

***Petit bourgeoisie,
female piety and mystical Pietism on the
South African frontier, 1760–1860***¹

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Abstract

In parallel with the Pietistic movement in Germany with its emphasis on mysticism, piety and spiritual devotion to Christ, feminine mystics in South African frontier communities reflected trends that were analogous to the flowering of mysticism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In addition to the influence of religious literature of German Pietism and devotional literature by Dutch Second Reformation authors, the marginalisation and isolation of feminine believers on the frontier cultivated pietistic tendencies similar to those in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany. It is suggested that lay feminine participation in pietistic spiritual culture forms a link, previously missing, between the Beguines, the Dominican penitent women, other women Pietists elsewhere in Europe and feminine mystics on the South African frontier.

Introduction

“Vide mea sponsa! See, My Bride! How beautiful are My eyes! How comely My mouth! How fiery My heart! How delicate My hands! How swift My feet! And follow Me!” This variation of Solomon’s Song of Songs 4:1ff. by Mechthild of Magdeburg (born c. 1207). in her mystical text *The flowing light of the Godhead*, a depiction of the *unio mystica* as a heavenly marriage between the soul, or Bride, and Christ, the Bridegroom, gave impetus to a mystical religious tradition in Germany with resurging effect in Western spirituality.

A prominent line of historical scholarship considers popular religious movements – like the rise of mysticism in thirteenth-century Europe and the wave of seventeenth-century Pietism in Germany – as part of a continuum,

¹ A word of sincere thanks is due to Fred van Lieburg (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) for making available valuable research materials in support of this essay.

whereby laypeople (the *petit bourgeoisie* or third estate) sought to recover their rightful role in ecclesiastical life.² According to this line of scholarship the Waldensians of the twelfth, Hussites of the fifteenth, and the Anabaptists of the sixteenth centuries all sought reform in ecclesiastical life as a means of reintegration into religious institutions that had become monopolies. Steven Ozment, for example, in his *Mysticism and dissent* (1973), suggests that a tradition of mystical theology inspired Protestants on the radical left wing of Reformational spirituality. To Ozment, Luther's *Theologia Deutsch* (1518) provided an important source for the revival of spiritual enthusiasm during the period 1524 to 1525 in Germany. The aspects of Luther's *Theologia Deutsch* that motivated spiritual radicals were among others a quest for deification and union with God, an elevating anthropology and ascetic exhortation to suffering and denial.³

A reading of feminine ego-texts by Pietist women on the South African frontier poses a number of questions: to what extent do these ego-texts reflect religious cultures of bygone movements? Were these autobiographical texts reflective of religious, political or social grievances? Were the ego-texts of feminine Pietists the products of recurring tendencies among lay feminine church members who lived in isolation and marginalisation from mainstream church life?

Scholarly research by Christina Landman and Karel Schoeman has provided answers to some of these questions. Their research on the religious culture prevalent in the early Cape settlement reveals that besides the orthodox Calvinist influences in Reformed circles at the Cape, non-Calvinist traditions like the Moravians affected the religious views of women in the interior.⁴ Both authors also argue that Calvinism cultivated the tendency among women locally to reject orthodoxy in favour of "a piety of inside experience".⁵ Landman further points out that this "local type of Dutch piety", was "deported out of the Colony" by women believers like Susanna Smit.⁶ Karel Schoeman's research on the religious culture at the Cape during the course of the 18th century also reveals strong lines of German pietistic influence permeating the Cape settlement. Both Landman and Schoeman point towards religious influences forming part of a broader current of

² Cf. Paul A. Russell, *Lay theology in the Reformation. Popular pamphleteers in Southwest Germany 1521–1525*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002, p. 18f.

³ Steven Ozment, *Mysticism and dissent. Religious ideology and social protest in the sixteenth century*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1973, p. 21f.

⁴ E.g. Christina Landman, "Calvinism and South African women: a short historical overview", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, October 2009, 35(2), 89-102 and Karel Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion. Machtelt Smit en die 18de eeuse samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749-1799*, pp. 124–146.

⁵ E.g. Landman, "Calvinism and South African women", p. 6.

⁶ Landman, "Calvinism and South African women", p. 6 *et seq.*

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religious experience of European origin prevailing at the Cape.⁷ This essay investigates three important aspects flowing from Landman's and Schoeman's research: first, the context of Pietism as a recurring phenomenon in Western spirituality, to which women believers at the Cape had recourse – similar to their female counterparts in Holland, Germany, the British Isles and elsewhere in the world; second, the dire circumstances under which women believers at the Cape experienced their faith and which contributed to their mystical religious experiences; third, the factors that gave rise to the flowering of pietistic mysticism on the South African frontier and the most important features of the quest for mystical unification with God in feminine ego-texts – similar to the mystical culture in Germany in the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Pietism, femininity and the third estate in German spirituality

Petit bourgeoisie, femininity and the flowering of mysticism during the medieval epoch

Medieval lay women reflected a distinct “female piety” and exhibited strong currents of contemplative activities in the thirteenth-century church. Mystical visions, spiritual marriages and ecstatic experiences all formed part of the “normal” spiritual life of the Cistercian nuns. The devoted meditations on the life and passion of Christ contributed substantially to the contemplative and visionary spirituality of these lay feminine religious practitioners. Although religious quietism was a common occurrence among mystical devotees, the rise of reactionary religious tendencies transformed the ecstatic experiences of these contemplative women into a calling to redeem society and the church. St. Catherine of Sienna (1347–1380) for example was a mystic who led an active life, advising popes and princes, and caring for the poor.⁸ At the age of six she believed that she had had a vision of Jesus and at seven she is said to have promised herself to him in virginity.⁹ Catherine led a life of meditation, prayer, ecstatic vision, and of so great a devotion to Jesus, whose bride she believed herself to be, that she felt that, spiritually, she had received the stigmata of his wounds.¹⁰

Early in the fourteenth century there was a notable mystical movement in Germany which had Dominicans among its outstanding leaders and which persisted into the latter part of the fourteenth century in the *Theologia*

⁷ Cf. Schoeman, *Dogter van Sion*, pp. 124–146.

