

Religious Ideals Shaping the Understanding of Work Amongst Pentecostal Charismatic Christian Women in South Africa

Abstract

In South African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCC) the workspace is regarded as a highly spiritualised place in which believers are called to fight evil force and evangelise the non-believers. This study found that PCC religious constructs of gender and work strongly shape women's understandings of themselves as career women, but less so their negotiation of the work-childcare balance. When socio-economic factors were in conflict with religious ideals members most often made decisions in line with their structural constraints and this was most evident amongst mothers who returned to work after childbirth, which is contrary to their churches' teaching.

Key words: work, religion, Pentecostal, women, South Africa, spirituality

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a continued growth in the popularity of Pentecostal Charismatic type churches in Africa. One of the key features of these churches is the emphasis they place on the workplace as the primary 'missionary field'. A common theme in sermons is how modern, urban, working people should cope with and negotiate the world of work. Yet little research has been done into the relationship between work and religion particularly in the African context. This paper looks at two PCC churches in the metropolis of Gauteng in South Africa. It examines how professional women's understanding of work is shaped by the teaching of their churches.

Since the early 1980s a 'third wave' of Pentecostalism strongly influenced by the Charismatic and Evangelical movements and largely dominated by the Word of Faith movement in the USA spread rapidly throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Some authors have argued that PCC encourages individual economic success and so helps individuals negotiate modernity,¹ others view it as a twenty-first century example of the Weberian spirit of capitalism and the protestant work ethic, expressed by Peter Berger and others in the Centre for Development and Enterprise report on Pentecostals in South Africa² while a third group called it a Prosperity or Faith Gospel³ which does not developed an ethic of hard work but rather a faith that God will miraculously provide work and money. Far less detailed attention has been given to the actual relationship between this type of religion and the reproduction of work, its meaning and how it is engaged with, particularly when it comes to women; although Dambo goes some way to unpacking this in her assessment of religion and the social reproduction of work in the Agape Christian Worship Centre in Pretoria⁴.

This qualitative study focuses on two PCC churches in Gauteng, and begins by unpacking how both paid and unpaid work are understood as vocational and are given equal social importance in both churches. This first section will show how the paid workplace is a highly spiritualised space in which evangelism is possible and while all members do not always believe that their work is their vocation they believe that they should evangelise in the work space. The second section of the paper argues that amongst the members interviewed ideas about paid work are highly influenced by their church's teaching about work because both churches offer intensive social and cultural skills training together with many prayer meetings aimed at helping members negotiate the world of work more effectively. The final section looks at the relationship between work and childcare in the lives of these women. Despite the teaching given by these churches that women should remain at home while caring for

¹ David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Richard van Dijk, 'Young Puritan Preachers in Post-Independent Malawi', *Africa* 62, (1992) 152-181.

² Peter Berger and David Martin, *Under the Radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and its Potential Social and Economic Role*, (Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2008).

³ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy*. (London: Hurst & Company, 2004).

⁴ Agatha Dambo, Exploring the role of religion in social reproduction: A case study of the Agape Christiana Worship Centre in Pretoria. (MA Thesis unpublished from the University of Pretoria, 2013).

young children, structural constraints in the lives of members often mean that they make decisions about work and family which are not in line with their churches' teaching, showing that agency is not always the primary factor in the decision making process of religious believers as some studies have shown.⁵

One of the most influential studies on the relationship between work and religion is Weber's⁶ argument that the Calvinistic Protestants of Northern Europe, redefined the meaning of work so that religious vocations were no longer limited to nuns, priests and monks, but included all types of work in the secular world. This led people to regard their work as holy and to do it with sobriety, diligence, and reverence just as any religious vocation would be done. Success at work began to be seen as a sign that believers were blessed by God and favoured by him. As Birgit Meyer⁷ has argued the circumstances of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant Calvinists of Northern Europe who were trying to define themselves over and against the Catholic Church are very different from the contemporary African Pentecostal Charismatic message which embraces modernity and aims to have a global appeal and influence, thus making it difficult to draw specific comparisons between the two phenomena. In this paper I show how work is understood in multiple and nuanced ways by African Pentecostals and while these ideas may have their origins in the Protestant ethic they have gone beyond this understanding of work.

