The piety of Afrikaans women

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Diaries of guilt

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Foreword

Feminism did not inspire me to write this book. I wrote it because I am angry. In the feminist interpretation of a text, anger is indeed a sound hermeneutic principle. But my anger is not in service of a theory. I am angry, and I am sad, especially when I look around me and I see Afrikaans women who are socially and politically enslaved by their piety. They are also enslaved by history and especially by history books portraying as the ultimate woman Racheltjie de Beer, who took off her clothes and died in the cold while her young brother warmly survived. I am intrigued by the way self-sacrifice has become synonymous with Afrikaans women while survival has become synonymous with the men. I am intrigued by the way female sacrifice has been focusing exclusively on the smaller circle of the family or in its extreme form only within the boundaries of the nation. And I am intrigued by the type of female piety used to enslave women to this type of ideology.

I am, of course, not angry at the women. I identify very strongly with those women whose diaries I have read. In a certain sense, their story is also my story: the story of a woman fervently seeking her God, pleading for religious answers to life’s problems and losses. Albeit only a number of diaries have been used for the purposes of this book, I have read all those diaries of Dutch-Afrikaans women that I could find. In every single one of them, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, in diaries of women who never met, I experienced the same type of piety. It is a piety concealed by submission and guilt, yet there is a strong yearning to be freed from societal chains in order to be near God. This piety involves pleasing men, the nation, as well as a male God, but it is also a piety filled with visions of a loving Jesus taking women into his arms.

These women are my foremothers. They lived on border farms in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony; they formed part of the Great Trek; they clung to life in British concentration camps. They searched for religious comfort when their children and their other loved ones died. They had no theological training. Consequently they believed that they were guilty of causing their own misery and that they could change their
fortune by pleasing God. Furthermore, they were regarded by society as Eve and therefore as guilty of the misery of all society.

Now that Afrikaans women are beginning to undergo theological training, it is no longer possible to believe this pious but deadly lie.

This is my story of my foremothers’ story. Now we are no longer storyless.
Introduction: The male Dutch connection

1.1 THE AFRIKAANS WOMEN IN GOD'S LIFE

Afrikaans society, like most societies, is divided into a male dominant culture and a female subculture. Writing from within a subculture means that one writes about one's private experiences, acknowledging that only the dominant culture is public, visible and audible.

During the past three centuries many Afrikaans women wrote in their personal diaries about God. These diaries, some in Dutch and others in Afrikaans, contain the religious history of women confined to a female subculture while piously believing in God as depicted by the male dominant culture.

In these diaries the women describe how they survived in the subculture through guilt fantasies, that is by making guilt the main characteristic of their relationship with God and men. By experiencing themselves as the religious guilty, they believed themselves wanted by God, and so overcame the isolation and loneliness of the female subculture. Understanding religion as 'guilt' allowed them personal involvement with God, as well as God's personal involvement with them.

1.2 AFRIKAANS WOMEN WRITING THEIR OWN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

The aim of this book is to write a religious history of Afrikaans women from their ego-texts, that is their diaries and letters. The only sources are
the writings of these women. Because these sources are scarce, this history is fragmented. Quite a few sources are available from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when men like J J Kicherer and John Philip edited the diaries of white women from wild Africa for the international market and placed their own names prominently on the front page. Sources therefore do exist although they are scarce. In modern church histories, however, female ego-texts have been left out of the story of Christianity in southern Africa.

Based upon these sources it will be argued that the type of piety these women preferred was in fact conditioned by the restricted social circumstances imposed upon them by their subculture. Their God is a personal God as restricted as they are themselves within their society.

Do not regard this as yet another book about Afrikaners and Calvinism. Local Calvinism was, of course, as sexist as it was racist. The Dutch-Afrikaans women on their farms, excluded from theological training, were not orthodox Calvinists, nor are today’s Afrikaans women in the suburbs. I will attempt to show that while their husbands and their brothers were formulating biblical Calvinism and applying ideological Calvinism, these women were (and are) serving the personal God of eighteenth-century Dutch and English piety, often decades, even centuries, after Europe had outlived her pietists. They took this dated European piety with them on the Great Trek to survive, as they believed, the wars with the blacks. During the second half of the nineteenth century the Reverend Andrew Murray, a local prophet, rekindled this type of personal piety for Afrikaans women. The women took Murray’s piety with them in their hearts and then (albeit partly) survived the British concentration camps. Although it was partly a male-formulated piety, it was attractive to these women because, on the one hand, it allowed them a personal relationship with God, which they were often denied with their husbands; on the other hand, because they were naturally proactive people, it afforded them the attraction of a life of individual holiness, self-sacrifice and service to God.

Therefore, this book is about the socio-political powerlessness of Afrikaans women and how they used their piety to empower themselves in their private lives. In the light of these preliminary presuppositions, I will attempt to argue that, because of the type of individualised piety these women believed in, it remained religious empowerment valid only within their own subculture.

These claims concerning Afrikaans women’s religiosity will be substantiated from their diaries to show that they effected this empowerment
in two different ways. In the first place they believed in a demanding male God who wished to be pleased and empowered those who succeeded in doing so. In the second place they acquiesced in submissiveness to men in order to gain the favour of the male dominant culture. Thirdly and consequently, in competing for the favour of this dominant culture they were, and still are, disloyal to one another. In the fourth place, the restrictions in their subculture led them to be extremely suspicious of other cultures, especially British and black cultures. Ultimately it will be shown that this piety of self-hate and submissiveness enabled the men of the dominant culture to use female piety not only to keep women from participation in public life, but also to engage them, often unknowingly, in male nationalist struggles.

Furthermore, my postulate is that even after three hundred years Afrikaans women have not yet liberated themselves from this subculture. Suspicious of other cultures, they are restricted to pleasing their male dominant culture and their male God.

1.3 PREVIOUS HISTORIES OF AFRIKAANS WOMEN

In the past Afrikaans men have written histories of Afrikaans women. These histories were not written from female sources but from the antipathetical point of view of an Afrikaans male ideology towards women’s suffrage. Within the ‘women-friendliness of the patriarchate’, Afrikaans women were convincingly indoctrinated by historical examples that the natural beauty of their souls rendered them unsuitable to vote.

Therefore, during the 1910s, when women elsewhere in the world were ready to emancipate themselves from the confinement of their subcultures, Afrikaans women were portrayed by the dominant male culture as pious martyrs and as fervent patriots; they were honoured for taking part in the religious activities of their subculture and simultaneously remaining passive and submissive to the male dominant culture.

1.3.1 The martyr history of the National Women’s Monument

In 1913 the erection of the National Women’s Monument outside Bloemfontein honoured the women and their children who suffered death during the South African War at the turn of the century. Thousands of women and children died of hunger and illness in confinement, in camps erected at the command of bachelor British generals. Their own sources testify to the fact that the suffering of these women was real and fierce.
However, martyrdom did not introduce Afrikaans women into the male dominant culture. This can be deduced from two booklets commemorating the erection of the National Women’s Monument (see Cloete 1992:47–51). Both are entitled Die Nasionale Vrouemonument (The National Women’s Monument). N J van der Merwe wrote one booklet in 1926, and 35 years later J J Oberholster (1961) wrote the second at a time when the Heilsgesdiichte of the Afrikaans nation reached its peak.