⁸ Russell, 2002, p. 187.

⁹ Kenneth S. Latourette, *A history of Christianity*. Eyre & Spottiswoode: London, 1955, pp. 643–644.

¹⁰ Latourette, 1955, pp. 643–644.

Germanica.¹¹ The Cistercian foundation for women at Helfa, near Eisleben, in Saxony, was a leading school of mysticism. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) at the tender age of three began to see visions and increasingly felt the light of God enveloping her soul. She recorded her mystical visions – usually in the form of allegories – and experiences in textual forms and spoke of the Antichrist and the end of the world. Mechthild, a beguine of Magdeburg (1217–1282), a Dominican tertiary, in her ego-text *The flowing light of the Godhead*, described her conversion as a girl of twelve and how she was “greeted by the Holy Spirit”.¹² However, the nature and contents of individual religiously inspired ego-texts to a large measure were shaped by the personality and emotional life of the authors concerned. In some instances texts were more contemplative, whilst in others the quest for piety predominated.

The century and a half between 1350 and 1500 witnessed the increasing prominence of feminine believers in the church. Women also appeared more strikingly as leaders and exemplars of the faith. More than previously, women were coming to the fore as mystics and saints – a process that was to continue in the church. Most of these women mystics were laypeople and could be regarded as members of the *petit bourgeoisie*. Emphasising the fundamental role of feminine believers in the mystical movement of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Herbert Grundmann argued that the theological system and the speculative teaching of the German mystics are precisely not the foundation, point of departure and source, but rather the intellectual justification and an attempt at a theoretical ordering and a theological mastering of that religious experience that first arose in the mystical quest of the religious women’s movement.¹³

Petit bourgeois pietistic religious experiences were usually expressed in diaries, deathbed accounts, poems, self-composed hymns and letters of a highly personal nature, and these autobiographical ego-documents produced the purest manifestations of individualistic mystical spirituality. In German religious literature from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, mystical ego-texts were particularly prevalent among feminine spirituals.¹⁴ The feeling of self-empowerment emanating from the ego-texts of feminine mystics inspired many others to commit their mystical experiences to writing. From the thirteenth century the flowering of mysticism in the German cloisters initiated a

¹¹ Latourette, 1955, p. 541.

¹² Cf. Mahrholz, 1919, p. 14. Amy Hollywood, *The soul as virgin wife*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995, p. 82, emphasises the non-quietistic structure of Mechthild’s mysticism.

¹³ H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*. University of Notre Dame Press: London and Notre Dame, 1961, pp. 430–431.

¹⁴ Mahrholz, 1919, pp. 10–15.

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culture of religious ego-texts unsurpassed in their intensity of feminine spirituality. These feminine mystical ego-texts had in common reflections of the authors on their interior spiritual life, meditative inclinations and the overwhelming longing for the unitive life with God. Individualistic mysticism and the accompanying feeling of self-empowerment experienced by these feminine mystics engendered emotions of independence from ecclesiastical instruments of salvation. In lay circles in Germany, medieval mysticism established new and independent spiritual relationships between the individual and God and the focal point of this new "lay spirituality" was the written texts of individual experiences on the mystical quest for unification with the Absolute.

In medieval German spirituality, male mystics also had large followings of women with mystical inclinations. Henry Suso (1295 or 1300–1365), a disciple of John ("Meister") Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1327), the chief founder of fourteenth-century German Dominican mysticism and a contemporary of Johann Tauler (c. 1300–1361), maintained extensive correspondence with mystically inclined women. His correspondents included the Countess of Falkenstein, Dominican women at Klingenthal, Margaretha from Goldenen Reich and the nuns at Unterlinden and Tolmar. The corpus of Suso's voluminous correspondence with feminine mystics is indicative of the impact of mystical experiential spirituality on women at that time.¹⁵ Suso's correspondents reflected high levels of spiritual ego-experiences, visionary revelations and the impact of spiritual experiences on the mystical quest. In some instances pious feminine mystics deepened their spiritual self-consciousness by means of self-inflicted chastisement, mortification of the body and spiritual reflections on the self. The spiritual purification of these women mystics was mostly accompanied by ecstatic emotional experiences. The spiritual experiences of these German women sparked off a new religious culture. This new culture gave rise to psychological descriptions reflective of the intimate mystical life experiences of individual feminine Christians. Margareta Ebner (born c. 1291), a resident at the Dominican cloister of Medingen, recorded her psychological experiences of a pious emotional nature, the mystical views of her spiritual companion Henry of Nordlingen and other experiences on her mystical quest. Margaret Ebner, heavily influenced by St. Bernard of Clairvaux's commentaries on the Song of Songs,¹⁶ is a typical example of the subjective self-observations prevalent among the *petit bourgeoisie* during the medieval epoch.¹⁷

¹⁵ Mahrholz, 1919, pp. 15–17.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Schmidt & L.P. Hindsley, "Introduction," in Margaret Ebner, Major works. Paulist Press: New York, 1993, p. 45f.

