INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND AGENCY IN SPIRIT-FILLED CHRISTIANITY

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Power and its transmission lie at the heart of charismatic experience. This global cluster of faiths and movements occupies diverse doctrinal

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and theological orientations, but is connected across distances in time and geography through a shared preoccupation with God’s ongoing interventions in the world. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the signs and wonders that typify these groups; through practices such as talking in tongues, prophecy, healing and intercessional prayer believers carve out space for God’s power to occupy their churches, lives and bodies, sanctifying and transforming them. These more spectacular ritual practices lie alongside a general conception of God as the ultimate source of all creation and change. As members of the congregations in which one of the editors conducted her fieldwork repeatedly reminded her, “without God you can’t really do anything”.

This focus on power as a property of the divine can place believers at odds with academic researchers, whose enquiries are more likely to be motivated by an interest in human action. Chasing power through Pentecostal and charismatic streams, researchers have drawn attention to the accumulation and circulation of financial capital in and through global ‘prosperity’ ministries (e.g. Coleman, 2000), or the manner in which congregations and leaders assert their influence through media production (e.g. Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Meyer, 2006), or how persuasive rhetorical technique can transform an everyday conversation into the stage for a dramatic conversion (e.g. Harding, 1987). The operations of power in religious communities have been considered at length through the study of gender, and it is this that we take for our focus in this special issue of *PentecoStudies*.

When we consider the various roles and meanings attached to men and women in spiritual life, we are confronted once again by the remarkable diversity of these movements. Spirit-filled churches range from the patriarchal yet overwhelmingly feminine spheres of South Korean Pentecostalism (Chong, 2015), to the charismatic women preachers noted in the histories of the twentieth-century Apostolic churches (Powers, 1999) to the muscular, masculine Christianity of North American Promise Keepers (Bartkowski, 2000). The editors approach these movements as anthropologists, a field with its own disciplinary evangelineal performance-based conversion events in the United States, with an interest in how these events allow youth participants to cultivate their own religious and political identities while using performance as a medium of intervention into the American public sphere. Saliha has presented papers at conferences throughout Canada and the United States, and is currently the graduate student representative on the executive committees of both the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion and the American Anthropological Association’s Society for the Anthropology of Religion.

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predispositions regarding power. In recent years, anthropology has generally discussed questions of power in terms of agency, broadly conceived of as the conscious self-direction of the individual, the ability of men and women to act (e.g. see Barnard and Spencer, 2002: 595).

Agency is usually to be found placed more or less explicitly in relation to the key social scientific concept of structure – the social systems within which we, as potential actors, find ourselves. Structure and agency are frequently considered to work as forces in opposition, and stories of the triumph of agency over structure attract a great deal of academic attention. In Spirit-filled churches, for example, we might find that women who are sidelined in ecclesiastical structures can lean on the genres of prophecy to ensure that their voices will be heard (Lawless, 1983). Or we might consider the emotionally taxing work of conservative Christian men, who participate in confessional men’s groups in order to reinforce a masculine discipline and accountability to another, but nevertheless find in these groups a space for intimacy and vulnerability that would in other contexts be understood to be inappropriately feminine (see Bartkowski, 2000: 42–3; see also Elisha, 2015).

Studies of agency therefore provide valuable insights into the creative use that actors make of the social stage. However, we should be aware of the potential pitfalls of this approach, as the focus on opposition between the actor and her wider social context can create its own oppressive structures. Theologians have accused the social sciences in general of cleaving to a rather bleak theology in which the individual is pitted in inevitable conflict against her wider social group (see Robbins, 2006; see also Sahlins, 1996). This problem has found a detailed response in the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005), whose study of women in the conservative mosque movement in Egypt cautions liberal scholars to avoid opposing agency to structure, and equating it with rebellion. It is possible, she notes, that those who devote their lives to a given religious movement may find that their sense of their ability to engage in meaningful, moral action is tied to, rather than suppressed by, the cultivation of pious forms of gender. As they learn to adopt modesty through veiling, and piety through continual and often inconvenient prayer, Mahmood likens her Muslim informants to musical virtuosos, whose very ability to perform well is conditioned and enabled by a disciplined engagement with their field of training.