From these booklets it is apparent that the Afrikaans women played no part in the planning, erection and inauguration of ‘their’ monument and not one of them was ever buried there. Since President Steyn initiated the project in 1906, only men have sat on the planning committees (Van der Merwe 1926:2–4). Because of his fundraising and his endeavours to find a suitable site for the monument, members of the City Council of Bloemfontein and even General Louis Botha criticised Steyn severely and accused him of instigating racial tension (in the context English–Afrikaner). However, Steyn convinced his committees and also the City Council of the legitimacy of his project and he made it blatantly clear that he was launching this project for the nation’s sake (Oberholster 1961:11–13). Significantly the inauguration, executed within nationalist ideals, occurred on Dingaansdag, 16 December 1913. In his inauguration speech Steyn did not refer to the women’s personal God, but instead to the national God, the Almighty God who rules over nations (Van der Merwe 1926:13). At this inauguration, only men spoke, with the exception of a speech by Emily Hobhouse read by Mrs Steyn. Ironically only men were buried at the foot of the Women’s Monument: President Steyn, General Christiaan de Wet and Dr Kestell; the ashes of Emily Hobhouse were placed there, albeit for its international value. Mrs Steyn, however, received the dubious honour of being buried on top of her husband. Both these booklets, written decades after the inauguration, honour only the Afrikaans men involved in the erection of this monument. Afrikaans women were maltreated during the war by the British to achieve their war ideals; after the war their own men misused them to accomplish their nationalist ideals.

Martyrdom did not introduce Afrikaans women into the male dominant culture. On the contrary, because of this nationally honoured martyrdom, suffering became an inseparable part of the nature of these women. This can be seen from the histories of ‘the Afrikaans woman’ written by their own men in the decade after the erection of the monument.
I shall now deal with these histories and how they define the Afrikaans female subculture.

1.3.2 The patrio-religious history of Willem Postma

In the aftermath of the inauguration of the Women’s Monument, two Afrikaans male historiographers, Willem Postma (1918) and Eric Stockenström (1921), praised the Afrikaans women for their patriotism and their religiosity. According to these histories, patriotism and religiosity, that is the exclusivist loyalty to the nation and to God, were inherent characteristics of ‘the Afrikaans woman’ inherited from her Dutch foremothers.

In 1918 Willem Postma, who was actively involved in initiating the Women’s Monument, published Die boervrouw, moeder van haar volk (Boer woman, mother of her nation) under the pseudonym of Dr O’Kulis, a name well known in Reformed circles. At his suggestion (Postma 1918: Voorwoord) the Afrikaans women raised money in order to pay him to write their history.

Postma identifies (at least) four areas in which the character of the Afrikaans woman excels within the boundaries of her subculture.

First, he admires her for her active and uncompromising patriotism. Like her Dutch foremothers who fought for the liberation of Haarlem under Kenau Hasselaar, the Afrikaans woman never turns back. She is vindictive and obstinate (Postma 1918:77). Even after the Boers were defeated by blacks at Blouwkrans (1918:60), she refused to turn back; she refused British rule in Natal (1918:61); she won the battle for the Boers at Amajuba (1918:61). The fact that the Afrikaans woman knows that she belongs to God’s nation accounts for her second characteristic, her deep sense of religion.

The Afrikaans woman does not compromise her nation and she does not argue about her religion (Postma 1918:66). Her true religiosity is revealed by her role of martyr in her nation’s history. For Postma the Afrikaans woman’s third beautiful characteristic is her acceptance of martyrdom. Key events in her martyr history are Slagtersnek (1918:70, 115) and the Great Trek (1918:72, 119) when she suffered because of blacks, and the South African Wars (1918:88, 100) when she suffered because of the British.

In the fourth instance Postma praises the Afrikaner woman for her submissiveness. Even though she vigorously fights the enemy culture, she bows submissively in front of her own dominant culture. In private con-
versations and in politics she keeps in the background (1918:100), because
the Bible tells her to do so.

Thus Postma reaches the crux of his historiography (1918:100) claiming that a woman with a history such as the one described, who was always her husband’s loyal helper, is not interested in the vote. The Afrikaans woman has her own identity, shaped through the centuries, and she does not run after the foreign ideas of overseas women (1918:101, 163, 171). She listens to the Bible (1918:102). Finally Postma acknowledges the influence of Abraham Kuyper on his ideas (1918:158). Kuyper was his contemporary, a conservative, woman-unfriendly Dutch statesman who actively resisted women’s suffrage in the Netherlands during the 1910s.

Postma introduces his history by identifying the Afrikaans woman with her Dutch foremothers who, centuries earlier, fought in the Eighty Years’ War. He concludes by disassociating Afrikaans women from contemporary European feminism, referring them to the ideas of conservative Dutch men.

1.3.3 The ethico-religious history of Eric Stockenström

Three years after Postma’s patriarchal women’s history, Eric Stockenström published Die vrou in die geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse volk (Woman in the history of the Dutch-Afrikaans nation). Stockenström repeats Postma’s historiographical inconsistencies which are offensive to today’s women historians. First, he (1921:13) exceeds Postma in his identification of the Afrikaners with the Dutch people. He places the origin of the Afrikaans nation in 1568, at the beginning of the Eighty Years’ War of Dutch resistance against (Catholic) Spanish rule – a century before Van Riebeeck came to the Cape. This enables Stockenström (1921:14) to make an identification between the history of the Afrikaans women who were honoured by the Women’s Monument in the twentieth century and the sixteenth-century Dutch women who fought with Kenau Hasselaar, albeit unknown to Afrikaans women. Like Postma, Stockenström writes a history of one woman whom he labels the Dutch-Afrikaans woman and who according to his perception has remained unchanged from the sixteenth century, who arrives in South Africa in the seventeenth, and from then on suffers and fights for the nation and for God, taking up her position behind man and God.

In the second place Stockenström, like Postma, attempts to convince the reader that Afrikaans women suffered extensively during the nine-
teenth century and especially so in the British concentration camps. However, like Postma he fails to convince the reader of his paradoxical ideology that martyrdom and social submissiveness go hand in hand; in other words, by suffering martyrdom at the hands of the enemy a woman enunciates that she is well adjusted in her female subculture.

Stockenström (1921:225–235) errs in the third place concerning the type of religion which kept these women going through their martyrdom. While quoting male sources only, Stockenström identifies Calvin, Knox and the Bible as the sources of their religiosity. The Calvinism and Bibli­icism of their husbands might have prescribed these women’s societal behaviour, yet from their diaries it is clear that they were indeed not primarily supported in their suffering by interpreting the Bible, because the dominant culture placed lay biblical interpretation under suspicion. Those Afrikaans women who could read preferred the Dutch pietists, whose books, when they could no longer find a European market, were shipped to South Africa at the end of the eighteenth century. Their husbands might have been praying to their national God in the midst of the wars, yet these women were praying to the nation’s God who had become their personal God, the God who provided comfort amidst their personal sufferings.

The aim of Stockenström’s history is to teach Afrikaans women the moral traditions of the foremothers. Stockenström expresses these ethics in political terms, linking the Afrikaans women’s morals with the nationalist agenda: the women kept the nation white. This applies also to that part of the Dutch-Afrikaans nation that stayed in the Cape. Morality and racism, as combined Christian characteristics, were responsible for making the Afrikaans women great:

The Christian education enjoyed by the Dutch and French women and the religiosity with which they were inspired, preserved and strengthened their firm morality. They consequently exercised a strong, ennobling influence on their husbands. This is the reason why the Dutch-Afrikaans nation, as nation, remained a purely white race in the Cape Colony.

(Stockenström 1921:241; translated)

Religiosity and morals kept the nation white. The presupposition is that the Afrikaans women inherited their morals from the Dutch and French foremothers, albeit their religion was that of the forefathers:
It is an irrefutable fact that the Boer women, however simple they appeared to be, were truly inspired with a deep religiosity, and that they, through their far-reaching moral influence were, and still are, the reason why the Boer population of the Cape Colony has remained a white race and why even today the great majority have remained true to the church and religion of their fathers.

(Stockenström 1921:246; translated)

Religiosity and morals also kept them from integrating with the English:

If anyone should ask: 'But now what was actually the influence of the Boer woman on the history of the Cape Colony?' then we must answer that, in spite of the overwhelming indigenous influences, and no thanks to the attempt by the British since 1806 to Anglicise the Dutch population, the Boer women, through their religiosity, their sense of freedom, their love of their fatherland, their love for their nation and language have been the most powerful reason why the Dutch population at the Cape never became one with the English but they have remained to the present day the unique, pure nation that has come to be associated with the name 'Afrikaner boer'.