The data⁸ for this study was gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted amongst professional women who were members of His People (HP) in Johannesburg and Grace Bible Church (GBC) in Soweto in 2002-3 and again in 2010. Both these churches began in the early 1980s and are linked to the Word of Faith movement. GBC began as a mission church of Rhema Bible Church but soon gained its independence from the mother church. In 2010 HP had a mixed race congregation, although only a third of the members were white and a membership of about 6 000 which had grown from 4 000 in 2003. GBC had 8 500 members in 2003 and during the time of this study the membership more than doubled but remained black and coloured. Both congregations have members from an economic and age cross-section of society but this study is focused on women who in 2002 were between the ages of 22 and 40. These women are considered professional because they all have a tertiary education, earned a monthly salary of more than R 5000.00 in 2002, managed at least one member of staff in their place of work and had definite career prospects. The study offers a longitudinal view of the impact of religious ideas on the decision making process of 10 white and 50 black women in these churches who joined the study in 2002-3. In 2010 only 37 women could be contacted again, five of these women were white while 32 were black. Of these women 37 only 30 were still members of HP or GBC while the other 7 had left the churches. Two of these seven women, who were both black had moved to mainline churches while the others, 1

⁵ For a detailed discussion on this view see: Gary Becker, *Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press: 1981). Gary S. Becker, Elisabeth M. Landes and Robert T. Michael, 'An Economic Analysis of Marital Instability', *Journal of Political Economy*. 85, no 6 (1977), 1141-87. Carmel Chiswick and Evelyn Lehrer, 'Religious Intermarriage: An Economic Perspective', *Contemporary Jewry*. 12, no 1 (1991), 21-34. Tim Heaton, 'How does religion influence fertility?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 25, no2 (1986) 248-58. Evelyn Lehrer, 'Religion as a determinant of marital fertility', *Journal of Population Economics*. 9, no 2 (1996), 173-96. William D. Mosher, Linda B. Williams and David P. Johnson, 'Religion and fertility in the United States: New pattern', *Demography* 29, no2 (1992), 199-214. Darren Sherkat, 'Religious intermarriage in the United States', *Social Science Research* 33, no 4 (2004) 606-26. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press: 2000). Li Zang, 'Religious affiliation, religiosity, and male and female fertility', *Demographic Research* 18, (2008), 233-62.

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1958).

⁷ Birgit Meyer, 'Pentecostalism and Neo-liberal Capitalism: Faith, Prosperity and Vision in African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 20, no 2 (2007), 5-28.

⁸ As a white, Anglican, women in the same age range as the interviewees my gender, religious affiliation, age and limited economic status as a researcher made me unthreatening to the informants, but my race made initial contact a barrier amongst some of the black informants and I needed to build up a relationship of trust before the interviews could begin. Pseudonyms have been used throughout and at both churches the head pastors gave their consent for the research to take place.

white women and 4 black women, no longer attended churches. This study focuses on decision making in relationship to two specific areas: women's career paths and what they understood work to mean, and their entry or exist from the work space after having children.

As the current system theory in religion studies are showing there is little separation between the public and the private or the working world and the religious world in the lived experience of many believers.⁹ 'Far from being structured out or set apart, the sacred finds its way into many corners of everyday life, often extending its power from those spaces into other activities and relationships.'¹⁰ That religion plays an important role in the decision making process of believers has been largely established,¹¹ but most of the studies examine how Christianities influence the decisions people make about entering the work place and what type of work they do.¹² They are quantitative in nature, based in North America and Europe, focus almost exclusively on paid work and pay little attention to the structural factors such as financial constraints that may affect believer's decision making, particularly over a length of time.