Mahmood (2001: 203) therefore considers agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create”.

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this reframed formation, the relationship between structure and agency becomes more harmonious; the ability of an individual to act is necessarily embedded in the social structure within which particular forms of action become possible and desirable. Looking again to the examples of agency cited above we can observe women and men finding ways to break out of the structures of patriarchal church organization and traditional male affect, but we might also consider how their actions are conditioned through these structures. The women who take over Pentecostal services to prophesy at length gain this stage for expression through their command of the rhetorical genres and ritual conventions of their wider religious community, and the emotional intimacy sought by conservative Christian men is understood by them to be a necessary aspect of the development of devout masculinity.

The testimony of believers may therefore point towards ways of considering relationships between gender and agency that cleave more closely to their own desires. In a piece on the uniquely Pentecostal hermeneutics through which gender imbalances in Christianity might be redressed, the theologian Janet Everts Powers argues (1999: 331) that “feminism simply cannot offer Pentecostal women the kind of power they value”. For the anthropologist, these words serve both as a useful admonition and a challenge. What is the agency that Pentecostal women, men as well for that matter, reach towards? In her piece, Powers (ibid.) argues that the only true route to empowerment for Pentecostal women lies in their “radical dependence upon God”. In this statement we see the habits of deference alluded to in the opening of this introduction. Spirit-filled Christians emphasize the power that lies beyond their own bodies and the communities and cultures established by human action, describing instead an ongoing reliance on the power that they draw from the presence of an in-dwelling God.

What kinds of actions are driven by this power? The Holy Spirit is understood to be a transforming spirit, and this transformation is largely achieved through communication. We might think of the wonders visited upon members of the fledgling church as reported in the second book of Acts, who find themselves suddenly able to speak the tongues of many languages and deliver words of prophecy that add thousands to their number. Anthropologists entering Pentecostal and charismatic fields today still find themselves surrounded by language, from the widely-circulated testimonies of Pentecostal singers in Brazil (Oosterbaan, 2015) to the prayer requests that shoot back and forth across the Facebook feeds of British Christians (Stewart, 2011), to the Bible verses memorized
and often used as decorative motifs by members of the Swedish Word of Life movement (Coleman, 1996). Broader preoccupations with expression can be seen in religious panics regarding censorship. Christians living in secular societies often express concern about being silenced in the public sphere (e.g. Engelke, 2012; Strhan, 2013), and yet this danger is rarely framed as a concern with self-expression. The silencing of the believer is not to be lamented because of her inalienable right to tell her story but because it is through the telling of her story, her testimony, that God becomes present in the world.

The ability to engage in certain kinds of communication, however, may be contested even within congregations. Although women have enjoyed a prominence in Spirit-filled movements that is unusual in the history of Christianity (Anderson, 2004: 273; Powers, 1999), the access that women have had to key roles of ritual mediation has waxed and waned across time and movements. The most prominent role in most congregations, one that is often synonymous with church leadership, is that of preacher, and doctrinal wrangling around of whether a woman can fulfil this role is a theme visited by many studies (see for e.g. Toulis, 1997; Austin-Broos, 1977; Stewart, 2011). Outside of the church, the domestic sphere may provide an even more significant site of gender difference. Christian teaching concerning gender frequently returns to an essentialist view of masculinity and femininity in which men are encouraged to be assertive and responsible, women to be submissive and gentle, and heterosexual marriage is widely promoted as the ideal stage for these enactments of sanctified personhood. This simple hierarchical model has been found to be more complicated in practice. Interviews with members of patriarchal movements often reveal that believers will tend to work out more mutual arrangements of submission and leadership in their own marriages (e.g. see Aune, 2006; Bartkowski, 2000). This being the case, it may be that the cultural stress on male leadership serves as a kind of communication in itself, a clear statement of order and distinction that differentiates Christians from what is often perceived as the chaos of a fallen world (see Gallagher, 2003: 170).