(Stockenström 1921:255; translated)

The main objection in terms of our topic against these histories of Postma and Stockenström is that the religiosity of Afrikaans women is described and prescribed in terms of a male ideology which treats nationalism and morality as the main components of religiosity. In the following chapters this objection will be worked out from the women's texts themselves, namely that their religiosity was of a personal nature aimed at survival in the subculture.

In this Introduction the claim in these histories concerning the historical link between Afrikaans and Dutch women will be explored.

1.4 THE DUTCH CONNECTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century male historians informed the Afrikaans women that they were, by descent and by nature, related to those Dutch women who 350 years earlier had fought for their nation and their religion. Afrikaans women were told that throughout their own history they had also acted within this sphere of religious patriotism.
Therefore, they were by nature opposed to their contemporaries, that is the European feminists of the twentieth century seeking female suffrage. Finally Afrikaans women were praised for upholding the morals of their (ancient) European foremothers which, together with the religion of their forefathers, they used as protection for their nation from all forms of integration.

One shall therefore investigate the actual Dutch influences on the religious self-concept of Afrikaans women. The thesis of this study is that the religiosity of Dutch women had very little influence upon Afrikaans women. The first Dutch woman who came to South Africa and who exercised influence on the piety of the local white society was Catharina Allegonda van Lier (1768-1801), whose own piety was dependent not upon Dutch sources, but rather on German pietists and English revivalists. Throughout the nineteenth century Afrikaans women fought the blacks and the British isolated from Dutch thought. This is especially true of the Dutch feminist thinking which swept across the Netherlands in the latter part of the nineteenth century while the Afrikaans women at that time pined away in British concentration camps.

Therefore, at the beginning of this century Afrikaans women were not influenced by Dutch women or feminists, but by the thoughts of Dutch men transmitted via the Afrikaans men of their dominant culture: the position their men accorded to these Afrikaans women, and which they accepted, was influenced by conservative Dutch men whose thoughts infiltrated the Afrikaans culture through those Afrikaans men who studied theology in the Netherlands and afterwards returned with the conservative ideas of Abraham Kuyper which they proceeded to prescribe to the women of their own subculture.

1.4.1 The seventeenth century

Almost like a good biblical story, the story of Christian women in South Africa commences with a Mary and an Eve. Maria van Riebeeck, the ‘housewife’ of Jan van Riebeeck, officially the first white settler in South Africa, is Mary. Born in 1629 in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Maria van Riebeeck's father, Abraham Quevellerius, was the Reformed minister of Rotterdam from 1619. Apparently he was rather orthodox in his preaching, especially concerning the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, one of the hot issues at that time (Mees 1952:17ff). Her mother was born into an established, middle-class Dutch family (Mees 1952:19-20).
Maria van Riebeeck did not keep a diary of her arrival and of her residence in South Africa and the personal letters she wrote home to Rotterdam are no longer extant. It is assumed that the religious concepts conveyed at this first contact of a Dutch woman with South Africans were those of Dutch male orthodoxy of the seventeenth century: God chooses us; God civilises us; God sends us to hell with our cooperation. Probably under the compulsion of these concepts, Maria van Riebeeck effected the first conversion to Christianity amongst the local Khoi-khoi, namely her servant, Krotoa, renamed Eva, whose life subsequently displayed the influences of these religious concepts: as God’s chosen she left the context of her tribe, only to die eventually in her own hell of prostitution and alcoholism.

While in South Africa primordial Christianity was going through its presumably ‘orthodox’ Mary-and-Eve phase, the Netherlands were already in the process of producing an early form of pious religious feminism with Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) as main representative. In her 1638 thesis on the right of women to education, she argued that education would further the piety and morality of Christian women. Studying under the well-known pietist Gisbertus Voetius at Utrecht, she set an example by becoming the first female student at a Dutch university. She complemented her studies with her pious lifestyle, directed towards charity (Irwin 1977:50-51). In later life and as an act of utmost piety, she joined the sect of Jean de Labadie, a religious household in which women held a higher level of influence than in the mainline churches (De Baar 1987:11-43; Douma 1924).

The Labadists formed part of a pietist reaction in the Netherlands against contemporary orthodoxy. The pietism of the latter half of the seventeenth century manifested itself in different forms. In general it carried the characteristics of self-guilt, heavenly joy through continuous prayer, a pessimist view of humanity and the renouncement of everything natural and worldly (Roldanus 1938:67). Eventually these religious tendencies concerning pessimism and the emphasis of guilt became characteristic of the religious experience of Afrikaans women. Despite their isolation, these women radicalised the ideas, using as their sources not the Dutch women, but the male European pietists.
1.4.2 The eighteenth century

Maria van Riebeeck was accompanied by her two nieces when she arrived in the Cape. In 1688 the small Dutch female constituency at the Cape was enlarged by eight orphan girls, also from Rotterdam (Mees 1952:55). Small groups of orphan girls joined them during the remainder of the century. These women and their descendants apparently never formed part of any consciously literate tradition and no ego-texts of Dutch women writing from within the South African context are extant for the seventeenth century.

Two women were born in southern South Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century whose diaries reflect the religious experience and understanding of the Dutch South African women of that century. These women were Matilda Smith born in 1749, later a missionary in Bethelsdorp, and Hester Venter born in 1750, a farmer’s wife in the Swellendam district. In 1786 Catharina Allegonda van Lier (1768–1801) came to the Cape with her brother, the Reverend Helperus Ritzema van Lier. Van Lier brought with her an eighteenth-century European tradition of writing down one’s innermost spiritual experiences in diary form (Hanekom 1959:250). Eventually all three of these diaries were published, albeit post mortem, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Van Lier’s diary, Dagboek, gemeenzame brieven en eenzame overdenkingen, appeared in 1804 under the editorship of the Reverend J J Kicherer; Matilda Smith’s Memoir was published through the efforts of John Philip in 1824, and De onderwindelijke bekeeringsweg Hester Venter was published in 1852 with J D Ackerman as the editor.

Catharina Allegonda van Lier was 18 years old when she joined her brother, Helperus Ritzema van Lier (1764–1793), who accepted a call from the Reformed Church in the Cape. Helperus Ritzema van Lier was not influenced primarily by Dutch pietism, as his main sources were the English evangelicals James Hervey and John Newton (Hanekom 1959:104). His preaching centred on salvation, the good God and the positive in human nature. Like her brother, Van Lier was particularly attracted to contemporary English writers, especially John Newton (1725–1807) and his ‘Cardiphonia’, his ‘Voices of the heart’. There were also a few contemporary Dutch poets who expressed depressing views on the negative abilities of human nature (Van Alphen and Van de Kasteele) of whom she was fond, as well as a few German pietists who likewise expanded in detail on humanity’s desperate need for salvation (De Brés and Duitsch).
Not only was she attracted to works different from those preferred by her brother, but those English authors they did share she read differently. She did not internalise their ideas on the blessed state of being under God’s grace; she read Newton for his sure knowledge of people’s guilt before the judging God. However, the influence of these works cannot fully account for the urge for religious self-chastisement and the fits of excessive guilt experienced by Van Lier according to her diary.

This diary (published in 1804) is characteristic of what eventually became the trademark of Afrikaans female piety: excessive feelings of guilt expressed in terms of a demanding God, a poor view of the self as well as of other people.