¹⁷ The influence of St. Bernard of Clairvaux on Margaret's spiritual life – similar to other feminine mystics of the time – was decisive: "The theme of Bernard's exposition on the

The petit bourgeoisie and the rise of Pietism in the seventeenth century

Ecclesiastical, political, social and economic upheavals initiated a resurgence of the *petit bourgeois* spiritual ethos in Germany and other European countries in the seventeenth century. In Germany, the Reformational emphasis on Lutheran congregational life was gradually undermined by the increasing isolation and marginalisation of the laypeople and political intervention by political authorities in ecclesiastical affairs. Members of the third estate were gradually excluded from active participation in ecclesiastical life. As a result laypeople became increasingly opposed to the dominance of preachers in the church and to their subservient positions in the state. The opposition to ecclesiastical and political subjection and isolation soon involved the whole ecclesiastical domain and as the ambition of ecclesiastical office-bearers increased, discord and avarice became common occurrences in Protestant churches.¹⁸ The increase in intellectualist preaching, lack of attending to the spiritual well-being of church members and the exclusion of the *petit bourgeoisie* from active participation in ecclesiastical life produced a revival of spiritual internalisation in matters of faith. The shift in spiritual focus revitalised individualism in theology, experientialism in spiritual matters and mysticism in the practice of faith among members of the third estate. Individualism, experientialism and mysticism, therefore, formed the main components of the rising tide of Pietism in Germany. Leading figures among the Pietists like Philip Jacob Spener (1635–1705), August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) and Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649–1727) were descended from families of the *petit bourgeoisie* and gave expression to the basic trends of pietistic spirituality.

Broadly defined, Pietism was a religiously-inspired social and political phenomenon associated with the emergence and development of the spiritual ethos of the *petit bourgeoisie*. The spiritual culture of the *petit bourgeoisie* emerged from the resistance and marginalisation of the third estate (laypeople) in the political and ecclesiastical domains in medieval Germany.¹⁹ In thirteenth-century Germany the rise of the religious culture of the *petit bourgeoisie* carried strong elements of mysticism in its wake. In the seventeenth century, diverse social, economic and political factors produced the flowering of similar trends and the rise of a strong culture of *petit*

Song of Songs, that in Christ, the Word, the incarnate God was revealed and because of this incarnation the divine Son of God could be experienced, opened up for Margaret a broader horizon of understanding of her own inner experiences, since Bernard spoke not as a speculative thinker, but from experience, whether based on his own or that of others" (Schmidt & Hindley, 1993, p. 46).

¹⁸ Mahrholz, 1919, p. 118f.

¹⁹ Cf. Werner Mahrholz, *Deutsche Selbstenkenntnisse*. Furche Verlag: Berlin, 1919, pp. 1–7.

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bourgeois mystical spirituality in Europe. The accompanying religious mentality of the third estate was similarly mainly individualistic and mystical in nature.²⁰

Pietistic views on life had a decisive effect on the spiritual culture of the *petit bourgeoisie*. It was also an energetic ideological reaction to the mechanisation and intellectualisation of the Protestant Church and a return to the medieval German mysticism of John Eckhart (and John Tauler (died 1361)).²¹ The popular Pietist work of the German M. Christian Scriver (1629–1693) *Seelen Schatz* (Treasure of the soul) – also circulating at the Cape – for example, quoted Tauler's mystical views on humility and meeting God in the ground of the heart.²² The Dutch Reformed Pietist Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), in his *Redelijke godsdienst* (The Christian's reasonable service (1700)), arguably the most read work on Dutch Pietism at the Cape, stated that he reckoned medieval mystical authors like John Tauler and Thomas à Kempis not to be among those Roman Catholic authors whose work smacked of paganism.²³

From a social perspective, Pietism was the first manifestation of the *petit bourgeois* self-consciousness in the modern epoch: it placed the individual in a direct and immediate relationship with God and also reflected a strong feeling of spiritual self-empowerment. This self-consciousness of the *petit bourgeoisie* culminated in strong spiritual opposition to the ecclesiastical and political subjection of the laypeople. The ensuing reactionary nature of Pietism had profound implications for all spheres of life: in church life laypeople took an active share in religious matters; the spiritual needs of congregational members were regarded as priorities; private religious gatherings of church members became common practice; the catechism of children received more attention; the emotional and spiritual needs of individuals were addressed from the pulpit and the dominant style of preaching in Protestant churches shifted from the polemical and dogmatical to the emotional and experiential. The feminine self-consciousness emanating from reactionary Pietism on the frontier reflected similar traits to those in Europe. Mirjam de Baar and Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen in their

²⁰ Mahrholz, 1919, pp. 10–14.

²¹ Cf. Mahrholz, 1919, pp. 1–7.

²² M. Christian Scriver, *Seelen-Schatz*. Vol. 4, Christoph Deidel: Magdeburg, 1723, pp. 25.54; 419.65; 168.3 & 286.26.

²³ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's reasonable service*. Vol. 2, Reformation Heritage Books: Grand Rapids [1700] 1999, pp. 640–641. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The rise of evangelical Pietism*. E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1971, p. 153, states that Brakel's *The Christian's reasonable Service*, "preserved the balance between the mystical and the ethical elements in Christianity which is so characteristic of the great Pietists in the Reformed communion."

historical researches have pointed to similar feminine reactions in seventeenth century Holland.²⁴

In 1704, during the flowering of Pietism in Germany, Johan Feustking, inspired by antifeminist sentiments, lamented the fact that Pietism in the Lutheran congregations was mainly the legacy of feminine Pietist religious practices: "Wodurch ist der unselige Pietismus in unserer Kirchen entstanden/als durch die Bezeugungen/Raptus und Enthusiasmus der Weiblichen/der von Asseburgin und Melauin? Wodurch hat er seinen Fortgang gewonnen/als durch die begeisterten Jungfrauen zy Erfurt/Quedlinburg und Halberstadt? Und wodurch wird er noch anietzo unterhalten/den durch allerhand verdachte Bücher der Weiber / als Catharina Genevensis, der Guionicae?" (referring to the mystics Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) and Jeanne-Marie de Guyon (1648–1717)).²⁵