However they are negotiated in practice, tendencies to publicly cleave to ‘traditional’ gender ideals can present problems for those who find themselves weighed down by circumstances that deviate from the culturally mandated norm. In her work with British Christians, Anna Stewart found single mothers, gay believers, and unmarried men and women occupied roles on the fringes of their congregations (Stewart, 2011, in press; see also Aune, 2008; Foster, 1992). Such members were often
frustrated in their attempts to articulate a theology that more closely echoed their own experience, and these perspectives were frequently viewed by the leaders of congregations, as well as the believers themselves, to be too narrow to appeal to the broad swathes of humanity that they hoped to attract. It is worth noting, however, that the status of outsider is heavily laden with spiritual meaning in these movements, associated with the divine personhood of Jesus himself. This fact did not escape the women Stewart worked with, several of whom repeatedly referenced the ways in which their contributions had been ignored or belittled in traditional churches as they sought new stages for spiritual expression online (see Stewart, in press).

And so we see that there are multiple routes to authority and agency in these movements; the power that Spirit-filled Christians seek does not interact with gender in any predictable way. Established ecclesiastical structures form the condition for developing agency and, under the right conditions, the marginalized voice becomes the unlikely vehicle, the medium for the insights of a God who speaks for the downtrodden. For this special issue, we draw upon the insights of history, psychology, social science and theology to consider how Spirit-filled Christians in a range of settings have sought to locate themselves in relation to the ultimate power of the divine. Seung Jin Son draws on ethnographic encounters in his analysis of how Honduran masculinities are remade by a Pentecostal prosperity gospel through “processual” conversion. Felix Chimera Nyika and Linda Ambrose explore biographies and institutional histories to trace how their respective subjects strategically situated themselves and their work within religious archetypes, narratives and institutions over the course of long and influential careers in ministry. Writing on Pentecostal movements in Norway and Sweden, Åse-Miriam Smidsrød examines the persistence of subtle barriers to female leadership in a comparatively egalitarian context, where women’s participation is justified by a theological mandate to use one’s full potential in serving God.

For Son’s interlocutors in the Honduran city of La Ceiba, many women’s everyday lives are defined by suffering and sacrifice in the face of masculine absence – the result of a Latin American “masculinity paradox” wherein family life centres on “the authoritative but abandoning father”. Son demonstrates through ethnographic, historical and cultural analysis that La Ceiba’s hegemonic masculinity is shaped by both a colonial grand-narrative of Spanish machismo and dominance over feminized Indios, as well as the destructive masculine dominance of organized crime networks. Against this backdrop, men who submit to
the Pentecostal conversion process are reborn as disciplined and gendered subjects, ready to take their societally sanctioned positions at the heads of families. The Pentecostal prosperity gospel thus promises not only the reconstruction of the masculine self, but also the re-situation of that self as an empowered leader within the intimate context of family as well as within the aspirational (and public) context of a reformed social and moral order.

By contrast, in Nyika's case study of Apostle Nellie Chigamba, founder of Malawi's Evangelistic New Exodus Church of God and Mission, Spirit-filled Christianity does not facilitate rebirth into hegemonic gender norms. In fact, for women occupying the cultural space between Chewa traditions and the Christianity of the Church of Central Africa's Nkhoma Synod, Nyika argues that neocharismatic spirituality enables the shattering of social, cultural and institutional barriers to spiritual leadership and autonomy. Far from achieving respectability or fulfilling socially acceptable gender roles through spiritual rehabilitation, Nellie Chigamba's externalized locus of spiritual agency (that is, her understanding of her actions as responses to God's direction) brought her into increasing conflict with an ecclesiastical establishment's complementarian vision of moral order – one in which women's access to authority grew progressively circumscribed. By juxtaposing the trajectory of Chigamba's obstacles and accomplishments against an examination of Chewa culture as well as of the Nkhoma Synod's evolving theology of gender, Nyika demonstrates how Chigamba found in neocharismatic Christianity both a calling and license to defy cultural and institutional bounds.