The Meaning of Work in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches

Out of a smart new cream and black Mini-Cooper stepped a fashionably dressed thirty –something women with long hair-extensions, a large designer bag and a huge welcoming smile. This was Mmachidi whom I had first met as a young woman of 24 in 2003 when she started going to GBC. She had been abandoned by her alcoholic mother and was raised by a series of aunts and grandparents who were only able to care for her during the times that they had work. In her late teens she became a member of GBC and after doing a three year diploma in marketing she began to work in tele-sales. In 2003 she impressed me with her passionate drive to learn everything she could and become a success.

I love Grace because I learn so much here, not just about God but how to be a Christian and make it happen. The Saturday seminars where they teach us about the work place are my big thing. Here I am learning how I can make it at work and to pray for success.

Eight years later Mmachidi had realised some of the success she had set out to gain. For her work was not so much a vocation or calling from God, in Calvinistic terms, but God's way of helping her out of poverty. Years later in 2010 she spoke of her job, which was now as a marketing manager for several accounts, as God's way of showing the world that through him Christians were blessed with success. 'My success is God's blessing for me and it shows other people that if they want to become successful they should also give their lives to God.'

Belinda, a white woman who came from a middle class family and who in 2003 was in her late twenties and a member of HP saw her job as a specific vocation which God had called her in prayer to do. She worked as a marketing manager for her own consultancy and in 2003 she told me that she felt called to

make a difference in advertising and how people sell things. As a Christian I can influence how things are sold and bring my skills to the church, because we have to be relevant and tell people about God in the language of multi-media and advertising. Working as a marketing executive is what God has called me to do.

Belinda and Mmachidi both did the same type of work but understood it in different ways. Mmachidi viewed work as a job which is a blessing from God, while Belinda saw it as a vocation to which God

⁹ Francisca Cho and Richard K. Squier, 'Religion as a dynamic and complex system', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no 2 (2013), 357-98.

¹⁰ Roman Williams, 'Space for God: Lived Religion at Work, Home, and Play', *Sociology of Religion* 17, no3 (2010), 257-79.

¹¹ Shain E. Sigalow and M. R. Bergey, 'Religion and Decisions About Marriage, Residence, Occupation and Children' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51 (2012), 304-323. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 1987).

¹² Samantha Ammos and Peggy Edgell, 'Religious influences on work-family tradeoffs,' *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no 6 (2007), 794-826. Alfred Darnell and Darren Sherkat, 'The impact protest fundamentalism on education attainment', *American Sociological Review* 62, no 2 (1997), 306-15.

had called her. This distinction arose many times in my interviews with women. In contrast the Calvinistic Protestants Weber studied the PCC churches in this study have narrowed the meaning of 'vocation' to mean doing a specific job, whether paid or unpaid, that through prayer the believer feels God has directly and specifically called them to do. Work is also understood as a key space in which Christians can evangelise to their colleagues and Christians should show their success and financial prosperous through consumer goods such as expensive cars and clothes so that they are effective in evangelising to non-Christians. Thirdly all work itself is understood as a blessing from God and if people are faithful to God he will bless them with work. Like the earlier Calvinists the PCC infuse work with spiritual meaning.

In North America studies difference in the meaning people make of work has been attributed to a variety of factors including race, income and education. Black women are shown to be more likely to view their jobs in religious terms than white women.¹³ People with better educations are more likely to view their work as a vocation and that

(t)he more benefits such as full-time employment, job security, and relatively large incomes are associated with work, the more people are inclined to think of work either as a calling or a career. When there are fewer rewards, people are more inclined to think of work as a job.¹⁴

This study also found that people who have internalized their religion to a high degree also have a high level understanding of their work as a calling.¹⁵ In a group with a high number of religious people in the sample¹⁶ the study found that people with a tertiary education were more likely to perceive religious factors as a main influence in their decision making about marriage, career paths and the meaning of work as a vocation.