The Pietist movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced an interiorisation of moral character and an emphasis on increased piety, the emancipation of the human spirit from worldly subjection, spiritual surrender to Jesus Christ and unification of the human spirit with God. The pietistic spirit reflected moods oscillating between moralism, enthusiastic emotional energy, the quest for mystical experientialism and commitment to the holy life. In varying degrees these aspects prepared the way for committing feminine autobiographical ego-experiences to writing in pietistic accounts of experiential faith. In these respects Pietism was the resurgence of the individualistic mysticism of thirteenth-century German ego-culture, the main difference being the explicit Protestant basis of the new mystical ethos of the seventeenth century.²⁶

The basic tenets of Pietism were contained in the works of Lutheran Pietists. Johann Arndt (1555–1621), in his *Ware Christendom* (True Chris-

²⁴ Cf. Mirjam de Baar, "'t En is geen vrouwenwerck te spreken in de kerk'. Vrouwen en religie in de zeventiende-eeuwse Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden," in *Dinamiek. Tijdschrift voor vrouwengeschiedenis*, 1988, Vol. 5, pp. 11–25; idem, "Van kerk naar sekte: Sara Nevius, Grietje van Dijk en Anna Maria van Schurman", *De zeventiende eeuw*, 1991, Vol. 7, pp. 159–170; idem, "'Let your women keep silence in the churches'. How women in the Dutch Reformed Church evaded Paul's admonition, 1650–1700", in *Women in the church*, W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1990, pp. 389–401; Annelies de Jeu, "Sara Nevius. Lessen voor het vrome leven", in Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al., *Met en zonder lauwerkrans. Schrijvende vrouwen uit de vroegmoderne tijd 1550–1850: van Anna Bijns tot Elise van Calcar: teksten met inleiding en commentaar*. Amsterdam University: Amsterdam 1997, pp. 324–329.

²⁵ J.H. Feustking, *Feustkingius gynaeceum haeretico fanaticum, oder Historie und Beschreibung der falschen Prophetinnen, Quäkerinnen, Schwärmerinnen, und andere sectarischen und begeisterten Weibes-Personen durch welche die Kirche Gottes verunruhiget worden; sambt einen Vorbericht und Anhang, entgegen denen adeptis Godofredi Arnoldi*. Iudicium Verlag: München., [1704] 1998, 117.

²⁶ Werner Mahrholz, *Der Deutsche Pietismus. Eine Auswahl von Zeugnissen, Urkunden und Bekenntnissen aus dem 17., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. Furche Verlag: Berlin, 1921, pp. 5–10.

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tianity) gave direction to the Pietist movement. However, it was Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) who in 1675 published the Pietist programme in his *Pia desideria* (Heartfelt desires for a God-pleasing improvement of the true Protestant Church). Spener's Pietism was aimed at the subjective appropriation of the believer's redemption rather than God's objective saving act in the incarnation. The order of salvation in the redemption proceeds through election (*electio*), illumination (*illuminatio*), conversion (*conversio*), regeneration (*regeneratio*), justification (*justificatio*), mystical unification with Christ (*unio mystica*), renovation (*renovatio*), and the preservation to the end (*conservatio*) to be glorified with the Son (*glorificatio*). These elements of the *ordo salutis* were stressed in varying degrees by Pietist authors from the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Many of these works circulated freely in the Lutheran congregation and among Lutheran families at the Cape: among others were Gottfried Arnold's *Unparteiischen Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie, Vom Anfang des Neuen Testaments bisz auf das Jahr Christi 1688* (A non-partisan history of the church and heresy, from the beginnings to 1688) (1699–1700); Johann Albrecht Bengel's (1687–1752) *Erklärte Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi* (Exposed revelation of John or rather Jesus Christ) (1746); Carl Andreas Redel's *Geistliches neuvermehrtes Altenburgisches Gesang und Gebeth-Buch* (Spiritual newly expanded Altenburg hymn and prayer book) (1765); the *Gesangbuch zum gottesdienstlichen gebrauch in den königlich Preussischen Länder* (The hymnbook for divine service used in the Prussian countries) (1822) and the *Arnstädtsches Gesangbuch zur beförderung der öffentlichen und häuslichen Erbauung* (Hymn book of Arnstadt for the promotion of public and domestic spiritual upliftment)(1811).

Petit bourgeoisie, pietism and mysticism on the South African frontier

Petit bourgeoisie and the devotional literature of the Trekboer movement

The exclusion of the lay people from, and their marginalisation in, the ecclesiastical sphere at the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also shifted the religious focus from social life to individualism and higher levels of spiritual self-consciousness, experiential theology and mystical spirituality. The relative isolation and marginalisation of the *petit bourgeoisie* on the frontier produced a similar vibrant and active culture of religious mysticism and Pietism.

Descendants of Dutch and German families at the Cape had recourse to the works of pietistic authors in Europe, England and Scotland. In the Netherlands the devotional literature produced by the Second Reformation writers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became the standard

spiritual texts of most families of Dutch descent. Hymn books, prayer books and exegetical literature by German Pietists also circulated among members of the Lutheran Church at the Cape.