In Linda Ambrose's article, Pentecostal missionary Alice Belle Garrigus came to occupy a position of power and influence as she built Spirit-filled Christian networks and institutions, much like Nellie Chigamba did in Malawi. Garrigus's work in Newfoundland, Canada, also took place despite prevailing cultural norms. Ambrose's historical and historiographical examination of Garrigus's ministry extends beyond the missionary's individual impact, however. Although Garrigus carried out her work in a strongly masculinized landscape, Ambrose cautions that existing historical approaches either elide women's ministry contributions by focusing on men in formal leadership positions, or over-compensate by examining women's roles in isolation. By way of alternative, Ambrose identifies and contextualizes the roles of some two dozen missionaries, leaders and lay people who belonged to Garrigus's Pentecostal network in Newfoundland; she thus demonstrates not only that ministry involved extensive collaboration between both women and men, but also that
actual power dynamics were dynamic and complex, hierarchies of gender notwithstanding.

While Ambrose and Nyika discuss historical contexts wherein barriers to women’s leadership were grounded in a combination of theological justifications, institutional regulation, and vocal and reactive opposition from their broader publics, Miriam Smidsrød surveys more subtle barriers to female leadership in today’s Norwegian and Swedish Pentecostal movements. Using surveys of contemporary attitudes on gender as well as studies of female Pentecostal ministry workers, Smidsrød examines the roots of such limitations and how they may be remedied. In recent years, female leaders have begun criticizing the persistence of obstacles to female leadership in ministry and lobbying for improved representation. Although Pentecostal women in Norway and Sweden face comparatively few formal challenges to their religious leadership, Pentecostal leadership and institutions remain male-dominated. Smidsrød reveals that within the Norwegian and Swedish Pentecostal discourse, women are encouraged to take authority and leadership only insofar as they fulfil biblical ideals of service and avoid accusations of possessing selfish ambition or disruptive sexuality – the red flags of delegitimation.

In all these discussions of gender and authority, female leadership – whether in the home or in the mission field – is characterized by an external locus of agency. When the men in these articles occupy leadership roles, they do so in a way that aligns with patriarchal hegemonic structures wherein male authority is naturalized. By contrast, women who take up the yoke of leadership are understood as deviating from, or failing to fulfil, societal norms. In Ambrose’s and Nyika’s articles specifically, we encounter women who narrate their lives and accomplishments using framing devices that emphasize their roles as conduits for divine authority, rather than as leaders in their own right. Nyika relates how Nellie Chigamba claimed to receive explicit orders from God in visions, whereas Ambrose relates how Alice Belle Garrigus claimed only to follow God in her travels. In both contexts, attributing all agency and credit to God has the ancillary effect of legitimizing one’s own actions; Ambrose writes that Garrigus’s “seemingly passive stance only served to reinforce her authority”. Even in the context of contemporary Norwegian and Swedish Pentecostal movements, Smidsrød notes that female leaders are obligated to prove the firm theological foundations of their authority in order to secure legitimacy.

While exploring Garrigus’s role in the spread of Pentecostalism throughout Newfoundland, Ambrose raises a particularly important
question about how we recognize or determine the locus of power within religious and cultural structures. For example, how much can one read into Garrigus’s absence from documents charting the institutional history of Pentecostalism in Newfoundland? Can institutional records represent the full scope of an individual’s influence within a movement? Ambrose argues that institutional histories hew to official, rather than practiced, norms and theologies, thus eliding the granularity of people’s experiences of meaning-making as well as the everyday dynamics of their relationships. Institutional narratives are also subject to historical revisionism based in the ecclesiastical or academic trends of the day; Ambrose’s close analysis of archival documents and visual texts thus offers a necessary alternative method, particularly when identifying the influence of non-normative – that is, not conventionally empowered – agents.