Mmachidi and Belinda have the same type of jobs, income, education and influence of church teaching but their personal backgrounds differ significantly. They both internalized their church's teaching about work but through the lens of their own experience. For Mmachidi the most important and life changing thing was to have a job that was stable and through which she gained economic independence and she spoke of her work as a job not a vocation. For Belinda it was a given that people worked, she found meaning in the fact that her work could be understood as a vocation – a special calling from God. Race did not seem to particularly affect how black or white women understood their work and both the white and black women from a middle class background held the same idea about work as a vocation while the black women from the working and under-employed classes saw their work as a job. These cameos show that the structural, socio-economic realities in people's life journeys, which are largely ignored by studies into religion and work can significantly affect how people interpret their church's message about work and therefore whether they understand their work as a vocation or a job which is a blessing from God.

Learning to succeed in the world of work

Both HP and GBC communicate very specific ideas about the meaning of work and this is re-enforced by giving training to their members enabling them to develop the necessary social and cultural capital, in the Bordieuian¹⁷ sense, needed to succeed in the contemporary South African professional work space. Many seminars focused on the social skills needed to gain a promotion or how to best present your ideas in a meeting. They also give financial advice on how to buy a car for the first time or a house, how to balance a personal budget and avoid debt, and generally manage material wealth. In both churches far more attention is given to praying for work or a promotion and learning the social skills needed to impress other people to secure a job or promotion rather than in developing a hard work ethic amongst believers. The world of work is considered an arena in which spiritual forces of

¹³ Linda Chatters, Robert Taylor, Kai Bullard, and James Jackson, 'Spirituality and subjective religiosity among African-Americans, Caribbean blacks, and non-Hispanic whites', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no 4 (2008), 725-37. Shain and Bergey 'Religion and decisions about marriage, residence, occupation and children'.

¹⁴ J. C. Davidson and D. P. Caddell, 'Religion and the meaning of work', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no2 (1994) 135-47. 145.

¹⁵ Davidson and Caddell, 'Religion and the meaning of work', 145.

¹⁶ Sigalow and Bergey, 'Religion and decisions about marriage', 304.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: Routledge, 1989).

good and evil have to be managed through prayer. This makes it unlikely that these specific churches will lead a change in attitude towards work as Weber maintains happened in Europe through the Protestant ethic. But unlike the secular neo-liberal capitalist paradigm that dominates the South African business world, these churches teach that the world of work is not a rational world free of spiritual forces. Rather it is world, like all others infused with spiritual powers of good and evil which need to be managed if believers are to succeed.

Norma was 38 years old and a senior logistics manager for a large para-statal transport company when I first met her in 2003. In 2010 I asked her to reflect on the things she thought had been most influential in her life with regards to GBC.

You know Grace helped me through a really difficult time at work when I was trying to make an impression as a manager but didn't really know how to do the job. They showed me how to speak up for myself and always reminded me to take difficult things to God in prayer.

For Norma her church's teaching on how to negotiate the spiritual, social and cultural reality of the work space was the primary influence in her working experience. While Norma's quick rise up the corporate ladder was unusual in the context of the women in this study, her comment that she had learnt most of her social and cultural skills at her church was something which almost every one of the women in this study said. This seems to be one of the most attractive things about churches like HP and GBC and in the research conducted in 2002-3 was cited by informants as one of the most important reasons why they were members of these churches.¹⁸ This contrasts with the findings of Davidson and Caddell, who found that the norms within a denomination, the influences of a pastor and the message of the sermons had very little effect on the way in which people thought about their work.¹⁹

Another informant who believed that the teaching at her church had influenced her career success was Penny who was 28 when I first met her in 2003. At the time she was a member of HP and had qualified as a physiotherapist. Her mother was a nurse and she didn't know her father. In grade 8 she won a scholarship to a private school in Johannesburg and after completing her matric with excellent grades got a scholarship to study physiotherapy.

I did physio because my mom was a nurse and she thought it would be good for me and at that time the government were giving us black girls lots of bursaries and stuff to study education and medicine but not for economics.

In 2003 Penny had just moved from being a physiotherapist in a large finance company to becoming an Human Resources officer in the same company.