Within a century after the Dutch settlement at the Cape, exponents of the Dutch Second Reformation and German pietistic spirituality had moved with their families and flocks far into the interior. By the year 1750, Pietist and Dutch Second Reformation-inclined families had settled as far as the Roggeveld and by 1780 had moved beyond the Sneeuberg. Karel Schoeman writes that the first farm in the Roggeveld, Uitkyk at the Sneeukrans, was awarded in 1746; in 1750 the farm Akkerendam was awarded in the Hantam, where Calvinia was later established; and in 1757 the first farm was awarded in the Nuweveld.²⁷ Politically and ecclesiastically these "Trekboers" were isolated from the mainstream religious and political institutions at the Cape; they played no active part in the ecclesiastical and political life at the time and for all practical purposes constituted a marginalised segment of the population. The only road from the Bokkeveld to the Waveren Valley was a rough track, an extremely dangerous route which crossed and re-crossed the river frequently before rising steeply at the far end to cross the neck at the head of the valley.²⁸

John Barrow, on his travels into the interior of South Africa in 1797 and 1798, captured the spirit of religious piety and the religious devotedness of the frontier families and the popularity of Willem Sluiter's pietistic hymn book among the isolated Boers on the frontier. In a vivid description of their pietistic religious life, Barrow wrote that a

book of any kind is rarely seen in any of the farmer's houses, except the Bible and *William Sluiter's Gezangen*, or songs out of the Bible done into verse by the Stermehold and Hopkins of Holland. They affect to be very religious, and carry at least the devotion of religion as far as most zealous bigots. They never sit down to table without a long grace before meat pronounced with an audible voice by the youngest of the family, and every morning before day-light one of William Sluiter's *Gezangen* is drawled out in full chorus by an assemblage of the whole family. In their attendance at church they are scrupulously exact, though the performance of this duty costs many of them a journey of several days. Those who live at the distance of a

²⁷ Karel Schoeman, *'n Duitser aan die Kaap 1724-1765*. Protea Boekhuis: Pretoria 2004, p. 328.

²⁸ Jose Burman, "Michell's pass," in *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*. Vol. 7, Nasou: Cape Town, 1972, p. 386.

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fortnight or three weeks from the nearest church generally go with their families once a year".²⁹

The traveller W. von Meyer, during his travels to the Cape frontier in the first forty years of the nineteenth century, remarked that nowhere had he encountered people as religious as the Dutch Boers, and that they were much inclined to Pietism.³⁰ Von Meyer's observations were shared by Chase who, commenting upon the religious character of the Boers, wrote: "With much truth we may describe the inhabitants of the Cape Colony at large as a serious and religious people, and especially with reference to that portion forming the most considerable part of the Community, the Dutch Boers, who are deeply imbued with strong sentiments of genuine piety, and are consistent members of the Christian Church".³¹

The Trekboers suffered extreme hardships during their trek into the interior. Because of the social, political and economic instability on the Cape frontier, the Trekboers were subjected to extreme hardship and social upheaval. The feminine members of the movement were arguably subjected to even harsher conditions of isolation and marginalisation. Trekboer women were often entrusted with the care of families with ten or more children as well as the spiritual well-being of the younger members of the family. They often had to take an active part in military skirmishes with hostile parties and assist when attacked by indigenous groups. Women assisted with farming operations and even among the more wealthy farmers it was not exceptional to find women actively sowing and harvesting. Mentzel sketches the involvement of entire *petit bourgeoisie* families in farming activities:

These are the chief characteristics of the third class of farmer. They are both master and *knecht* (labourer). They are always busy. At sowing time they are their own sowers. In the harvest season their own binders. They sow the garden seeds themselves on suitable beds and on transplanting divide the rows by means of lines. Their wives and grown-up children or the female slaves put the plants into the soil ... After the harvest

²⁹ John Barrow, *Travels into the interior of Southern Africa*. Vol. 1, An account of travels into the interior of Southern Africa, in the years 1777 and 1778. A. Strahan: London, 1801, pp. 82-83.

³⁰ W. von Meyer, *Reisen in Süd-Afrika während der Jahre 1840 und 1841. Beschreibung des jetzigen Zustandes der Colonie des Vorgebirges der Guten-Hoffnung*. J.P. Eric: Hamburg, 1843, p. 135.

³¹ J.C. Chase, *The Cape of Good Hope and the Eastern Province of Algoa Bay*. Pelham Richardson: London, 1843, p. 135.

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they are present at the threshing of the grain, gather the threshed grain, and measure it out straightaway³²

Life on the frontier was demanding and dangerous. From the middle of the eighteenth century the Trekboer quest to the interior was halted because of attacks by hostile groups of Khoi and San tribes. By 1770 virtually the whole Cape frontier was in a state of military turmoil. In a letter of 6 November 1776 the Landdrost of Stellenbosch reported to Governor Tulbagh on the military campaigns by and against Khoi and San groups on the borders of the colony. Reporting on the extent of the military operations he wrote that

according to communications received from the field corporals stationed beyond Salt River, behind the Coup, in the Bokkeveld, beyond the Doorn River, in the Nieuweveld, behind the Roggevelds Berg, and behind the Roggeveld beyond Salt River – the Bosjesmans Hottentots have again carried off some herds of cattle – even killed with arrows, in said Nieuweveld, a slave of the farmer Barend Lubbe, who was attending the sheep, was also murdered, another shepherd, a Hottentot, of the farmer Cornelis van Wyk, when attending the flock; while, at the same time, behind the Roggeveld, beyond Salt River, a hundred sheep of the farmer Willem van Zyl, being carried off by that tribe, and the herd also killed.³³

Katzen states that “war was therefore endemic on the frontier and was almost continuous between 1779 and 1812 despite the conventional division into four frontier wars”.³⁴ In November 1835, in a statement in D. Strydom’s handwritten devotional book, Beatrix G. Nel records the traumatic experiences of a feminine believer on the Eastern frontier during one of the frontier wars. During an attack their homestead was set alight and her husband killed. After she had rescued her children, she managed to drag the body of her husband through the flames. After this tragic event she and her children were left in extreme poverty for almost a decade.³⁵

³² O.F. Mentzel, *A complete and authentic geographic and topographic description of the Cape of Good Hope*. Van Riebeeck Society: Cape Town, 1921, pp. 105–106.

