines of tradition.

Academic historians often argue that the available sources have little to offer on the subject of women in Pietism. Any Pietist archive reveals this statement to be based solely on a lack of interest (see Klosterberg 2007). To be sure, the gender-specific organization of the archives with their privileging of men makes it difficult to study women's influence, but a segment of the sources clearly refers to women.[2] There is no simple analogy between the amount of material and the degree of women's participation in Pietism.

Since the organization of the archives focused from the outset on office and profession, the material on women is less voluminous, but it exists nonetheless. Women appeared in state and church archives, for example, when they came into conflict with the law, as the records of interrogations of radical Pietist women demonstrate.

Family-centered Pietist archives generally house far more material on women than state and church archives.[3] Since Pietism was a movement of lay persons, the personal papers preserved by families as well as the archives of Pietist institutions (deaconess houses) contain many documents by women: letters, diaries, accounts of their final hours, autobiographies as well as poems and religious reflections. Large numbers of autobiographical texts by women Pietists can be found in the manuscript collections of the German regional libraries (*Landesbibliotheken*).

Conclusion

In the light of the examples cited above, it is clear that the structure of tradition-building within the historiography of Pietism has been created by manipulating or neglecting biographical and autobiographical texts.

At first, the culture of memory cultivated by Pietist groups incorporated both women and men. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, the tradition came to center strongly on men. The evidence of women's active participation was suppressed in the literature, and eventually forgotten. To be sure, famous and influential women retained a presence in histories of

2 The research of Ulrike Witt for the Pietist movement in Halle provides evidence (see Witt 1996).

3 For example the *Archiv für Familienforschung der Werner–Zeller–Stiftung* (Archive for Family Research of the Werner–Zeller–Foundation) in Leonberg/Stuttgart; see Kittel (2007).

Pietism, both those written for internal consumption and those with scholarly pretensions, but the interpretation of their contributions changed. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the focus was solely on their model devotional practices or the fanatical excesses of their piety. Women's active intellectual, theological, and political influence on the movement as a whole was disregarded. The public, influential, and sometimes leading positions of the female protagonists of Pietism fell victim to an individualistic interpretation, in which only their personal piety existed. In this, Pietist historians were merely adapting to more general changes in what nineteenth-century historiography deemed worthy of note.[4] It seems likely that Pietist memorial culture adapted to developments in church history in order to make itself more compatible as part of Protestant memory. On the threshold of modernity, women lost their position in the public culture of memory. With the aid of history, they were transported to a deviant or fictitious private sphere that never existed in the past (Gleixner and Gray 2006). We should note here that any clear distinction between familial, popular, and academic histories of Pietism is largely illusory.

Protestant church history can be understood as a conceptualization of history based on the exclusion of women as agents. Church historians' tradition of writing the history of piety without women is also evident in the *Geschichte des Pietismus*, a recent four-volume survey of Pietist history published between 1993 and 2004, which represents the past thirty years of scholarship (Brecht 1993; Brecht and Deppemann 1995; Gäbler 2000; Lehmann 2004).

A new research perspective taking into account the processes of exclusion and reinterpretation that I have laid out here must illuminate women's active participation in the Pietist reform movement by adopting a social and cultural historical approach. Wide-ranging network analyses, for example the study of correspondence, could demonstrate women's formative role and their involvement in Pietist communication. Overall, the significance of gender for the history of Pietism remains largely unexplored territory.

4 For the shift of historical concepts, see Wunder (1994); Smith (1998); and Epple (2003).

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