I made the move to HR when I realised that I just didn't love physio. At HP they have these business group meetings every Tuesday and workshops once a month. Here I realised that God wanted me to be successful and I could learn about mission statements, budgets and corporate social skills so I asked if I could be transferred from physio into Human Resources at work.

When I followed up with her in 2010 she had moved to GBC 'to be more part of the township culture and not be such an Oreos.'²⁰ She was still in Human Resources and maintained that if she had not been to all the workshops on business at HP she would not have made the career move. 'I would still be doing something I didn't enjoy and wasn't my calling just to please my mom.' She maintains that it was the teaching of her church which enabled her to make a career change. She also felt that the church had helped her to learn to take her difficult situations to God

¹⁸ Maria Frahm-Arp, *Professional Women in South African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁹ Davidson and Caddell, 'Religion and the meaning of work', 145.

²⁰ Oreos – which is the name of a biscuit that is dark chocolate on the outside and white on the inside was a term used in these churches to refer to black people who acted as if they were white. The same concept is also referred to as being a 'Coconut' – a black person who behaves, dresses and speaks like a white person.

You know it's not the actual work that is hard but working under pressure especially with all the financial stuff in the last few years. I find myself sitting at my desk or going to the bathroom and just praying. I don't know how else to manage some situations – so often it feels like the devil is attacking me and making me insecure.

One of the most dominant themes in the stories of Penny, Norma, Mmachdi and Belinda is how they prayed at work for God to help them solve something difficult or manage a social situation. This came up in all the interviews with the 30 women who were still members of PCC churches in 2010 and was the strongest common idea expressed by all the women. Very often these hurdles are conceptualised as a spiritual attack and the women speak of themselves as doing 'battle with evil powers'. Disagreements with colleagues are perceived as moments of spiritual attack which first need to be fought in prayer and then in dialogue with the colleagues concerned. They all believe that this ability to pray had been one of the most important reasons for their own success. As Williams noted in his study on space, religion and work

As people pray, they imagine outcomes influenced by their understanding of the way a divine actor (or actors) works in the world. They anticipate scared power actually doing something in the context of their world.²¹

The seven women who had left the churches during the eight years between my field work, and whom I could track down, did not speak about praying in the work place. Many of them felt that they had learnt good social skills at their previous churches but no longer believed that God changed their personal circumstances or gave them the direct guidance they were looking for. For these women the narrative that God is in control has been crowded out of their lives as they struggle with family problems, failure at work and or problematic romantic relationships. They did not feel that God was in control helping them to succeed and so finally they left their churches sometimes to go to mainline denominations but most often leaving churches altogether.

Both HP and GBC gave out a consistent rhetoric about the world of work and how members could and should succeed in it. Sigalow and Bergey concluded that members in different religious communities send out different messages about the role that religion should play in decision making in everyday life and that it is not possible to argue that Christians or religious people generally make decisions about work influenced by religions.²² But in these PCC churches religion is a dominant influence in the way Christians understand and manage their work experience. The world of work, like family, is directly affected by the spiritual world which is all around the believers.

Work and childcare – paid work and unpaid work

For professional women who have children both churches maintain that the ideal is for them to become stay-at-home-mothers after the birth of their first child. At both churches a conservative construction of gender roles are maintained and gender is understood in heterosexual terms limited to the notions of two distinct categories – male and female. Each gender has clearly defined roles within the family unit. The ideal family is the nuclear family, which consist of a father, mother and their children, from their current marriage or any previous relationships. Men are expected to be the providers for the family and women are expected to be the primary carers of children, cook the meals and run the household. The home space is therefore a place which is highly gendered and in which women are expected to submit to their husbands. But in the work space these norms do not apply because women are expected to be submissive only to Godly men, not to all men. The emotional and relational tension this causes is discussed elsewhere.²³

The previous sections have shown how much women internalise their faith, use it to help them cope with the stresses of their work and how religious ideals are at the centre of the way they make meaning of the work experiences. These women all articulated their churches' convictions that mothers who stayed at home are able to care for their children better than working mothers, that stay-

²¹ Williams, 'Space for God', 273.