³³ Donald Moodie, *The record; or a series of official papers relative to the conditions and treatment of the native tribes of South Africa, Part 3. 1769–1795, No. 1. 1769–1774*. A.S. Robertson: Cape Town, 1838, p. 8.

³⁴ M.F. Katzen, “Frontier wars,” in *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*. Vol. 5, Nasou: Cape Town, 1972, pp. 55–61.

³⁵ Beatrix G. Nel, *Devotional book*, c. 1835. Unpublished copy in the collection of A.W.G. Raath, Brandfort, unpaginated.

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Feminine spiritual ego-texts on the frontier

Few of the feminine Pietists on the South African frontier took an active part in social and religious matters in the ecclesiastical circles to which they had access, although Machtelt Smit and Louisa Thom were exceptions who contributed actively to missionary projects at the Cape, and after the British annexation of Natal, the Voortrekker feminine Pietist, Susanna Smit, played an active role in the Boer resistance to the British occupation. Life on the frontier of the Cape interior, however, did not allow feminine pioneers the luxury of involving themselves extensively in ecclesiastical and political affairs. Although Pietist frontier pioneers were, theoretically speaking, British subjects of the Cape government and members of the Dutch Reformed Church, in practice feminine members of pioneering settlements (like their male counterparts) found themselves largely isolated in family groups beyond the effective legal jurisdiction of British political supremacy and outside the sphere of ecclesiastical ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape. Van der Merwe states that most of the Boer pioneers (Trekboers) had to provide for their own religious needs and to "maintain their own sense of spirituality" because the church "could not care for its dispersed flocks in the interior".³⁶

The pietistic religious culture of bridal mysticism, piety, contemplation and meditation was strengthened and amplified by the experiential and mystical works of the Dutch Second Reformation³⁷ divines – from its earliest exponents Jean Taffin (1528–1602) and Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) to Alexander Comrie (1706–1774) and Theodorus van der Groe (1705–1784). Bridal imagery became the standard metaphorical symbols for describing the unification of the virtuous soul with Christ: Willem Teellinck's (1579–1629) *Het geestelijk sieraad van Christus' bruilofskinderen, of de praktijk van het h. avondmaal* (The spiritual ornament of Christ's children of the bridal chamber, or the use of the holy supper) (reprinted eleven times from 1620–

³⁶ P.J. van der Merwe, *Die trekboer in die geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie (1657-1842)*. Nasionale Pers: Kaapstad, 1938, p. 249: "Ongetwyfeld het die persoonlike en daaglikse gebruik van die Bybel deur die boere self meer daartoe bygedra om hul godsdienssin aan te wakker en in stand te hou as die Kerk, wat jare lank min aan sy verspreide kudde in die binneland kon doen."

³⁷ Historically the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*) coincides and largely runs concurrent with both English Puritanism in the British Isles and German Pietism. Each of these movements, says Elshout, had a common objective to make the wondrous truths of Scripture, rediscovered in the Reformation, a vibrant reality in the hearts and lives of ministers and parishioners alike, and thus to strive for a life of genuine piety issuing forth from a life of intimate fellowship with God. These three movements are therefore at times placed under one umbrella of European Pietism (Bartel Elshout, *The pastoral and practical theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*. Reformation Heritage Books: Grand Rapids, 1997, pp. 7–8).

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1665); Cornelius Ens (died 1742), *De wonderen van de gemeynschap tusschen Christus en sijn volk, onder de sinne-beeldden van bruydegom en bruyd* (The wonders of the community of Christ and his people, described in the symbols of bridegroom and bride) (1695) and Mattheus Gargon (1661–1728), *Zangswyze uitbreiding over 't Hooglied van Salomo* (Hymnal exposition of Solomon's Song of Songs) (1697) are typical examples of the Dutch pietistic works in Holland and at the Cape. However, the most important source of their religious practice was the Bible in large folio format. In 1820 Mary Moffat, wife of the famous missionary, wrote to her parents from Beaufort West: "I think I never saw so many fine-looking Bibles in my life as since I came to Africa. They (the Boers) seem to have a particular pride in them".³⁸ Women believers in Holland and at the Cape also took particular interest in specific Bible books like Solomon's Song of Songs and texts rich in mystical bridal metaphors.

The ego-focus in the wake of mystical experiential spirituality on the frontier also carried with it the desire for piety, moralism and interiorisation of the religious life of individuals. This deepening and individualisation of religious life manifested in autobiographical ego-texts with undertones of mystical experiential spirituality.³⁹

Under the stressful conditions on the frontier, and influenced by German Pietism and the pietistic tendencies of the Dutch Second Reformation religious culture in the interior, the feminine members of the *petit bourgeoisie* recorded their deepest and most sincere religious sentiments in private ego-texts – similar to the medieval feminine mystics and the Pietist women in Europe. These ego-texts were cast in the form of biographical notes (Anna Steenkamp, born Retief, baptised 1797) and Hester Venter (baptised 1750), self-composed hymns (Hendrina Cecilia Kruger, born 1744), poems (Beatrix Nel born c. 1750), Dorothea Goosen (baptised 1775) and Susanna Smit (1799–1863), and letters expressing pietistic sentiments (Susanna Smit).⁴⁰

Almost half a century later, during the Great Trek into the interior, mystical Pietism was still the predominant religious culture among the frontier farmers in their quest to settle outside the area of British supremacy and to move beyond the sphere of influence of the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape. The lingering influence of Pietism in Germany and at the Cape appears

³⁸ Robert & Mary Moffat, *The lives of Robert and Mary Moffat*. T. Fischer Unwin: London, 1885, p. 74.