This issue foregrounds the complexity of defining or discerning female authority, with authors presenting seemingly intuitive indicators of agency only to reveal their limitations. Smidsrød argues that even a lack of formal or theological objections to female authority does not ensure full representation of women in religious institutions. Nyika acknowledges Chewa women’s important roles within indigenous beliefs and ritual practices, noting how they may also occupy positions of political or spiritual power. However, he then juxtaposes their ritual prominence with observations of the significant material disadvantages that they face in day-to-day life. Son contends that neither the mere presence of women, nor the mere absence of men, necessarily signifies female leadership; despite the prevalence of female-headed households in La Ceiba, such domestic arrangements are the result of male abandonment and thus Son argues that they should not be taken for evidence of agentive female autonomy. In fact, many of his interlocutors chose to frame their circumstances as distinctly involuntary, as suffering rather than empowerment. This analysis bears noting: just as agency cannot be understood solely as opposition to one’s surrounding structures, it also cannot be assumed to be synonymous with autonomy.

Correspondingly, the most unambiguous instances of female leadership may be found in contexts where structures of masculine hegemony seem entirely intact. While the institution of marriage may sometimes occlude female authority, both Nyika’s and Ambrose’s articles demonstrate how some marital partnerships also furnish a structure in which women’s leadership can thrive. Nyika references the Nkhoma Synod’s 1989 decree stipulating that only wives of serving clergy could be national leaders of the Chigwirizano women’s union; while this may underscore
the extent of institutional patriarchy and the systemic invalidation of female autonomy, marriage in itself did not undermine Nellie Chigamba’s authority in ministry. Her complementarian theology compartmentalized her domestic role from her spiritual calling, allowing her to defer to her husband within their marriage while maintaining full authority in missions work. Ambrose describes Alice Belle Garrigus’s missionary network as consisting of both married and unmarried men and women who found common cause through their devotion to Spirit-filled Christianity. Explaining that married women’s contributions extended far beyond supporting their husbands, Ambrose cites one couple called to serve in separate towns: the wife hired a domestic worker to take over her household and maternal duties so that she could “devote her time fully to ministry”.

This issue’s articles do not argue, however, that marriage or patriarchal structures are inherently emancipatory or conducive to female religious authority. They do gesture toward a question that merits further discussion: how do women incorporate existing expectations, institutions and tropes into their self-narration? Drawing on gender historians’ accounts, Ambrose discusses how Maria Woodworth-Etter and Aimee Semple McPherson, two “leading ladies” of the mission field, “leveraged” culturally approved female roles by invoking the personas of a mother and bride, respectively. For those for whom the images of mother or bride were a poor fit, a judiciously chosen persona could nonetheless permit a rare synthesis of personal life and spiritual aspirations, and even garner a degree of exemption from gendered conventions. While Alice Belle Garrigus’s status as an older, single and childless woman precluded her from achieving legitimacy through conventional feminine roles, she ultimately characterized her path as that of a pilgrim or sojourner, walking alongside God; this relatively gender-neutral trope facilitated her mobility while emphasizing her obedience.

Tropes and framing devices thus emerge in these articles as powerful tools for women in religious leadership: they legitimize unconventional paths, bolster credibility and render volatile situations legible within religious worldviews. Nyika explains how Nellie Chigamba claimed that, being a female pastor, she was assumed to be less corrupt than her male counterparts. Tropes of feminine purity and goodness thus worked to reinforce Chigamba’s spiritual authority. A combination of religious and gendered tropes also mediate how conflicts could be narrativized. In a detailed vignette, Nyika relates how Chigamba was imprisoned along with her unweaned infant for refusing to join a women’s league dance performance for Malawi’s dictator; here, the Christian trope of spiritual
courage in the face of imprisonment and possible martyrdom is easily discernible. Nyika’s exploration of Chigamba’s embodied acts of defiance effectively turns what might under normal circumstances be a symbol of vulnerability – a nursing mother in jail – into a validation of Chigamba’s spiritual authenticity and strength.