Hester Venter who, contrary to Van Lier, was South African born and married with ten children, lived a hazardous life on a farm. Van Lier, originally from the Netherlands, did not read mainly Dutch sources – the Dutch pietists at this time being out of fashion in the Netherlands as has been explained. Venter, on the other hand, at this time in South Africa received the books of all those Dutch pietists of whom the Dutch people had become tired. When a zealous bookseller sold her a copy of Bernardus Smijtegelt’s Het gekrookte riet, she became a convert of pietism. However, it is significant that Venter and Van Lier displayed in their diaries the same pessimistic, guilt-ridden piety, although Venter was local, read Dutch sources, was married and led a difficult life. Van Lier was single and led a highly protected life, came from abroad and immersed herself mostly in English sources, and yet they introduced the same themes into the religious history of Dutch-Afrikaans women which were to become the topoi of their particular type of piety: an obsession with hell, Satan and personal sin, fantasies of God’s physical presence and care, the experience of regular divine visions, the habitual reference to the self in humiliating language, the use of biblical verses as deus ex machina, and a strong suspicion of the threat of many personal enemies, including Satan and the heathen. In the chapter on the piety of these two women it will be attempted to demonstrate that the concurrence in the type of piety expressed by these two women should be attributed to the type of theologies to which they were exposed, and to an overwhelming extent to the restrictiveness both experienced in their female subculture.

In summation, therefore, guilt fantasies of Afrikaans women were first audibly expressed by Hester Venter and Catharina Allegonda van Lier. The fact that Van Lier’s diary was reprinted four times during the fifty years after her death is indicative of the extent of her influence in her
own religious circle in the Cape. One of her close friends, who was, in fact, converted by Helperus Ritzema van Lier, was Matilda Smith.

The diary of Matilda Smith (1749–1821), a part-time missionary at Bethelsdorp, contains the same type of pessimistic view of the self and of other sinners as is found in the diaries of the two women discussed. In her diary she continually dwells upon her personal depressions because of her failure to live up to God’s liking; at the same time there are her descriptions of her negative excitement caused by the sins of other Christians. Her diary differs from the other two especially in one important aspect: her adamant belief in the power of Christ to convert people and therefore her religious goodwill toward people of other races and cultures. Having worked with English-speaking people at Bethelsdorp amongst coloured people, she succeeded in breaking the barriers of her own culture, and to a certain extent of her female subculture.

1.4.3 The nineteenth century

(1) Meanwhile in the Netherlands

While these women wrote their diaries in South Africa, the Netherlands were experiencing the Réveil in which the Dutch women played a role of which the women in South Africa were (and still are) totally unaware.

According to modern research by Dutch feminists (De Bie & Frischy 1985:30–58), although the Dutch Réveil entertained no feminist ideals, it did pave the way for the first wave of feminism which hit the Netherlands during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Through the insights of the Réveil, women engaged voluntarily and \textit{en masse} in charitable work. They were empowered by a growing awareness of their ability to contribute to society even though still feeling comfortably Christianlike. Possible one of the best examples is Elizabeth Groen van Prinsterer-Van der Hoop (1807–1879), wife of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) (Kluit 1950:202–205).

Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer played an important role in influencing Afrikaans males in South Africa with his conservative ideas concerning a Christian state. However, it is indeed doubtful whether the potential women’s liberation initiated by his wife ever reached the female consciousness in the Cape. Local Afrikaans women were at that time preoccupied mainly with the problem of Satan-and-I.
During the 1830s Afrikaans women followed their husbands in the trek to the north, following a dream of white Afrikaner independency. An extant diary from a woman who lived through this movement, which eventually became known as the Great Trek, contains the same type of piety as that described above: a negative female self-image based on excessive personal guilt, a domineering male image of God as the strong man who has to be pleased, a simple view of Christ as a co-martyr, and an extremely negative view of the rest of humanity. Her diary also testifies to a longing for Jesus as lover. I refer you to the (unpublished) diary of Susanna Smit (1799–1863), sister of the Trek leader Gert Maritz and wife of the Trek missionary, Erasmus Smit.

Susanna Smit's diary is an excellent example of the results of severe subcultural restrictives imposed upon the religious mind. She was lonely and poor, yet she taught herself to read. The only sources available to her were the Bible, the Leerreden of Helperus Ritzema van Lier, De Kerkbode — and, of course, the works of representatives of the Second Reformation ('Nadere Reformatie'), of which Wilhelmus a'Brakel's (1635–1711) were locally the most popular. More than a century earlier, a'Brakel had written extensively and piously on faith as an act of the human will (Graafland 1961:190–199). Smit was subjected simultaneously to the influence of the sources of the Van Lier circle and the works of the Dutch Pietists read by the local Dutch-Afrikaans women. Yet again it was the work of Wilhelmus a'Brakel that was read, while the work of his wife, Sara Nevius, remained unknown (see De Baar 1991) to the women of South Africa.

Within the minute space allowed to her by her subculture, Susanna Smit fantasised about hell as well as God's involvement with her in rescuing her daily from the threats of unbelievers. In her fantasies her personal religious guilt brought her nearer to God. She believed herself to be empowered by her attempts to please God.

When the piety of Susanna Smit is examined at a later stage in this book, the influence of the Afrikaans female subculture on her fantasies will also be examined by means of a comparison, inter alia, with the religious experiences related in the diaries of English women who lived in South Africa at that time and who, apparently, experienced more freedom in their subcultures. Available for comparison are the journals of Elizabeth Lees Price (Long 1956), who exchanged the hell-talk of her mother and father, Mary and Robert Moffat, for a positive view of God and people, black and white. Also extant are the letters of Frances Colenso, wife of the
famous John Colenso. John Colenso and his wife based their missionary work on the assumption that, in the absence of hell, the divine light of God shines in all people independent of their culture (or subculture).

(3) War in the north

At the turn of the century the northern Afrikaners fought the British in what became known as the South African War. Part of this time, a large number of the Dutch-Afrikaans women were confined in British concentration camps where approximately 26,000 women and children died.

During and after these wars many diaries and memoirs were written by Afrikaans women. Some of these women carried with them to the camps an image of God created by the preaching of the Reverend Andrew Murray, a frequent traveller to the north. This belief encompassed a personal God who displays goodwill toward those people who obey his commands. In the subhuman circumstances of the camps, the belief of many women in their personal God underwent a change and they struggled with the possibility of an enraged national God who turned against them because of their sins. However, the concept of personal guilt remained uppermost in the religious thinking of Afrikaans women despite their circumstances. In addition, in this warlike atmosphere of suspicion and hatred against other cultures, the so-called enemy cultures fostered and grew in the religious thinking of Afrikaans women. The war diary of Alie Badenhorst will be analysed as an example.

1.4.4 The first two decades of the twentieth century

After the wars with Britain, the dominant Afrikaans male culture deemed it necessary to reconfirm the role of its women in a female subculture. This was done, as has been indicated at the beginning of the chapter, by presenting the history of these women as that of active patriots and passive martyrs. In other words, religious grounds were used to restrict women's activities to the subculture of their own nation.

Religion played an important role in this ideology, so that more than a history was needed to uphold it. It was necessary to create a theology as well. A patriarchal, nationalist theology was provided not by Dutch men who came to South Africa, but by those Afrikaans men who went to the Netherlands to study theology. There they met with the patriarchal theology of Abraham Kuyper (d 1921).
While Afrikaans women were first of all fighting for physical survival against the British, and then suffering at the hands of their own men who propagated an ideology of female subcultural confinement openly, the first feminist wave was sweeping across the Netherlands. Between 1894, with the establishment of the ‘Vereeniging voor Vrouwenkiesrecht’ (Society for Women’s Suffrage), and 1918, when Dutch women obtained the vote, there were numerous breakthroughs by women in the Netherlands in academic, economic and political spheres (Naber 1937/1985:189–201).