³⁹ Mahrholz, 1919, pp. 10–15.

⁴⁰ Karel Schoeman "Vroeë geskifte deur Suid-Afrikaanse vroue, 1749–1865" in *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal*. 1997, Vol. 36, 1997, (May), pp. 24–47, contended that this corpus of writings constitutes the beginnings of written South African literature, and "deserves closer attention both on literary and socio-cultural grounds" (p. 24).

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from the popularity in both countries of hymns books like the *Geistlicher Liederschatz. Sammlung der vorzüglichsten geistlichen Lieder für Kirche, Schule und Haus und alle Lebensverhältnisse* (Spiritual treasury of songs. A collection of the most outstanding spiritual songs for church, school and home and all relationships of life) (1840) in which hymns and spiritual songs of a host of Pietist authors were included: among others Gottfried Arnold (1665–1714), Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), Johann Franck (1618–1677), August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), Paul Gerhardt (1606/1607–1676), Johann Heermann (1585–1647), Valerius Herberger (1562–1627), Friedrich Adolph Lampe (1683–1729), Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), Philipp Nicolae (1700–1760), Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760).

In his hymn *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*⁴¹ (Oh Morning Star, how fair and bright), Philipp Nicolae (1556–1608)⁴², for example, used typical mystical bridal metaphors:

“Oh Morning Star, how fair and bright
Thou beamest forth in truth and light!
Oh sovereign meek and lowly!
Sweet Root of Jesse, David’s Son,
My King and Bridegroom, Thou hast won
My heart to love Thee solely!
Lovely art Thou, fair and glorious,
All victorious,
Rich in blessing,
Rule and might o’er all possessing” (verse 1).

And

“Then touch the chords of harp and lute,
Let no sweet music now be mute,
But joyously resounding,
Tell of the Marriage-feast, the Bride,
The heavenly Bridegroom at her side,
'Mid love and joy abounding;
Shout for triumph, loudly sing ye,

⁴¹ This hymn is based on Revelations 22:16 & 17 (Lutheran Bible): “Ich bin die Wurtzel des Geschlechts Davids, ein heller Morgenstern”.

⁴² He was court preacher to Count Waldeck in Wildungen (1587); doctor in theology at Wittenberg (1594); in 1601 pastor at St. Catherine in Hamburg. He published the influential *Freudenspiegel des ewigen Lebens* (1599 and 1604), from which four hymns were published in the Lutheran hymn book.

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Praises bring ye,
Fall before Him,
King of kings, let all adore Him!" (verse 6).⁴³

Although male believers of Protestant extraction also reflected the influence of mysticism and Pietism – like Francois Retief (the brother of Voortrekker Piet Retief) and Sarel Cilliers (compiler of the vow prior the battle of Blood River) – very few ego-texts by pietistic men are extant. Religious ego-texts of women on the frontier are more frequent and the religious ego-experiences of feminine mystics are more fully documented than those of male believers. These religious mystical ego-texts reflect patterns of spiritual involvement in mystical-pietistic religious practices: conversion (self-illumination), purification of the self through spiritual detachment and self-mortification, self-illumination and meditative and contemplative practices producing ecstatic visions and voices, experiences of mystic joy, the personal growth in self-recollection and spiritual introversion (accompanied by experiences of ecstasies, rapture, psychic fatigue following high levels of spiritual consciousness, and of the unitive life with God in Christ (the Bridegroom of the pious human spirit (the bride)).

Jesus-centred bridal mysticism formed the basis of most of these feminine mystical texts. The Trekboer women Hester Venter and Hendrina Cecilia Kruger both reflect features of the erotic longing to be unified with Christ. In a self-composed hymn Hester Venter expressed her longing for Jesus:

“Jesus my love! take my hand,
Jesus my love! direct my will,
Jesus my love! reside in me,
Jesus my love! in you I reside gladly,
Jesus my love! on your narrow way
I cannot fall,
But strongly go into battle.”⁴⁴

⁴³ “Wie schön leuchtet uns der Morgenstern, voll Gnad’und Wahrheit von dem Herrn, die süsse Wurtzel Jesse! Du, Davids Sohn aus Jakobs Stamm, mein König und mein Bräutigam, hast mir mein Hertz besessen. Lieblich, freundlich, schön und herrlich, gross und ehrlich, reich von Gaben, hoch und sehr prächtig erhaben” (Verse 1). “Singt unserm Gott recht oft und viel, und last andächtig Saitenspiel ganz freudenreich erschallen dem allerliebsten Jesulein, dem wunderschönen Braut’gam mein zu Ehren und Gefallen. Singet, springet, jubiliret, triumphiret, dankt dem Herren! Gross ist der König der Ehren” (verse 6). In the *Geistlicher Liederschatz* (1832) it was hymn no. 1910 and the edition of 1840 hymn no. 829.