²² Siglow and Bergey, 'Religion and decisions about marriage,' 320-3.

²³ Maria Frahm-Arp, 'Singleness, Sexuality and the Dream of Marriage' *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (2012), 369-85.

at-home mothers ensure that their families were more stable, their husbands happier and their marriages stronger. But out of the 60 women I interviewed in 2003 and the 37 women I was able to re-connect with in 2010 only 15% of the mothers were able to stay at home while their children were small. All the working mothers except for one maintained that they would love to stay at home with their children but that their families would not be able to financially cope if they stopped working. Often these professional women earned more than their husbands and so the families would lose their main source of income.

In 2003 I met Susan who came from a white middle class family and admitted rather shyly that

in my heart I feel that being a mom is my vocation and real calling. I am working to save money for my wedding and my house although I don't yet have a boyfriend.

When we met again in 2010 she had given up working as an engineer, married a Christian from her church and was a stay-at-home mom. She believed that she was now living out her vocation and in the teaching of her church, His People, being a full time mother was regarded as one of the most prestigious vocations for a woman. While she might be looked down upon by secular society, in her church Susan and her husband held a high level of social and spiritual status because they were living out the ideal and must therefore be particularly blessed by God.

Most of the informants who were mothers wanted to be like Susan but in reality they were working mothers. Belinda, Norma, Mmachidi and Penny were all mothers in 2010 and they all worked full time, although all of them except Belinda wanted to be full time stay-at-home-moms. Belinda – with her own marketing company was the only one who felt that she was able to give her children the time and attention they required because her working hours were flexible. For the women who worked in corporate companies their jobs provided little flexibility and they all felt that they could not make the decision to stay at home because then they would not be able to send their children to good schools (not necessarily private schools) provide them with extra lessons in sport and the arts or take them on holidays. While these women deeply internalised their faith they made decisions about returning to work after childbearing based on their structural needs rather than their religious ideals. These findings point to the fact that amongst women who place a high degree of importance on their spirituality and who make many of their career decisions based on their faith, when structural demands like financial stability make following their faith impractical, they chose to go against the teachings of their churches to ensure the well being of their families.

Conclusion

The workplace is for many PCC the new mission field and this paper has explored the influence that religious ideas about work have on decision making and meaning making amongst professional women who are members of these churches. While other research highlights race, gender, education and income as key determining factors in how religious women internalize their faith and use it to understand their work, this study finds that the socio-economic background of women is an extremely important factor. Women who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to view their work as a job and blessing from God, while women from middle class backgrounds generally viewed work as a vocation to which God had specifically called them. For both groups having work and being successful is understood as a sign of divine intervention and blessing. Particular to this type of Christianity is also the idea that the workspace is a key place for evangelism and that Christians should be successful in order to show non-Christians that through God people can achieve material blessings.

The teaching which both churches give on how to make meaning of the working experience and how to negotiate the demands of work is a significant factor in how women understand their career success and how they cope with difficulties at work. This teaching primarily focuses on two areas. First, how to pray for; work, a promotion at work, or for difficulties to be resolved at work. Second, how to improve one's social network and cultural skills such as dressing appropriately, expressing oneself eloquently, developing a good corporate image and dealing with interpersonal conflict in the workspace. It is highly unlikely that this ethic will lead to a new Protestant re-shaping of South Africans attitudes to hard work in line with European Calvinist ideas in previous centuries. In this

Weltanschauung success at work is understood as the result of a victory over spiritual forces of evil and an ability to impress people.

The religious women taking part in this study make many decisions about work based on religious ideals and understand their work in terms of their churches teaching. But when structural limitations such as family income affect the well being of their families then these women are far less likely to follow the teaching of their churches in order to provide what they perceive to be the best for their families. This means that for these professional women their re-entry into the work place after childbirth is influenced to a much larger extent by their families immediate financial needs rather than their churches teaching. Further research needs to be done to follow up those women who left the churches and how their perception and understanding of their work and workspace experience might have changed after leaving HP or GBC.