Prominent Christian men in the Netherlands reacted against the feminists’ political claims. On this political level the name of Abraham Kuyper features prominently. Modern feminist research has concentrated on describing Kuyper’s reaction against political feminism. Kuyper, in his notorious De eerepositie der vrouwen (Woman’s honorary position, 1914), and W Geesink, in his publications as professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Amsterdam (1890–1926), defend a conservative view concerning the inequality of women and men (Manenschijn 1987:20–22). Within Reformed circles, however, there was a cautious deviation from this view in favour of female political consciousness after women obtained the vote in 1918. This is especially observable in a later work of H Bavinck, De vrouw in de hedendaagsche maatschappij (Woman in contemporary society, 1918), and in the establishment of the ‘Nederlandse Christen-vrouwenbond’ (Dutch Christian Women’s Society) in 1919 (Gerritsma 1987:79–83).

Unfortunately this reformed voice within Reformed thinking was not yet audible in South Africa. Here only the voice of Kuyper was heard and made audible by the Afrikaans males. In 1920 Dr J D du Toit, the Afrikaans theologian and the poet Totius, was a member of a commission of three men who presented a report to the Synod of the Reformed Church of South Africa (Die Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid-Afrika) regarding the vote of women in the church. The recommendation of this report was that as a matter of principle women should not be allowed to vote in the church. Based almost verbatim on Kuyper’s De eerepositie der vrouw, this report was accepted by the Synod against women’s suffrage, and they forthwith sent a copy to Parliament advising against women’s suffrage on a national level.

Only one woman reacted against this decision from within Afrikaans Reformed circles, namely Marie du Toit (1880–1931), the sister of J D du Toit. In 1921, one year after the synodal decision against the vote for
women, she published the book *Vrou en feminist* (Woman and feminist). This was the first and the last time the term ‘feminist’ appeared in the title of a book written in Afrikaans. In her book Du Toit warned the Afrikaans women that the role they submissively accepted in their subculture was ‘unnatural’. She described to them how many women across the globe had endeavoured to change their own subcultural roles and have subsequently managed to be introduced into the dominant culture.

Du Toit begged Afrikaans women to rid themselves of their guilt before God and to reread the life and work of Jesus Christ with reference to his attitude toward women. She beseeched them to rid themselves of their inherent sense of unworthiness regarding males, of their disloyalty towards their own sex and of their suspicions towards their fellow people, especially those of other nationalities.

Marie du Toit remained inaudible and her work was never read. In contemporary diaries of Afrikaans women the eighteenth-century themes of Catharina Allegonda van Lier and Hester Venter continued to prevail: guilt, self-degradation and suspicion.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


*Bibliothèque van theologische letterkunde* 4(1) 1806. Amsterdam: Brave.


Catharina Allegonda van Lier (1768–1801): The Eve of our female sin

2.1 A FEMALE TRINITY: SIN, JESUS AND HELL

It was suggested in the introductory historical sketch that the type of piety which Dutch-Afrikaans women preferred allowed them, above all, to attack the self excessively. This chapter represents an attempt to analyse the religious consequences of this self-degradation according to the ego-texts of Catharina Allegonda van Lier, namely her Dagboek, Gemeenzame Brieven en Eenzame Overdenkingen (Diary, letters and lonely meditations, 1804). Three of the consequences of her self-attacking piety will be examined.

In the first instance, we shall look at how conscious Van Lier was of her own sin. She introduced to South Africa the European tradition of writing about religious experiences and thus became the epitomy of the local Eve of female insight into sin. As has been pointed out earlier, the Khoi-khoi Eva, a century and a half earlier, had been the first recipient of a Christian concept of sin, and she had been the first to exemplarise the consequences of female sin. Because this is a story about whites, we leave Eva and commence with the first published definition of the blackness of female sin, and thus honour Van Lier as the Eve of those Dutch-Afrikaans women who fantasised about sins they had never committed.

Thereafter the effects of a poor self-image on Van Lier’s image of God will be examined. As a matter of course Van Lier believed in a male
God, who had to be pleased and who judged. Yet, she did not emphasise the maleness of the domineering Father to the same extent as later Afrikaans women. Unwell if not ill the greater part of her short life, she strongly tended towards the image of the healing Jesus. It should be noted, however, that in her letters to women friends she referred mainly to Jesus, whereas she preferred to refer to God in her letters to men.

In the third place the effect of pious self-hate on Van Lier's experience of Satan and hell warrants investigation. It will be seen that Van Lier attributed as much (if not more) power to Satan as to God/Jesus.

However, in the first place it is imperative to attempt to establish her social and religious circumstances. Because this is very difficult, the influence of her subculture on her religious experience will be deduced from the way in which she differed from her male sources and contemporaries.

2.2 VAN LIER AND THE MEN IN HER LIFE

The eighteen-year-old Catharina Allegonda van Lier came to the Cape with her brother Helperus Ritzema van Lier in 1786 (Hanekom 1959:119). They both died at an early age. Four years younger than her brother, she died at the age of thirty-three on 22 September 1801 (Kicherer in Van Lier 1804:111, V). In a letter dated 29 September 1801, a week after Van Lier's death, a friend, MES, related how Van Lier greeted everybody for the last time, thanked them for their love, and then called upon Jesus to separate her soul from her body (MES in Van Lier 1804:288).

Three sets of facts are known about Van Lier's short life. The first is that she was engaged to JJ Kicherer and that she asked him to publish her diary after her death.

Kicherer himself gave this information in the introduction to her diary. It is, in fact, not clear when these things happened. It is not certain whether they happened at all. Kicherer was an ambitious man and when he came to the Cape in 1799 as a missionary for the London Missionary Society, Van Lier was already a 'spinster' according to the values of that time. She was in her thirties and seven years his senior. But she was from a prominent Dutch family and from a leading religious circle at the Cape.

It is possible that Kicherer claimed a betrothal for the sake of publicity when he published her diary. Nowhere else, not even in his own diary, is this betrothal mentioned. According to his diary, Kicherer (1805:10) came to the Cape in March 1799 as a missionary of the London Missionary Society. He departed from Cape Town for the Zak River in
May, 800 km from Van Lier in Cape Town. During the period preceding her death, Kicherer returned in February 1800 to Cape Town for one month only (Kicherer 1805:13, 41). During this month he preached in the Reformed Church where Van Lier’s late brother had ministered. If they became engaged during this time, when did she ask him to publish her diary? From May 1800 to March 1802 he visited the Orange River for missionary purposes. In the middle of this period of ten months, Catharina A van Lier died. Three years later Kicherer took the honour for publishing her diary (with the help of the Reverend G Masman from Utrecht), claiming that she had commissioned him to do so, although neither of them had recorded these facts in their diaries when they were supposed to have happened.

This information is important, because I intend to argue in this book that even at this very early stage, men abused the piety of Dutch Afrikaans women to achieve international acclaim.

Catharina Van Lier was responsible for the disclosure of a second fact about her religious life: the inspiration to write her diary came from reading the religious self-revelations of other Christians in their ego-texts. Her reading matter included the autobiographies popular in her time, especially English and (translated) German ones. Reading Een dagverhaal van eene Godvreezende Jufvrouw (a diary of a Godfearing miss) published by John Newton (Van Lier 1804:1) inspired her to write her own diary. She also read James Hervey’s letters to John Newton (Van Lier 1804:5, 8), and the autobiography of Solomon Duitsch, a Hungarian ex-Jew who converted to Christianity (Van Lier 1804:109, 111). She also revelled in the personal poetry of Van Alphen and Van de Kastelee, her only genuine Dutch sources (Van Lier 1804:139).

This information is important, because I shall argue that although she did not read the Dutch pietists of the Second Reformation, Van Lier interpreted her sources in such a way that she came to the same understanding of sin and hell and self-hate as the Dutch pietists. Since the Dutch-Afrikaans women in South Africa read the Dutch pietists, it will be argued that the socially restricted role all these women had to play made them prone to a certain type of piety, one in which they feared many things and tried to please one specific image of God, and that they all felt bad about themselves as human beings.