⁴⁴ “Jezus lief! Ach vat mijn hand, Jezus lief! Och stier mijn wil, Jezus lief! Och woon in mij, Jezus lief! In U woon ‘k blij, Jezus lief! Op uw effen baan, Kan ik niet struikelengaan, Maar volmondig ten strijde staan” (Hester Venter, *Ondervindelijke bekeringsweg van de zalige*

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Hendrina Cecilia Kruger, also in a self-composed hymn, sings of her love for Christ:
“Oh Lord Jesus my rest
Oh had you kissed me
Lord Jesus my longing
Lord Jesus my rest
Oh had you kissed me.”⁴⁵

Isolated living conditions on the frontier provided an exceptionally fruitful environment for the meditative and contemplative life. A strong resurgence of the mysticism of Thomas à Kempis (born 1379 or 1380) and St. Bernard of Clairvaux (born c. 1090) in the devotional literature of the Dutch Second Reformation and German pietistic works added to the ascetic tendencies of feminine mystics removed from the mainstream Reformed spirituality at the Cape. It is, therefore, understandable that feminine members of the *petit bourgeoisie* on the frontier would reflect similar levels of mystical self-consciousness to their feminine peers in Europe.

Conclusion

Similar to feminine religious practitioners in the late medieval and early modern epochs in Northern Germany, frontier women reflected what Rothkrug describes as a special *mentalité collective*, a strong Christocentric piety, influenced by “feminine devotion of a previous age”.⁴⁶ Similar to feminine religious practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Germany and Holland, feminine Pietists on the South African frontier exhibited a personal, meditative, individualistic piety of a mystical nature. This tradition of lay mystical activities was more firmly established on the frontier than in the cities and towns of the Cape Colony.

Although it is debatable to what extent individualistic Pietism contributed to empowering women believers to take an active part in prophesying

vrouw Hester Venter. Van de Sandt De Villiers: Cape Town, 1853, p. 52). Cf. Andries Raath, “Bevinding en geestelike verlatting op die limiete: Die historiese en teologiese kontekstualisering van die pioniersvrou Hester Venter (c.1750-c.1830) se *Ondervindelijke Bekeeringsweg*”, in HTS 60(4), 2004, p. 1469. Translations of Hester Venter’s hymns and poems into English by the author (AWGR).

⁴⁵ Hendrina Cecilia Kruger, *Devotional Book*, c. 1750-1800. Unpaginated. Unpublished copy in the collection of A.W.G. Raath, Brandfort. Translations of Kruger’s hymns and poems into English by the author (AWGR).

⁴⁶ L. Rothkrug, “Popular religion and the holy shrines: their influence on the origins of the German Reformation and their role in German cultural development,” in J. Obelkevich (ed.), *Religion and people, 800-1700*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC, 1979, pp. 20–86.

and marking the genesis of a new role for feminine mystics in the rural parts of the Cape, it is clear that feminine religious practitioners on the frontier gave expression to some of the basic elements found in medieval mystical femininity, thereby forming a continuum with similar tendencies in medieval Germany, Holland and elsewhere in Europe. The most evident aspect of this "golden thread" of mysticism was the high level of Jesus-centred bridal mysticism in the autobiographical ego-texts of feminine believers on the frontier.

The form of popular piety prevalent among frontier women could well be described in terms of Bell's definition of piety: "... the more or less spontaneous, at least partly autonomous religious ideas of men and women who were neither sophisticated doctrinalists, nor members of the clerical hierarchy", and although the extent of involvement by males in the Pietist movement on the frontier has hitherto not been extensively researched, there are indications that similar trends also surfaced among male members of frontier families.

Parallel to the pietistic movement in Germany with its emphasis on mystical experientialism, a pious life and spiritual devotion to Christ, and the Dutch Second Reformation with its resistance to the dead orthodoxy in the Dutch Reformed Church,⁴⁷ feminine mystics on the South African frontier reverted to the same trends that produced the flowering of mysticism and Pietism in the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Like the lay spirituality of early modern Pietism, feminine mysticism on the South African frontier was a reactionary spiritual culture in opposition to the rationalistic and dogmatic ecclesiastical institutionalism in the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape. The South African line of feminine Pietism can therefore also be regarded as a radical manifestation of opposition by the *petit bourgeoisie* on the frontier to overcome their isolation and marginalisation from the mainstream church life at the Cape.

Contrition, mystical reunion with God and the freeing of the human spirit gave rise to feminine experiences of spiritual self-empowerment. However, the unification of the heart with God was not regarded as being a reward for contemplative withdrawal from society, but became the means to a new active view on life.

The piety of frontier women gave rise to a spiritual culture with a strong scripture-based outlook complemented by an equally deep mystical, affective piety, and it preserved the contemplative aspects of bridal mysticism. Research on the pietistic literature circulating at the Cape in the

⁴⁷ Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*. Peter Lang: New York, 1991, p. 384, observes that the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*) is in fact the counterpart to English Puritanism: "The link between these movements is strong historically and especially theologically."

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seventeenth and eighteenth centuries supports Landman's and Schoeman's observations that the interiorisation of faith by female believers had profound effects on the religious culture in South Africa.

Feminine Pietism on the South African frontier was a continuum of the medieval affective mystical tradition. Although formally attached to the Dutch Reformed Church, feminine Pietists on the frontier provide evidence of the medieval continuum of affective mystical experiential spirituality. Under the impact of Dutch Second Reformation and German pietistic devotional literature, the groundswell of pietistic mysticism grew into an evangelical movement inspired by a culture of autobiographical ego-texts reflective of a mystical anthropology and reactionary spirituality. Because the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape was not accommodating enough for active participation by the laity, feminine believers participated enthusiastically in the new mystical evangelical movement, appealing to the same pietistic tendencies that shaped the rise of mysticism in the thirteenth century and later gave birth to German Pietism in the seventeenth century. Perhaps the lay participation in pietistic spiritual culture forms a missing link between the Beguines, the Dominican penitent women, other women mystics elsewhere in medieval Europe and feminine mystics on the South African frontier.

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