Nonetheless, the same anecdote highlights the crucial problem that embodied vulnerability can present for female leaders. As often as not, female bodies and characteristics appear in these articles as liabilities in women’s paths to spiritual power and credibility. Although Ambrose shows that some female missionaries succeeded within the “masculine” landscape of Newfoundland, their contemporaries openly questioned their suitability for the task because they perceived women as physically weak and thus out of place in rugged terrain. In Son’s article, it is not women’s physical frailty that limits their authority but rather their social construction as submissive, suffering martyrs. Despite frequently leading households, women’s roles within the Honduran social order are defined by the negative space of male leadership and their own embodied and affective reactions. In her discussion of factors leading to female under-representation in positions of prominence, Smidsrød points out that women lack guidance partly due to “the fear of physical attraction” in cross-gender mentorship. Even within the theoretical egalitarianism of Norwegian and Swedish Pentecostalism, women are shown to be confined to their embodiment: their capacity for spiritual leadership does not override the disruptive potential of their bodies.

A consistent picture of how female embodiment mediates female authority thus does not emerge. Across the context of all four articles, men are called to fulfil their naturalized obligation to lead, whereas women must either have recourse to the legitimizing power of culturally accepted roles, or transcend perceived feminine limitations (e.g. their vulnerable bodies, their threatening sexuality, the unseemliness of their ambition). Otherwise, to be a woman and a spiritual leader in the context of patriarchal religious and cultural institutions is to be perceived as necessarily insufficient and audacious, unworthy and overreaching. To the extent that they were able to take positions of spiritual leadership, the women here described made it abundantly clear that the transfigurative power of one’s spiritual calling took precedence above human convention. Beyond the apparent necessity of a divine complement to one’s femininity, there is no single formulation for how women access, develop and secure acceptance of their spiritual authority. Across wide-ranging historical and geographical territories, negotiations of gender and power
within Spirit-filled Christianity involve complex encounters with surrounding traditions, structures and material conditions.

And so problems of gender and agency, of the capacity of men and women to act, lead us to broader questions. What are the limits of human and divine activity; what forms of action are desirable; and how are such efforts helped or hindered? Such inquiry bears theological as well as anthropological import. The indwelling of the spirit is intended to bring renewal not only to individuals but to the societies they live in; these Christians are intensely interested in change (Robbins, 2006). The papers that follow remind us that gender can prove a fruitful avenue for inquiry into spirit-filled faith, as the programs for societal change pursued within these movements are so frequently concerned with gendered roles and practices.

We see this in the story of the Malawian apostle whose authority both draws upon and defies traditional gender hierarchies, and the account of the diminutive evangelist who worked with the men and women of her church to bring Pentecostalism to the unfamiliar landscape of Newfoundland. Elsewhere, Honduran believers inform an academic interlocutor that the restoration of their nation can only be achieved through the return of fathers to the home, and female pastors in Scandinavia seek to understand why a prevailing cultural egalitarianism has not been reflected in the structures of their churches. Spirit-filled Christians for the most part espouse an essentialist ideology of gender as a fixed property of creation, the first human order instituted by God. In this context, gender may serve as a still point around which the arbitrary, temporary arrangements of nations, cultures and ecclesiastical structures can be critiqued and transformed. Rather than approaching masculinity and femininity as part of a regime imposed through culture upon the individual, the papers in this volume consider the possibility that gender can become a conduit of cultural and institutional reformation.

References