Finally, it is important to note that Van Lier’s diary did enjoy a relatively wide circle of readers. It was so popular in the small Cape community that within fifty years of her death it experienced a fourth
reprint (Hanekom 1959:12). This popularity was apparently restricted to the Cape, however, when it was published in the Netherlands, it received an extremely negative review in 1806 in the *Bibliotheek van theologische letterkunde* (1806:235–237). The reviewer was very obviously irritated with the work. He described it as uninteresting and consisting mainly of monotonous complaints centring on the author herself. The reviewer quite correctly identifies the sources and the religious expression of Van Lier's depression. The reviewer views the following sources as problematical, that is the pietist Salomon Duitsch, Van Lier's personal difficult social circumstances, and, last but not least, her alleged fiancé, Kicherer. The reviewer complains that Kicherer zealously attached his name to the printed diary, yet failed to provide the reader with a curriculum vitae of the woman. And, indeed, we concur that these are in fact the main sources which caused the monotonous melancholy of Catharina Allegonda van Lier. At the same time they caused her to interpret her religious experiences, unlike her brother, in a pietistic and not a revivalist way.

Kicherer therefore failed to attract popularity for himself in the Netherlands through his alleged fiancée. The only outcome of his endeavour was that Van Lier's type of pessimistic piety influenced white, and presumably especially female, religiosity at the Cape.

The influence of Van Lier's pessimistic piety in local Dutch circles was not restricted to the first fifty years following her death. Six of the seven verses of a poem from her own hand (published on pages 52 and 53 in her diary) made their way into the *Evangelische Gezangen* (1806). Apparently this was because of the influence of the Reverend G Masman, the co-publisher of her diary with Kicherer and a member of the Hymn Commission. The poem describes a state of mental misery and recommends that Christians should be content with their fate. In nineteenth-century South Africa this overtly pessimistic hymn was popular amongst Dutch-Afrikaners. It was frequently sung to a so-called 'liederwysie', that is an adapted tune resembling a popular folk song. According to Cillié (1982:108) this popular tune resembled the English 'Clementine'. Almost two and a half centuries later, in the mid-twentieth century, it was translated into Afrikaans by G B A Gerdener and became Hymn 28 of the *Afrikaanse Gesangeboek* (1944). This translation concurs with the original Dutch version in all its eighteenth-century pessimistic detail. When the words were reviewed more than thirty years later for the 1978 Hymn Book, the concept of 'fate' (*lot*) was deleted, however, and Van Lier's pessimism concerning the miserable plight of the Christian on earth was
toned down. The first verse of Van Lier’s poem appears below in comparison with the two Afrikaans translations:

1806

Moet ik steeds met onspoed strijden,  
'k Ben te vreden in mijn lot;  
'k Hebb' een' Helper in min lijden,  
Moet ik dan met onspoed strijden,  
'k Ben te vreden in mijn lot:  
o! Mijn redder is mijn God.

1944

Moet jy stry teen moeilikhede,  
Christen, treur nie oor jou lot!  
Krag ontvang jy op jou bede.  
Moet jy stry teen moeilikhede,  
Wees tevrede met jou lot,  
Hy, jou Redder, is jou God!

1978

Moet jy stry teen moeilikhede,  
kind van God, vertrou op Hom;  
Hy gee krag op jou gebede;  
Hy ken jou omstandighede.  
Hy omskep die smart in vreug;  
ons kan ons in Hom verheug.

For almost two centuries Van Lier’s passive melancholy was accommodated in the piety of the Dutch-Afrikaners. An early commentator on the Evangelische Gezangen, A W Bransveld (18—:197), called Van Lier and her contribution to the hymn thesaurus ‘bevindelijk’, a typical word for characterising the pietism of the Dutch Second Reformation. And indeed, although she read few pietistic Dutch sources, Van Lier’s piety aimed at making God part of the misery she experienced in her subculture.
2.2.1 The brother who loved people and the sister who hated herself

In 1786 the 22-year-old Helperus Ritzema van Lier (1764-1793) arrived in the Cape, having been called to minister to the Reformed congregation at the Cape of Good Hope. He was accompanied by his sister, Catharina Allegonda, who was to influence the piety at the Cape. His own religious contribution to his new context was a higher estimation of his soul than of his mind. He did not think of the soul in terms of the self-insult of the Dutch pietists and he never referred to the mind in his works. On the contrary, he believed in the happy union between the self, the soul and God as preached by contemporary English revivalists.

One of the English theologians who strongly influenced Helperus Ritzema van Lier (Hanekom 1959:107) was the Anglican Reverend John Newton (1725-1807). In a letter to John Newton, Van Lier looked from a religious point of view at his own history. Born in 1764 in Assen, Holland, of a family of prominent ministers, he became a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Groningen in 1782. He had had no interest in theology but, according to Van Lier, God heeded the tears of his mother and converted him abruptly in the first place by saving him from drowning in icy water and in the second place by the death of his fiancée. Van Lier turned from his love of the natural sciences and, inspired by the glory of God, immersed himself in his newly formulated religious interpretation of life by developing a love for all people. To be able to practise this love as a minister, he consequently studied theology, accepted a call and was duly installed as a Reformed minister at the Cape in 1786 where he officiated for only six years, until his early death at the age of 28 in 1793.

In his Leerreden (Instructions), preached to his congregation at the Cape between 1789 and 1793, Van Lier verbalised his religious convictions using simple contrasts. He contrasted sin with the generous forgiveness through Jesus (Van Lier 1802:1, 12) and the delightful consequences of a religious life with the notorious outcome of sin. He rejected natural revelation through quick-witted reasoning in favour of the internal revelation of God’s Spirit within the soul (1802:7).

The brother, who loved all people, preached this positive message to them. In her self-chastisement, however, his sister did not hear this message. In the light of our thesis concerning the influence of the female subculture on religious experience, it is interesting to compare the views on God, the self and other people, of two people influenced more or less
by the same religious sources, the one belonging to the dominant culture and the other to a subculture.

In the first place, Helperus R van Lier’s message revolves around the unimportance of the negative side of religious reality. The powers outside the person, that is the powers of Satan, are rendered impotent by Jesus; the negative inclinations of sin and guilt within a person are eradicated by the same Jesus. In the contrast between sin and grace forgiveness and happiness reign.

Catharina van Lier’s Dagboek (1804) displays the same simple contrasts between good and bad. Catharina, however, did not dogmatise the contrasts, unlike her brother, who was formally trained in theology. She ‘experienced’ the contrasts. The contrast between good and bad is described in terms of individualised, personal experience. Contrary to her brother, she strongly emphasised the negative experience. Satan becomes more important than Jesus. Personal sin gets a higher profile than divine forgiveness for all.

An excellent example is the following summary of her religious moods during her first week of diarising (1804:2—15). Her diary begins on a Sunday with the joy she experiences because of the nearness of God. Then Satan attacks, leaving her incapable of any good. On Monday her sinful nature gains the upper hand, until the Heavenly Bridegroom covers her with kisses from his mouth. On Tuesday she finds overwhelming reason to cry out: ‘My sin is my burden!’ On Wednesday she experiences grace. On Thursday she struggles with her haughty heart. On Friday she experiences guilt because of her complaints concerning divine providence. On Saturday her happiness is endless. On Sunday she cries about her own ingratitude. On Monday she loves God. On Tuesday she wakes up without enthusiasm for the Lord and cheers herself up by reading about the Lord’s suffering. The dominant experience in Catharina van Lier’s religion is self-hate, guilt and, consequently, depression.

In the second instance, according to the brother (Van Lier 1802:19, passim), religion is more than performing religious responsibilities. Of course, this he declared with the conviction that religion settles in the heart and does not adhere to orthodoxy and formalities. This is a tendency in the thinking of Helperus Ritzema Van Lier, namely to contrast plight and responsibility and the hardships of religion with the glory of God as well as to place moral responsibilities in a direct causal relationship with their joyful consequences.
travel accounts of Captain Cook (Kicherer 1805:II) who was not religious at all.

Of course, Van Lier and her alleged fiancé produced different kinds of diaries. Although Kicherer’s ‘diary’ is a report to the London Missionary Society about his work in the South African ‘mission field’, it is about people and activities. In no way was religious self-reflection his primary aim. While his diary is about converts and missionary travels, Van Lier’s is an ego-text. The author is concerned with herself only in a passive contemplation of her sinful nature.

The common denominator, however, is their extensive reference to God. The point of comparison is, therefore, their concept of God. On the one hand there is a missionary trail-blazer (Kicherer) and on the other hand somebody restricted to suburban and subcultural conditions (Van Lier). Kicherer’s reference to God is mainly, almost exclusively, as Providence (Voorzienigheid, 1805:12, 29, 62, 65, etc). God is identified with the positive happenings in his life (e.g. 1805:22) and after successfully completing a journey or conversion he gives thanks to God as his providing Shepherd (e.g. :48, 62). In the missionary situation, Kicherer presents a slightly different view of God/Jesus. To the black people he introduced and presented God as the Almighty Highest Being, and he placed God in competition with the highest beings of the ‘heathen’ (e.g. Kicherer 1905:32), to whom he also emphasised the love of a Jesus Christ who actively effects conversion in the hearts of people (e.g. :71). Kicherer thus preached the Creator God and the loving Jesus to the so-called heathen. And it was to his personal God as Providence and Shepherd that he turned and gave credit for his personal successes and faith.

Kicherer, in other words, conceived of his personal God as an active God of the present.

This was not how his alleged fiancée back at the Cape experienced God. She perceived him as a static God who regulated her life through laws from the past. Unlike Kicherer, Van Lier does not refer to God as Providence, although once or twice she does acknowledge the providence of God (Van Lier 1804:11, 16). For her God is not so much present as He is in heaven (:22); God is her heavenly Father (:3, 17, 30, 48). Of course, He is on her side and, therefore, like Kicherer, she believed in a good God (:27, 36, 118, 120), albeit not explicitly a benevolent God.

Catharina Van Lier believed mainly in God as Judge.
God gave people laws (Van Lier 1804:3, 4, 10, 16, 63, 68 etc) and Jesus gave his blood (het bloed van Jesus :5, 14, 22, 56, 60, 65, 98 etc). Van Lier believed in the static God and the suffering Jesus of the past – and in the active presence of the Satan. In her first entry, she devised her own theology, namely that through God she came to the conviction of her own sinfulness and she also came to know Satan. On the other hand, through Satan, she was enlightened about God (:3).

The following is the crux of her view of God as the One who provides the laws and plans of salvation, and of Jesus as the One who effects this salvation:

I came to know the extent, holiness and excellence of the Divine law, God’s strict righteousness and immaculate Holiness. Because of this His eyes are too pure to behold evil. I came to know this excellent road to salvation, for which I long, the excellent road for the salvation of Sinners. The Father has planned this in his endless love and wisdom, and You, my dear Saviour, have made it possible. (Van Lier 1804:3, translated)

Jesus Christ makes his own demands, but his insistence on good works is gladly met by this woman who overcame her loneliness with the belief that to love only Jesus is not only appropriate but ensures a life in the hereafter devoid of any loneliness. A sermon on the Song of Songs (4:16) allows her to express her absolute commitment to Jesus in covertly physical terms:

I cannot deny – although I have to fight against my corrupted flesh – that the friendship of Jesus is more important to me than anything which the world can give. Yes, my soul wishes that I only have to love [beminnen] him, that I only have to serve and obey him, and that I may not lust after anyone else on earth. (Van Lier 1804:85, translated)

2.2.3 The Amazing Grace of John Newton, and a wretch like she

Far more important than her ‘fiancé’ were the other men in Van Lier’s life, those men whose diaries and letters she perused. Early on in her diary she twice mentions James Hervey (Van Lier 1804:5, 8) from whose work she deduces a view of a very stable God, a rock everlasting, yet a God who must be feared. She read Hervey’s letters to John Wesley, as well as Hervey’s ‘Theron and Aspasio’ which contains a dialogue between these
two characters. Their views on the righteousness of Christ’s suffering and its legal obligations for Christians (Hervey 1765) were themes which Van Lier in her self-image as a sinner found very attractive.

Van Lier, of course, was also acquainted with the work of Salomon Duitsch (1734–1795). According to her own claims (Van Lier 1804:109, 111) she identified very strongly with his idea of self-denial and unification with the crucified Christ. Her reviewer in the *Bibliotheek van theologische letterkunde* (1806:236) criticises her affinity with Duitsch, even though Van Lier mentions him only very late in her diary (1804:109, 111). Perhaps he was not a major influence on her way of thinking, yet it is nonetheless interesting to note her interpretation of his autobiography, *De wonderlijke leiding God met eenen blinden leidsman der blinden* (Duitsch 1883; God’s wonderful guidance of a blind leader of the blind). Duitsch presents his autobiography as a ‘Heilsgeschichte’, a success story of his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. To Van Lier, however, it represented hints on Christian self-affliction, the loss of the self and the total identification with the suffering of Christ. Van Lier read Duitsch’s ‘Heilsgeschichte’ as an ‘Unheilsprophetie’ for sinners.

But the man who caused her to become the mother of our female sin was John Newton (1725–1807), today famous as the composer of the song ‘Amazing Grace’. Newton did not force Van Lier into this type of motherhood. Van Lier misinterpreted his words; she forced Newton to testify to the sinful nature of man or, more specifically, woman. According to Newton the almighty God caused everything, including suffering. Van Lier, however, was convinced that God caused her suffering because of her own sinful nature. Van Lier used the negative remarks on human nature in Newton’s works out of context and as a source for her self-hate.

John Newton’s ‘Cardiphonia’ (1840) consists of 156 letters, written to 24 different people of whom ten were women and four of these, like Van Lier, unmarried. John Newton had but one message for all these people. This was that God caused everything according to his will (Letter 1 to Mr B; Newton 1840:189) and that one should therefore remain completely dependent upon God (Letter 1 to Rev R; 1840:198). Newton’s words reveal a deep sense of religious optimism (1840:198, 199): ‘If the Lord keeps you sensible of your danger, and dependent upon him, you will walk safely ..... The Lord ... will ... sweeten all your trials, and cause his light to shine upon your paths.’

The question is whether Newton formulated his message to women in a different way from men. Indeed. In his letters to men he discussed
matters of principle, the causes and the nature of a decline in grace (1840:129), the difference between acquired and experimental knowledge (:131), the doctrine of the Trinity (:169), the substance of a proper calling to the ministry (:235), and what one’s view on justification ought to be (:260). To men he revealed in a formal way his views on the humane aspects of religion, such as the causes of suffering (:189) and the road of self-denial (:241). Indeed, to men he was formal and kept within the limitations of the ‘right’ type of dogmatics.

There are two dominant themes in his letters to women, however. The first theme is humility. Especially in letters to unmarried women he recommends the exchange of personal freedom for humility. He urged Miss F (Newton 1840:215) ‘to be humble, and like a child, afraid of taking a step alone’. Miss Th he reprimanded for visiting a playhouse, expressing the hope that ‘your humble and charitable construction of their mistake will not lead you to extenuate the evil of those diversions in themselves’. To Miss P (:300) he confessed ‘our gracious Lord [who] is longsuffering ... yet he will take methods both to shame and to humble us’. The Christian behaviour which Newton prescribed to women conditioned them for a lifetime in the female subculture.

While it abounds in his letters to women, humility is not a concept which is explicitly stated in Newton’s letters to men.

The second theme which proliferates in Newton’s letters to women is, of course, that of sin. ‘Sin is the sickness of the soul’ (Newton 1840:281) is more or less the message Newton had for men and even more so for women. However, he never referred to sin without immediately referring both men and women to the grace of Jesus Christ. Newton always saved his reader from despairing about a sinful nature. He emphasised security in Christ, the happiness received from God and the light which was always present in the dark. In the subcultural concept of humility expressed mainly toward women, and in the extra-cultural concept of sin also emphasised mainly towards women, Newton stressed salvation and recommended rejoicing.

However, in her subculture, Catharina Allegonda van Lier was unable to integrate these two aspects of religion. She found it difficult to recognise one’s guilt and to know that it is graciously forgiven, to be miserable about evil abilities and to rejoice in God’s affirmative action. As far as Van Lier was concerned, she was either ecstatically happy in her God or in the depths of depression because of her sinful nature.
This resulted from the fact that Van Lier was, within her social circumstances, brought to believe that she had an innately sinful nature. However, nowhere in her diary is Van Lier able to spell out her sins. The only sins she does name are doubt and unbelief, which are innate to every sinful nature.

Influenced extensively by her male sources, Van Lier was ultimately controlled by the mood in her female subculture. It was a mood of self-meditative depression, a ‘zwaarmoedige, meditatiewe inslag’ as Buijnsters (1973:175) calls it.

2.2.4 Sinful nature or sinful culture?

As has been indicated previously, Catharina Allegonda van Lier believed strongly in the sinful nature of (wo)man, yet it was actually her subculture which should be blamed for her poor self-image. It is, of course, difficult to test such a thesis without the support of contemporary sources from the same subculture.

One other female ego-text from roughly the same period is still extant. In February 1810 Sophia Burgmann, who came as a missionary to South Africa, kept a diary (1813) of her voyage from the Netherlands to the Cape. From this diary her religious views can be deduced and compared with those of Van Lier. Sophia Elisabeth Henriëtte Burgmann-Albrecht (1767-1812) was born in Müllheim in the German Ruhr area. She came from good stock, as her father was a Lutheran pastor. From approximately 17 years of age, she was in the care of people in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. After having lived in Rotterdam for 24 years, at approximately 43 years old she left for the Cape (Burgmann 1813:99).

Inspired by the missionary fervour of the late eighteenth century, Burgmann offered her services to the Dutch Missionary Society and was duly accepted within the ranks of missionaries. She was sent off to South Africa in 1810, where she married Christian Albrecht, a German missionary in the service of the London Missionary Society. At the time of their marriage he worked amongst the Namaqua beyond the Orange River, in today’s Namibia. It is important to note that Sophia Burgmann was not sent to the Cape to marry; she was acknowledged by the Dutch Missionary Society as a missionary in her own right (Schoeman 1992).

Sophia Burgmann-Albrecht survived only two years in southern Africa before she died in 1812.
What type of piety did Sophia Burgmann bring with her from the Netherlands? Did she believe in the innate sinfulness of (wo)men? According to her diary the answer is no. As a religious person, Burgmann appears to have led an independent and active life which, according to this thesis, probably influenced her piety decisively.

On 16 February 1810 Burgmann boarded the ship the *Ranger*, due for Cape Town. She has diarised how she had prayed to God for more than four years for this opportunity. With the euphoric optimism which characterises her diary, she testifies how she experienced God's support on the ship (1813:79) and the contentment she felt in her soul (1813:80) concerning her circumstances. It is noteworthy that she, still a spinster, also harboured fond thoughts concerning J J Kicherer, Van Lier's 'fiancé', while on her journey (1813:81). On board ship, she actively engaged in the aggressive distribution of Bibles and popular religious tractates ('tractaatjes') amongst the passengers and the crew.

Her piety consisted of a dependence upon God, accompanied by excessive thanksgiving for his support, as well as an unconditional belief in the omnipotence of God. She needed this type of piety on a ship battered by continuous storms. After the first storm she was asked about her feelings during the storm (1813:88, 91). Her answer was to the effect that her Anchor was not lodged in sand, but that she was anchored in the unchangeable God, who controls nature. According to her testimony God holds the ocean in his hand like a drop of water (1813:91). Van Lier and Burgmann believed in the same God, yet their beliefs differed because the demands of their (sub)cultures differed. Van Lier had been restricted physically and subculturally; Burgmann formed part of an active missionary culture. To understand their individual beliefs, the resemblances and differences should be examined.

Burgmann, like Van Lier, often needed support because of her physical circumstances (e.g Burgmann 1813:94). The difference is that Burgmann did not relate calamities, like storms at sea, to her own sinful nature. In contrast to Van Lier, she saw God's sovereignty in overcoming ill-fortune, and not in God's wrath for her personal sins.

Burgmann and Van Lier both gave much thought to the suffering of Christ. The journey to Cape Town coincided with Easter and in her diary Burgmann often refers to her readings of the history of Christ's suffering (e.g Burgmann 1813:107). Like Van Lier, she was also deeply concerned about sin and guilt, her own sin as well as that of others (e.g Burgmann 1813:100, 103). However, she was not possessed with the idea of sin as the
main characteristic of an ahistorical human nature. To a far greater extent than Van Lier she emphasised the glory of effective and lasting forgiveness.

Burgmann firmly believed that she experienced the closeness of God’s presence: ‘[H]et rollen des Donders in de Nachtelijke stilte was mij plegtig, als eene stemme Gods, en ik voelde mij tot Hem getrokken’ (1813:105). This is far removed from Van Lier’s (almost) physical yearning for the Jesus whom she visualised as the lover of the Song of Songs. Burgmann, on the other hand, translated her experience of the nearness of God into self-empowerment; therefore God is with her and near her in her missionary endeavours.

Finally it should be noted that the names Burgmann used for God were usually prescribed by her context in a particular era. God is her ‘Raad, Helper, Trooster, Redder’ (1813:124). Once again, these appellations were far removed from the male God who demanded from Van Lier a (wo)man’s constant (and socially paralysing) confessions of guilt.

The comparison between Van Lier and Burgmann serves to underscore the role (sub)cultural context played within the subcultural parameters of female piety.

**SUMMARY**

In summation the contents of the piety Catharina Allegonda van Lier established at the Cape more or less encompassed the following: Because our sinful nature sides with Satan, we are captives in a world in total opposition to God’s requirements. God wants us to alienate ourselves from our own nature. The tension between the nature of our world and the demands of God cannot be solved in the life on earth.

It is clear from her work that Catharina Allegonda van Lier was restricted by a subculture in which it was not possible to engage in much sin. Her concept of sin, and the sinful nature she attributed to herself, should therefore be seen as phantasms of her imagination, especially since she could never name these sins. From her diary it is clear that she see-sawed constantly between a fantasised sinful world of Satan, which she apparently experienced as very real, and the Godlike life she felt culturally obliged to follow.

The premise of this chapter is that Van Lier’s ideas concerning sin and self-hate were primarily influenced by the isolation caused by her subculture, especially since she deviates quite extensively from the piety
of her sources. Furthermore, her subculture prescribed her piety because her view of God/Jesus/Satan and her self-image concurred with her personal circumstances, namely physical restrictedness and suburban inactivity.

It is no longer possible to determine how many other women were brought to the brink of depression by her pessimistic and self-afflicting piety and to what degree. Unfortunately the question concerning the extent of her influence on other women will, because of a lack of sources, always remain unanswered. The diary of Sophia Burgmann, however, who came from the same European context as Van Lier but who was not exposed to Van Lier's passive, subcultural isolation at the Cape, provides us with crucial data. Burgmann adhered to the same pietistic principles as Van Lier but her experience and context led her to verbalise this piety in an active and positive missionary approach.

On the other hand, another female ego-text extant from this period, written by a local Dutch South African woman, also subculturally restricted, displays the same type of self-afflicting piety as Van Lier's. This woman was Hester Venter. Van Lier and Venter had no contact and shared nothing but the same type of melancholic piety – and the fact that they belonged to a restricted female subculture.

We now turn to the unhappiness of the sin-happy Hester Venter.

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